

Thrive and Endure

Voluntary sport clubs as exemplar for
a new era of organizational thinking



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Resie Hoeijmakers

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Voluntary sport clubs as exemplar for a new era of organizational thinking

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(met een samenvatting in het Nederlands)

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***Opgedragen aan TV Rapiditas en de 25.954 andere
sportverenigingen in Nederland.***

Table of contents

PART ONE 9

Chapter 1

VSCs in troubled waters	10
1.1 Introduction	10
1.2 Ineffective public policies	10
1.3 In need of theory on VSCs	12
1.4 Aims and central research question.....	20
1.5 Methodological approach.....	21
1.6 Structure of the dissertation	22

PART TWO 25

Chapter 2

Towards a theoretical framework on VSCs	26
2.1 Introduction	26
2.2 The Sport-Management Theory Development Approach	27
2.3 Step 1: prioritizing, selecting and summarizing relevant literature	27
2.4 Step 2: reflecting on the central concepts of the borrowed theories.....	36
2.5 Step 3: additional literature search	38
2.6 Step 4: finalizing the theoretical framework	47

PART THREE 51

Chapter 3

Conformity to institutional logics: A Neo-Institutional View	52
3.1 Introduction	52
3.2 Theoretical expectations.....	53
3.3 Methods.....	58
3.4 Results.....	62
3.5 Discussion and implications.....	65

Chapter 4

The strategic management of club goods: A Resource-based View	70
4.1 Introduction	70
4.2 Theoretical framework and research questions.....	71
4.3 Methods.....	73
4.4 Results.....	77
4.5 Discussion and implications.....	85

Chapter 5

The importance of collective identities: A Classic Institutional View	88
5.1 Introduction	88
5.2 Theoretical framework and research questions.....	90

5.3	Methods	92
5.4	Results	98
5.5	Discussion and implications	102
PART FOUR		107
Chapter 6		
A value co-creation systems perspective on organizations		108
6.1	Introduction	108
6.2	VSCs are unique organizations	109
6.3	The dual purpose of VSCs' existence	110
6.4	VSCs' core processes for long-term survival	112
6.5	VSCs as an exemplar of a new systems perspective on organizations	118
Chapter 7		
Management of Meaning		123
7.1	Introduction	123
7.2	A novel management approach for organizations	123
7.3	The strategic blueprint of MoM for VSCs	127
7.4	Management practices of MoM for VSCs	131
Chapter 8		
Discussion, conclusions and recommendations		140
8.1	Introduction	140
8.2	Primary conclusions	142
8.3	Main recommendations	148
8.4	Research agenda	160
8.5	Limitations of the dissertation	162
8.6	Closing remarks	163
Notes		164
References		165
Samenvatting (in het Nederlands)		188
About the author		198
List of publications		199
Dankwoord (in het Nederlands)		202

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Part one:

The need for more effective policies to support VSCs





Chapter 1

VSCs in troubled waters

1.1 Introduction

Despite the central role and value of voluntary sport clubs (VSCs) in civil society, they are, if not in crisis, at least in troubled waters (Seippel et al., 2020). For many years, VSCs thrived as civic organizations rooted in traditional value systems that were central to social life (Lucassen & Van der Roest, 2018). However, that era appears to be over. In the 20th century, the processes of individualization and depillarization, particularly in Western welfare states, led to the breakdown of these traditional value systems. As a result, individuals gained greater freedom to choose their social group affiliations, moving away from rigid norms and expectations that once governed participation in social groups (Borgers, 2015). This shift has contributed to a greater fluidity in social group affiliations, making it more difficult for membership organizations like VSCs to thrive and endure (Putnam, 2000). More and more VSCs are struggling with declining member commitment, involvement, and willingness to volunteer in service of the organization. Seippel et al. (2020) found that one in five VSCs across nine European countries face major issues related to volunteer recruitment and retention (27%), coaches and instructors (24%), memberships (21%), and financial stability (24%). Similarly, research in the Netherlands indicates that VSCs are encountering growing challenges, particularly concerning member commitment and participation (Van Kalmthout & Hoeijmakers, 2023; Stuij et al., 2023). Although the past few years, marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, have been exceptionally turbulent for VSCs, the growth of these problems began earlier and appears to be accelerating (Van Eldert & Van Kalmthout, 2024).

With approximately 700,000 VSCs and an estimated 60 million members (Steinbach & Elmoose-Østerlund, 2017), VSCs still play a fundamental role in European civil society (Nagel et al., 2020). These organizations, which have the legal form of an association, provide a formal setting for organized sports activities (Nagel et al., 2020; Van Eldert & Van Kalmthout, 2024). As membership organizations, VSCs have formal organizational structures, are independent from the public sector, do not distribute profits and operate on a voluntary basis, with membership being non-compulsory (Anheier, 2000). Nearly three in ten Europeans aged 15 and older belong to a club where they participate in sport or recreational physical activity (European Commission, 2022). Additionally, across Europe, national, regional, and local governments recognize the valuable contributions of VSCs to public welfare, particularly in areas such as health promotion, social cohesion, volunteering, and democratic participation (Nagel et al., 2020). As such, VSCs not only serve as the backbone of the sports system in Europe (Hoekman et al., 2015), but are also highly valued in many countries for their meaningful societal contributions and as key instruments in achieving public policy goals.

1.2 Ineffective public policies

In response to the challenges faced by VSCs, sport federations, sport service organizations, and national, regional, and local governments across many European countries have promoted three key management approaches among VSCs: flexibilization, instrumentalization and



professionalization. The effectiveness of these approaches in improving VSCs' functioning is highly questionable. First, policymakers have encouraged VSCs to broaden their services and offer more flexible membership options (Van der Roest et al., 2015). The underlying assumption is that VSCs face growing competition from commercial sport providers and that members' expectations and preferences regarding membership are becoming more diverse. The idea is that by offering a wider range of services and more flexible membership options, VSCs can attract and retain more members. Second, policymakers have increasingly urged VSCs to contribute to a broader set of public goals (Nagel et al., 2020; Skille, 2008; Vos et al., 2011; Waardenburg, 2016a). By expanding their activities and playing a larger role in society, it is believed that VSCs can increase their appeal to members. Third, because VSCs must adapt to members' changing needs and fulfill a broader role in society, policymakers assume that the organization of VSCs has become more complex, specialized, and extensive. As a result, VSCs are encouraged to professionalize by adopting more formal structures to organize activities more efficiently (Nagel et al., 2015). For VSCs, this has led to a greater emphasis on goal rationality management concepts, including formal policy plans, mandatory member tasks, more standardized rules and procedures, and the rise of paid staff (Boessenkool et al., 2012; Lucassen & Van der Roest, 2018). This means that, over the past few decades, policymakers have focused on organizational growth and promoted the expansion of services as key strategy for supporting VSCs. This focus appears ineffective in helping VSCs thrive and endure for two key reasons, which I will explain below.

VSCs' long-term survival is overlooked in favor of short-term performance goals

While it may seem self-evident that ensuring long-term survival should be the primary objective of such policies, the management approaches currently promoted focus on improving immediate performance, assuming that this will automatically lead to enhanced survival. However, organizational science shows that survival and performance are distinct goals, and they are not automatically linked (Eapen & Finkensadt, 2024). Although they may seem related over time, performance and survival are driven by different factors (Pajunen & Järvinen, 2018). As Eapen and Finkensadt (2024) aptly put it, by focusing on immediate performance, policymakers are “ignoring the roots while yearning for the fruit” (p. 27). Instead of emphasizing short-term, performance-related goals such as growth and service expansion, public policies that aim to effectively support VSCs should prioritize enhancing long-term survival, which is described as the “bedrock of long-term organizational health” (Eapen & Finkensadt, 2024, p. 27). Although the COVID-19 pandemic prompted a temporary shift in focus from performance to survival in public policies supporting VSCs, the goal of survival was narrowly defined as simply avoiding collapse (Hoeijmakers & Van Kalmthout, 2020). However, as the main objective in public policies designed to support VSCs, organizational survival should not be equated with “merely getting by”, but rather understood as “thriving and enduring” (Eapen & Finkensadt, 2024, p. 30).

VSCs are not an extension of government or for-profits in disguise

Another issue is that public policies intended to support VSCs often encourage management approaches borrowed from the business sector or public administration. If VSCs are “no more than an extension of government” (Toepler & Anheier, 2004, p. 254) or for-profits



in disguise (Weisbrod, 1988), applying management ideas from traditional business and public administration could address their challenges. However, this is not the case. There is broad consensus in the membership organization literature that membership organizations have structural differences that set them apart from both business and public organizations. The most significant distinction lies in their fundamentally different objectives (Toepler & Anheier, 2004). Governments aim to optimize social welfare through resource redistribution and meeting basic needs, while businesses pursue profit maximization by selling goods. In contrast, membership organizations exist as vehicles for members to express beliefs or pursue shared interests (Toepler & Anheier, 2004). These organizations typically function as value vehicles (Toepler & Anheier, 2004), where the main goal is to create value for members. This is a fundamentally different way of organizing: membership organizations are not designed to serve external goals but to be meaningful to their members. Additionally, membership organizations differ significantly from businesses and public organizations in the way they generate the resources needed to operate. Businesses typically rely on market-based financial methods, such as charging for products or services, while public organizations are funded through compulsory taxation. In contrast, membership organizations rely almost exclusively on membership dues, donations, and some external funding, such as government subsidies or revenue from selling products or services (Toepler & Anheier, 2004).

Another reason why applying management ideas from traditional business and public administration to VSCs is problematic is the need to account for the sport-specific logic that distinguishes sport from other sectors of society (Gammelsæter, 2021). While sport is typically valued for its positive spillover effects on society, such as promoting health and social integration, it is not inherently performed for these external benefits. To truly understand sport, it must be recognized as a relatively autonomous field, with its own set of expressive meanings and institutional structures that are distinct from those in other domains (Gammelsæter, 2021; Steenbergen, 2004). For those who view sport through an instrumental lens – focusing on its external outcomes – , the same activities and structures may appear unnecessary or even harmful (Van Bottenburg, 2018). This expressive understanding of sport contrasts with the more instrumental view that is prevalent in public policy (Nagel et al., 2020; Skille, 2008; Vos et al., 2011; Waardenburg, 2016a). In public policy, sport is often framed as an instrument for achieving broader societal goals, such as improving public health or fostering social integration. While these external benefits are important, the intrinsic value of sport – rooted in its own expressive meaning and structures – should not be overlooked. VSCs can only be effectively supported by recognizing and addressing both the instrumental and expressive meanings and structures that define sport. Ignoring this sport-specific logic risks undermining the very external benefits that sport is believed to generate (Gammelsæter, 2021).

1.3 In need of theory on VSCs

It is not entirely surprising that public policies designed to support VSCs often promote management approaches borrowed from the business world or public administration. To date, there is limited scholarship regarding how VSCs should be managed. While existing scholarship has yielded important insights (e.g., Egli et al., 2014; Horch, 1998; Thiel & Mayer, 2009), the field remains without a management framework that is firmly rooted in a deep, contextual understanding of how these organizations function. This gap is particularly striking, given that separate management disciplines have been established for business

organizations (business administration) and government entities (public administration) (Stokvis, n.d.). More importantly, this gap is highly problematic. Tailored management approaches are essential for VSCs—not because VSCs are “simple, trivial organizations”, but because they are inherently complex (Anheier, 2000, p. 13). They furthermore operate within a complex domain of society, characterized by both an instrumental and own expressive meanings and structures that set it apart from other sectors (Gammelsæter, 2021; Thiel & Mayer, 2009). Given the downward spiral many VSCs are currently experiencing, it is evident that effective management tools and public policies are necessary to help VSCs overcome challenges and emerge from troubled waters. However, developing a management approach rooted in a deep understanding of how VSCs operate necessitates further research into the factors that enable them to thrive and endure. Before elaborating on this observation, I first summarize below the key insights into the nature of VSCs and their functioning, drawing on the current state of scholarship on VSCs.

The scholarly landscape of VSCs

In recent decades, the scholarly field of VSCs has seen substantial growth, with much of the research emerging at the intersections of sport management, sport sociology, organizational studies, public policy, and the nonprofit sector. This field has particularly grown in Europe (e.g., Germany, Scandinavia, the UK, and the Netherlands), where VSCs play a pivotal role in the delivery of sport. The most significant contributions include scholars examining what makes VSCs unique (e.g., Elmoose-Østerlund et al., 2016; Heinemann, 2004; Horch, 1992; 1998), comparing them to other voluntary organizations (e.g., Jolles, 1972; Van Meerbeek, 1977), and analyzing whether these characteristics persist in contemporary European societies (e.g., Nagel et al., 2015; 2020). More recently, VSC research has reflected VSCs’ evolving role in public policy, placing greater emphasis on their societal contributions. Key areas of focus include promoting health (e.g., Kokko et al., 2016; Meganck et al., 2017), fostering social integration (e.g., Østerlund & Seippel, 2013; Vandermeersch et al., 2015), supporting democratic engagement (e.g., Ibsen et al., 2019), and advancing volunteering as both a resource for VSCs and a form of active citizenship (e.g., Hallmann & Fairley, 2018). Based on these analyses, there is a broad scholarly consensus that VSCs in Europe are defined by seven core elements, which have their roots in their nineteenth-century origins and have been shaped by evolving political expectations to contribute to public welfare (Nagel et al., 2015; 2020). These elements are:

1. VSCs allow individuals to join or leave freely, without any political, legal, or social constraints.
2. VSCs are oriented towards the interests of their members, focusing on shared goals and collective activities rather than relying on monetary incentives to retain members.
3. To ensure members’ interests are met, VSC operate with a democratic decision-making structure, where members can vote on key decisions in general assemblies, as regulated by the VSCs’ statutes.
4. The majority of services are provided through voluntary work, with members contributing their time and effort. Although paid functions have increased, they remain secondary.
5. VSCs are autonomous organizations that primarily finance themselves through membership fees, although they may also access public funding or other external resources.



6. VSCs are not-for-profit organizations, meaning they reinvest any financial surplus into the VSCs' activities instead of distributing profits among members.
7. Finally, the principle of solidarity underpins VSCs' operations, with a flat-rate membership fee granting access to all services and helping subsidize broader activities, such as youth programs, which benefit members even if they do not directly participate.

In addition to exploring the key characteristics of VSCs through their historical origins and contemporary societal role, scholars have examined them through economic and sociological lenses. These approaches have been employed to gain a deeper, more contextual understanding of VSCs' organizational structures. To provide a clear overview of these contributions, the following section outlines how scholars applying economic and sociological perspectives have advanced the understanding of VSCs within the academic field.

Understanding VSCs through economic lenses

Most scholars examining the operations of VSCs adopt an economic perspective, placing particular emphasis on the distinctive nature of the products they offer, the specific configuration of their value chain, and the resource dependencies and revenue structures that shape their organizational functioning. Scholars employing this perspective conceptualize VSCs as third-sector organizations that produce club goods, have to manage scarce resources to deliver these goods, depend on a diverse set of stakeholders for resource acquisition, and sustain themselves through diversified revenue streams. Within this perspective, VSCs' ability to thrive and endure is typically linked to the assumption that efficiency is essential for long-term survival and is often associated with the adoption of business management practices and marketing strategies.

VSCs as providers of club goods

From an economic view, VSCs as third-sector organizations exist due to the shortcomings of both the state and the market (Weisbrod, 1988). In this perspective, VSCs are seen as providers of club goods (Wicker et al., 2014), defined as ownership-membership arrangements (Buchanan, 1965; Sandler & Tschirhart, 1997) that fall outside the scope of provision by the state or the market (Anheier, 2014; Weisbrod, 1988). Central to this economic perspective on VSCs, is the idea that members collectively pool both financial resources and time to share production costs and advantages that are restricted to those who hold membership (Sandler & Tschirhart, 1997). The ability to achieve cost savings by collectively producing club goods can be attributed to economies of scale (Wicker et al., 2014). Economies of scale suggest that the marginal cost per unit decreases as the number of products increases, since fixed costs are distributed across a larger output (Anheier, 2014). A similar concept, economies of scope (Panzar & Willig, 1981), focuses not on organizational size in terms of membership, but on the variety of products. Economies of scope arise when production costs are lower for a range of products produced by a single organization, rather than each organization producing one product separately. While these economic concepts are used to explain why collectively producing club goods creates benefits (Anheier, 2014; Chandler & Takashi, 1990), previous research has found evidence of scope economies in VSCs, but not scale economies (Wicker et al. 2014). For VSCs, the relationship between club size and reduced production costs is not linear. The benefits of producing club goods persist only up

to a certain optimal size, where the marginal benefits of adding members equal the marginal costs. Beyond this point, VSCs seem to become overcrowded (Buchanan, 1965).

VSCs constrained by scarce resources in their provision of club goods

In studies of VSCs, dimensions of organizational capacity are frequently employed to underscore the distinctive configuration and resource constraints within their value chain (e.g., Doherty et al., 2014; Elmoose-Østerlund et al., 2021; Millar & Doherty, 2016; Swierzy et al., 2018b; Wicker & Breuer, 2011; 2013b). While scholars have used various conceptualizations of organizational capacity, the most commonly applied classification is that of Hall et al. (2003). Hall et al.'s (2003) organizational capacity model is a system resource model with five key dimensions of organizational capacity: (1) human resources, (2) finances, (3) relationships and networks, (4) infrastructure and processes, and (5) planning and development. These resources are considered essential for VSCs to successfully accomplish their mission (Elmoose-Østerlund et al., 2021; Wicker & Breuer, 2011). Resources can be defined as all the assets, capabilities and means at the disposal of VSCs to produce club goods (De Witt & Meyer, 2014). Since VSCs often lack clearly defined objectives – and therefore lack appropriate benchmarks for monitoring performance (Thiel & Mayer, 2009) – research in this area frequently examines perceived organizational challenges in relation to dimensions of organizational capacity (e.g., Lamprecht et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2009; Wicker & Breuer, 2013b; Wicker et al., 2022). A recurring theme in this body of research is the challenge of recruiting and retaining volunteers, which is consistently identified as a critical issue for VSCs. Additionally, difficulties in attracting and retaining members, qualified coaches, and obtaining financial resources are frequently highlighted as significant challenges. As a result, human resources (such as volunteers) and financial resources are often the most limited at VSCs (Wicker & Breuer, 2011). To mitigate the scarcity of their resources, VSCs sometimes replace them with other, more accessible resources. This leads to substitution effects. For instance, a declining number of core volunteers can be temporarily compensated by an increased workload for the remaining volunteers and, in the long term, by hiring paid staff (Wicker et al., 2012). In response to persistent resource limitations, recent studies have increasingly emphasized capacity building as a strategic approach for enhancing the long-term survival of VSCs (e.g., Millar & Doherty, 2016, 2018; Rossi et al., 2024). Capacity building focuses on strengthening an organization's ability to fulfill its objectives by optimizing various dimensions of capacity.

VSCs dependent on different stakeholders for resource acquisition

Other researchers using an economic perspective show that VSCs depend on a diverse set of stakeholders for resource acquisition (e.g., Breuer, 2005; Elmoose & Iversen, 2020; Vos, 2012). Breuer (2005) characterizes VSCs as organizations with a public purpose that “combine resources from internal sources with those from external sources” (Nagel et al., 2015, p. 14). Internal resources are provided by members or staff, such as (voluntary) labor, networks, and membership fees. External resources represent contributions from entities like the government, sponsors, and sport federations. These include primarily financial contributions, such as subsidies or reduced rates for sports facilities. Public subsidies for VSCs can be categorized into two main types: direct and indirect subsidies. Direct subsidies are provided directly to VSCs, typically aimed at supporting specific policy objectives. For most VSCs they constitute a relatively small portion of the total revenues, often less than 10%



in countries such as the Netherlands, England, and Germany (Breuer et al., 2017). Indirect subsidies tend to be more significant than direct subsidies (Bergsgard et al., 2017; Iversen & Cuskelly, 2015). In most European countries municipalities build and maintain sports facilities and they typically offer them to VSCs free of charge or at reduced fees (Hoekman et al., 2015). This makes sports facilities the most significant financial tool used by policy-makers to support VSCs in Europe (ibid.). As such, VSCs are, to some extent, dependent on external resources, demonstrating resource dependence (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978).

VSCs with diversified revenue structures

VSCs are also understood, from an economic standpoint, to possess specific, highly diversified revenue structures. The majority of VSCs' revenues come from membership fees, bar and catering/club events, and sponsorships (Ibsen et al., 2015; Lucassen & Van der Roest, 2018). This revenue diversification is closely tied to financial stability, as broadening the income portfolio is believed to enhance financial health (Wicker & Breuer, 2013b). Research supports this, showing that VSCs with more diversified revenue streams tend to have stronger financial conditions (Wicker & Breuer, 2013b), experience less revenue volatility (Wicker et al., 2015), and are more financially resilient (Cordery et al., 2013). However, research about the consequences of the Covid-19 crisis for VSCs also showed detrimental dependencies due to diversified revenue streams (Hoeijmakers & Van der Roest, 2021). VSCs that relied primarily on internal revenues, such as membership fees, demonstrated the greatest financial resilience (ibid.). Further, an important contributing factor to the financial resilience of VSCs is the ability of VSCs to increase their membership fees. Scholars have found that the average willingness to pay for an annual membership fee among members is higher than the actual fee paid (Swierzy et al., 2018b; Wicker, 2011). They also observed that members are willing to contribute more financially when the club faces economic difficulties, demonstrating a willingness to support the VSC during challenging times (ibid.).

Understanding VSCs through sociological lenses

Although scholars within the field of VSCs generally agree that VSCs provide club goods, must manage scarce resources to deliver these goods, rely on a diverse set of stakeholders for resource acquisition, and sustain themselves through diversified revenue streams, a one-sided economic perspective on VSCs is criticized. Prompted in particular by the work of Thiel and Mayer (2009), scholars have cautioned against the uncritical application of economic perspectives to describe the operations of VSCs. In recent decades scholars increasingly adopted sociological lenses, placing particular emphasis on the interactions between individuals, groups, and organizational structures within VSCs, as well as their role in broader society. These scholars conceptualize VSCs through sociological systems frameworks, emphasizing that VSCs are essentially groups of people who develop structures in response to internally defined needs. These structures both shape and are shaped by the actions of their members and are not only oriented toward achieving specific goals but also allow for diffuse, expressive interpersonal relationships. Moreover, they are increasingly characterized by hybrid goal orientations that combine serving their members with providing services to non-members and contributing to broader public interests.

VSCs as cooperative actors

From a sociological perspective, VSCs are understood as social systems, as they comprise organized and patterned networks of relationships and interactions structured around shared goals, norms, and activities—particularly participation in sport and recreation (Nagel et al., 2015; 2020; Thiel & Mayer, 2009). Mainly drawing on Giddens’ structuration theory, which emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between social actions and social structures (Giddens, 1984), scholars highlight that VSCs operate through formal and informal organizational structures shaped by members’ activities, which in turn influence their actions (e.g., Nagel, 2008; Nagel et al., 2015; 2020). Social action within VSCs involves members pooling their resources to produce club goods. Members’ roles within the VSCs are often not explicitly formalized but involve various normatively expected activities (Heinemann, 2004). This exchange establishes an implicit contract between the VSCs and its members, guided by informal norms of solidarity and reciprocity (Heinemann, 2004; Horsch, 1998; Nagel et al., 2015).

Key elements – such as membership conditions and decision-making processes – are formalized in the VSCs’ articles of association, enabling members to coordinate their efforts more effectively and function as a collective or “cooperative actor” (Nagel, 2008). This helps ensure continuity and organizational stability, even as individual members come and go. As “bottom-up” organizations (Scharpf, 2000), VSCs are shaped by the ongoing interaction between individual preferences and collective goals. This dynamic interplay continually reshapes organizational structures, reinforcing the cooperative nature of the system (Coleman, 1986; Schimank, 2000; Nagel et al., 2015). From this perspective, Thiel and Mayer (2009) emphasize that VSCs, as social systems, cannot be directly controlled by external forces (Nagel et al., 2015). Instead, they primarily respond to internally defined needs, engaging with external influences in a highly selective and self-determined manner. While external expectations may stimulate internal reflection and discourse, any resulting organizational change remains contingent on internal decision-making processes. As a result, the structural characteristics of VSCs render them notably resilient to external pressures and resistant to top-down interventions from outside organizations (Nagel et al., 2015; Slack & Parent, 2005; Thiel & Meier, 2004).

VSCs with intermediate structures

Beyond the cooperative approach, which highlights the interplay between formal and informal structures of VSCs and members’ actions, other scholars have drawn on a sociological perspective on organizations to conceptualize VSCs as intermediary organizations positioned between small groups and formal institutions (Horsch, 1998; 2018; Lang et al., 2019). Horsch (1998) characterizes the organizational structure of voluntary organizations as a contradictory, intermediate position between informal small groups, such as friendship networks, and formal bureaucratic organizations with clearly defined objectives. These structures aim to achieve goals but also provide ample room for diffuse, expressive interpersonal relationships. Several other scholars have examined the organizational structures of VSCs through the lens of Slack and Hinings’ (1987) conceptual framework for analyzing amateur sport organizations. These scholars focus on key dimensions such as specialization, standardization, and centralization (e.g., Fahlén, 2006; Kikulis et al., 1989; Papadimitriou, 2002). These studies found diverse organizational structures among the VSCs analyzed. For



example, Kikulis et al. (1989) identified a shift toward more professionalized and bureaucratic forms, while Papadimitriou (2002) found that VSCs tended to be highly loosely structured and only minimally bureaucratic. Nonetheless, the literature commonly portrays VSCs as less formalized, less specialized, and more ambiguous in their organizational structures, often making them less efficient compared to for-profit sport organizations (Auld & Cuskelly, 2012; Horch, 2018; Lang et al., 2019).

Scholars point out that there are many organizational challenges associated with this intermediary structure (Horch, 1998). The main challenge, according to Horch (2018), is striking a balance between the group-like and organization-like characteristics (Horch, 2018). Streeck (1981) already highlighted that “the system problems of voluntary associations can be traced either to the problem of integrating incompatible structural forms into one and the same social entity (for instance volunteer and paid staff) or the fulfilling of contradictory functions through one and the same structure (for instance instrumental and expressive functions)”. For instance, employing paid staff in VSCs can lead to disempowerment (Cuskelly, 2004; Kim et al., 2007) and loss of control over organizational issues for volunteers (Thibault et al., 1991), reducing effectiveness, commitment and satisfaction within VSCs (Cuskelly et al., 1999; O’Brien & Slack, 2003; Shilbury & Moore, 2006). Furthermore, when instrumental activities replace social and collective functions, member involvement and loyalty tend to decline (Boessenkool et al., 2011). Consequently, VSCs find themselves in a continual struggle to balance effectiveness with expressive functions. The management of VSC is therefore compared with walking a tight rope (Horch, 1998).

VSCs with hybrid societal functions

In recent decades, VSCs have increasingly been described as hybrid organizations that combine structures and functions from the market, state, and private spheres (e.g., Boessenkool et al., 2011). To explain this development, scholars have predominantly drawn on the concept of institutional logics—the overarching belief systems and value frameworks that guide organizational behavior by defining appropriate practices and pathways to success (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Kraatz et al., 2016). Traditionally, VSCs were grounded in a mutual-support logic, a third-sector rationale emphasizing voluntary participation, democratic self-governance, and the provision of collective goods based on solidarity, reciprocity, and the shared interests of members. However, scholars have shown that VSCs have increasingly incorporated elements of both market logics – such as delivering services to non-members in a business-like manner (e.g., Van der Roest et al., 2015) – and state logics, by taking on public responsibilities and aligning with governmental objectives (e.g., Nagel et al., 2020; Skille, 2008; Waardenburg, 2016a). As a result, their organizational structures are now oriented not only toward serving their members, but also toward providing services for non-members and contributing to broader public interests.

Time to advance

The above discussion shows that through distinct economic and sociological lenses, scholars have made significant progress in illuminating the key characteristics of VSCs and the particularity of their organizational structures. There is broad scholarly agreement that VSCs originated as cooperative organizations, with members pooling resources to collec-

tively produce and consume club goods (e.g., Nagel, 2008; Nagel et al., 2015; 2020). Club goods refer to all benefits of a VSC membership -such as sports and social activities- that are exclusively available to members (Heinemann, 2004; Wicker et al., 2014). To access club goods, members voluntarily contribute resources such as membership fees and effort, which are supplemented by external support from governments, sponsors, and sport federations (Sandler & Tschirhart, 1980; Nagel et al., 2015). Resources are defined as the assets, capabilities, and means available to VSCs for producing club goods (De Witt & Meyer, 2014), with five categories considered essential: (1) human resources, (2) finances, (3) relationships and networks, (4) infrastructure and processes, and (5) planning and development (Elmose-Østerlund et al., 2021). While formal organizational structures are designed to efficiently deliver club goods, increasingly contribute to broader public interests, and ensure continuity amid membership changes, VSCs also operate as informal, group-like social systems. Guided by implicit norms of conduct, members contribute resources grounded in solidarity and reciprocity and actively shape organizational structures to achieve shared goals (Heinemann, 2004; Horch, 1998; Nagel et al., 2015). As a result, VSCs exhibit a dynamic interplay between formal, organization-like structures and informal, social group-like processes (Horch, 1998).

However, the overview also indicates that relying on distinct economic and sociological perspectives has yielded limited insight into how the particular organizational structures of VSCs enable them to thrive and endure (Lucassen & Van der Roest, 2018). Scholarship on VSCs mainly treats VSCs' organizational structures as a black box: although their specific features are understood, the underlying mechanisms and causal pathways through which these structures enable VSCs to thrive and endure constitutes a persistent gap in the literature. To address this gap, a systems-theoretical framework is needed – one that integrates the existing, yet separate, sociological and economic insights into VSCs, while incorporating organizational science principles to illuminate the mechanisms underlying VSC long-term survival. Developing such a framework would be a significant theoretical advancement, providing a deeper understanding of the core organizational processes behind VSC long-term survival and a foundation for evidence-based management strategies. With substantial research on VSCs' core characteristics and the particularity of their organizational structures now established, the field seems ready to advance.

Much work to be done

Although organizational science is a rich and rapidly evolving field (Scott & Davis, 2016), there is still much work to be done in developing a deeper understanding of VSCs core organizational processes that enable long-term survival. In addition to the lack of an 'own' systems-theoretical framework grounded in the organizational dynamics of VSCs, there is also a significant gap in knowledge regarding membership organizations (Anheier, 2000; Toepler & Anheier, 2004). In 1986, Knoke concluded that “put bluntly, association research remains a largely unintegrated set of disparate findings, in dire need of a compelling theory” (p. 2). Two decades later, Tschirhart (2006) noted that Knoke's observation still holds, as the field of association scholarship had not advanced and no distinct field of nonprofit or voluntary sector studies had emerged. According to these scholars, effective management of membership organizations requires a distinct exploration of their organizational structure and processes (Toepler & Anheier, 2004). Furthermore, the sport management discipline



also lacks sport-specific theoretical insights that VSC scholars could draw upon. Not many scholars have focused on the interplay of both the instrumental and expressive meaning of sport and its implications for the long-term survival of sports organizations. Only recently Gammelsæter (2021) argued that, in order to understand the management of sports organizations, we should bring “sport back to sport management” (p. 257). Lastly, the broader field of organizational sciences continues to lack a deep understanding of how formal structures and informal social processes interact within organizations, leaving us with a fragmented knowledge base to build upon (Hunter et al., 2020; McEvily et al., 2014; Scott & Davis, 2016). Research on formal organizational structures and informal social processes remains largely siloed, with limited integration between the two domains—akin to ships passing in the night (Soda & Zaheer, 2012).

1.4 Aims and central research question

Therefore, to move the scholarly field of VSCs beyond the descriptive focus on core characteristics and distinctive organizational structures, this dissertation seeks to develop a systems-theoretical framework that explains the core organizational processes enabling VSCs to thrive and endure. This systems-theoretical perspective is necessary to provide a foundational framework for developing effective management strategies and public policies that enhance key organizational processes and ultimately support the long-term survival of VSCs. As explained in this chapter, VSCs are membership organizations that perform distinct functions and exhibit structural differences, which set them apart from both the business sector and public organizations. Additionally, VSCs are embedded in a distinct domain of society, with instrumental and an own set of sport-specific meanings and structures not found in other sectors. Moreover, their organizational structures occupy a distinctive and paradoxical position – situated between formal bureaucratic organizations and small, informal groups – pursuing specific goals while simultaneously allowing space for diffuse, expressive relationships (Horch, 1998). Identifying and acknowledging this “distinctiveness” (Dowling et al., 2023, p. 403) is crucial, as it will guide a deeper understanding of how VSCs are organized and should be managed to thrive and endure. It will also enhance the legitimacy of the sport management research field (Corley & Gioia, 2011; Lachance et al., 2024), as the existence of any academic discipline depends on “its distinct body of knowledge that is not covered by another discipline” (Doherty, 2013a, p. 5). Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, by advancing the understanding of the processes through which VSCs thrive and endure, sport management practitioners and policymakers will be better equipped to address and solve the challenges facing VSCs. This leads to the following research question of this dissertation:

What are the core organizational processes that enable VSCs to thrive and endure, and which management approaches can effectively enhance these processes in the context of VSCs?

1.5 Methodological approach

Building on the aims and central research question, this dissertation employs a mixed-methods research design. It begins by developing a framework that shows the theorized core organizational processes enabling VSCs to thrive and endure. The Sport-Management

Theory Development Framework (Lachance et al., 2024) serves as tool for constructing this framework. Rather than starting from scratch, this framework allows for the integration and adaptation of concepts and theories from multiple disciplines, extending them with variables, relationships, and explanations specific to the VSC context. An extensive review of relevant literature about long-term survival of organizations is conducted. Given the complexity of VSCs, a multilevel and multidisciplinary approach is adopted, incorporating macro, meso, and micro organizational processes to form a holistic perspective on VSCs. The framework centralizes and combines several theoretical perspectives, including neo-institutional theory, the resource-based view, and classic institutional theory, along with concepts from organizational behavior (prosocial organizational behavior), sport management (multiple institutional logics and competitive balance), strategic management (dynamic capabilities for responsiveness), anthropology (cultural transmission), and the ecology of affiliation (social transmission). In the second part, the theoretical assumptions underpinning this framework are empirically tested in the context of VSCs. To this end, both cross-sectional and longitudinal panel data from Dutch VSCs (2007–2021) are analyzed, complemented by a multiple case study of four Dutch voluntary tennis clubs, each with distinct identities, resources, and located in close proximity.

And lastly, by integrating these theoretical and empirical insights, this dissertation conceptualizes a coherent and interrelated set of core processes that enable VSCs to thrive and endure, using Weber's (1949) concept of the ideal type as a guiding tool. An ideal type is a conceptual tool that highlights the most essential and defining characteristics of a particular phenomenon. While it is not intended to describe reality exactly as it is, the ideal type is highly useful for theorizing and conceptualizing complex organizations such as VSCs. To deepen the understanding of VSCs, this ideal type conceptualization is then contrasted with existing systems perspectives on organizations in organizational science and used as an exemplar for developing a new systems perspective on how organizations function. After characterizing this new systems perspective, the primary rationale behind it is employed as a foundational logic for developing an alternative management approach—one that differs from mainstream and sport management sciences. This is achieved by applying and enhancing Moore's strategic triangle (2000) to VSCs, and by translating Selznick's theory of institutional leadership (1957) into a coherent set of management practices designed to optimize the core processes essential for VSCs' long-term survival.

1.6 Structure of the dissertation

To develop a systems perspective on the core organizational processes that enable VSCs to thrive and endure, and identify effective management approaches for enhancing these processes, this dissertation is structured into three parts.

Construction of a theoretical framework on VSCs

In the second part of this dissertation (Chapter 2), a theoretical framework for the core processes that enable VSCs to thrive and endure is developed. After reviewing relevant literature on the long-term survival of organizations across sociological, organizational, and strategic management disciplines, the combined insights of neo-institutional theory, the resource-based view, and classic institutional theory are used as the foundation for the theory development process. In doing so, I draw on and integrate two distinct streams of thought



within organizational theory. One stream views organizational processes through a rational lens, with management seen as purely utilitarian, while the other focuses on the cultural, informal, and deeper aspects of social structure, understanding management as symbolic and political. A critical reflection of the central concepts from these theories prompts further exploration of concepts that appear promising for understanding VSCs. The identified macro, meso, and micro processes for organizational survival are then integrated into a holistic theoretical framework for VSCs.

Empirically scrutinizing the assumptions of the framework

The third part of the dissertation (Chapters 3-5) focuses on the empirical analysis. These chapters center around three organizational theories – neo-institutional theory, the resource-based view, and classic institutional theory – that are considered most relevant for understanding the core processes of VSCs. These theories are blended with additional concepts to make them applicable to the VSC context. In each chapter, the assumptions of the theoretical framework are assessed, and based on this evaluation, the relevance of these theories for VSCs is critically reflected upon. Suggestions are provided on how the fundamental tenets of the borrowed theories can be applied, advanced, or combined with other concepts to better align with the distinct characteristics of VSCs. Furthermore, the contextual and temporal boundaries of these theories are examined, explaining in which contexts and under what circumstances these theories hold merit. This analysis contributes to both the theoretical understanding of VSCs' core processes for long-term survival and the broader understanding of the organizational theories employed.

Chapter 3 centers on the neo-institutional perspective and examines whether conformity to institutional norms is crucial for VSCs to thrive and endure. A key concept within this perspective is legitimacy, which highlights the necessity for organizations to align with institutional norms to secure resources and support for survival. This chapter identifies the institutional logics present within the institutional field of Dutch VSCs, assesses the extent to which VSCs have conformed to these logics, and explores whether those VSCs that align with institutional logics are stronger and have more resources than those that do not. Additionally, it analyzes whether institutional conditions affect the likelihood of conformity. To investigate these relationships, cross-sectional and longitudinal panel data from Dutch VSCs between 2007 and 2021 are utilized.

Chapter 4 examines which club goods generate value for members to foster their involvement, while also providing VSCs with a competitive advantage. As VSCs face growing competition from local VSCs within the same sport that jeopardize their long-term survival, it seems crucial to not only offer club goods that align with members' interests and sustain engagement but also to develop those that enhance VSCs' appeal over rival VSCs. A mixed-methods research design is employed, combining focus groups, questionnaires, and website coding across four rival Dutch voluntary tennis clubs. The VRIO framework, developed by Barney (1991) as part of the resource-based view, is employed to determine whether VSCs' club goods can sustain a competitive advantage over rival VSCs. Drawing on this framework, the chapter examines which club goods generate value for members to foster their involvement (V), while also providing VSCs with a competitive advantage by being rare (R) and difficult to imitate (I). Finally, it assesses the extent to which VSC management strategically leverages these goods (O).

Chapter 5 explores the positive effects and factors that shape collective identities within

VSCs. As the role and development of collective identities in VSCs remain poorly understood, classic institutional theory is combined with social identity theory to identify the micro- and organizational-level factors that shape these identities. A multiple case study is performed, combining focus groups and questionnaires among four Dutch voluntary tennis clubs. To understand the importance of fostering collective identities for VSCs' ability to thrive and endure, the concept of organizational identification from social identity theory is applied, exploring its relationship to member involvement beyond the value of club goods. Furthermore, to understand how collective identities are fostered, this chapter examines which social groups are key in shaping collective identities within VSCs and identifies the organizational factors that trigger organizational identification processes. Finally, the extent to which elements defining the historical, holistic, and value-driven nature of identity make VSCs distinctive – and how management can leverage these strategically to counter growing competition for members from local VSCs in the same sport – is examined.

Developing a new systems perspective on organizations and their management

In the final section of this dissertation, a new systems perspective on organizations (Chapter 6) and a novel approach to their management is presented (Chapter 7) and discussed (Chapter 8). By integrating the theoretical and empirical insights of this research, this study demonstrates that VSCs represent an organizational type that calls for a novel systems-theoretical perspective on their functioning. Central to this perspective is a value co-creation rationale, which suggests that formal, standardized, and regulatory structures are not merely mechanisms to control the behavior of individuals, but also serve to facilitate, sustain, and enhance members' participation and embeddedness within relational networks in the organization. With the aim of ensuring that members voluntarily co-create the value and continued existence of the organization for both individual and collective benefit. While this perspective is grounded in the specific core processes that allow VSCs to thrive and endure, the underlying logic of how they operate is equally relevant to other organizations that (aim to) operate sustainably through the commitment of various stakeholders to support the organization's continued existence.

To support the long-term survival of VSCs, the value co-creation rationale is used as a foundational framework for developing a novel management approach. This management approach, referred to as Management of Meaning (MoM), consists of a strategic blueprint designed to guide management in making informed decisions about the allocation of scarce resources, supported by a coherent set of management practices to reinforce their strategic choices. This was achieved by applying and enhancing Moore's strategic triangle (2000) to VSCs, and by translating Selznick's theory of institutional leadership (1957) into a coherent set of management practices designed to optimize the core processes essential for VSCs' long-term survival. The dissertation concludes with a discussion of the implications of these insights for policymakers, as well as organizational and management scholars, both inside and outside the domain of VSCs.



Part one – The need for more effective policies to support VSCs

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Part two:

Constructing a theoretical framework



Chapter 2

Towards a theoretical framework on VSCs

2.1 Introduction

To develop a theoretical framework on VSCs' core processes to thrive and endure, I begin by positing that VSCs represent a distinct organizational type, rather than simply a subset of industry or government to which mainstream organizational or management theory can be applied. This assumption is important as it implies that we must be careful with blindly adopting theories from other disciplinary fields into the context of VSCs. Suddaby et al. (2011, p. 237) point out that when we import theories from other scholarly domains, also "core questions, assumptions, and metaphors" are automatically transferred that may not fit well in other contexts. This lack of organizational sensitivity is both a broader tendency in organizational studies (Whetten et al., 2009) and a blind spot for sport management researchers (Doherty, 2013a). By positioning VSCs as a distinct organizational type, I automatically ensure that "the distinctive features of organizations as social actors and the associated distinctive features of the organizational social context" are not ignored (Whetten et al., 2009, p. 538).

I also see significant value in borrowing theories developed for other types of organizations rather than relying solely on a grounded theory framework. Borrowing theories helps avoid reinventing the wheel, as organizational theories have been shown to explain similar phenomena across different contexts. Furthermore, many scholars have demonstrated that organizational theories based on other types of organizations can be useful for understanding VSCs to some extent (e.g., Nagel et al., 2015; Thiel & Mayer, 2009; Vos, 2012). To fully utilize the existing body of work, I argue that the most effective approach is to adopt a multilevel (cross-level) and multidisciplinary (cross-context) framework. This would combine theoretical borrowing and conceptual blending to construct a comprehensive theoretical model of VSCs. The goal of conceptual blending is "for theory to be more relevant to the focal context by merging borrowed theory and its concepts with those uniquely relevant to the focal context" (Doherty, 2013a, p. 9). A key reason for adopting an integrated, multi-theory approach is that single-theory frameworks often provide only partial views of organizations. As Tolbert (1985, p. 12) noted, "organizational phenomena are much too complex to be described adequately by any single theoretical approach". By integrating multiple perspectives, we can achieve more robust and complete explanations (e.g., Slack & Hinings, 1992; Vos et al., 2011; Wicker & Hallmann, 2013).

To move beyond organizational and management theories designed for organizations in other sectors but also to build on the work that is already done, the Sport-Management Theory Development Approach (Lachance et al., 2024) offers a useful tool. The Sport-Management Theory Development Approach helps to simultaneously borrow and apply concepts and theories from other research fields and extending them with variables, relationships and explanations specific for the context of VSCs. This approach avoids reinventing the wheel while also challenging previous knowledge and assumptions about a phenomenon, ensuring



sensitivity to the specific context (Lachance et al., 2024). In the remainder of this chapter, I outline the Sport-Management Theory Development Approach (Section 2.2) and demonstrate how I apply it to the context of VSCs (Sections 2.3–2.5). This leads to the development of a theoretical framework that points out the core processes enabling VSCs to thrive and endure (Section 2.6). This framework will serve as the foundation for the empirical part of the dissertation.

2.2 The Sport-Management Theory Development Approach

The Sport-Management Theory Development Approach is based on Whetten's (1989) theory development perspective. According to Whetten, theory development comprises four main elements: (1) the *what*, (2) the *how*, (3) the *why*, and; (4) the *who*, *when*, and *where*. The *what* entails an operationalization of the borrowed theoretical concepts needed to explain or understand a phenomenon. The *how* refers to reasons or factors that might influence the theorized or empirically established explanations of the borrowed theories. The *why* refers to how the context changes the fundamental assumptions of the borrowed theories. Finally, the *who*, *when*, and *where* refer to the temporal and contextual boundaries of the borrowed theories. Adopting this approach, I use four steps to construct a theoretical framework that points out the core processes enabling VSCs to thrive and endure.

2.3 Step 1: prioritizing, selecting and summarizing relevant literature

In Chapter 1, I outlined VSCs' key characteristics and the particularity of their organizational structures. As discussed here, VSCs occupy a distinctive and paradoxical position—situated between formal bureaucratic institutions and small, informal groups. Their structures are designed to pursue specific goals effectively while simultaneously fostering diffuse, expressive relationships (Horch, 1998). Research on membership organizations supports this view, emphasizing the need to recognize the dynamic interplay between rational structures and social dynamics to fully capture their nature (Anheier, 2000; 2005; Helmig et al., 2004; Toepfer & Anheier, 2004; Tschirhart & Gazley, 2014). Given the distinctiveness of their structures – and the observation that how these structures enable long-term survival remains a black box in current research – a multidisciplinary and multilevel approach appears most effective for developing a systems-theoretical framework that can shed light on the core organizational processes enabling VSCs to thrive and endure.

Despite recent progress, organizational science still lacks a comprehensive understanding of how formal structures and social processes interact, creating a persistent “disconnect” in the literature (Hunter et al., 2020; McEvily et al., 2014; Scott & Davis, 2016). Bridging this gap requires an approach that starts by analyzing the “interplay between the formal organization and the informal social structure” (McEvily et al., 2014, p. 303). A multidisciplinary approach that views formal structures and social dynamics as fundamentally interconnected, rather than separate, is therefore necessary to build a theoretical framework on the core processes that enable VSCs to thrive and endure. Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter 1, since VSCs operate within a complex societal domain – shaped by instrumental purposes for achieving public goals and unique sport-specific meanings and structures not found elsewhere – a multilevel approach is required to capture the interactions between formal organizational structures and social dynamics across multiple levels. With this approach



I align with recent advancements in VSC scholarship, which point out that a multilevel framework – capturing macro-, meso-, and micro-level organizational processes – provides the most effective method for analyzing VSCs (e.g., Nagel, 2006; 2007; Nagel et al., 2015; Nagel et al., 2020).

Bridging the gap between formal structures and multilevel social processes

To theorize the interplay between the formal organization and multilevel social processes in VSCs, I draw upon and integrate two distinct streams of thought within organizational theory. The first stream is the rational perspective, which provides a framework for understanding organizational processes that enable organizations to thrive and endure in purely rational terms. It emphasizes utilitarian management approaches (Scott & Davies, 2016), viewing organizations as tools or instruments designed to achieve specific objectives. This perspective is helpful for understanding how VSCs operate with formal, standardized rules, procedures, and roles that guide the behavior of their members. To theorize this more specifically, I turn to the resource-based view (RBV) of the firm (Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984). The RBV is one of the most influential theoretical frameworks in rational management approaches (Davis & DeWitt, 2021) and offers valuable insights into how organizations can manage resources effectively to direct member behavior. This makes the RBV a valuable component for my framework.

The second stream of thought is the institutional perspective, which conceptualizes organizational processes in terms of cultural, deeper, and more informal aspects of social structure. This perspective emphasizes symbolic and political management, focusing on the ways organizations acquire meaning beyond their technical goals. I argue that institutional theory is particularly well-suited to studying VSCs, given the importance of their organizational structures and processes in generating meaning beyond purely functional objectives (e.g., Robertson et al., 2022; Nite & Edwards, 2021; Washington & Petterson, 2011). According to the institutional perspective, “organizations are not purposively designed instruments performing tasks with machine-like efficiency, but rather organic entities infused with value and meaning that extend beyond the formal structure’s intended purpose” (Baum & Rowley, 2017, p. 5). VSCs are increasingly understood in terms of values and norms dominant in society and are seen as instruments for achieving public goals. Given this societal role, I find neo-institutional theory (NIT) particularly useful, as it theorizes the socially constructed aspect of the organizational environment (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

However, VSCs also have an internal social world with core values and beliefs that influence their functioning. To account for both macro- and micro-level institutional processes within VSCs, I propose integrating multilevel institutional processes by reintroducing classic institutional theory (CIT) into organizational scholarship, and specifically, into my theoretical framework. While institutional theory has evolved significantly since the introduction of CIT in the 1950s, CIT continues to offer valuable insights for theorizing the internal social structures that shape organizations. Specifically, it helps explain how VSCs are regarded as meaningful entities and how they cohere as social actors with distinctive identities (King, 2015). In the following section, I will outline the fundamental assumptions of these three theoretical perspectives and explain why I consider them relevant for understanding VSCs.



Neo-institutional theory: institutional norms and legitimacy

I start my theoretical framework with NIT. NIT is one of the most popular and influential theories in the field of organizational science (Demers, 2007) and the most dominant theory in sport management research (Washington & Patterson, 2011). By starting with NIT, I begin by theorizing the macro processes that enable VSCs to thrive and endure, before focusing on the meso and micro processes with the RBV and CIT.

Introduction

The basis of the ‘new’ institutional perspective was established in 1977. In that year, Meyer and Rowan published a classic article to criticize the dominant rational perspective of viewing organizational survival as a result of internal functioning and efficiency. The core idea of NIT is that organizational survival is enhanced by legitimacy which is the result of conforming to institutional norms that demonstrate to audiences that the organization is acting in a desirable, proper and appropriate manner (Deephouse, 1996; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Organizations must conform to these rules and requirements if they are to receive support and be perceived as legitimate (Baum & Rowley, 2016). In this view, NIT deviates from viewing organizational survival as an outcome of the design and management of efficient organizations. Organizational survival rather results from adopting taken-for-granted assumptions “independent of the immediate efficacy of the acquired practices and procedures” (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 340). Later, this perspective is labelled as “new” institutionalism to distinguish it from Selznick’s work (1957) who viewed institutionalization as an organizational-level phenomenon.

In organizational science, the significance of the institutional environment for organizations is well understood. It is common thought that organizational environments consist of more than “simply sources for inputs, information, and markets for outputs” (Baum & Rowley, 2016, p. 9). Normative and cognitive elements, such as norms and beliefs about organizational forms, behaviors, and activities, also play a prominent role (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). As I mentioned in Chapter 1, sport in public policy is situated within a broader network of societal values and norms. From a societal perspective, sport is not only seen as a tool for achieving public goals—such as health, social integration, or character development—but is also evaluated in the context of the values and norms that dominate society. Although organizational literature learns that some types of organizations are more subject to the institutional environment, all organizations are considered to be influenced by institutional forces to some extent (Scott, 2013). According to Washington and Patterson (2011, p. 9), sport is pre-eminently a setting “where there are strong and diverse sets of institutional pressures”. According to them this is visible in the tendency of sports organizations to act in the search for legitimacy instead of increased performance. Already much research has shown the presence of institutional pressures in the sport context (e.g. O’Brien & Slack, 2004; Skille, 2011a; Slack & Hinings, 1994; Stenling & Fahlén, 2009; Vos et al., 2011). I therefore contend that it is “perfectly justifiable” (Washington & Patterson, 2011, p. 8) to use NIT to theorize the macro processes that influence VSCs’ long-term survival.



Organizational legitimacy

Central to NIT is the notion of organizational legitimacy (Kraatz et al., 2016). Organizational legitimacy is “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). In other words, it is a social construction of meaning by a collective audience that accepts or endorses the organization’s actions and identity as rational, valid and reasonable because these are congruent with the collective’s cultural beliefs, norms, values and expectations for action (Deephouse, 1996; Galaskiewicz, 1985; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). With the concept of organizational legitimacy, NIT emphasizes “the socially constructed nature of the environment and the impact that belief systems and normative and cultural constraints have on organizations” (Demers, 2007, p. 33). Organizations “are not viewed as atomistic entities living in a jungle where only the strongest survive, but as members of a social network in which they are embedded” (Demers, 2007, p. 33-34) and through which they are influenced. Organizational legitimacy must therefore be understood as a general status of understandability and taken-for-grantedness conferred by a collective group (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Suchman, 1995).

Institutional agents

NIT especially highlights a socio-political conception of organizational legitimacy. Socio-political legitimacy refers to “the value placed on an activity by cultural norms and political authorities” (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994, p. 648). Various institutional agents can function as cultural or political authorities able to confer legitimacy (Scott, 2013). Who these institutional agents are, varies from time to time and place to place (ibid.). In the end, according to Stinchcombe (1965), whose values define legitimacy is a matter of social power. Scholars seem to agree that the state and professionals are often critical institutional agents (Scott, 2013). The government is often the most important actor in the environment of organizations as it has the ability “to rely on legitimate coercion” such as “allocating key resources such as finance capital or monopoly status, imposing taxes, and exercising regulatory controls” (Scott, 2013). Professionals exercise their control via cognitive and normative processes. By “defining reality, by devising ontological frameworks, proposing distinctions, creating typifications, and fabricating principles or guidelines of actions” professionals “construct cognitive frameworks that define arenas within which they claim jurisdiction and seek to exercise control” (Scott, 2013). Also for VSCs, the government and sport federations can be seen as the most important institutional agents exerting pressure on them (Van der Roest, 2015).

Organizational legitimacy as central organizational process for thriving and enduring

In the NIT perspective, adhering to the norms and expectations of institutional agents is thought to enhance an organization’s ability to thrive and endure (Aldrich & Fiol 1994; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Especially, in contexts where relations with the community and government are dense, socio-political legitimacy is important. According to NIT, socio-political legitimacy leads to organizational survival because audiences are most inclined to supply resources to organizations that appear desirable, proper or appropriate (Parsons, 1960; Suchman, 1995). Furthermore, it is argued that audiences perceive legitimate orga-



nizations as “more meaningful, more predictable, and more trustworthy” (Suchman, 1995, p. 575). Socio-political legitimacy therefore empowers organizations by making them seem meaningful and natural (Suchman, 1995) and “a sine qua non for easy access to resources, unrestricted access to markets, and long-term survival” (Brown, 1998, p. 35).

Managerial capabilities of conformity to institutional norms

By questioning the notion that rational processes alone determine organizational survival, NIT highlights the strategic importance of creating uniformity and recognizability among organizations. According to Meyer and Rowan (1977), managerial decisions are not the result of rational decisions but of social processes revolving around the search of socio-political legitimacy. They argue that managerial decisions are frequently based on unquestioned assumptions rather than rational analysis, driven more by the desire for socio-political legitimacy than by the pursuit of efficiency (ibid.). DiMaggio and Powell (1983) distinguish three kinds of institutional pressures that are exerted on organizations to conform to their institutional environment: coercive, mimetic and normative pressures. Coercive pressures arise from organizations upon which others depend, as well as from cultural expectations within society. Mimetic pressures refer to the tendency of an organization to imitate other organizations in the face of uncertainty. And normative pressures are driven by professionalization that produces pressures to conform to legitimated professional practices. Thus, under these institutional pressures, NIT argues that VSCs must adopt practices and activities that align with prevailing expectations in order to achieve or maintain organizational legitimacy (Oliver, 1997).

The Resource-based View: VRIO resources and sustainable competitive advantages

I proceed my theoretical framework using the RBV. While NIT points out macro processes influencing organizational survival, the RBV is essentially meso- and micro-analytic. It helps me focus on the relationship of VSCs with other organizations within the same organizational population and on rational processes within VSCs that enable them to thrive and endure.

Introduction

Today, the RBV is one of the most dominant theoretical perspectives in the field of strategic management (Davis & DeWitt, 2021). In the RBV perspective, organizations are conceived as rational instruments for optimizing transactions with customers. Since business firms aim for profit maximization by producing goods for sale, customers play a central role. Their transactions provide the means to maintain financial performance over time and to earn returns for shareholders (Moore, 2000). In essence, the RBV argues that organizations within the same organizational population differ due to differences in their resources. It emphasizes that differences in resources and their exploitation are essential for business firms to thrive and endure. The RBV can be traced back to the work of Penrose (1959) and Rubin (1973). They argue that, for a firm’s competitive positioning, the way in which tangible resources are utilized is more important than the resources themselves (Abatecola, 2012). Wernerfelt (1984) developed these ideas into a formal resource-based view of the firm by arguing that a firm’s performance is mostly determined by “the capacity of acquiring those



resources that result critical to the developing of the demanded products” (Abatecola, 2012, p. 16). Barney (1991) developed the RBV into a full-grown theory by providing an empirical testable theoretical framework. His main argument is that variations in resource endowments across firms over time can lead to a resource-based competitive advantage. The sustainability of this advantage largely depends on the inimitability and non-substitutability of the resources (Abatecola, 2012).

I expect that the ability of VSC management to make strategic decisions about how to exploit their organizational resources will be useful in explaining VSCs’ ability to thrive and endure. In addition to persistent resource scarcity (Wicker & Breuer, 2011) and the complex task of producing a diverse range of club goods to meet members’ interests and sustain their engagement (e.g., Kolbl et al., 2022; Schlesinger & Nagel, 2015), VSCs face rising competition for resources. In recent decades, VSCs have faced more frequent membership turnover (Hoeijmakers, 2022). This development is attributed not only to the rise of commercial sports providers and shifting patterns of sport participation (Rossi et al., 2019; 2024), but also to an increasingly consumerist attitude among members (Bodet, 2009; Enjolras, 2002; Ibsen & Seippel, 2010; Van der Roest, 2015). Consumerism is widely regarded as a significant societal shift, often described as an empowering development in people’s private lives that enhances individual autonomy in making cost-utility decisions (Lorentzen & Hustinx, 2007). This mindset extends beyond private-sector goods and services to collectively produced offerings such as sports, leisure, and cultural activities, which are increasingly treated as marketable products. As a result, members perceive providers of these goods similarly to market competitors, expecting their needs to be met—otherwise, they readily switch to alternative providers (Kelly, 2005). Since members can leave or switch at any time, it is increasingly important for VSCs to focus their efforts and maximize the impact of their resources (Misener et al., 2020). Given that the RBV is considered one of the most influential frameworks in strategic management by providing valuable guidance for resource allocation (Davis & DeWitt, 2021), I argue that applying it to the context of VSCs is both relevant and worthwhile.

Organizational heterogeneity and a sustainable competitive advantage

Specifically, the RBV draws attention to the idea that to maintain long-term survival, an organization must implement “a value creating strategy not simultaneously being implemented by any current or potential competitors” (Barney, 1991, p. 205). With this idea, Barney points out the importance of organizational heterogeneity for organizational survival through “relatively durable differences in strategy and structure across firms in the same industry” (Oliver, 1997, p. 701). Essentially, the RBV considers organizational survival to be the result of bundles of resources in competition with each other. Organizations are conceived as a bundle of both tangible and intangible resources. Variability in these tangible and intangible resource bundles, due to history or managerial decisions, are the basis for organizations to develop above-normal rates of return and a sustainable competitive advantage. This means that from this perspective, organizations thrive and endure depending on their ability to obtain and exploit resources that create sustainable competitive advantages (Barney, 1991; Barney & Hesterly, 2006; Penrose, 1959; Wernerfelt, 1984). These resources include: “all assets, capabilities, organizational processes, firm attributes, information, knowledge, etc. controlled by a firm that enable the firm to conceive of and implement



strategies that improve its efficiency and effectiveness” (Barney, 1991, p. 101). These can be classified into three categories: (1) physical capital resources, such as geographical location, access to raw materials, plant and equipment; (2) human capital resources such as knowledge, relationships, training and experience; and (3) organizational capital resources such as formal structures, processes and systems as well as informal relationships among groups (Barney, 1991).

VRIO-resources as central organizational processes for thriving and enduring

Not all organizational resources have the potential to generate sustainable competitive advantages. The RBV’s core significance lies in pointing out the difference between general resources available to all organizations in a population and organization-specific resources that are unique and valuable to an individual organization. According to Barney and Hesterly (2006), organizational resources form the basis of sustainable competitive advantages if they meet four criteria: they must be valuable, rare, difficult to imitate, and exploitable by the organization to its full potential (VRIO). Organizational resources are valuable when they have competitive significance (V). This might be situation specific; while it may have a positive impact on one organization’s competitive position, it may have no impact for another organization. However, valuable resources cannot be sources of competitive advantages when they are possessed by many rival organizations. This means that resources must be rare or specific to a given organization and not widely distributed among an industry (R). Furthermore, for valuable and rare organizational resources to be sources of sustained competitive advantages they have to be difficult to be obtained or replicated by rival organizations (I). This can be caused through unique historical conditions that lead to the possession of a resource (history), causally ambiguous understanding by rivals of the valuable resources (ambiguity), difficulty to acquire certain resources (complexity) and legal prevention of acquiring resources (patents) (ibid.). Finally, for resources to be the basis of sustainable competitive advantages, there must be an organization in place that exploits the full competitive potential of the resources (O). This means that organizational structures have to function in an effective and efficient way to capitalize a valuable, rare and not easily imitated resource. These criteria are often applied in determining the potential of organizational resources to be sources of sustained competitive advantages (De Witt & Meyer, 2014; Knott, 2015).

Managerial capabilities of rational resource selection and accumulation

According to the RBV, the essential task of management is making rational decisions related to obtaining and maintaining the right resources for implementing a value creating strategy not simultaneously being implemented by any current or potential competitors (Barney, 1991). These managerial choices about resource selection and accumulation are characterized by an economic rationality focused on efficiency, effectiveness and profitability (Oliver, 1997). In this regard, the RBV makes fundamental different assumptions about management than the NIT perspective. Whereas the NIT perspective motivates that management must conform to external social pressures for organizational legitimacy (Oliver, 1997), the RBV argues that management must make rational choices to optimize their competitive position relative to rival organizations.



Classic institutional theory: organizational character and value infusion

I continue my theoretical framework on VSCs by reintroducing CIT into organizational scholarship. Although conformity to institutional norms and rationally managing organizational resources seem important for VSCs' ability to flourish and survive, I argue that this ability is also likely to be the result of distinctive identities and values. For understanding these meso- and micro-institutional processes, CIT proves to be particularly valuable.

Introduction

CIT draws attention to the idea that organizations have value “beyond the technical requirements at hand” (Selznick, 1957, p. 17). Long-term organizational survival in this perspective is based on the organization being judged as a meaningful entity for the groups for whom they form a prominent part of everyday life (Selznick, 1957). As organizations become meaningful, they are to such a degree valued that their members “may even find it hard to imagine a life without” (Boin et al., 2021, p. 2). This is likely to increase an organization's chance of becoming immortal (Kaufman, 1976). When organizations are regarded as nonexpendable entities (Kraatz, 2009), it intrinsically motivates members, employees, clients or stakeholders to contribute to the organization's cause (Ansell et al., 2015; Boin et al., 2021). I contend that the value members attach to the organization beyond functional purposes, provides high potential in explaining VSCs' ability to thrive and endure. Schlesinger and Nagel (2015) point out that VSCs are not only “beneficial organizations for recreational activities”, but also “important identity vehicles for individuals” (p. 71). Most VSCs also contain members who are not involved (anymore) in sporting activities but still remain member out of loyalty to the club (Van der Roest, 2015). Especially in a sporting context, organizations are seen as fostering a deep sense of value for their members, driven by enthusiastic devotion to a sport, competition, or sports team (Oja & Bass, 2021; Oja et al., 2023).

While CIT gave way over time to NIT – with refocusing attention away from the individual organization to categories of organizations –, there is renewed attention to the insights of CIT (e.g. Boin et al., 2021; Greenwood & Hinings, 1996; Kraatz, 2009). This has resulted in Selznick's ‘classic institutionalism’ being described as newly alive and well (Kraatz, 2009; Raffaelli & Glynn, 2015) and used again to show and examine particular value-laden entities, often public organizations (e.g. Boin & Christensen, 2008; Boin et al., 2021). While the family of institutional theories revolves around the social context of organizations, the rise of NIT introduced a critical distinction between classic and neo-institutionalism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Whereas NIT understands organizations as loosely coupled arrays of standardized elements, CIT views organizations as organic wholes (Demers, 2007). In essence, CIT argues that organizations must be seen as political and symbolic systems with internalized moral beliefs and standards of conduct (Demers, 2007). As NIT prompted scholars to focus on field-level processes that led to homogeneous organizations, the idea that organizations have unique characteristics with their own internal logics for action came to be seen as old-fashioned (King, 2015). This resulted in institutions being redefined as existing outside the organization and inside the institutional environment. CIT's core idea that organizations become institutions when committed to a particular set of values and developing lives of their own, was mostly ignored or forgotten by the 1990s (King, 2015).



Institutionalization

CIT is primarily associated with Selznick's work on organizations (Hinings & Greenwood, 2015; King, 2015). Selznick acknowledges that organizations are essentially created as instruments to achieve specific goals. However, he stipulates that organizations can transform to vehicles through which people enact their own values (Selznick, 1957). Selznick defines this category of organizations as 'institutions'. In his view, an institution is more than an organization. It provides value "beyond the technical requirements at hand" to those groups that are essential for the organization to thrive and endure (Selznick, 1957, p.17). Institutions, then, refer to those organizations that are valued in the eyes of their stakeholders because they embody values that make life meaningful. As a result, institutions are considered to have enduring viability (Chandler, 2015). The ideal-type 'organization', in contrast to the 'institution', is simply an established mode of cooperation between two or more individuals. These organizations are devoid of character and "an expendable tool, a rational instrument engineered to do a job" (Selznick, 1957, p. 5). The organization is likely to be terminated "when its goals were achieved or its function became obsolete" (Kraatz, 2009, p. 62). Selznick argues that organizations can transform into institutions through commitment to a particular set of values and developing a distinctive self (Kraatz et al., 2016). This transformational process is referred to as institutionalization. Institutionalization is a deeply constraining process that is largely driven by social forces within the organization. As a result of this process, an anchored identity with "central, distinctive, and enduring" properties is formed which is referred to as an organization's character (Kraatz et al., 2016, p. 13). This contrasts with the NIT perspective. NIT views organizational identity not as an organizational phenomenon but rather as something that exists at the field level (Kraatz et al., 2016, p. 8). CIT also differs from the RBV perspective. While the RBV emphasizes bundles of resources (Barney, 1991), CIT argues that organizational character is the key factor that distinguishes organizations within the same organizational population.

Organizational character as central organizational process for thriving and enduring

In Selznick's view, organizational character is the basis for value attachment beyond functional purposes. According to Selznick, organizational character is an attribute of organizations which "is composed of habits, dependencies, interests, and values" (Selznick, 1994) that "breathe life into purely technical organizations" (Kraatz et al., 2016, p. 7). When members value the organization's character, they internalize the organization, view themselves part of a valued community and relate to the organization differently than to other organizations that lack these attributes (Besharov & Khurana, 2015). This means that the social structure of organizations is considered to determine organization's ability to thrive and endure. However, an important distinction must be made between CIT and NIT.

In the NIT perspective, the social structure is judged by its membership in socially constructed categories. These memberships are seen to define identity and presumed to be the basis by which organizations become legitimate, increase an organization's "commitment of internal participants and external constituents" and "protects the organization from having its conduct questioned" (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 349). In CIT, in contrast, the social structure is judged on the basis by which it inhibits values that make life meaningful for the groups for whom the organization forms a prominent part of everyday life (Selznick, 1957; 1992; 1996) as "something more than a socially engineered tool" (Kraatz et al., 2016, p. 8).



Managerial capabilities of developing, adapting and enduring organizational character

In Selznick's view, leadership is responsible for the task of transforming the organization from purely a technical tool into a meaningful and enduring organization (Raffaelli & Glynn, 2015). Leadership must offer "a guiding hand to a process that would otherwise occur more haphazardly" (Selznick, 1957, p. 27). In particular, the role of leadership is to infuse values into the fabric of organizations (Raffaelli & Glynn, 2015) and to overcome pressures that threaten the institutional values or integrity of the organization (Besharov & Khurana, 2015). Selznick realized that leaders have the tendency "to become preoccupied with technical matters and to lose sight of the broader values on which the success of the institution rests" (Besharov & Khurana, 2015, p. 10). To prevent this and ensure that values are built into the social structure of the organization, he warned leaders to be at risk of being absorbed by operational demands. His writings on leadership must therefore be viewed as a "pragmatic guide" for leaders to not concern themselves "only with the imperatives of administrative management that arise from the nature of organizations as technical systems, but also with the political, cultural, and value-laden demands central to the maintenance of the institutional system" (Besharov & Khurana, 2015, p. 10). Selznick describes leadership as the art of institution-building (Deemers, 2007) and considered leaders "statesmen... required to manage a wide complex of interests" (Selznick, 1957, p. 81).

2.4 Step 2: reflecting on the central concepts of the borrowed theories

What becomes apparent after studying the essentials of NIT, RBV and CIT, is that the three theories differ in what they consider critical processes for organizational survival. The three theories highlight different and sometimes contradictory macro, meso and micro processes that influence the ability of organizations to thrive and endure. I summarize these processes into (1) the internal dimension, which encompasses critical organizational processes that direct the behavior of members essential for survival; (2) the external dimension, which refers to the organization-environment relationships influencing survival; and (3) the dynamic dimension, which focuses on the dynamic capabilities that safeguard survival over time. Although all three theoretical perspectives are often used in sociology, organizational theory, strategic management, and sport management research, it is surprising that the underlying concepts and assumptions regarding long-term survival have never been adequately tested or scrutinized in the context of VSCs. Moreover, given that VSCs have distinctive features, it is questionable whether all identified macro, meso and micro processes apply to the context of VSCs in the same way as proposed by NIT, RBV and CIT.

Firstly, when I focus on the internal dimension, all three theories suggest that organizations rely on the behavior of organizational members or customers to achieve their goals. However, the three theories provide different interpretations of what this behavior entails. NIT seems to withhold from a clear conceptualization. The RBV and CIT provide different accounts of the critical behavior of organizational members, focusing on transactions and commitment of members. In contrast, due to the structural characteristics of VSCs as membership organizations, I contend that the most important behavior of members necessary for VSCs to thrive and endure must be operationalized as prosocial organizational behavior. In addition, the theories highlight various processes directing the behavior of organizational members or customers. NIT emphasizes socio-political legitimacy, while the RBV refers to



VRIO-resources and CIT to distinctive organizational values. I argue that a fusion of these processes is needed for theorizing how VSCs direct the behavior of their members towards prosocial actions. I will explain this in the next paragraph.

Secondly, deriving from the external dimension, all three theories show to be open system theories, conceiving organizations “as inhabitants of a larger system in which they operate and depend on for resources” (Baum & Rowley, 2017, p. 6). However, when it comes to defining the environment, NIT and CIT both emphasize the socially constructed nature of the (institutional) environment. In contrast, the RBV perceives the (task) environment as a competitive arena where members of an organizational population vie for limited resources. The conceptual difference between the institutional and task environment implies different interdependencies and appropriate responses of organizations. While NIT emphasizes the importance of conforming to institutional rules and norms for organizational survival, the RBV stipulates that the ability of organizations to thrive and endure is dependent on sustainable competitive advantages over rival organizations. Scholars agree that few environments are purely institutionalized or competitive (Tolbert, 1985; Zucker, 1987). Although VSCs seem to relate both to the institutional and task dimensions of the environment, I contend that due to the expressive meaning of sport, these dimensions need refinements. I will elaborate on this in the next section.

Third, emerging from the dynamic dimension, conflicting views arise. While the RBV is mainly a static perspective, NIT and CIT emphasize opposing dynamic capabilities for dealing with change. In organizational theory, dynamic capability is referred to as the capability of an organization to purposefully engage in “adapting, integrating, and reconfiguring internal and external organizational skills, resources, and functional competences toward changing environment” (Teece & Pisano, 2003, p. 1). The core idea of NIT is that organizational survival is enhanced by legitimacy. Legitimacy, in turn, results from conforming to institutional norms, which demonstrate to audiences that the organization is acting in a desirable, proper, and appropriate manner (Deephouse, 1996; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In contrast, without discounting the importance of macro-institutional processes for organizations, CIT stipulates that organizations also have an internal world with core values and beliefs. This internal world functions as input for how organizations should respond to their external environment. In particular, CIT considers organizational change dangerous when it disrupts core values and practices that shape organizational character and affect member commitment. For safeguarding VSCs’ continuous existence, I argue that dynamic capabilities of both adaptation and stability are important. VSCs are in a continuous state of membership flux, warranting the need to simultaneously defend organizational values and responsively adapt the organization to changing circumstances. This will be further theorized in the following paragraph.



Table 2.1 Summary of NIT, RBV and CIT's essentials.

Theory	System perspective	Essence of organizational survival	Critical behavior of organizational members	Environmental dimension	Dynamic capabilities	Managerial capabilities
NIT	Open-natural	Socio-political legitimacy		Institutional	Institutional conformity	Conformity to institutional environment
RBV	Rational-open	VRIO-resources	Transactions	Task		Rational decisions
CIT	Natural-open	Organizational character	Commitment	Institutional	Institutional integrity	Political leadership

2.5 Step 3: additional literature search

I continue my effort to theorize the core organizational processes enabling VSCs to thrive and endure, based on an additional literature review. In this review, the three dimensions (internal, external, and dynamic) of organizational survival that I earlier constructed, function as main focus. To understand the behaviors of members essential for the survival of VSCs, I first delved into the organizational behavior literature. This seemed useful, as this stream specifically focuses on human behavior within an organizational context. Within this stream, the concept of prosocial organizational behavior appeared to be particularly relevant for VSCs. To refine the external dimension of VSCs, I explored the sport management literature on the environment of sports organizations. Based on this exploration, I found that multiple institutional logics and competitive balance are key concepts for sports organizations and useful to include in my theoretical framework. Finding relevant literature on the dynamic capabilities of VSCs was more challenging. By using responsiveness and stability as a starting point, I eventually identified various concepts related to dynamic capabilities of responsiveness from strategic management, cultural transmission from the anthropological perspective, and social transmission from the ecology of affiliation perspective. By blending these additional concepts with the assumptions of the three centralized theories, a theoretical framework results with testable hypotheses about how VSCs thrive and endure. These hypotheses allow me to empirically scrutinize the framework in the next part of my dissertation.

Constructing the internal dimension of VSCs

The distinctive features of VSCs, together with the assumptions of the centralized theories, determine how the internal dimension – critical organizational processes that direct the behavior of organizational members necessary for organizational survival – is to be constructed. To fill in the theoretical gaps within this dimension, it is worthwhile to turn to organizational behavior scholarship about prosocial organizational behavior, social exchange theory (SET) and social identity theory (SIT). Organizational behavior scholarship is concerned with explaining human behavior within an organizational context.



Prosocial organizational behavior of members

As membership-based organizations, VSCs represent a particular organizational form in which members act as both consumers and producers of the value they seek to derive (Horch, 1998). VSCs “primarily rely on member-paid fees for revenues” (Misener et al., 2020, p. 592). And although the number of VSCs employing paid staff has increased over the past decade, they continue to depend predominantly on volunteers to fulfill administrative and operational tasks (Hoeijmakers, 2022; Misener et al., 2020; Nagel et al., 2015; 2020). Scholars consistently highlight voluntary work as a vital resource for the sustainability and functioning of VSCs (e.g., Hallmann & Fairley, 2018; Nichols, 2017; Vos et al., 2012). This implies that in the context of VSCs, member involvement is the constitutional element of how the organization functions (e.g. Cuskelly, 2004; Emrich et al. 2014; Nagel et al., 2015; 2020; Østerlund, 2012; Schlesinger & Nagel, 2013). While paying membership fees is a formal requirement of membership, members’ roles within the VSCs are often not explicitly formalized but involve various normatively expected activities (Heinemann, 2004). The concept of prosocial organizational behavior is therefore highly relevant, as it highlights the critical behaviors of organizational members necessary for VSCs to thrive and endure. Prosocial organizational behavior refers to behavior that cannot be enforced by the organization (McNeely & Meglino, 1994), goes beyond specified role requirements (Brief & Motowidlo, 1986) and is “deemed necessary for effective organizational functioning” (Rodriguez-Montoya et al., 2021, p. 193). As such it is similar with the concept of organizational citizenship behavior (McNeely & Meglino, 1994; Rodriguez-Montoya et al., 2021). While its interpretation may vary across organizational contexts, in the context of VSCs, Misener et al. (2020) identify member loyalty, volunteering, and positive word-of-mouth about the club as key forms of prosocial organizational behavior.

Member-organization relationships

Nowadays, two perspectives have been extensively used in the organizational behavior literature to understand and explain how prosocial organizational behavior results (Van Knippenberg, 2011): social exchange theory (SET) and social identity theory (SIT). Both perspectives provide a well-supported theoretical mechanism for how and why relationships between the organization and members are formed (Tavares et al., 2016). Although SET and SIT differ in the mechanisms that drive prosocial organizational behavior, I consider both perspectives crucial for theorizing the key processes underlying this behavior in the context of VSCs. The research of Schlesinger and Nagel (2015, p. 71) makes it clear that VSCs are “both beneficial organizations for recreational activities and important identity vehicles for individuals”. This highlights the importance of integrating both perspectives, as SET emphasizes the need to provide club goods that align with members’ interests to sustain their involvement, while SIT focuses on the creation of social identities that foster member engagement.

Social Exchange Theory

SET posits that individuals direct reciprocal actions toward the source of received benefits (Blau, 1964). It extends beyond the traditional homo economicus framework by accounting for a wider range of exchanges, including those shaped by emotional, relational, and non-rational considerations (ibid.). Unlike for-profit organizations, where customer rela-



onships are typically grounded in straightforward quid pro quo economic exchanges, research indicates that member–organization relationships within VSCs are based on broader, more multifaceted forms of exchange. From an economic view, VSCs act as providers of club goods (Wicker et al., 2014), defined as ownership-membership arrangements (Buchanan, 1965; Sandler & Tschirhart, 1997) that fall outside the scope of provision by the state or the market (Anheier, 2014; Weisbrod, 1988). Club goods refer to all shared benefits of membership of a VSC that are exclusively available to the members of that VSC. Scholars have established that club goods encompass various facets of membership benefits. These benefits appear to include club goods that extend beyond the traditional focus on tangible products (hardware) and sports opportunities and activities (orgware) (e.g., Kolbl et al., 2022; Nagel, 2008; Schijns et al., 2016; Schlesinger & Nagel, 2015). These scholars instead adopt a social exchange perspective, emphasizing the importance of social relationships (software) as key components of membership benefits. The RBV can be situated within the broader social exchange perspective, as it conceptualizes organizations as instruments for facilitating exchanges with stakeholders. As a rational perspective, the RBV assumes that members require strong incentives to invest their financial resources and time in the organization.

Within the logic of SET, the networks in which members are embedded is an important factor influencing prosocial organizational behavior (Scott et al., 2018). This follows out of a social network perspective. Whereas traditional approaches in the social sciences focus on autonomous and independent organizational members, a social network perspective points out the importance of relationships between organizational members. Since organizational life within membership organizations is full of opportunities to develop relationships, it is likely that members become deeply embedded in organizational network structures (Ibarra, 1993). Research has shown that the nature of member networks influences a range of outcomes, including prosocial organizational behavior (Scott et al., 2018). The more embedded a member is within an organization's social network, the more likely they are to engage in prosocial behaviors – aimed at maintaining, strengthening, or expanding their social ties and benefiting from the associated advantages (Scott et al., 2018).

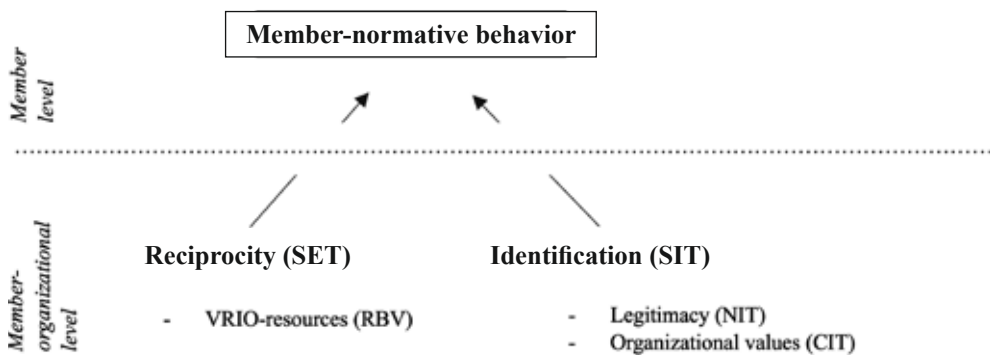
Social Identity Theory

While SET considers members and organizations to be separate parties connected through rational and relational transactions, SIT indicates that prosocial organizational behavior results from them being unified into a joint entity (Liu et al., 2022). The core idea of SIT is that social groups can be internalized by members and become part of their self-definition. Drawing from Ashforth et al.'s (2008) work on identification with various categories, the social identification literature points out that individuals can identify with multiple targets (or foci of identification) within their social context. Organizational identification is a specific form of social identification that relates to a membership of an organization and occurs when members define themselves in terms of the organization as a social category (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Members who strongly identify with their organization incorporate the collective interest and perform prosocial organizational behavior because their organizational membership is central to their sense of who they are (Avanzi et al., 2013; Tavares et al., 2016). Especially in the sporting context, organizations are seen as key facilitators of collective identities, driven by passionate commitment to a sport, competition, or team (Oja

et al., 2023). Special attention has already been given to various collective identities in the context of VSCs that transcend the traditional organizational focus in SIT research. Besides organizational identities (Kolbl et al., 2022; Schlesinger & Nagel, 2013; 2015), that relates to a VSC membership (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), scholars have shown that individuals develop a sense of identification and belonging to a specific sports team (Buser et al., 2024) or the overall sport (Hoeijmakers & Steenbergen, 2024).

The two institutional theories (NIT and CIT) can be categorized to fall in the social identity perspective. They emphasize organizational identity as a key factor in why stakeholders perceive organizations as worthwhile investments of their time and money. For this to result, organizations need to meet expectations that are considered appropriate for the organizational type (NIT) and to develop a distinctive identity full of values (CIT). With the concept of legitimacy, NIT considers cultural norms to be a crucial aspect of organizational identity (Gioia et al., 2013). When organizations conform to “the minimum standards of a particular social identity prototype”, they can be judged to be part of that socially constructed category (King & Whetten, 2008, p. 192). As a result, the organization becomes “linked to the crucial social and cognitive mechanisms through which assessments of legitimacy and reputation emerge” (King & Whetten, 2008, p. 194). CIT revolves around central, distinctive and continuous elements of organizational identity. Thus, with their focus on legitimacy, NIT emphasizes the importance of the isomorphic or sameness aspect of organizational identity (Gioia & Hamilton, 2016), while CIT emphasizes differences between organizations.

Figure 2.1 The internal dimension of VSCs based on the three borrowed theories and additional concepts (bold).



Constructing the external dimension of VSCs

The distinctive features of VSCs, together with the assumptions of the centralized theories, also determine how the external dimension – organization-environment relationships influencing organizational survival – is to be constructed. Due to the expressive and instrumental meaning of sport, the organization-environment relationships influencing organizational survival as proposed by NIT, the RBV and CIT need to be tailored to the specific context of VSCs. Based on the sport management literature about the environment of sports



organizations, two concepts need to be included for understanding VSCs' institutional and task environment: the concept of institutional logics and of competitive balance.

Multiple institutional logics

In the last decades, NIT scholars have developed the concept of institutional logics to identify what desirable, proper and appropriate behavior of organizations entails. This concept revolves around the idea that the institutional environment of organizations exists out of different institutional logics (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton & Ocasio, 1999). Institutional logics are “assumptions and values, usually implicit, about how to interpret organizational reality, what constitutes appropriate behavior, and how to succeed” (Kraatz et al., 2016, p. 8). These cultural accounts of appropriate behavior are constructed within an institutional context through a collective cognitive acceptance by which “social processes, obligations, or actualities come to take on a rule-like status in social thought and action” (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 341). The institutional logics perspective departs from the idea that society is composed of different institutions which all exhibit a specific logic of what entails good, right and rational behavior (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton et al., 2012). Friedland and Alford (1991) identified the bureaucratic state, democracy, the market, the nuclear family, and Christian religion as the pillar institutions of the western world. Later Thornton et al. (2012) posited family, community, religion, state, market, profession and corporation as seven ideal-typical institutions with an own logic. According to NIT, conforming to these institutional logics increases organizations' ability to thrive and endure. This happens as organizations gain legitimacy and taken-for-grantedness by incorporating practices and actions that are seen as the only natural way of acting within the institutional context (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

Although the institutional logics perspective has frequently been applied in the sport management literature (Washington & Patterson, 2011), it has primarily been used to examine how VSCs align with assumptions and values regarding the externalities of sport in their environment. However, in order to properly understand the institutional environment of VSCs, it is necessary to view sport as an ideal-typical institution with an institutional logic of its own. Recently, Gammelsæter (2021, p. 258) argued that we should define sport as an ideal-typical institution with an internal logic “that is conceptually separate from those that seek to benefit from its external effects, be it as industry or public policy”. Sports activities primarily gain their meaning when they are viewed from the logic of the sports world. Sport is characterized by a non-rational logic, revolving around a fixed group of people deciding to refrain themselves from using more efficient means to achieve goals (Steenbergen, 2004). Competitive play is at the center of this logic (Gammelsæter, 2021; Steenbergen, 2004). From competitive play stems “the pyramidal structure(s) of sport, the membership model, games, races and tournaments, trophies, awards, and sport's autonomy and integrity” (Gammelsæter, 2021, p. 265). For those who look at sport from a different rationality and seek its purpose and enjoyment outside the sport itself, the same activity can appear as useless or dangerous (Van Bottenburg, 2018). As a result, sport can only be understood from its own socially constructed logic and therefore distinguishes itself from other social spheres.

By conceptualizing sport as an ideal-typical institution, we may understand the institutional field of VSCs to be a social space influenced and formed by competing logics.



This competition is between different rationalities about sport. For example, Van der Roest (2015) uses the concept of different institutional logics to explain how market principles have penetrated the organizational field of VSCs. Because policymakers often make the comparison between VSCs and commercial sport providers, they pressure VSCs to organize their VSC more in accordance with the institutional logic of the market. In addition, Waardenburg (2016a) shows in his dissertation that the institutional logic of public organizations is penetrating the organizational field of VSCs. Due to the public value of VSCs, policymakers are stimulating VSCs to act as policy implementers (Nagel et al., 2020; Skille, 2008; Vos et al., 2011; Waardenburg, 2016a). It follows that VSCs' institutional environment is composed of multiple institutional logics. According to Van Eekeren (2016), it is undesirable to follow one particular institutional logic. Instead, Van Eekeren argues that VSCs should combine different logics to thrive and endure.

An arena of cooptation instead of competition

For membership organizations such as VSCs, the most critical resource in competition is the limited time and attention of their members (McPherson, 1983; Popielarz & McPherson, 1995). Given that individuals have finite time and other resources to allocate to organizational involvement, VSCs face ongoing competitive pressures (McPherson, 1983). Every environment has limited resources, and each organizational population faces an upper limit on the number of organizations that can operate viably within it. This ceiling is referred to as the carrying capacity of the population (Boone & Van Witteloostuijn, 1995). With few organizations in a population, competition for scarce resources is limited. However, as the number of competitors rises, competition intensifies, and organizations begin to diminish each other's ability to thrive and endure (Hannan & Freeman, 1977).

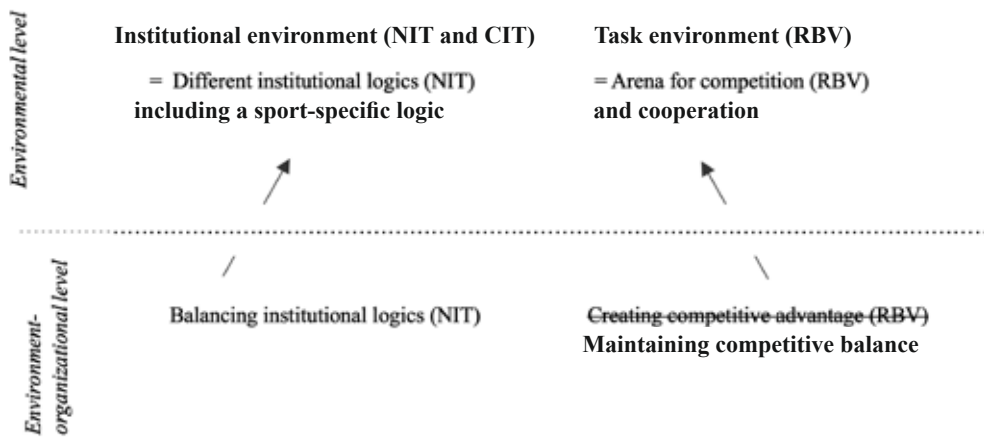
Although VSCs compete with other organizations for scarce resources to ensure success and survival, competitive dynamics in the context of VSCs differ from those in business organizations. Unlike business organizations, competition in VSCs does not presuppose hostility, but rather something that can generate benefits for both parties. One of the idiosyncratic elements of sport is that sporting competitions are only able to take place when opponents compete with each other under equal conditions (Wemmer et al., 2016). In order to achieve this, VSCs of almost all major sports worldwide are embedded in “a competition pyramid that is inextricably bound with a cooperation pyramid, both presupposing the other” (Gammelsæter, 2021, p. 267). Cooperation between competitors is necessary for organizing tournaments, standardizing rules and competition formats and for enforcing rules. Most VSCs are part of a pyramid model, embedded in a network of other VSCs, regional sport federations, national umbrella sport organizations and European and/or international sport federations (Hoeijmakers, 2022). This means that in addition to a carrying capacity which is an upper bound of organizations that are able to viably operate in a population (Boone & Van Witteloostuijn, 1995), VSCs also deal with a necessary minimum capacity of the population. VSCs require competitors for their ability to thrive and endure. A lack or low density of competitors, lowers VSCs' ability to flourish and survive as there are less opponents. This increases travel distances, reduces the number of opponents in tournaments or leagues, increases the level difference and makes competitions less attractive.

The necessity for other VSCs, implies that VSCs need to maintain a competitive balance with other VSCs. Competitive balance is a well-known concept in the literature about



professional sports organizations. Rottenberg (1956) noted that a unique attribute of the professional sports industry is that competitors must be of approximately equal ability if any are to be successful. How this works for VSCs is not yet explored. Deephouse (1999) developed a theory of strategic balance, arguing that organizations “should be as different as legitimately possible” (p. 247). One method for this is to embrace a high degree of similarity to be attractive and a recognizable part of the community, while also fostering a distinct identity from their rivals (Deephouse, 1999; Villadsen, 2013). Precise identification of the strategic balance point requires a better understanding of the underlying relationships among similarity and competition. Further development of a theory of strategic balance can help to better understand the trade-offs between conformity and differentiation (Deephouse, 1999; Villadsen, 2013).

Figure 2.2 The external dimension of VSCs based on the three borrowed theories and additional concepts (bold).



Constructing the dynamic dimension of VSCs

The distinctive features of VSCs, along with the assumptions of the centralized theories, also shape how the dynamic dimension – dynamic capabilities that safeguard organizational survival – is to be constructed. VSCs are membership organizations with open boundaries (Ziller, 1965). As new members are continuously added and current members are lost, the composition of VSCs is always redefined. This results in a continuous state of membership flux (Arrow & McGrath, 1993), which is regarded as “an integral part of the dynamics of voluntary associations” (McPherson & Rotolo, 1996, p. 180). Membership flux imposes serious challenges. Since prosocial organizational behavior is crucial for VSCs, they have to organize these changing group dynamics. Scholars from membership change research agree that membership change should be viewed “as a significant event” (Trainer et al., 2020, p. 223) that impacts the functioning of an organization. According to Arrow and McGrath, “when the membership of a group changes, whether the change involves the arrival of new members, temporary absences, permanent departures, turnover and replacement, or the



occasional participation of irregular members, such as guests, other aspects of the group's functioning are bound to change as well" (1993, p. 335). Li and Van Knippenberg (2021) indicate that with new members or members that are leaving, a group's cognition, interaction patterns and interpersonal relationships are influenced. Due to this continuous state of membership flux, the dynamic capabilities proposed by NIT and CIT should be refined for VSCs. I turn to strategic management for ideas about dynamic capabilities of responsiveness, and to anthropological theory and ecology of affiliation for concepts that explain stability.

Dynamic conservatism

With the emergence of open system thinking, it has become almost a fundamental principle of organizational science that organizations must adapt in order to align with a changing environment (Demers, 2007). In contemporary organizational theory "flexibility and responsiveness are the name of the game" (Ansell et al., 2015, p. 90). However, what is missing in current scholarship but seems crucial for understanding VSCs' ability to thrive and endure, is how organizations maintain its functioning during shifting cohorts of members (Stokvis, n.d.). To understand this, the concept of dynamic conservatism, as proposed by Ansell et al. (2015), seems relevant. The essence of dynamic conservatism revolves around how organizations keep aligned with a changing environment "while remaining true to core values and competences" (ibid., p. 91). For this, organizations should "simultaneously defend organizational values (conservatism) and responsively adapt the organization to the on-going problems it confronts (dynamism)" (ibid., p. 107). This is "not change for change's sake but a way to preserve what is valuable and to stay true to proven principles and practices" (ibid., p. 108). Although their concept is useful for VSCs, Ansell et al. (2015) remain vague in specifying what capabilities are necessary for dynamic conservatism. It is therefore necessary to include concepts that theorize how change and stability can be achieved during membership flux.

Change through dynamic capabilities of responsiveness

Dynamic capabilities theory emerged as an extension on the RBV to address the need to respond to changing environments. Dynamic capabilities theory argues that sustainable competitive advantages do not only result from the ability of organizations to acquire valuable, rare, inimitable and non-substitutable (VRIO) resources (Barney, 1991), but also depend on dynamic capabilities to develop or reconfigure these resources to adapt to a changing environment (Teece et al., 1997; Teece, 2007). Teece (2007) identifies three processes that underlie these dynamic capabilities: sensing, seizing, and transforming. Sensing is about how organizations spot new opportunities, and is "a scanning, creation, learning and interpretive activity" (Teece, 2007, p. 1322). Seizing refers to executing the sensed opportunity, while transforming entails the "ability to recombine and reconfigure assets and organizational structures" in order to stay agile (Teece, 2007, p. 1335). According to Teece (2007, p. 1323) the organization will be vulnerable if these processes are "left to the cognitive traits of a few individuals", arguing to embed them into the organization. While dynamic capabilities theory has been widely applied in research on business organizations, recent studies highlight its relevance for the context of VSCs as well (Gerke et al., 2022). Gerke et al. (2022) demonstrate that VSCs maintain alignment with changing environments



through sensing, seizing, and transforming processes. Furthermore, they argue that only VSCs capable of transferring these capabilities from managers to the organization can sustain them over the long term.

Stability through cultural transmission

Organizational culture is often regarded a critical element in the management of organizations, holding shared values together over generations. Anthropologists and sociologists already have been studying the concept of culture for a while, resulting in different definitions. In most definitions, culture is used to explain the existence of collective patterns of thinking and behavior that applies to a group or a collective (Demers, 2007). Schein (1990) distinguishes three levels of culture: artefacts (such as symbols and rituals or shared behavior patterns), values (beliefs about why things are the way they are) and an underlying pattern of assumptions (implicit, taken-for-granted ideas). In anthropology, the concept of culture is mainly used explaining the stability of communities. In a similar fashion, Schein stipulates that culture also marks permanence of organizations. According to Schein “cultural assumptions are the things that survive through successive generations” (1990, p. 57), implying stability. At the same time, culture is also dynamic, “as new conditions arise and as new members with different beliefs, values, and norms enter the group, there will inevitably be both reinforcement and change” (Schein, 2010, p. 10).

Although much has been written about organizational culture, relatively little scholarship focused on its transmission. This is surprising, considering that the persistence of organizational culture is based on its transmission (Cavalli-Sforza & Feldman, 1981). Furthermore, cultural transmission is believed to be more challenging in organizational settings than in other cultural systems, such as societies and groups. In organizational settings, members “come and go more quickly, in larger relative numbers, and with less overlap in their periods of membership” (Harrisson & Carrol, 1991, p. 553). To understand the transmission of culture in organizational settings, Harrisson and Carrol (1991) developed a cultural transmission model for formal organizations. The essence of the model revolves around a tradeoff between “socialization intensity relative to demographic flow” (ibid., p. 554). Socialization refers to a process by which both new and incumbent members are made aware of the value system, the norms, and the required behavior patterns of the organization which he is entering or already part of (Schein, 1990). If the socialization intensity is high enough, culture can be maintained even with high turnover and newcomers. Stokvis (n.d.) also regards the tradeoff between recruitment and socialization as two fundamental, interrelated mechanisms, ensuring VSCs to exist longer than its members.

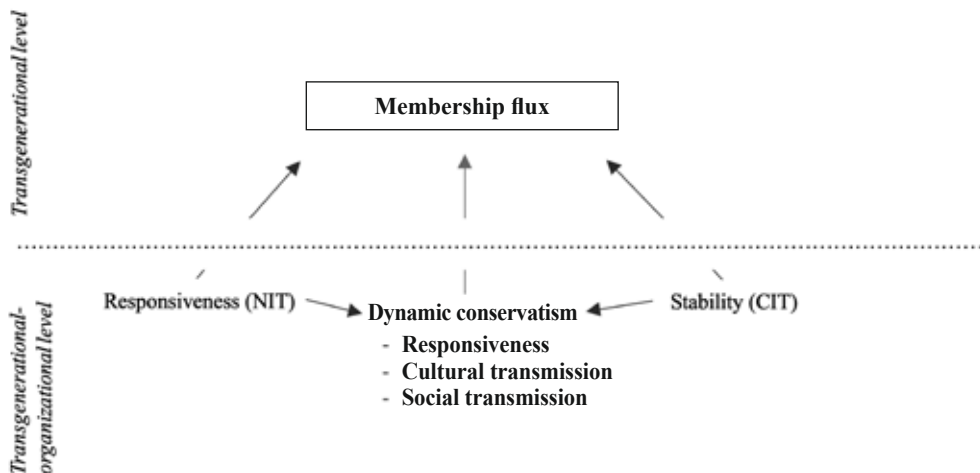
Stability through social transmission

Another approach for theorizing how organizations safeguard their existence across shifting cohorts of members, is to draw on ecology of affiliation theory about social transmission. Based on a combination of social network thought and population ecology, McPherson formulated a theory of voluntary groups’ dynamic behavior. The likelihood of social interaction to occur more between similar individuals is the theory’s main assumption. This is known as the ‘homophily principle’ (Popielarz & McPherson, 1995), holding very generally across time, space and for most types of social network ties, including VSCs (Van Haaften, 2022). It is therefore argued to be one of the few rules known to organize social networks



(McPherson et al., 2001). The theory's key implication for VSCs is that homophily within voluntary groups is naturally preserved across changing cohorts of members, as selection and retention are driven by social network ties. Voluntary groups such as VSCs mainly recruit new members through the network ties of their members (Babchuk & Booth, 1969), implying – following the homophily principle –, that those friends and acquaintances who join the group will be very similar to the members already in the group. As a result, new members reduplicate the sociodemographic traits of incumbent members. Furthermore, voluntary groups lose members with less overlap in sociodemographic characteristics faster than those members who are more similar. To understand this process, McPherson (1983) introduced the mechanisms of niche-edge and niche-overlap between groups of people. Through the niche-edge mechanism, voluntary groups lose fastest those members who are atypical of the group. According to Popielarz and McPherson (1995), “for individuals at the center of the niche, the group is an integral part of the social structure of relations” (p. 704). However, “for those at the edge of the niche, the group divides the social world rather than reinforces it” (ibid., p. 704). Additionally, through the niche-overlap mechanism, members in demand of multiple social groups, leave the group more quickly than members in less demand (Popielarz & McPherson, 1995). This means that homophily implies some level of structural stability in social groups.

Figure 2.3 The dynamic dimension of VSCs based on the two borrowed theories and additional concepts (bold).



2.6 Step 4: finalizing the theoretical framework

In the final step, I complete my systems-theoretical framework by hypothesizing the core organizational processes enabling VSCs to thrive and endure. Given the distinctive nature of VSCs' structures – which are designed not only to deliver club goods but also to contribute to broader public interests while fostering diffuse, expressive relationships (Horch, 1998) – a combination of the assumptions underlying NIT, RBV, and CIT is considered



most relevant for understanding the core processes of VSCs. However, as elaborated upon extensively, it seems crucial to combine these assumptions with concepts of prosocial organizational behavior from organizational behavior theory, multiple institutional logics and competitive balance from sport management, dynamic capabilities from strategic management, cultural transmission from anthropology, and social transmission from the ecology of affiliation perspective.

As a result of this conceptual blending approach, I contend that VSCs represent a distinct type of organization, fundamentally different from business, public, and membership organizations in other sectors of society. This distinction arises because prosocial organizational behavior of members is critical for VSCs to thrive and endure. This behavior results from the value members derive from club goods and the identification processes that occur between members and the VSC. Furthermore, due to the dual expressive and instrumental meaning of sport, VSCs operate within an institutional environment, involving multiple institutional logics. These logics include governmental assumptions and values about the societal benefits of sport, as well as a sport-specific logic centered on competitive play. Additionally, since a competitive pyramid is essential for competitive play, VSCs must also maintain a competitive balance with other VSCs. And finally, VSCs are in a continuous state of membership flux, requiring them to organize shifting group dynamics. To navigate this, VSCs must defend organizational values while adapting responsively to changing circumstances. This balancing act necessitates dynamic capabilities – sensing, seizing, and transforming – as well as stability, achieved through cultural and social transmission.

This theoretical framework leads to the following hypotheses regarding VSCs' core processes to thrive and endure:

VSCs are a distinct type of organization with organizational structures that differ fundamentally from those of business, public, and membership organizations in other sectors, due to the following interrelated core processes that enable VSCs to thrive and endure:

- A) *VSCs attain their goals through the prosocial organizational behavior of members, which stems from the value members derive from club goods and the identification processes that occur between members and the VSC.*
- B) *VSCs engage with multiple institutional logics.*
- C) *VSCs maintain a competitive balance with competitors.*
- D) *VSCs have dynamic capabilities that balance responsiveness and stability.*

In the following chapters (3-5), the theoretical assumptions underlying this framework are empirically tested in the context of VSCs. To approach this in a structured way, each chapter focuses on one of the three organizational theories – NIT, RBV, CIT – that are considered most relevant for understanding the core processes enabling VSCs to thrive and endure. These theories are blended with additional concepts to make them applicable to the VSC context, as outlined in the theoretical framework. This approach enables testing of the hypotheses I have formulated in this chapter regarding how VSCs thrive and endure, alongside a critical reflection on the relevance of these three organizational theories for VSCs. To this end, both cross-sectional and longitudinal panel data from Dutch VSCs (2007-2021) are analyzed, complemented by a multiple case study of four Dutch voluntary tennis clubs,

each with distinct club goods and identities, and located in close proximity. Chapter 3 focuses on NIT, examining whether conformity to institutional norms is essential for VSCs to thrive and endure, in order to provide insight into Hypothesis B. Chapter 4 focuses on the RBV, examining which club goods management should strategically prioritize in the allocation of resources, thereby informing Hypotheses A, C, and D. Chapter 5 delves into CIT, assessing the significance of developing collective identities for VSCs to offer additional insight into Hypotheses A, C, and D. The theoretical (Chapter 2) and empirical insights (Chapters 3-5) together will form the foundation for conceptualizing a coherent set of inter-related core processes that enable VSCs to thrive and endure, as outlined in Chapter 6.



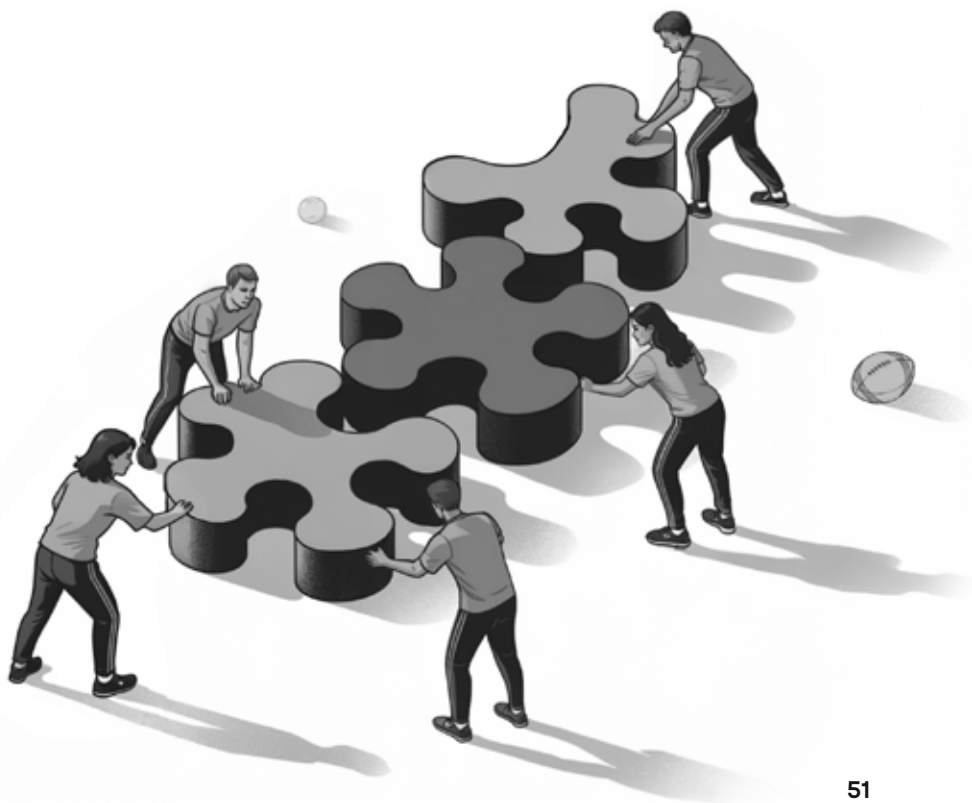
Part three:

Empirical

results about the

theoretical

underpinnings



Chapter 3

Conformity to institutional logics: A Neo-Institutional View¹

3.1 Introduction

In Chapter 1, I outlined that VSCs emerged as cooperative entities, formed through members pooling their resources to pursue club goods, making them highly dependent on member-contributed resources such as membership fees and voluntary labor (e.g., Nagel, 2008; Nagel et al., 2015; 2020). Club goods refer to all benefits of a VSC membership – such as sports and social activities – that are exclusively available to members (Heinemann, 2004; Wicker et al., 2014). Additionally, I showed that VSCs are increasingly subject to public expectations and cannot be understood in isolation from their broader context (Breuer, 2005; Nagel et al., 2015). From a societal perspective, VSCs are not only seen as a tool for achieving public goals – such as health, social integration, or character development – but are also evaluated in the context of the values and norms that dominate society. While much research has already shown that norms that dominate society influence the behavior of VSCs (e.g. Skille, 2011a; Skirstad & Chelladurai, 2011; Stenling & Fahlén, 2009; Vos et al., 2011), the importance of conforming to these norms for VSCs' ability to thrive and endure, and their implications for management, remains unclear.

Neo-institutional theory suggests that when an organization is viewed as legitimate, odds of survival are increased (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Oliver, 1991; Suchman, 1995). Central to this perspective is the notion of legitimacy (Kraatz et al., 2016) which is “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Legitimacy is a social construction of meaning by a collective audience that accepts or endorses the organization's actions and identity as rational, valid and reasonable because these are congruent with the collective's cultural beliefs, norms, values and expectations for action (Deephouse, 1996; Galaskiewicz, 1985; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Organizational legitimacy must therefore be understood as a general status of understandability and taken-for-grantedness conferred by a collective group (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Suchman, 1995). According to neo-institutional theorists legitimacy leads to organizational survival because audiences are most inclined to supply resources to organizations that appear desirable, proper or appropriate (Parsons, 1960; Suchman, 1995). Furthermore, it is argued that audiences perceive legitimate organizations as “more meaningful, more predictable, and more trustworthy” (Suchman, 1995, p. 575). Legitimacy therefore empowers organizations by making them seem meaningful and natural (Suchman, 1995) and “a sine qua non for easy access to resources, unrestricted access to markets, and long-term survival” (Brown, 1998, p. 35).

The core idea of neo-institutional theory is that organizations pursue legitimacy by conforming to institutional norms that demonstrates that the organization is acting in a desirable, proper and appropriate manner and audiences should evaluate it as legitimate (Deephouse, 1996; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In the last decades, neo-institutional theory has



included the concept of different institutional logics to understand various organizational field processes. The institutional logics perspective bridges the gap between institutional norms and organizational actions (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008) and has often been adopted in the sport management literature (Washington & Patterson, 2011). According to this perspective, the institutional field of organizations can be characterized by institutional logics (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton & Ocasio, 1999) which are cultural accounts (Meyer et al., 1987) about what constitutes appropriate behavior (Thornton, 2004). The literature indicates that institutional logics can be seen as a resource for organizational identity construction (Gioia & Hamilton, 2016) and can endow organizations with meaning and legitimacy (Glynn, 2017). Substantial research has shown that institutional conformity increases the survival chances of corporate and public organizations (e.g. D'Aunno et al., 1991; Deephouse, 1996; Ruef & Scott, 1998; Singh et al., 1986).

Sports organizations are argued to be highly impacted by its institutional environment (Washington & Patterson, 2011) and much research has shown the presence of institutional pressures and logics in the sport context (e.g. O'Brien & Slack, 2004; Skille, 2011a; Slack & Hinings, 1994; Stenling & Fahlén, 2009; Vos et al., 2011). In the institutional field of Dutch VSCs three institutional logics can be identified that affect VSCs (Boessenkool et al., 2011). In the last decades, VSCs are increasingly being stimulated by policymakers and sport federations to professionalize (Boessenkool et al., 2011; Nichols et al., 2015; Perck et al., 2016; Seippel, 2019), to broaden their services (Van der Roest et al., 2015) and to contribute to the realization of government policy (Nagel et al., 2020; Skille, 2008; Vos et al., 2011; Waardenburg, 2016a). From a neo-institutional perspective, VSCs are expected to conform to these institutional logics in the search for legitimacy. However, VSCs are at the same time characterized by a resistance to change (Janssens, 2011; Thiel & Meier, 2004) and a traditional association logic that seems to clash with the three institutional logics (Ibsen & Seippel, 2010). This raises the question if and under what conditions VSCs have actually conformed to the institutional logics of professionalism, consumerism and instrumentalism and whether conformity to these logics contributes to organizational legitimacy and resources as the neo-institutional perspective implies. As the neo-institutional theory is a major theory in sport management, it is surprising that in sport management research it has yet to be answered whether sports organizations that conform to institutional pressures indeed have greater strength and survivability than sports organizations that do not (Washington & Patterson, 2011).

This article examines if Dutch VSCs have conformed to the institutional logics in their field by becoming more professional, consumerist and instrumental as it can be expected in their search for legitimacy. Furthermore, it scrutinizes the central assumption of both neo-institutional theory and Dutch sport policy by examining whether VSCs that respond to the institutional logics have more organizational strength and resources than VSCs that do not. It is furthermore analyzed whether institutional conditions influence the likelihood of conformity. Cross-sectional and longitudinal panel data of Dutch VSCs between 2007 and 2021 are used to examine these questions.

3.2 Theoretical expectations

Conforming to institutional logics

According to the neo-institutional view, organizations seek legitimacy and taken-for-grantedness through incorporating practices and actions that can be seen as the only natural way



of action within the institutional context. These taken-for-granted rules that shape practices and actions can be associated with institutional logics. Institutional logics are “assumptions and values, usually implicit, about how to interpret organizational reality, what constitutes appropriate behavior, and how to succeed” (Kraatz et al., 2016, p. 8). Institutional logics are constructed within an institutional context through a collective cognitive acceptance by which “social processes, obligations, or actualities come to take on a rule-like status in social thought and action” (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 341). In order to increase legitimacy, organizations adopt characteristics that are associated with the logics in their field. Thus conformity to institutional logics can be identified as it shapes organizational identity and processes of isomorphism because organizations resemble each other within a field by sharing characteristics that are deemed culturally appropriate (Kraatz et al., 2016). Through this process of isomorphism, a collective identity develops which defines the boundary between organizations that are considered meaningful and judged as legitimate and those that are not. Organizations that do not share these characteristics are considered to fail to fit into this category and to lose legitimacy and support (Kraatz et al., 2016).

In the institutional field of VSCs, three institutional logics can be identified that can be assumed to have shaped the organizational identity of VSCs in their seek for legitimacy and long-term survival. First, VSCs are highly stimulated to professionalize by stakeholders such as governments, sport federations and other external partners (Nagel et al., 2015) to be able to respond adequately to external developments such as consumeristic and instrumental pressures (Nagel et al., 2015; Seippel, 2019; Shilbury & Ferkins, 2011). Second, due to an increasing consumerist attitude and behavior among sport club members (Bodet, 2009; Enjolras, 2002; Ibsen & Seippel, 2010), policymakers and sport federations are putting pressure on VSCs to broaden their services to cater to the needs of consumerist members (Van der Roest et al., 2015) or sport-light participants (Borgers et al., 2016). As a result, a market logic where members are seen as consumers that pay a fee in return for a service, might be replacing the association logic where members are considered part of a collective that organizes the sport (Ibsen & Seippel, 2010; Van der Roest et al., 2015). Third, due to the increased awareness of the social benefits of sport, VSCs are increasingly used and steered by governments to act as policy implementers (Nagel et al., 2020; Skille, 2008; Vos et al., 2011; Waardenburg, 2016a). Governments in many countries develop specific policy programs and regard VSCs as project implementers within such programs (Waardenburg, 2016b).

In the last decade, Dutch VSCs were pressured to become more professional, consumeristic and instrumental (Boessenkool et al., 2011). DiMaggio and Powell (1983) distinguish three kinds of institutional pressures that are exerted on organizations to conform to their institutional environment: coercive, mimetic and normative pressures. Coercive pressures result from other organizations upon which they are dependent on and by cultural expectations from society. Mimetic pressures refer to the tendency of an organization in the face of uncertainty to imitate other organizations. And normative pressures are driven by professionalization that produces pressures to conform to legitimated professional practices. In the Netherlands all three pressures play a role. Governments highly stimulate VSCs to participate in policy programs by means of subsidies (Hoeijmakers, 2022; Van Waardenburg, 2016a). The broadening of services and professionalization is highly stimulated by all kinds of club support programs and services of local governments and sport federations (Van der



Roest et al., 2015). Furthermore, VSCs mime each other in their search of appropriate and effective actions and policies as they increasingly regard their future uncertain due to increasing problems and environmental changes (Hoeijmakers & Van Kalmthout, 2019b). Under these institutional pressures, VSCs are thus expected to have adopted practices and activities that meet expectations regarding a professional, consumeristic, and instrumental logic.

However, conforming to these three institutional logics is not embraced by all clubs as they seem to clash with the traditional association logic (Ibsen & Seippel, 2010). For example, it has been suggested that professionalization ignores the nature of club life, undermines the willingness to volunteer and makes sport unaffordable (Boessenkool et al., 2011; Cuskelly, 2004; Kim et al., 2007). Increased consumerism also encounters criticism: a consumerist attitude is said to contrast with the fundamental organizing principles of VSCs and therefore threatens their future (Enjolras, 2002; Ibsen & Seippel, 2010; Van der Roest, 2015). Increased instrumentality of VSCs, too, might be detrimental to the organization, as it is argued to be accompanied with greater expectations than VSCs are capable of, or to lead to a loss of identity (Nagel et al., 2015; Stokvis, 2010; Van der Roest et al., 2020). Furthermore, it is argued that VSCs exhibit a considerable resistance to change due to their structural conditions (Janssens, 2011; Thiel & Meier, 2004). It is therefore not self-evident that Dutch VSCs have actually conformed to the institutional logics of professionalism, consumerism and instrumentalism. A lack of conformity would be surprising as Dutch policy is highly aimed at stimulating these institutional logics among VSCs and this would furthermore mean that VSCs are not as strongly influenced by their institutional field as is often assumed (Washington & Patterson, 2011). To analyze this, we identified whether Dutch VSCs have adopted practices and activities that meet expectations regarding professionalization, consumerism, and instrumentalization between 2007 and 2021. This leads to the first hypothesis:

H1: Between 2007 and 2021 VSCs have adopted organizational characteristics of professional, consumeristic and instrumental logics.

Institutional conditions

Although VSCs are expected to respond to the above-mentioned institutional pressures in their search for legitimacy, research has shown that not all organizations in a field respond. Some organizations are more able or willing to resist conformity pressures in their institutional field. This might especially be the case for VSCs. As they are such diverse organizations in terms of size, resources, visibility, age and societal expectations (Hoeijmakers, 2022), it cannot be expected that they all seek to gain external legitimacy in the same way. To fully understand conformity processes, it is therefore important to account for heterogeneity among VSCs. Oliver (1991) argues that the nature of institutional pressures is an important determinant of the responses of organizations to institutional pressures and expectations and offered a typology of institutional conditions that is often shown to be related to the likelihood of conformity, including for VSCs (e.g., Garrett, 2004; Sotiriadou & Wicker, 2013). To account for VSCs' heterogeneity, we examine if the institutional conditions of (1) cause, (2) constituents, (3) content, (4) control and (5) context affect institutional conformity of VSCs.

With the (1) cause of institutional pressures, Oliver (1991) refers to “the rationale, set of expectations, or intended objectives that underlie external pressures for conformity”



(p. 161). Institutional conformity is considered more important for the organization when legitimacy or economic gain resulting from conformity is considered high. Vos et al. (2011), who looked at coercive pressures targeting VSCs, argued that older clubs were better able to generate resources and were therefore less likely to conform to institutional practices. Size might also play a role, as Van der Roest (2015) found size to be one of the most important determinants of the extent to which clubs conformed to institutional practices. Considerations of acquiring legitimacy are considered particularly salient for larger organizations due to their larger visibility in society and attention from institutional actors (Deephouse, 1996; Goodstein, 1994; Ingram & Simons, 1995).

Oliver (1991) indicated that when organizations are more dependent on the (2) constituents or source of the pressures, conformity is a more viable strategy, because the organization is held captive by another organization for social support, resources or legitimacy. Stenling and Fahlén (2016) acknowledged that “[a] system in which the non-compliance with policy goals results in the withdrawal of funds might coerce VSCs to recast their organizational identities due to the imminent threat to the club’s survival such income loss would pose” (p. 47). Vos et al. (2011) found a positive effect between VSCs’ dependency on governmental subsidies and the adoption of coercive pressures. While Vos et al. (2011) only looked at the dependency on governmental subsidies, Van der Roest (2015) found a positive relationship between the financial dependence of VSCs on external sources and the extent to which they conformed to institutional practices.

According to Oliver (1991), organizations will be more willing to conform to institutional practices when the (3) content of these practices is compatible with internal goals. In the context of VSCs, several researchers have shown that the likelihood of institutional conformity depends on the congruence of the organizational identity and the institutional practices (e.g., Garrett, 2004; Nowy et al., 2020; Stenling & Fahlén, 2016). Inconsistency might raise doubts about the validity or legitimacy of institutional expectations (Oliver, 1991). Institutional (4) control refers to “the means by which pressures are imposed on organizations” (Oliver, 1991, p. 168). The more diffused the institutional practices are, the more it is assumed to lead to legitimacy (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In the context of VSCs, a process of mimetic isomorphism has been shown, meaning that VSCs mimic ideas from other VSCs (Heij et al., 2021; Skille, 2011a), indicating that diffusion of practices influence the behavior of VSCs. Cordery and Davies (2016) found that VSCs were more likely to adopt professionalism when professionalism became more institutionalized in the sporting field.

The (5) context of institutional pressures refers to the conditions “within which institutional pressures are exerted on organizations” (Oliver, 1991, p. 170). In the context of VSCs, a relationship between the experience of competition and the tendency to conform to institutional practices was found (Hoeijmakers & Romijn, 2018; Van der Roest, 2015). In times of environmental uncertainty institutional conformity can protect organizations from environmental turbulence (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Furthermore, organizations are more likely to conform to institutional practices when the environment is highly connected, because institutional norms are diffused through relational channels (Oliver, 1991). In the sport context, research showed that VSCs that cooperate more were more involved in the process of integrating refugees (Nowy et al., 2020) and in broadening their services (Van der Roest, 2015). This leads to the following hypothesis:

H2: Institutional conditions influence the likelihood of VSCs to adopt organizational characteristics of professional, consumeristic and instrumental logics.



Effect of institutional conformity on organizational strength and resources

According to neo-institutional researchers, legitimacy increases organizational survival because audiences are most inclined to supply resources to organizations that appear desirable, proper or appropriate (Parsons, 1960; Suchman, 1995). Legitimacy not only affects how people act toward the organization but also what it means to them (Deephouse, 1996). Legitimacy as a collective construction of meaning, “has both a cognitive dimension that constitutes the object for actors as a valid, objective social feature and a normative, prescriptive dimension that represents the social object as right” (Johnson et al., 2006, p. 57). In this way, when organizations are considered desirable, proper or appropriate by conforming to institutional logics, the organization is expected to become legitimate and to gain the resources needed for strength and survival. Substantial research has shown that institutional conformity increases the survival chances of corporate and public organizations (e.g. D’Aunno et al., 1991; Deephouse, 1996; Ruef & Scott, 1998; Singh et al., 1986).

However, due to the structural conditions of VSCs, it might be questionable if external legitimacy is most essential for survival as is assumed in neo-institutional theory. While in the neo-institutional view, the meaning of the organization is socially constructed based on characteristics of shared practices and a collective attribution of legitimacy to those practices (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, 1991; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 2013), this might be a limited view for VSCs. For membership organizations and especially for VSCs, as they act largely independent from their external environment due to resources they generate themselves (Vos et al., 2011) and a strong dependence on volunteers (Skille, 2008), not collective audiences but small groups of members are critical for long-term survival and therefore the primary object of concern. Member involvement and engagement are considered to be constitutional elements of membership organizations’ structures and performance (Balasiano & Chandler, 2009; Bennett, 2000; Harris, 1998; Helmig et al., 2004; Knoke, 1988, 1990; Wang & Ashcraft, 2014; Zimmer, 2010). Members, according to Brupbacher (2017), “determine the overall goal of associations, they are the representative body, financial contributors, volunteer members, clients and co-producers of services as well as the legitimizing force of the collective activity”. Since members are “the lynch pin” of member-based organizations (Brupbacher, 2017), VSCs that are most successful in creating meaningful relationships between small groups of members and the organization can be expected to function most successful and to have highest survival chances.

According to the organizational behavior literature, meaning construction is not only about cultural ideas about what constitutes desirable, proper, or appropriate behavior, but also revolves around unique organizational values. According to these scholars, the meaning of the organization is socially constructed within the organization and based on unique practices and identity attributes (Glynn, 2017). Meaning construction through the formation of identity based on uniformity is therefore argued to be only one side of the coin (Pedersen & Dobin, 2006). This leads to the question whether legitimacy actually increases the strength and resources of VSCs as is expected in neo-institutional theory. While neo-institutional theory is one of the major theories within sport management (Washington & Patterson, 2011), it is surprising that it is unclear whether conforming to institutional logics (i.e. cultural ideas about what constitutes desirable, proper, or appropriate behavior) increases the organizational strength and resources of VSCs.

Self-perceived organizational strength and problems regarding organizational resources are used as measures of organizational strength and resources. Most VSCs have no clear

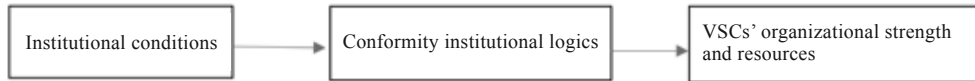


objectives and therefore no adequate points of reference for monitoring performance (Thiel & Mayer, 2009). It is therefore common in VSC research to examine perceived organizational problems in relation to organizational resources (e.g., Lamprecht et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2009; Wicker & Breuer, 2013b; Wicker et al., 2022). Although perceptual measures of performance are not as desirable as objective measures due to attribution bias, research has shown a high degree of correlation between perceptual and objective measures of organizational performance (e.g. Ketokivi & Schroeder, 2004). However, it is not clear how decisive organizational resources are for the strength of VSCs. We therefore also focus on VSCs' self-perceived strength of their organization. In the absence of objective indicators for VSCs' organizational strength, we consider the assessment of their self-perceived organizational strength and resources the most suitable proxy measures for this research. This leads to the third hypothesis:

H3: Adopting organizational characteristics of professional, consumeristic and instrumental logics is positively related to VSCs' self-perceived organizational strength and resources.

These theoretical expectations lead to the following conceptual framework (figure 3.1), where conformity to institutional logics is assumed to lead to VSCs' strength and resources and where institutional conditions are assumed to influence the likelihood of conformity.

Figure 3.1 Conceptual framework conformity to institutional logics and organizational strength of VSCs.



3.3 Methods

Data

For this research two datasets were used. In 2021 and 2007 a nationwide online survey among Dutch VSCs was performed. The Dutch sport club panel of the Mulier Institute was used to perform the online surveys. Questionnaires were sent to board members, often the secretary of the VSC. In January 2021, the questionnaire was sent out to repeat the measurements performed in 2007. In 2021, the questionnaire was completed by 549 VSCs. This is 2% of the population. The sample was representative in terms of club size, type of sport and type of club in comparison with characteristics of the population. Because all VSCs within the panel hold a unique identifier, we were able to select a sample that completed questionnaires in 2007 and in 2021. In total, 164 VSCs completed both questionnaires and were used for the longitudinal sample. Between 2007 and 2021 the panel changed substantially in professionalization efforts and not all VSCs fill out every questionnaire sent to them. 6 clubs were excluded from the data-analysis due to a merger with another VSC between 2007 and 2021. We checked for representativeness in terms of club size, type of sport, type of club and found that large VSCs were slightly overrepresented. We have chosen to use this relatively small longitudinal sample for the analyses because it enabled us to analyze whether individual VSCs conformed to the institutional logics between 2007 and 2021. Cross-sectional data from the 2021 study were used to identify the relationship between conformity, institutional conditions and organizational strength and resources.



Variables

Dependent variables

VSCs' self-perceived strength was measured by asking representatives of VSCs to indicate their perception of the strength of their VSC on a 3-point scale.

Organizational resources were measured based on the dimensions of organizational capacity (Hall et al., 2003). The concept of organizational capacity explains the importance of different types of organizational resources to the overall functioning of the organization. Based on the combined insights of the studies of Wicker and Breuer (2013b), Wicker et al. (2014), Wicker et al. (2022) and Seippel et al. (2020), we choose to include problems relating to the recruitment and retention of members, sufficient volunteers, sufficient coaches/instructors, the financial situation of the VSC and the availability of sports facilities. Organizational resources were measured based on a 5-point scale and transformed to a dummy variable ((strong)problem = 1).

Institutional logics

Professionalism can be defined “as an organizational process of transformation leading towards organizational rationalization, efficiency and business-like management” (Nagel et al., 2015, p. 407). Nagel et al. (2015) distinguished in the context of sports organizations the professionalization of 1) activities, 2) individuals and 3) structures and processes. Based on this definition we created an index score (0-7) based on having members with a volunteer allowance, having paid workers, the presence of a club manager (individuals), having outsourced jobs/tasks, using external professional support (structures and processes), having objectives or plans put on paper with regard to the functioning of the club, and having a clear mission and vision for the long term which is supported by both the board and the members (activities).

Consumerism refers to a model in which members pay a fee in exchange for services produced by others, rather than participating as part of a collective that organizes the sport (Van der Roest et al., 2016). We follow Van der Roest et al. (2016), who created an index score (0-10) based on the presence of flexible forms of membership, the introduction of new forms of sports and play, activities for non-members, a gym, student supervision, office facilities, physiotherapy, day care for children, work/homework/meeting facilities and sport stores.

Instrumentalism means that governments ascribe VSCs a valuable role for society and increasingly use them as partners for contributing to public issues (Waardenburg, 2016b). The operationalization of this variable is therefore highly context-driven. In the Netherlands, local governments are the most important governmental actor and one of the major institutional actors in the organizational field of VSCs (Waardenburg, 2016a). Dutch municipalities view VSCs as project implementers and VSCs are often involved in policy programs to contribute to social values and involved in the integration of specific-target groups (ibid.). For this context, a dummy variable was created based on whether VSCs organized sports for specific target groups or cooperated with municipalities in a project.

Institutional conditions

The *size* of VSCs is measured by the VSC' total number of members. The *age* of VSCs is measured by the number of years after the VSC' foundation. External dependence of VSCs is captured by whether the club possesses its *own facilities*.



Compatible goals can be defined as congruence of organizational interests with institutional objectives (Oliver, 1991). In the context of viewing VSCs as policy implementers, the logic of integration is contrasted with the logic of competitiveness (Skille, 2009, 2011). We measured the *degree of competitiveness* as the share of members who can be viewed as performance athletes. Board members were asked to indicate the share of members who can be considered performance athletes. Performance athletes are defined as members that use their training to achieve the highest possible sporting performance and are contrasted with recreation athletes, who are defined as members that give higher priority to social contacts and conviviality.

Diffused practices can be defined as the extent to which an institutional expectation or practice has already diffused or spread through an organizational field (Oliver, 1991). Diffused practices are captured by the level of Dutch VSCs that in 2007 did not receive a score on the indicator of consumerism, professionalism and instrumentalism. As 8% of all Dutch VSCs scored ‘0’ based on the indicator of professionalism compared to 57% of the VSCs based on the indicator of instrumentalism and 15% based on the indicator of consumerism, we assume that professionalism is the most diffused practice spread through the organizational field of VSCs in 2007.

Environmental uncertainty can be defined as “the degree to which future states of the world cannot be anticipated and accurately predicted” (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978, p. 67). This was measured by whether VSCs *experienced competition* from other VSCs nearby in the same sport, other VSCs nearby in another sport, commercial sport providers (e.g. fitness centers, gyms, bootcamp), unorganized sports (e.g. walking, cycling, running in public places) or others.

Interconnectedness refers to “the density of interorganizational relations among occupants of an organizational field” (Oliver, 1991, p. 170). Interconnectedness is captured by whether the VSC *cooperates with other VSCs*.

Control variables

We included whether a VSC is an indoor or outdoor VSC as a control variable, since indoor VSCs experience more organizational problems than outdoor VSCs (Hoeijmakers & Van Kalmthout, 2019b).

Table 3.1 Overview of variables.

Variable	Items	Scale
Dependent variables		
Self-perceived strength VSC	1=(very) strong	Dummy
Problems members	1=(strong) problems	Dummy
Problems volunteers	1=(strong) problems	Dummy
Problems coaches	1=(strong) problems	Dummy
Problems finances	1=(strong) problems	Dummy
Problems facilities (availability)	1=(strong) problems	Dummy



Institutional logics		
Professionalism	Scale based on having members with a volunteer allowance (<i>I=yes</i>), having paid workers (<i>I=yes</i>), the presence of a club manager (<i>I=yes</i>), having outsourced jobs/tasks (<i>I=yes</i>), using external professional support (<i>I=yes</i>), having objectives or plans put on paper with regard to the functioning of the club (<i>I=yes</i>) and having a clear mission and vision for the long term which is supported by both the board and the members (<i>I=yes</i>)	Metric
Consumerism	Scale based on the presence of flexible forms of membership (<i>I=yes</i>), the introduction of new forms of sport and play (<i>I=yes</i>), activities for non-members (<i>I=yes</i>), a gym (<i>I=yes</i>), student supervision (<i>I=yes</i>), office facilities (<i>I=yes</i>), physiotherapy (<i>I=yes</i>), day care for children (<i>I=yes</i>), work/homework/meeting facilities (<i>I=yes</i>) and sport stores (<i>I=yes</i>)	Metric
Instrumentalism	Organized sports for specific target groups or cooperated with municipalities in a project (<i>I=yes</i>)	Dummy
Control variable		
Indoor	Indoor VSC (<i>I=yes</i>)	Dummy
Institutional conditions		
Size	Total number of members	Metric
Age	Number of years after foundation	Metric
Own facilities	Own facilities (<i>I=yes</i>)	Dummy
Degree of competitiveness	Share of performance athletes	Metric
Diffused practices	Share of Dutch VSCs that in 2007 did not receive a score on the indicator consumerism, professionalism and instrumentalism	Metric
Experienced competition	Scale based on whether VSCs experienced competition from other VSCs nearby in the same sport (<i>I=yes</i>), other VSCs nearby in another sport (<i>I=yes</i>), commercial sport providers (<i>I=yes</i>), unorganized sports (<i>I=yes</i>) or others (<i>I=yes</i>)	Metric
Cooperation with other VSCs	Cooperated with other VSCs (<i>I=yes</i>)	Dummy

Data analyses

Paired samples t-tests were conducted to compare the level of conformity of VSCs to the institutional logics in 2007 and 2021. The paired samples t-tests allowed us to determine whether the means of the conformity measures in 2021 are statistically different from the means in 2007 (Field, 2005). Furthermore, based on the cross-sectional dataset, several logistic regression analyses were carried out to test the relationship between the institutional conditions and the conformity measures (model 1.1-1.3), the relationship between the conformity measures and the self-perceived strength of the VSC (model 2.1) and the relati-



onship between the conformity measures and problems relating to organizational resources (model 2.2-2.6). As the variables of professionalism and consumerism display a non-normal distribution, these variables were converted to a dummy variable for the logistic regression analyses.

3.4 Results

Organizational strength of VSCs

The descriptive statistics are summarized in Table 3.2. The descriptive statistics for the cross-sectional analysis show that in 2021, most VSCs perceive themselves as a (very) strong club ($M=.763$). Most often VSCs experience problems regarding the recruitment and retention of members ($M=.254$) and coaches ($M=.224$).

Table 3.2 Descriptive statistics variables cross-sectional and longitudinal study.

Variables	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Self-perceived strength VSC ^a	539	0	1	.763	.426
Problems members	549	0	1	.254	.435
Problems volunteers ^a	549	0	1	.149	.357
Problems coaches ^a	549	0	1	.224	.417
Problems finances ^a	549	0	1	.057	.232
Problems facilities (availability) ^a	549	0	1	.128	.334
Institutional logics					
Professionalism	549	0	7	2.458	1.525
Consumerism	549	0	9	1.986	1.370
Instrumentalism	549	0	1	.746	.651
Professionalism ^a	158	-3	6	0.044	1.512
Consumerism ^a	158	-3.50	8	0.025	1.574
Instrumentalism ^a	158	-1	1	0.203	0.646
Control variables					
Indoor	548	0	1	.418	.494
Institutional conditions					
Size	549	4	2500	200.830	297.544
Age	542	1	173	53.667	26.390
Own facilities	549	0	1	.479	.500
Degree of competitiveness	521	0	100	20.971	24.330
Experienced competition	549	0	4	0.953	1.000
Cooperation with other VSCs	549	0	1	.510	.500

^a Δ in longitudinal analysis



Conforming to institutional logics

In contrast to what we expected, VSCs did not highly conform to the three institutional logics between 2007 and 2021. Paired samples t-tests were conducted to compare the level of conformity in 2007 and 2021. We found no significant difference in the scores for 2007 and 2021 for professionalism (2007: $M=2.69$, $SD=1.51$) (2021: $M=2.65$, $SD=1.61$); $t(157)=.37$, $p=.71$ and consumerism (2007: $M=2.07$, $SD=1.32$) (2021: $M=2.09$, $SD=1.44$); $t(157)=-.20$, $p=.84$. However, we did find a significant increase in the level of instrumentalism between 2007 and 2021 (2007: $M=.150$, $SD=.51$) (2021: $M=.85$, $SD=.67$); $t(157)=-5.58$, $p=.001$. This means that VSCs have become more instrumental between 2007 and 2021. They did not become more professional and consumeristic. Based on these results, hypothesis 1 is only partly confirmed.

Relationship between institutional conditions and conformity

The outcomes of the logistic regressions between institutional conditions and the three conformity measures are displayed in Table 3.3. In all three models a significant positive relationship was found between cooperation with other VSCs and the likelihood of conformity. VSCs that cooperated with other VSCs had a higher odds of being professional (odds ratio = 2.64), consumeristic (odds ratio = 2.86) and instrumental (odds ratio = 2.58), compared to VSCs that did not cooperate. Furthermore, size is found to be positively related to the likelihood of the conformity measures. An increase in size of 1 member was associated with higher odds of being professional (odds ratio = 1.01), consumeristic (odds ratio = 1.003) and instrumental (odds ratio = 1.004). Degree of competitiveness was found to be significant positively related to the likelihood of being professional (odds ratio = 1.01) and consumeristic (odds ratio = 1.01). Having own facilities (odds ratio = 1.87) and the level of experienced competition (odds ratio = 1.27) were found to be significant positively related to the likelihood of being consumeristic. No significant relationships were found between age, diffused practices and the conformity measures. Thus, hypothesis 2 can be confirmed as results do provide evidence for the relationship between institutional conditions (cooperation with other VSCs, size, degree of competitiveness, own facilities and experienced competition) and the likelihood of conformity.



Table 3.3 Results of the logistic regressions between institutional conditions and conformity measures of Dutch VSCs, in odds ratios (Exp(β)).

	Professionalism (model 1.1) n=510	Consumerism (model 1.2) n=510	Instrumentalism (model 1.3) n=510
Constant	.625	.080***	.683
Indoor	.801	1.400	1.106
Size	1.010***	1.003***	1.004***
Age	.997	.997	.994
Own facilities	.728	1.868*	1.287
Degree of competitive- ness	1.012*	1.009*	1.003
Experienced competition	.859	1.267*	.989
Cooperation with other VSCs	2.637***	2.859***	2.581***
Nagelkerke R2	.308	.269	.200

* $p < .05$ / ** $p < .01$ / *** $p < .001$

Relationship between institutional conformity and VSC strength and resources

The outcomes of the logistic regressions between the conformity measures and the perceived strength of the VSC and the problems relating to organizational resources are displayed in Table 3.4. The institutional conditions were used as control variables. In contrast to what was expected, no significant relationships were found between the conformity measures of professionalism, consumerism and instrumentalism, and the perceived strength of the VSC. Looking at the resource problems, only professionalism is significantly negatively related to the likelihood of having problems with members. Professional VSCs had a lower odds of experiencing problems relating to members (odds ratio = .44) compared to non-professional VSCs. At the same time, professionalism is significantly positively related to problems with the availability of facilities. Professional VSCs had a higher odds of experiencing problems with the availability of facilities (odds ratio = 2.62) than non-professional VSCs. And lastly, instrumental VSCs had a lower odds of experiencing problems relating to members (odds ratio = .38) compared to non-instrumental VSCs, while consumeristic VSCs had a higher odds of experiencing problems relating to members (odds ratio = 2.46) compared to non-consumeristic VSCs. Therefore, we reject hypothesis 3.



Table 3.4 Results of the logistic regressions between conformity and the self-perceived strength and resource problems of Dutch VSCs, in odds ratios (Exp(β)).

	Self-perceived strength VSC (1=very strong) (model 2.1) n=502	Problems members (1=yes) (model 2.2) n=510	Problems volunteers (1=yes) (model 2.3) n=510	Problems coaches (1=yes) (model 2.4) n=510	Problems finances (1=yes) (model 2.5) n=510	Problems facilities (availability) (1=yes) (model 2.6) n=510
Constant	2.582**	.473*	.155***	.163***	.057***	.074***
Professionalism	1.672	.436**	1.056	1.264	.731	2.617*
Consumerism	.752	2.460**	1.108	0.849	1.542	1.636
Instrumentalism	.905	.736	1.040	1.303	.384*	.922
Indoor	1.224	.935	.742	.837	1.026	.759
Age	1.004***	1.011*	1.009	1.000	1.014	.997
Size	.985**	.996***	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
Own facilities	2.510**	.758	.446*	.712	.586	.296**
Degree of competitiveness	1.004	1.003	.990	1.001	.989	1.008
Experienced competition	.606***	1.186	1.328*	1.549***	1.382	1.227
Cooperation with other VSCs	1.588	1.072	.845	1.117	.880	1.043
Nagelkerke R2	.212	.195	.053	.072	.057	.118

* $p < .05$ / ** $p < .01$ / *** $p < .001$

3.5 Discussion and implications

The aim of this study was to examine if and under what conditions VSCs conformed to the institutional logics of professionalism, consumerism and instrumentalism and whether conformity to these logics increases the organizational strength and resources of VSCs. In contrast to what was expected based on the neo-institutional perspective, VSCs did not highly conform to the three institutional logics between 2007 and 2021. VSCs did become more instrumental between 2007 and 2021, but not more professional and consumeristic. The results do provide evidence for the relationship between institutional conditions and the likelihood of conformity. Cooperation with other VSCs, size and – to a lesser extent – degree of competitiveness, own facilities and experienced competition, are related to the likelihood of institutional conformity. Using cross-sectional panel data, conforming to institutional logics was not found to be related to the self-perceived strength of VSCs or their experienced problems relating to their organizational resources.



Resistance to conformity to institutional logics

The results of this study are in contrast to the dominant view among sport management scholars that sports organizations are highly impacted by their institutional environment (Washington & Patterson, 2011) and raise the question what explains VSCs' ability to resist institutional pressures. The results of this study suggest that VSCs are not incapable of change but do exhibit a certain resistance to it (Janssens, 2011; Thiel & Meier, 2004). First of all, previous research shows that the self-interestedness of VSCs can inhibit the implementation of sport policy because their interests and values may not always coincide with those of sport policy (Garrett, 2004; Skille, 2009). This also seems to be the case for Dutch VSCs. Hoeijmakers (2022) shows that Dutch VSCs have become more convinced of their societal function, suggesting that instrumental functions are increasingly regarded by VSCs as part of what it means to be a VSC. This seems not, or only for a minority of VSCs, to be the case for the logics of professionalism and consumerism and therefore might explain the lack of conformity to these practices. Also this study indicates the importance of compatible goals, as results show that a higher share of performance athletes in contrast to recreation athletes increases the likelihood of conformity to the professional and consumeristic logic.

Second, the ability of VSCs to resist institutional pressures is related to the particularity of their organizational form. VSCs enjoy considerable independence or autonomy from their institutional environment due to a strong dependence on resources they generate themselves (Vos et al., 2011) and reinforced by strong dependence on volunteers (Skille, 2008). This might imply that the focus of VSCs is more targeted on providing meaning within their organization for their relatively small group of members than conforming to cultural ideas about what constitutes desirable, proper, or appropriate behavior. However, this seems to differ for larger clubs, as the findings of this study indicate that larger VSCs exhibit a stronger tendency to conform to institutional norms. This may be because board members of larger VSCs are more removed from their members due to added organizational layers and must manage a broader, more diverse membership with conflicting interests – making them more likely to conform to culturally defined norms of appropriate behavior.

Third, VSCs have structural internal conditions that hamper change, such as the absence of explicit or entrepreneurial objectives, a sole focus on satisfying members' interests often aimed at cultivating tradition, a hierarchical structure where officials are committed to the general meeting, and the recruitment of staff from within the club (Thiel & Mayer, 2009; Thiel & Meier, 2004). Also, a lengthy history has made these organizations extra slow in change processes (Skirstad & Chelladurai, 2011) and a relative high age of board members (Van Kalmthout, 2022) does not contribute to a focus on the outside world (Van der Roest, 2015). However, results of this study show that when VSCs cooperate with each other, the likelihood of conformity is higher. Although this study cannot demonstrate causality, it seems plausible that VSCs that are already more externally oriented – through cooperation with other VSCs – are more likely to adopt institutional logics, either consciously or unconsciously.

Finally, it can be assumed that VSCs already enjoy high levels of legitimacy, suggesting that they do not experience a reason to conform to the expectations of governments because they feel that their existence is already considered desirable and meaningful regardless of their level of conformity to the institutional logics. VSCs are valued for many reasons (Waardenburg, 2016b), and regardless of their organizational characteristics, were for example often saved from insolvency and well-supported by the government during the



COVID crisis (Hoeijmakers & Van Kalmthout, 2021). This implies that as long as the entire population of VSCs is perceived as legitimate, it becomes less important for individual VSCs to conform to governmental norms in order to enjoy the benefits of legitimacy.

Essential organizational processes

The results of this study indicate that conforming to collective beliefs about what constitutes desirable, proper, or appropriate behavior alone – as the neo-institutional view implies – is a limited view for explaining VSCs' ability to thrive and endure. While due to the structural conditions of VSCs the neo-institutional view seems a limited view, this study also raises the question whether the institutional logics of professionalism, consumerism and instrumentalism are actually culturally anchored in society as desirable, proper and appropriate identities of VSCs. A counter-reaction seems to have emerged towards the professionalization of VSCs. In the Netherlands in the last 15 years, VSCs are becoming more critical of having paid employees and seem to be shifting back towards the association logic (Hoeijmakers, 2022). Although previous research has shown that the number of paid staff does not have a significant impact on voluntary engagement (Schlesinger & Nagel, 2013; Swierzy et al., 2018a) and more VSCs have employed paid staff (Breuer et al., 2012), the number of VSCs with paid staff has remained the same in the Netherlands in the last 15 years, and significantly less VSCs believe paid staff would benefit them (Hoeijmakers, 2022). The relationship between having paid staff and volunteers is often regarded as problematic, as hiring paid staff might be associated with disempowerment (Cuskelly, 2004; Kim et al., 2007) and loss of control over organizational issues for volunteers (Thibault et al., 1991). However, professionalizing VSCs includes many aspects. Making use of a professional support structure and using a policy-based approach with goals and strategies seem to be less conflicting with the association logic. Previous research has shown that strategic and formation policies of VSCs contributed to the reduction of organizational problems and thus contribute to the overall functioning of the club (Wicker & Breuer, 2013b).

Becoming more consumeristic and resembling commercial sport providers seems sensible, since VSCs lose market value to commercial sport providers (Schlesinger & Nagel, 2015; Van 't Verlaat, 2010; Vos, 2012) or sport-light initiatives (Borgers et al., 2016). However, resembling them and focusing on attracting as many members as possible might not be the answer for improving the organizational strength of VSCs, as we identified that consumeristic VSCs were more likely to experience problems with members. According to Borgers et al. (2016), the flexibility related to sport-light initiatives appears to imply a less continuous, frequent and/or time-intensive pattern of sport participation. This means that adopting more flexible forms of membership to attract sport-light participants might result in higher membership volatility, which is negatively related to the self-perceived strength of VSCs (Hoeijmakers, 2022). Furthermore, for Dutch VSCs it seems that increased attention to attracting and recruiting new members in the last 15 years comes at the expense of organizing social activities for current members (Hoeijmakers, 2022). Besides health, conviviality and social activities are still the most important reasons for sport club membership (KPMG, 2019), indicating that organizing social activities is important for the retention and attraction of club members. This assumption is supported by previous research. VSCs that set a higher value on conviviality experience fewer problems concerning the recruitment and retention of volunteers (Wicker & Breuer, 2013b), while having growth-oriented goals



is negatively related to the decision to volunteer (Schlesinger & Nagel, 2013).

Finally, instrumentalization can also be viewed critically. As a result of the changing role of sport in society, VSCs have to deal with increased expectations. This new role results in new tasks that are different from traditional tasks and which VSCs might not be capable of fulfilling (Nagel, Schlesinger, Wicker, et al., 2015). Hoeijmakers and Van Kalmthout (2019b) argue that taking on a greater societal role comes at the expense of activities that are organized for VSCs' own members. They furthermore suggest that especially for clubs that are having a hard time surviving, focusing on investing in social activities for their own members can be a better solution. Although taking up a broader societal role might increase VSCs' legitimacy from the perspective of government, for members the attractiveness of clubs does not appear to be based on being involved in societal activities, but on conviviality, sport opportunities and social activities. Therefore, from the perspective of VSCs, complying to the latter requirements might be more beneficial, since VSCs are more dependent on internal resources than subsidies for their survival (Davids et al., 2018; Vos et al., 2011; Wicker & Breuer, 2011).

Policy implications

In the introduction and the theoretical expectations of this article, we stated that Dutch sport policy directs VSCs into becoming more professional, consumeristic and instrumental to improve their long-term survival. The findings of this study imply that the assumptions that underpin these policy directions cannot be substantiated. We therefore recommend policy-makers to broaden their perspectives when it comes to stimulating VSCs only based on these logics. VSCs' ability to survive is more likely to be enhanced when policies are aligned with the associational logic on which they are based, rather than pushing VSCs to operate according to alternative, competing (professional, consumeristic and instrumental) logics.

Yet, the absent relationship between the three institutional logics and the organizational strength of VSCs does not mean that stimulating these logics should be departed completely. We rather argue that, to increase the ability of VSCs to thrive and endure more effectively, sport policymakers should pay (more) attention to the institutional conditions of VSCs and the ways in which institutional logics interact. Large VSCs that have their own facilities can be further stimulated to professionalize, broaden their services or take on broader instrumental tasks, as long as this is not at the expense of the mutual bonding of members and their willingness to volunteer. Smaller VSCs that are organized based on the association logic, however, are best helped by stimulating conviviality, sport opportunities and social activities for members. In this way and by enduring, they already create value for their environment.

Future research

With this study, we believe we make a valuable contribution to understanding VSCs' ability to thrive and endure. It is well-established in the literature that when an organization is viewed as legitimate, odds of survival are increased (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Sport is argued to be one of those fields that is highly impacted by its institutional environment (Washington & Patterson, 2011). All the more surprising that in sport management research it has yet to be answered whether sports organizations that conform to institutional pressures indeed have greater strength than sports organizations that do not (Washington &



Patterson, 2011). Based on the results of this study, we argue that the neo-institutional view is a limited view for explaining VSCs' long-term survival, since the results show that institutional conformity is not related to the organizational strength or resources of VSCs. We therefore contend that we are in need of a framework based on a combination of theoretical concepts in order to understand, monitor and improve the long-term survival of VSCs. Two streams of organizational theory can contribute to this: the resource-based view and classic institutional theory.

The results of this study indicate that environmental uncertainty plays a role in the organizational strength of VSCs. Therefore, the resource-based view (Barney, 1991), in which it is assumed that achieving and maintaining a competitive advantage over rival organizations operating in the same business area is a necessity to thrive and endure, might be beneficiary. Since we have suggested that complying to the requirements of members instead of the government might be more important to VSCs in their long-term survival, more research is needed to identify what defines VSCs' attractiveness over rival organizations. However, applying the resource-based view with a dominant focus on continuity of the organization based on strategically exploiting resources to offer members more valuable club goods than its competitors has its limitations. VSCs are not only "beneficial organizations for recreational activities", but also "important identity vehicles for individuals" (Schlesinger & Nagel, 2015, p. 71). Recent studies indicate that social identification processes also play a crucial role in fostering member commitment (e.g., Buser et al., 2024; Kolbl et al., 2022; Schlesinger & Nagel, 2013; 2015). We therefore argue that it is fruitful to go back to the classic institutional theory in which organizations are considered meaningful by its members based on their character (Selznick, 1957). With this perspective, the focus of long-term survival shifts from merely the institutional environment to the organization, a perspective that disappeared into the background in current organizational scholarship (King, 2015).

This study's limitations can guide future research. First, VSCs' strength is measured by board members' subjective perceptions rather than more objectively. Second, because we were not able to follow VSCs that disappeared in the last 15 years, our sample is biased towards VSCs that have survived. To account for this bias, it would be fruitful to undertake exhaustive data collection efforts to identify all living and terminated organizations in a population over a considerable period of time (Hannan & Freeman, 1977). Third, the longitudinal study is limited to the 158 VSCs that participated in both the 2007 and 2021 panel studies. This is not a particularly high number, and compared to the cross-sectional dataset, this sample showed some differences regarding size. Fourth, the scales for the conformity measures were mainly data driven and future research could focus on validating these scales.



Chapter 4

The strategic management of club goods: A Resource-based View²

4.1 Introduction

Voluntary sport clubs (VSCs) emerged as cooperative organizations, with members pooling resources to collectively produce and consume club goods (e.g., Nagel, 2008; Nagel et al., 2015; 2020). Club goods refer to all benefits of a VSC membership -such as sports and social activities- that are exclusively available to members (Heinemann, 2004; Wicker et al., 2014). To access club goods, members voluntarily contribute resources such as membership fees and effort, which are supplemented by external support from governments, sponsors, and sport federations (Sandler & Tschirhart, 1980; Nagel et al., 2015). Resources are defined as the assets, capabilities, and means available to VSCs for producing club goods (De Witt & Meyer, 2014), with five categories considered essential: (1) human resources, (2) finances, (3) relationships and networks, (4) infrastructure and processes, and (5) planning and development (Elmose-Østerlund et al., 2021).

VSCs face considerable challenges in managing their resources effectively (Seippel et al., 2020). In addition to persistent resource scarcity (Wicker & Breuer, 2011), VSCs face the complex challenge of allocating their resources strategically to produce a diverse range of club goods to meet members' interests and sustain their engagement (e.g., Kolbl et al., 2022; Schlesinger & Nagel, 2015), while simultaneously differentiating themselves from rival organizations. In recent decades, VSCs have faced increasing competition (Rossi et al., 2020; 2024). Both commercial sports providers and, more notably, other local VSCs within the same sport draw (potential) members away, jeopardizing their long-term survival (Hoeijmakers, 2022; Rossi et al., 2024). While VSCs competing with commercial sports providers often develop strategic plans, those competing with local VSCs within the same sport are less likely to do so (Rossi et al., 2024), possibly because they see fewer opportunities to differentiate. Strategically exploiting club goods that boost VSCs' appeal over rival VSCs could help counter competition and ensure long-term survival.

The VRIO framework – developed by Barney (1991) within the resource-based view (RBV) – provides a valuable tool for assessing whether club goods can sustain a competitive advantage over rival VSCs. The RBV posits that organizations achieve a sustainable competitive advantage when they implement a value-creating strategy that no current or potential competitors are using, and when competitors are unable to replicate its benefits (Barney, 1991). While scholars have established the importance of producing club goods that provide individual benefits to strengthen member commitment (e.g., Kolbl et al., 2022; Schlesinger & Nagel, 2015), it is unclear whether club goods can be leveraged as competitive advantages over rival VSCs. Since most VSCs participate in sporting competitions governed by specific rules and standards – such as those concerning surface, activities, and competition formats – similarity in club goods is to be expected. The VRIO framework



– widely used to identify and leverage unique resources and capabilities for sustained competitive advantage – can help VSCs leverage strategic advantages, allocate resources more effectively, and maintain appeal to (potential) members.

The purpose of this study is to explore which club goods generate value for members to foster their involvement, while also providing VSCs with a competitive advantage. As VSCs face growing competition from local VSCs within the same sport that jeopardize their long-term survival, it seems crucial to not only offer club goods that align with members' interests and sustain engagement but also to develop those that enhance appeal over rival VSCs. Drawing on the VRIO framework, developed within the RBV, this study examines which club goods generate value for members to foster their involvement (V), while also providing VSCs with a competitive advantage by being rare (R) and difficult to imitate (I). Finally, it assesses the extent to which VSC management strategically leverages these goods (O).

4.2 Theoretical framework and research questions

Capacity building strategies based on VRIO club goods

Today, the RBV (Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984) is one of the most influential theoretical perspectives in the field of strategic management (Davis & DeWitt, 2021). The VRIO framework, developed by Barney (1991) within the RBV, is a strategic management tool for analyzing a firm's resources and capabilities, evaluating their potential to sustain a competitive advantage. When applied to club goods, the VRIO framework helps determine which VSCs' club goods are valuable (V), rare (R), difficult to imitate (I), and supported by an organization capable of fully exploiting their potential (O). If a club good meets all four criteria, it can provide a sustainable competitive advantage that is difficult for competitors to replicate or surpass, making it a central focus of capacity-building efforts. In view of VSCs' resource constraints, recent research has increasingly focused on capacity building as a strategic approach for VSCs (e.g. Millar & Doherty, 2016; 2021; Rossi et al., 2024). Capacity building aims to strengthen an organization's ability to achieve objectives by optimizing various dimensions of capacity.

Increased member involvement behavior through value from club goods

For club goods to be valuable to VSCs, they must foster member involvement. As membership-based organizations, VSCs represent a particular organizational form in which members act as both consumers and producers of club goods (Wicker et al., 2014). As a result, member involvement is fundamental to the organization's functioning (Horch, 1998) and essential for management to promote. Since members require a strong incentive to invest their financial resources and time, VSCs must align club goods with members' interests to encourage their active involvement in the co-creation of those club goods. While research shows that the utility derived from club goods strengthens members' loyalty to the VSC (e.g., Kolbl et al., 2022; Schijns et al., 2016; Schlesinger & Nagel, 2015), it remains unclear how the value members derive through their engagement with club goods relates to different aspects of member involvement behavior. In the context of VSCs, member involvement includes several dimensions, with loyalty, volunteering, and positive word-of-mouth identified as most essential for VSC functioning (Misener et al., 2020). This leads to the first research question:



RQ1: What is the relationship between value from club goods and the involvement behavior of VSC members?

Value-adding club goods

Given resource constraints, VSCs cannot equally serve all member interests (Schlesinger & Nagel, 2015). To maximize the incentive for members to be involved in the VSC, management should therefore prioritize club goods that deliver the greatest value to the largest number of members (V) (Barney, 1991). Scholars have shown that club goods encompass various facets of membership benefits (Kolbl et al., 2022; Nagel, 2008; Schijns et al., 2016; Schlesinger & Nagel, 2015). These benefits involve a combination of tangible items (hardware), sport opportunities and activities (orgware) and relationships (software). For example, Schlesinger and Nagel (2015) highlight that VSCs have an organizational structure made up of club services, facilities, activities, and people – all of which shape individual member behavior. Similarly, Kolbl et al. (2022) found that member satisfaction in a leading German tennis club is influenced by several factors, including: (1) general facilities and core services; (2) secondary services; (3) club atmosphere, heritage, and traditions; and (4) the price-to-quality ratio of the membership fee. Schijns et al. (2016) further emphasize that members' evaluations of staff, programs, and facilities play a key role in perceived service quality and loyalty in two Dutch VSCs. Although this underscores the complexity of offering a diverse range of club goods to meet members' interests and sustain their engagement, it remains unclear which club goods provide the greatest value to the largest number of members. This leads to the second research question:

RQ2: What club goods provide the greatest value to the most members in the context of VSCs?

Competitive club goods

As VSCs face increasing competition from local VSCs within the same sport that threaten their long-term survival, it seems essential not only to provide club goods that meet members' interests and sustain engagement, but also to cultivate those that enhance VSCs' appeal over rival VSCs. To ensure a VSC has a sustainable competitive advantage, management could prioritize club goods that are not only valuable, but also rare (R) and difficult for rival organizations to imitate or substitute (I) (Barney, 1991). However, while scholars have established that club goods encompass various facets of membership benefits, it remains unclear whether club goods that drive member value within the context of VSCs, can be leveraged as competitive advantages over rival VSCs. Since most VSCs participate in sporting competitions governed by specific rules and standards – such as those concerning surface, activities, and competition formats – a certain degree of similarity in club goods is to be expected. This leads to the third research question:

RQ3: Which club goods that drive member value in the context of VSCs are rare and non-substitutable compared to those offered by rival VSCs?

Strategic capacity of VSC management

Finally, value-adding and competitive club goods should only become a central focus of strategic capacity-building efforts if VSC management is capable of fully exploiting their



potential (O) (Barney, 1991). Questions can be raised regarding VSC management's ability to identify the club goods that add the most value and offer a competitive advantage. In essence, VSCs are "bottom-up" organizations (Scharpf, 2000), where members collectively negotiate and agree on common goals (e.g., Cyert & March, 1992). While this suggests that club goods are actively discussed, ensuring that VSCs deliver those that provide the greatest value to the most members, in practice, general meetings are often poorly attended (Hoeijmakers, 2022), and the governance of VSCs is frequently described as oligarchic, concentrated in the hands of a few (Michels, 1970). Also VSCs' ability to leverage club goods in ways that enhance their appeal relative to direct competitors might be limited. Since club goods encompass various facets of membership benefits, it is challenging for VSCs not only to identify their own most valuable club goods, but also to evaluate those of their direct competitors. This leads to the fourth research question:

RQ4: To what extent are value-adding and competitive club goods strategically exploited by VSC management?

4.3 Methods

Data

A mixed-methods approach was used, combining focus groups, questionnaires, and website coding, across four Dutch voluntary tennis clubs located in close proximity within a city of nearly 200,000 inhabitants. These four VSCs were chosen because they recruit members from the same region and have recently faced a decline in membership, making them likely competitors for members and a relevant case for examining the VRIO characteristics of club goods. Tennis provides a compelling case, known for its service-oriented nature, which blends various club services, facilities, and activities while also fostering diverse social relationships through its combination of individual and team elements (Van der Poel & Bakker, 2015). This suggests the presence of different categories of club goods (hardware, orgware and software) identified in the literature.

For every VSC two separate focus groups of 4 members were organized for generating a list of all shared benefits of membership that are exclusively available to the members of that VSC. These members were selected in collaboration with the VSC board to ensure a representative cross-section of the club. The semi-structured interviews combined a deductive and inductive approach, with members asked to reflect on the club goods identified in the literature, as well as to suggest any additional ones they felt applied to them. Based on the interview results, a list of club goods was developed and operationalized to assess their VRIO characteristics, with further evaluation through a member questionnaire. All adult members of the four VSCs were invited to complete the questionnaire online. To enhance the response rate, three reminders were sent over a two-month period. 306 members responded. This resulted in a response rate of 15% for club A, 17% for club B, 10% for club C and 12% for club D. Although the response rate is relatively low, the descriptive results demonstrate a satisfactory level of diversity in the respondents' characteristics, including age, gender, level of involvement, and membership duration. However, it is possible that the questionnaires were mainly completed by individuals that highly value the club goods, which could skew the VRIO characteristics of those club goods. The VSCs' websites were coded to establish what club goods are strategically exploited by the VSCs. Although this



does not show the extent to which VSC management prioritizes the respective club goods in their policies or organization, it does provide an indication of which club goods management considers most representative of the organization.

Variables

Club goods

Club goods refer to all shared benefits of membership of a VSC that are exclusively available to the members of that VSC. Literature indicates that these benefits concern the combination of tangible items (hardware), sport opportunities and activities (orgware) and relationships (software). Based on the literature and focus groups, 27 club goods were identified that cover a wide range of benefits that fall into these categories: *Hardware* (Courts, Park/club house, Pricing), *Orgware* (Level, Activities) and *Software* (Atmosphere, People, History).

Value from club goods

Value from club goods is defined as the value members derive from satisfaction and subjective goal attainment through their engagement with club goods (Brupbacher, 2017). 5-point scales were used to assess the importance (1 = not at all important; 5 = very important) and the experienced fulfillment (1 = not at all fulfilled; 5 = very fulfilled) of the 27 club goods earlier identified.

VRIO-club goods

A club good is considered valuable (V) if it enhances member value from club goods, rare (R) if it is not controlled by rival VSCs, and inimitable (I) if rivals cannot substitute its value with other club goods. Organization (O) is achieved when VSCs strategically showcase its most value-adding and competitive club goods on its website, reflecting management's ability to identify and leverage its most significant club goods.

Member involvement behavior

This study follows Misener et al. (2020) who considered member loyalty, volunteering and speaking positively about the club as the most important member involvement behaviors in the context of VSCs. *Loyalty* is the foundational variable of member involvement behavior as club membership is the most important precondition that a VSC is able to exist and survive (Hoeijmakers, 2022; Schlesinger & Nagel, 2015). This was measured by a one-item intention to leave scale of Schlesinger and Nagel (2015). *Voluntary engagement* refers to members who perform voluntary activity in or for their VSC and is a relevant member involvement behavior within the membership organization context since most VSCs rely heavily on volunteers for the organization of activities, provision of services and the management of the club (Wegner et al., 2020; Hoeijmakers, 2022). Voluntary engagement can be defined as members that give their time for the benefit of VSCs without receiving any tangible benefits (De Clerck et al., 2021) and was measured by asking respondents if they perform volunteer work for their club. *Word of mouth* (WOM) refers to members speaking favorably about their club to others and the active promotion of the club to people who are not member (Lee et al., 2016). WOM is a relevant involvement behavior within the membership organization context as it has an important marketing function in member acquisi-



on, sponsor loyalty and organizational reputation building (Misener et al., 2020). This was measured by the Misener et al.'s (2020) five-item scale which they used among members of community sport associations.

Control variables

Membership duration and age were included as control variables, as member involvement behavior may be influenced by how long individuals have been members and their age. Organizational identification (which will be discussed further in Chapter 5) was included to assess the importance of club goods for member involvement behavior, independent of social identification processes (Schlesinger & Nagel, 2015). According to the organizational behavior literature, organizational identification is a distinct mechanism that can influence member involvement behavior (e.g., Liu et al., 2022).

Data analyses

The survey items were formulated based on the literature and focus groups to assess the multifaceted nature of club goods. It was presumed that different club goods would fit to the structure of five categories of club goods: Courts, Level, Activities, Atmosphere, History, Park/club house, Pricing and People. A Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted to evaluate how well the club goods fit to the constructs of the five categories of club goods. The Cronbach's Alpha, however, were not satisfactory and therefore instead of categories, the 27 separate club goods were included in the analyses. In order to calculate the value of every club good (VCG), this study used the lowest score of the importance and fulfillment scale responses [$\min(\text{Importance}, \text{Fulfillment})$]. In a next step, the mean of all items were summed to an overall total value from club goods index (TVCG) which represents the average value members derive from satisfaction and subjective goal attainment through their engagement with club goods (Brupbacher, 2017). Adjusted VCG indices were formed by calculating the difference between each VCG item and the TVCG ($\text{VCG index } i - \text{TVCG}$). A positive delta indicates relative high importance and fulfillment, while a negative delta score indicates a low importance or fulfillment.

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics by frequency distributions, percentages, means, and standard deviations of the separate VCG items, the TVCG and the adjusted VCG. Additionally, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to determine whether there were any significant differences in the fulfillment of the separate VCG items between the four clubs. Statistical significance was accepted in an alpha level of $p < .05$. Where the results of ANOVA testing revealed statistically significant differences between the four clubs, these were investigated further using appropriate post hoc procedures. Logistic regressions show the relationship between TVCG and the separate member involvement behavior indices (loyalty, volunteering, WOM). Website data were used to establish to what extent the club goods are exploited by the VSCs.



Table 4.1 Overview of variables.

Variable	Items	Scale
Member involvement behavior		
Loyalty	Have you ever thought about canceling your membership with [club] in the past year? (1= often, to 5= never)	Metric
Volunteering	Do you volunteer at [club]? (1=yes, 0=no)	Dummy
WOM	I encourage my friends to join [club]. I like to inform people about [club]. I tell others about [club]. I am positive about [club] towards others. If people ask, I recommend them to join [club]. (1= not at all, to 5= completely)	Metric
Club good categories		
Hardware		
Courts	Surface	Metric
	Court capacity (sufficient opportunities to play)	Metric
	Quality of the courts	Metric
	Possibility to play in winter	Metric
Park/club house	Appearance of the park	Metric
	Kitchen assortment	Metric
	Assortment from the bar	Metric
	Parking nearby	Metric
	Park is close by	Metric
Pricing	Membership fee	Metric
	Price of the training	Metric
	Prices of the bar/kitchen	Metric
Orgware		
Level	Sufficient opportunities to play at your own level	Metric
	Opportunities to play competitive activities at your own level	Metric
	Sufficient training opportunities	Metric
Activities	Attractive tennis activities organized	Metric
	Attractive social activities organized	Metric
Software		



Atmosphere	Small scale	Metric
	Liveliness	Metric
	Diversity of people	Metric
	Club feeling	Metric
	Sense of belonging/being welcome	Metric
	Conviviality	Metric
People	Friends/acquaintances are members	Metric
	Family is a member	Metric
	People of the same age are members	Metric
History	Traditions/lots of history	Metric
Control variables		
Duration membership	How many years have you been a member of [club]? If there is an interval in between, you may deduct those years.	Metric
Age	What is your age?	Metric
Organizational identification	I feel that I belong to [club]. I like being at [club]. I enjoy going to our [club] events. I am proud to say that I belong to [club]. I often discuss [club] matters with other members. (1= not at all, to 5= completely)	Metric

4.4 Results

Member involvement behavior

The descriptive statistics are summarized in Table 4.2. The descriptive statistics for member involvement behavior show that most members are loyal ($M=.80$), do not volunteer ($M=.43$) but do perform positive WOM behavior ($M=.90$) and derive satisfaction and subjective goal attainment through their engagement with club goods to some extent ($M=17.39$). The average age of the sample members is 49 years, with a mean membership duration of 12 years.

**Table 4.2 Descriptive statistics main variables.**

Variables		N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Member involvement behavior	Loyalty	306	0	1	.80	.40
	Volunteering	306	0	1	.43	.50
	WOM	306	0	1	.90	.31
Value from club goods	Total value from club goods	306	5	27	17.39	2.12
Value from hardware						
Courts	Surface	306	1	5	3.78	.98
	Court capacity	306	1	5	3.57	.86
	Quality of the courts	306	1	5	3.79	.75
	Possibility to play in winter	306	1	5	3.14	1.17
Park/club house	Appearance of the park	306	1	5	2.39	.93
	Kitchen assortment	306	1	5	3.63	.81
	Assortment from the bar	306	1	5	2.54	.82
	Parking nearby	306	1	5	2.98	.90
	Park is close by	306	1	5	2.84	1.08
Pricing	Membership fee	306	1	5	3.00	.77
	Price of the training	306	1	5	2.75	.84
	Prices of the bar/kitchen	306	1	5	2.87	.78
Value from orgware						
Level	Play at own level	306	1	5	3.77	.74
	Competitive activities at own level	306	1	5	3.13	1.14
	Sufficient training opportunities	306	1	5	3.11	1.00
Activities	Attractive tennis activities	306	1	5	3.09	.89
	Attractive social activities	306	1	5	2.90	.93
Value from software						
Atmosphere	Small scale	306	1	5	3.05	1.00
	Liveliness	306	1	5	3.50	.88
	Diversity of people	306	1	5	3.25	.86
	Club feeling	306	1	5	3.30	.90
	Sense of belonging/being welcome	306	1	5	3.82	.80
	Conviviality	306	1	5	3.77	.77



People	Friends/acquaintances are members	306	1	5	3.67	.93
	Family is a member	306	1	5	2.36	1.06
	People of the same age are members	306	1	5	3.56	.86
History	Traditions/lots of history	306	1	5	3.40	.96
Control variables	Duration membership	305	1	67	12.41	11.79
	Age	306	18	85	49.11	16.39
	Organizational identification	306	1	5	3.52	.70

Value from club goods and member involvement behavior

The outcomes of the logistic regressions between total value from club goods and the three measures of member involvement behavior are displayed in Table 4.3. In two models a significant positive relationship was found between total value from club goods and member involvement behavior, controlling for organizational identification, membership duration, and age. Members that derive higher levels of satisfaction and subjective goal attainment through their engagement with club goods had a higher odds of being loyal (odds ratio = 1.26) and performing positive word of mouth behavior (odds ratio = 1.58), with the highest odds ratio observed for positive WOM. Interestingly, no significant relationship was found between total value from club goods and volunteering. This suggests that while aligning club goods with members' interests is crucial for loyalty and WOM, it does not play a role in encouraging volunteering.

Table 4.3 Results of the logistic regressions between total value from club goods and member involvement behavior, in odds ratios (Exp(β)).

	Loyalty	Volunteering	WOM
Total value from club goods	1.257**	.982	1.581***
Organizational identification	2.062**	2.129***	5.437***
Duration membership	.984	1.012	.999
Age	1.023	.991	.986
Nagelkerke R2	.169	.085	.376

* $p < .05$ / ** $p < .01$ / *** $p < .001$

Value-adding club goods

The mean values of the importance and fulfillment scores and the VCG and adjusted VCG indices are displayed in Table 4.4. Based on the mean importance scores, Court capacity (M=4.25), Conviviality (M=4.21), Quality courts (M=4.17), Sense of belonging/being welcome (M=4.12), Play at own level (M=4.06), Surface (M=3.97), Liveliness (M=3.96),



Possibility to play in winter ($M=3.86$), Friends/acquaintances are members ($M=3.82$), Appearance of the park ($M=3.77$), People of the same age are members ($M=3.73$) and Club feeling ($M=3.70$) are the most important club goods that drive member value in the context of the four VSCs. These items all have positive delta scores, indicating that the value from the corresponding club good raises the total value from the club goods index and are therefore the most value-adding club goods of VSCs. These club goods refer to the hardware, orgware, and software of VSCs, implying that the most important club goods driving member value are a combination of all three categories.

Table 4.4 Mean values of the importance and fulfillment scores and the VCG (delta) indices.

		Importance score	Fulfillment score	Value from club goods (VCG) indices	Adjusted value from club goods (VCG) indices
Hardware					
Courts	Surface	3.97	4.29	3.78	.56
	Court capacity	4.25	3.71	3.57	.35
	Quality of the courts	4.17	4.01	3.79	.57
	Possibility to play in winter	3.86	3.38	3.14	-.08
Park/club house	Appearance of the park	3.77	4.11	3.63	.41
	Kitchen assortment	2.83	3.33	2.54	-.68
	Assortment from the bar	3.11	3.80	2.98	-.24
	Parking nearby	3.03	3.76	2.84	-.38
	Park is close by	3.52	3.96	3.40	.18
Pricing	Membership fee	3.31	3.59	3.00	-.22
	Price of the training	3.07	3.31	2.75	-.47
	Prices of the bar/kitchen	3.07	3.63	2.87	-.35
Orgware					
Level	Play at own level	4.06	4.12	3.77	.55
	Competitive activities at own level	3.49	3.67	3.13	-.09
	Sufficient training opportunities	3.48	3.58	3.11	-.11
Activities	Attractive tennis activities	3.30	3.66	3.09	-.13
	Attractive social activities	3.11	3.54	2.90	-.32



Software					
Atmo- sphere	Small scale	3.19	3.75	3.05	-.17
	Liveliness	3.96	3.75	3.50	.28
	Diversity of people	3.54	3.71	3.25	.03
	Club feeling	3.70	3.65	3.30	.08
	Sense of belonging/being welcome	4.12	4.04	3.82	.60
	Conviviality	4.21	3.94	3.77	.55
People	Friends/acquaintances are members	3.82	4.04	3.67	.45
	Family is a member	2.45	3.30	2.36	-.86
	People of the same age are members	3.73	3.98	3.56	.34
History	Traditions/lots of history	2.46	3.39	2.39	-.83
Mean		3.50	3.74	3.22	.00

Competitive club goods

Surface (M=4.30), Play at own level (M=4.12), Appearance of the Park (M=4.11), Sense of belonging/being welcome (M=4.04), Friends/acquaintances are members (M=4.04), Quality of the courts (M=4.01), People of the same age are members (M=3.98), Park is close by (M=3.96), Conviviality (M=3.94) are the club goods that lead to the highest fulfillment scores. Using one-way ANOVA, the mean scores of the fulfillment of the VCG items were calculated for members of the four different VSCs. Table 4.5 presents the mean scores, the F ratios for the analyses of variance, and the significance level. Several significant group differences were found. However, only two types of club goods were significantly different for one VSC compared to all other VSCs. The post-hoc tests indicated that Club C had significantly higher scores on the fulfillment of Possibility to play in winter (M=4.47) compared to all other clubs (Club A M=3.14; Club B M=2.69; Club D M=2.70). Club A had a significantly higher fulfillment score on Liveliness (M=4.15) compared to all other clubs (Club B M=3.46; Club C M=3.60; Club D M=3.64). As we have seen in the former section, these club goods are also highly valuable club goods. This means that Possibility to play in winter and Liveliness are the only value-adding club goods that are also rare in the context of these four VSCs.

However, although there are significant differences in the fulfillment scores between the club goods of the VSCs, there are no significant differences in total value from club goods between the four VSCs (Table 4.6). This means that all four VSCs have different club goods bundles that account for VSCs' total value from club goods. It can therefore be concluded that although some value-adding club goods are rare, they can be substituted by other club goods bundles.

Table 4.5 Mean values, the F ratios and significant differences for the analyses of variance of the fulfillment scores between the four VSCs.

		Club A	Club B	Club C	Club D	F-statistics	Post hoc
Hardware							
Courts	Surface	4.64	4.62	4.37	3.96	13.95***	A<D, C<D, B<D
	Court capacity	3.55	4.62	3.70	3.73	5.270**	A<B, C<B, D<B
	Quality of the courts	4.44	4.38	3.75	3.88	14.12***	A<C, D C<B
	Possibility to play in winter	3.14	2.69	4.47	2.70	73.76***	C<A, D, B A<D
Park/club house	Appearance of the park	4.00	3.69	4.07	4.27	4.25**	A<D D<B
	Kitchen assortment	3.34	3.46	3.36	3.28	.34	
	Assortment from the bar	3.75	3.69	3.73	3.91	1.47	
	Parking nearby	3.66	4.08	3.86	3.71	1.71	
	Park is close by	4.00	4.15	3.86	3.99	.98	
Pricing	Membership fee	3.76	4.00	3.60	3.41	5.64	D<A, B
	Price of the training	3.42	3.23	3.32	3.24	1.11	
	Prices of the bar/ kitchen	3.52	3.85	3.82	3.53	3.93**	B<A, D
Orgware							
Level	Play at own level	4.19	3.92	4.02	4.18	1.45	
	Competitive activities at own level	3.66	3.46	3.52	3.83	2.48	
	Sufficient training opportunities	3.64	3.31	3.48	3.65	1.22	
Activities	Attractive tennis activities	3.71	4.15	3.48	3.71	4.44**	C<B
	Attractive social activities	3.61	3.85	3.30	3.65	5.63**	C<A, D, B
Software							



Atmosphere	Small scale	4.23	4.38	3.65	3.44	21.53***	A<C, D B<C, D
	Liveliness	4.15	3.46	3.60	3.64	8.61***	A<C, D, B
	Diversity of people	3.93	3.69	3.52	3.72	3.97**	A<C
	Club feeling	3.98	3.69	3.46	3.57	5.58**	A<C, D
	Sense of belonging/ being welcome	4.31	4.08	3.95	3.92	5.04**	A<C, D
	Conviviality	4.25	3.92	3.80	3.84	6.46***	A<C, D
People	Friends/acquaintances are members	4.14	3.77	4.10	3.95	1.93	
	Family is a member	3.30	3.38	3.33	3.26	.22	
	People of the same age are members	4.15	3.85	3.90	3.94	2.24	
History	Traditions/lots of his- tory	3.38	3.54	3.24	3.51	3.70*	C<D

* $p<.05$ / ** $p<.01$ / *** $p<.001$

Table 4.6 Mean values, the F ratios and significant differences for the analyses of variance of the total member value scores between VSCs.

	Club A	Club B	Club C	Club D	F-statistics	Post hoc
Total value from club goods	17.62	18.03	17.34	17.20	1.017	

* $p<.05$ / ** $p<.01$ / *** $p<.001$

Exploited value-adding and competitive club goods

Based on the mean values of the club goods scores (VCG) and whether a remark is made about it on the website, it is shown in Table 4.7 that VSCs do not seem to strategically exploit all of their value-adding club goods. From the top five club goods with the highest mean scores, Club A refers to 2, Club B refers to 3, Club C refers to 2, and Club D refers to 2 of those items in the description about their club on their website. In addition, it turns out that Club B refers to 2, Club D refers to 3, Club A refers to 4 and Club C refers to 6 club goods that did not appear to be value-adding club goods based on the focus groups and questionnaires among members of those clubs. Furthermore, Table 4.7 shows that Club A and Club C actively promote their rare club goods – *Liveliness* and *Possibility to play in winter* – on their websites. This suggests that VSC management strategically leverages certain competitive advantages.

**Table 4.7 Mean values of the 6 most important club goods per VSC and their exploitation.**

	VCG	Exploited
Club A		
Conviviality	4.11	Yes
Quality of the courts	4.05	No
Surface	4.03	No
Sense of belonging/being welcome	4.01	No
Liveliness	3.79	Yes
<i>Other club goods</i>		4
Club B		
Court capacity	4.15	No
Quality of the courts	4.08	No
Surface	4.00	Yes
Small scale	4.00	Yes
Attractive tennis activities	3.92	Yes
Sense of belonging/being welcome	3.92	No
<i>Other club goods</i>		2
Club C		
Possibility to play in winter	4.26	Yes
Surface	3.79	Yes
Friends/acquaintances are members	3.75	No
Sense of belonging/being welcome	3.74	No
Quality of the courts	3.62	No
Play at own level	3.62	No
<i>Other club goods</i>		6
Club D		
Play at own level	3.86	No
Appearance of the park	3.80	No
Sense of belonging/being welcome	3.74	Yes
Quality of the courts	3.73	No
Conviviality	3.69	No
Court capacity	3.59	Yes
<i>Other club goods</i>		3



4.5 Discussion and implications

This study explores which club goods generate value for members to foster their involvement, while also providing VSCs with a competitive advantage. As VSCs face growing competition from local VSCs within the same sport that jeopardize their long-term survival, it seems crucial to not only offer club goods that align with members' interests and sustain engagement but also to develop those that enhance VSCs' appeal over rival VSCs. The VRIO framework, developed by Barney (1991) as part of the RBV, is employed to determine whether club goods can be leveraged as competitive advantages over rival VSCs. Drawing on this framework, club goods are assessed based on their ability to generate value for members to foster their involvement (V), while also providing VSCs with a competitive advantage by being rare (R) and difficult to imitate (I). Finally, the extent to which VSC management strategically leverages these goods is assessed.

The results indicate significant positive relationships between the value members obtain from club goods and their loyalty and positive WOM. No significant relationship was found between the value members obtain from club goods and volunteering. Given that VSCs rely heavily on member involvement for their functioning, this suggests that while aligning club goods with members' interests is important, it alone is insufficient to enhance the various facets of their involvement. The results show that club goods related to tangible assets (hardware), sports opportunities and activities (orgware), and relationships (software) are value-adding club goods within the context of VSCs. Although some value-adding club goods appear to be rare among the four VSCs, such as the Possibility to play in winter and Liveliness, other VSCs seem to be able to substitute these by other club goods bundles. Finally, the results suggest that while VSC management leverages certain competitive advantages, it does not strategically capitalize on its most significant value-adding club goods, indicating a potential inability to identify what club goods members value most.

Member focus core element within broader management approach for VSCs

The conclusion that aligning club goods with members' interests is insufficient to enhance the various facets of their involvement suggests that VSC management should exercise caution in relying solely on a member-focused approach. Scholars already pointed out that prioritizing activities benefiting individual members contradicts the collective action needed to run VSCs (e.g. Enjolras, 2009). VSCs do not merely sell products or services; members act as both consumers and producers of club goods, making their involvement essential to the organization's functioning (Horch, 1998). This study aligns with recent research indicating that social identification processes are crucial for fostering member involvement (e.g., Buser et al., 2024; Kolbl et al., 2020; Schlesinger & Nagel, 2013; 2015), suggesting that, beyond providing club goods, VSC management should cultivate collective identities to enhance the functioning of VSCs. This aligns with the view of many social scientists who consider the application of the economic model of behavior to be limited to the traditional economic domain (Kirchgässner, 2008). It also supports the caution raised by Thiel and Mayer (2009) against blindly applying economic concepts to the management of VSCs.

However, completely dismissing a focus on meeting members' needs would hinder VSCs' ability to strengthen member commitment. The results also show strong positive relationships between the value members derive from club goods and their loyalty and positive word-of-mouth, highlighting the need to embed a member-focused approach as



a fundamental part of a broader management strategy to secure VSCs' long-term survival (Schlesinger & Nagel, 2013; 2015). In recent decades, VSCs have faced growing competition from sports providers (Rossi et al., 2020; 2024), and a growing consumerist attitude among members (Bodet, 2009; Enjolras, 2002; Ibsen & Seippel, 2010; Van der Roest, 2015). Consumerism is widely regarded as a significant societal shift, often described as an empowering development in people's private lives that enhances individual autonomy in making cost-utility decisions (Lorentzen & Hustinx, 2007). This mindset extends beyond private-sector goods and services to collectively produced offerings such as sports, leisure, and cultural activities, which are increasingly treated as marketable products. As a result, members perceive providers of these goods similarly to market competitors, expecting their needs to be met—otherwise, they readily switch to alternative providers (Kelly, 2005). Given that members can leave and switch at any time, these developments make it increasingly crucial for VSCs to meet members' expectations regarding club goods.

Role of club goods in capacity building decisions

Due to the importance of club goods for member loyalty and positive word-of-mouth, it can be concluded that aligning club goods with members' interests should be a strategic priority in VSC management capacity-building decision-making. The findings suggest two key directions. First, the conclusion that members value not only tangible products or services (hardware) and sports opportunities (orgware) at VSCs, but also the relationships (software) they co-create themselves, calls for capacity-building decisions focused on fostering the development of social relationships among members. Since Schlesinger and Nagel (2015) note that sociability – referring to the informal social ties, friendships, and sense of community among members – is often seen as outdated by VSCs in their efforts to modernize and professionalize, a renewed focus on sociability is crucial for management to ensure the long-term survival of VSCs. Second, the conclusion that current structures of VSCs might be inadequate to effectively identify the interests of members calls for capacity-building decisions focused on developing member knowledge systems (Behnam et al., 2021), such as platforms and tools that collect, manage, and share members' knowledge, experiences, and skills to better align organizational activities with their needs. Once it is clear which club goods matter most, these can be better leveraged to maximize value for members.

Role of club goods in countering competition

Additionally, it can be concluded that the extent to which club goods distinguish VSCs from their peers – and can be strategically leveraged by management to counter growing competition – is limited. Although two VSCs in this study produce a value-adding club good that increases attractiveness over their competitors, this study demonstrates that these club goods are not unique, — that is, they are not one of a kind or unlike anything else. Rather, those VSCs appeared more effective at creating value for members through similar types of club goods. Therefore, to counter competition from local VSCs with the same sport, VSCs may find it more effective to differentiate themselves from their peers by emphasizing their organizational character (Selznick, 1957). As the resource-based view (RBV) suggests, a sustainable competitive advantage is achieved when organizational assets that drive it are difficult for competitors to replicate (Barney, 1991). Organizational character could therefore be a key asset for VSCs, as the historical, holistic, and value-driven nature of VSCs'



identity is imbued with causal ambiguity, making it challenging to fully understand or replicate. However, in response to competition from commercial sports providers, promoting and marketing VSC club goods appears to be a valuable strategy for differentiation. Unlike customers of commercial sports providers, who seem to value these organizations primarily for their services, VSC members place greater value on social elements, such as relationships with fellow members and the overall atmosphere, which are considered VSCs' unique selling points (Schlesinger & Nagel, 2015).

Limitations and future research

This study's limitations can guide future research. First, the multiple case study is limited to only four VSCs of the same sport. Tennis is an individual but social sport with specific club goods regarding for example surface. Tennis furthermore has a specific competitive structure. Players compete for their own VSC, but also play tournaments at other VSCs and with members of other VSCs. The competitive activities also feature a high degree of interaction with opponents, with teams often having drinks and/or eating together before and after matches. This can cause isomorphic tendencies to become more deeply rooted than in other types of sports. More research into other types of sports would therefore strengthen insights into club goods that lead to member value and the extent in which they are rare, substitutable and exploited. Additionally, it is possible that the questionnaires were mainly completed by individuals that highly value the club goods, which could skew the VRIO characteristics of club goods. Further research with a larger and more diverse sample would be beneficial. Furthermore, VSCs' websites may be outdated or fail to accurately reflect the club goods most strategically exploited, highlighting the need for better indicators to identify which club goods management prioritizes. And lastly, based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that economic perspectives framing VSCs as benefit-maximizing entities should be complemented by approaches that account for commitment beyond individual gains. Classic institutional theory (CIT) might be a promising perspective in this regard, as it emphasizes that organizational survival depends primarily on the value core constituencies attach to the organization as something more than a socially engineered tool (Selznick, 1957).

Policy implications

This research suggests an alternative policy approach to enhance VSCs' ability to thrive and endure. As Van der Roest (2015, p. 127) indicates, in sport policy "a threatening version of consumerism is sketched". Based on the idea that VSCs have been faced with increasing competition from commercial sports providers and members seem to have different wishes and needs regarding membership, VSCs are stimulated to broaden their services and making membership forms more flexible. This research aligns with Van der Roest (2015) who already demonstrated that expanding services and offering flexible memberships have minimal impact on the value members derive from VSCs. Governmental policy aimed at strengthening VSCs should be focused more on further developing, exploiting and marketing the product of VSCs; namely 'social sport'. Stimulating relationships between members not only leads to societal benefits, but is also a necessary part of what members bind to the VSC.



Chapter 5

The importance of collective identities: A Classic Institutional View³

5.1 Introduction

With around 700,000 voluntary sport clubs (VSCs), these organizations serve as the backbone of Europe's sports system (Hoekman et al., 2015) and are widely recognized for their contributions to health promotion, social cohesion, volunteering, and democratic participation (Nagel et al., 2020). However, VSCs face considerable challenges and uncertainty (Seippel et al., 2020). A key characteristic of VSCs is that members contribute both financial resources (e.g., membership fees) and time (e.g., volunteer work) to collectively provide club goods. Club goods refer to all benefits of membership of a VSC -such as sports and social activities- that are exclusively available to members (Heinemann, 2004; Wicker et al., 2014). Given their reliance on members for resources, it is concerning that VSCs are facing growing challenges regarding the commitment and involvement of members. One in five VSCs across nine European countries struggle with volunteer recruitment, coaches, memberships, and finances (Seippel et al., 2020). Research in the Netherlands also highlights growing challenges, particularly in member commitment and participation, which threaten the long-term survival of VSCs (Van Kalmthout & Hoeijmakers, 2023; Stuij et al., 2023).

To tackle these challenges, policymakers and sports federations across Europe have encouraged VSCs to professionalize their structures (Boessenkool et al., 2011; Seippel, 2019), expand services for both members and non-members (Van der Roest et al., 2015), and broaden their activities to enhance their societal role (Nagel et al., 2020; Skille, 2008). As a result, VSCs primarily receive support for their functional role – delivering club goods that provide individual benefits to strengthen member commitment (Heinemann, 2004; Wicker et al., 2014). However, VSCs are not only “beneficial organizations for recreational activities”, but also “important identity vehicles for individuals” (Schlesinger & Nagel, 2015, p. 71). Recent studies indicate that social identification processes also play a crucial role in fostering member commitment (e.g., Buser et al., 2024; Kolbl et al., 2020; Schlesinger & Nagel, 2013; 2015). This suggests that beyond providing club goods, cultivating collective identities is central to VSCs' functioning. However, policymakers' emphasis on club goods may pose a significant management challenge, as prioritizing individual benefits could conflict with collective identity formation (Enjolras, 2009), potentially undermining member involvement. Understanding the factors that influence collective identities in VSCs can help address this challenge effectively.

To this end, it may be beneficial to turn to classic institutional theory (CIT), as it provides a perspective that integrates the functional role of VSCs in offering club goods with the development of collective identities to explain the long-term survival of organizations (Selznick, 1957). CIT argues that when members begin to view the organization not merely as an instrument for functional purposes, but “as a vehicle for the realization of their own values



and identities”, the organization acquires significant meaning for them and becomes “a subject of genuine moral concern” (Kraatz, 2009, p. 63). Especially in the sporting context, organizations are seen as key facilitators of collective identities, driven by passionate commitment to a sport, competition, or team (Oja et al., 2023). Collective identities refer to a shared sense of belonging and self-definition among members of a group, community or category (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Special attention has already been given to various collective identities in the context of VSCs that transcend the traditional organizational focus in Social Identity Theory (SIT) research. Besides organizational identities (Kolbl et al., 2020; Schlesinger & Nagel, 2013; 2015), that relates to a VSC membership (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), scholars have shown that individuals develop a sense of identification and belonging to a specific sports team (Buser et al., 2024) or the overall sport (Hoeijmakers & Steenbergen, 2024).

To date, research on the positive effects and influencing factors of VSCs’ collective identities has been limited, with studies primarily focusing on how identification with social groups within the context of VSCs affects member commitment (e.g. Buser et al., 2024; Kolbl et al., 2020; Schlesinger & Nagel, 2013; 2015). This micro-level perspective on collective identities exposes a gap in the literature by overlooking the organizational factors that influence them. Research on VSCs highlights that member commitment is shaped by the broader organizational context, emphasizing the role of the organization’s values (Buser et al., 2024; Schlesinger & Nagel, 2013; 2015). According to CIT, members’ collective identities are shaped by the organization’s “habits, dependencies, interests, and values” (Selznick, 1994). This historically rooted, holistic, and value-driven nature of identity (Kraatz et al., 2016) not only strengthens members’ connection to the organization but also differentiates it from others and establishes its significance and appeal within society (Kraatz et al., 2016; Selznick, 1957). In doing so, they strengthen their ability to attract and retain (new) members and contribute to health promotion, social cohesion, volunteering, and democratic participation in society (Nagel et al., 2020). Therefore, to fully understand the role and development of collective identities in VSCs, combining CIT and SIT allows for the integration of micro- and organizational-level processes that shape these identities. This approach can help VSCs leverage collective identities, enabling more effective resource allocation and maintaining appeal to both current and potential members.

The purpose of this study is to explore the positive effects and factors that shape collective identities within VSCs. CIT argues that an organization’s ability to thrive and endure depends on both its functional role and the formation of collective identities. However, the micro- and organizational-level factors shaping collective identities remain poorly understood. Therefore, combining CIT with SIT can provide valuable insights for management on how collective identities emerge and how they can be effectively leveraged. To understand the importance of fostering collective identities for VSCs’ ability to thrive and endure, the concept of organizational identification from SIT is applied, exploring its relationship to member involvement beyond the value of club goods. As membership organizations, VSCs rely heavily on member involvement for their functioning. Furthermore, to understand how collective identities are fostered, the study examines which social groups are key in shaping collective identities within VSCs and identifies the organizational factors that trigger organizational identification processes. Finally, the extent to which a collective identity distinguishes VSCs from its peers – and can be strategically leveraged by management to counter growing competition – is examined.



5.2 Theoretical framework and research questions

Value beyond functional purposes through organizational identification

While CIT gave way over time to Neo-Institutional Theory (NIT) with refocusing attention away from the individual organization to categories of organizations, there is renewed attention to the insights of CIT (e.g. Greenwood & Hinings, 1996; Kraatz, 2009; Boin et al., 2021). CIT is primarily associated with Selznick's work on organizations (Hinings & Greenwood, 2015; King, 2015). While Selznick sees organizations as instruments for achieving collective goals, he argues that they can also evolve into vehicles for individuals to express their own values (Selznick, 1957). Selznick (1957) defines this particular category of meaningful organizations as 'institutions'. Unlike ordinary organizations, which function merely as structured collaborations between individuals, institutions provide value "beyond the technical requirements at hand" to the groups essential for their survival (p. 17). In contrast, the opposite of an institution – the ideal-typical 'organization' – is a purely functional entity, "an expendable tool, a rational instrument engineered to do a job" (p. 5).

From an organizational behavior perspective, the process referred to by Selznick can be best understood through SIT (e.g., Ashford & Mael, 1989; Hogg & Terry, 2000). The main assumption of SIT is that people's self-definition contains two components: a personal identity and different social identities (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Belonging to social groups or categories is important for the construction of one's self-concept because it helps define the individual's self-image and thus has meaning for people. According to this approach, organizations can be a big part of one's self-concept and is shown to influence member behavior. Members who strongly identify with their organization incorporate its collective interests and act in service of the organization because their membership is central to their sense of identity (Tavares et al., 2016).

Increased member involvement behavior through organizational identification

Selznick (1957) argues that an organization's long-term survival is ensured when collective identities that drive member involvement evolve "beyond the technical requirements at hand" (p. 17). However, VSCs are a particular type of organization where members act as both consumers and producers of the value they seek. As a result, member involvement is fundamental to the organization's functioning (Horch, 1998). This suggests that for VSCs, the technical task of these organizations extends beyond their core role of providing club goods. It also involves fostering collective identities to drive member involvement, which is essential for their functioning.

To grasp the significance of collective identities for VSCs, it is useful to apply the concept of organizational identification from SIT and analyze, at a micro level, whether member involvement arises from members' sense of identification and belonging to the VSC (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Member involvement in the context of VSCs encompasses various facets. Misener et al. (2020) highlight loyalty, volunteering, and positive word-of-mouth – key for member acquisition, sponsor loyalty, and organizational reputation – as essential. While research has shown that members who identify with their VSC tend to be more loyal (Kolbl et al., 2022; Schlesinger & Nagel, 2013; 2015), it remains unclear how this relationship applies to different aspects of member involvement beyond the value derived from club goods. This leads to the first research question:



RQ1: What is the relationship between organizational identification and the involvement behavior of VSC members beyond the value members derive from club goods?

Multiple foci of identification

While Selznick emphasizes the organization as the most relevant social category (focus) of identification, it remains uncertain whether this applies equally to members of VSCs. Given that VSCs are often loosely structured membership organizations (Horch, 1998), it is likely that members not only develop a perception of oneness or belongingness to the VSC, but also with diverse social groups within them. Schlesinger and Nagel (2015) argue that, in the context of VSCs, it is not “the formal organizational unit of the club that is the focus for the members’ commitment but the socially manageable unit of the sport group or the division that then functions as a sort of club within a club” (p. 71). While research in the context of VSCs shows that collective identities emerge through social identification processes with various social groups – such as the VSC itself (e.g., Kolbl et al., 2022; Schlesinger & Nagel, 2015; 2013), teams within the VSC setting (Buser et al., 2024), or the type of sport (Hoeijmakers & Steenbergen, 2024) – it remains unclear which social groups are most crucial for the development of a collective identity in VSCs and how these groups are interconnected. This leads to the second research question:

RQ2: What are the key identification foci for VSC members, and how are they related?

Identity cues that stimulate organizational identification

Although social identification is a fundamental construct in organizational theory, the process by which it occurs has received limited scholarly attention (Ashforth et al., 2008). In Selznick’s view organizational character is the basis for organizational identification processes to emerge. According to Selznick, organizational character is an organizational attribute “composed of habits, dependencies, interests, and values” (Selznick, 1994) that “breathe life into purely technical organizations” (Kraatz et al., 2016, p. 7). Selznick’s concept of character highlights the historical, holistic, and value-driven nature of identity (Kraatz et al., 2016), which evolves through a historical process of making commitments (King, 2015). It is argued that, as members value the organization’s character, they internalize its identity, see themselves as part of a valued community, and relate to the organization in ways that differ from their connection to other organizations lacking these attributes (Besharov & Khurana, 2015).

While a congruence of values between members and the organization is often found to stimulate organizational identification, the literature on organizational identification suggests that various cues can trigger this process (Ashforth et al., 2008). Identity cues are signals in the organization’s fabric that “spur the potential enactment of organizationally relevant identities” (Ashforth et al., 2008, p. 332) which encourage members to cognitively categorize themselves as part of the organization. These identity cues can be shaped by organizational leaders, embedded in organizational structures, reflected in the organization’s history, or emphasized in its mission or culture (Ashforth et al., 2008). Literature suggests that organizational identification is driven by social relationships that foster a sense of connection and belonging to the organization (Bartel & Dutton, 2012), signals that differentiates the organization from others and help members recognize with it (Mael & Ashforth,



1992), and signals that help members understand their role and relationships within the organization (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). However, which identity cues trigger the formation of collective identities in VSCs remains unclear. This leads to the third research question:

RQ3: What identity cues stimulate organizational identification processes of VSCs' members?

Organizational character and distinctiveness

In Selznick's view, organizational character should be understood not only as the basis for collective identities to emerge as it breathes life into organizations, but also as what makes organizations distinctive among their peers (Kraatz et al., 2016). Chapter 4 highlights that VSCs are rather similar in club goods, such as facilities, activities, and services. As most VSCs are connected with other VSCs in sporting competitions that come with specific rules and standards, a certain degree of similarity also seems necessary to be integrated into the competition pyramid. However, in recent decades, VSCs have faced growing competition, mainly from local VSCs within the same sport (Hoeijmakers, 2022; Rossi et al., 2024) and must take strategic action to address this challenge (Rossi et al., 2024). To counter this competition and given the importance of maintaining a high degree of similarity in club goods for staying attractive and recognizable within the sports community, it might be effective for VSCs to cultivate a distinct identity through their organizational character. As the resource-based view (RBV) suggests, a sustainable competitive advantage is achieved when organizational assets that drive it are difficult for competitors to replicate (Barney, 1991). Organizational character could therefore be a key asset for VSCs, as the historical, holistic, and value-driven nature of their identity is imbued with causal ambiguity, making it challenging to fully understand or replicate – even by those within the organization itself. However, within the context of VSCs, organizational identity remains underexplored. Most analyses focus on identity at the organizational field level, where a shared understanding of core legitimate purposes and practices shapes appropriate actions (e.g., Skille, 2009, 2010, 2011; Stenling & Fahlen, 2016; Stenling, 2013). As a result, little is known about the elements that define the historical, holistic and value-driven nature of identity and whether it truly contributes to the distinctiveness of VSCs. This leads to the fourth research question:

RQ4: Does organizational character set VSCs apart from their peers?

5.3 Methods

Research design and sample

A mixed methods approach was employed – combining focus groups and questionnaires – among four Dutch voluntary tennis clubs located in close proximity in a small city. These four VSCs were selected because they recruit members from the same area, making them likely competitors for members and a relevant case for examining the effects and influencing factors of collective identities. Tennis offers a compelling case, combining individual and team elements. Players can join teams or training groups, indicating that various social groups contribute to the formation of collective identity within VSCs. For every VSC two separate focus groups of 4 members were organized for generating a list of foci of identification and identity cues that stimulate organizational identification processes. These mem-



bers have been selected in consultation with the VSC board to represent a cross-section of the club in terms of age, gender, playing skills, involvement and membership duration. The semi-structured interviews combined a deductive and inductive approach, with members asked to reflect on the foci of identification and identity signals identified in the literature, as well as to suggest any additional ones they felt applied to them. Based on the interview results, a list of identification foci and identity cues was developed and operationalized to assess the impact of collective identities on the ability of VSCs to thrive and endure, with further evaluation through a member questionnaire. All adult members of the four VSCs were invited to fill out the questionnaire online. Over two months, three reminders were sent to improve the response rate. 306 members responded. This resulted in a response rate of 15% for club A, 17% for club B, 10% for club C and 12% for club D. While the response rate is not very high, the descriptive results show a satisfactory level of diversity in respondents' characteristics, including age, gender, level of involvement, and membership duration. However, it is possible that the questionnaires were mainly completed by individuals with a strong identification with the VSC, which could skew the perceived importance of organizational identification.

Variables

Member involvement behavior

This study follows Misener et al. (2020) in identifying loyalty, volunteering, and positive word of mouth (WOM) as the most salient forms of member involvement in VSCs. *Loyalty* is a crucial form of member involvement, as membership is a fundamental condition for the existence and survival of VSCs (Schlesinger & Nagel, 2015). This was measured using Schlesinger and Nagel's (2015) 'intention to leave' scale. *Volunteering* refers to members who contribute their time to the benefit of the VSC without receiving tangible rewards (De Clerck et al., 2021). This form of involvement is particularly relevant because VSCs rely heavily on volunteers for administrative and operational tasks (Wegner et al., 2020). Volunteering was measured by asking respondents whether they engage in volunteer work for their club. *Word of mouth* (WOM) is defined as members speaking favorably about their club to others and actively promoting the club to potential members (Lee et al., 2016). WOM is a key member involvement behavior due to its significant role in marketing, member acquisition, sponsor loyalty, and building the organization's reputation (Misener et al., 2020). This was measured using the scale developed by Misener et al. (2020) for members of community sport associations.

Organizational identification

Organizational identification is defined as "the perception of oneness with or belongingness to an organization, where the individual defines him or herself in terms of the organization(s) in which he or she is a member" (Mael & Ashforth, 1992, p. 104). This was measured using Schlesinger and Nagel's (2015) scale.

Foci of identification

This study defines relevant social categories of identification through different foci of identification. These were selected based on the literature (VSC, team, sport), and additional insights from the focus groups (committee/board, sporting group). The salience of these



foci was measured by asking members to rate the importance of each social category in their lives on a five-point scale.

Identity cues

Based on the focus groups and literature, this study used several organizational identity cues. Based on the literature, these cues were categorized in social, inter-organizational and intra-organizational cues. Where the literature provided clear concepts and operationalizations, this study used existing scales that, in most cases, were modified to the context of VSCs (social relationships, organizational distinctiveness, prestige, reputation, rivalry, congruence of values, identity strength, participation in competitive sports). New scales were developed for concepts introduced by the focus groups and for areas where operationalizations were lacking in the literature, such as personal relationships and governance.

Social cues refer to identity signals arising from relationships with other members and are considered to stimulate organizational identification. Social relations within an organizational network are likely to foster members' sense of connection and belonging to the organization (Bartel & Dutton, 2012). This study employed two social cues. The first was a general construct reflecting *the strength of social relationships within the VSC*, measured using an adapted version of Sampson et al.'s (1997) 'relationship with neighbors' scale. The second was a personal construct referring to *the strength of personal relationships within the VSC*, for which a new scale was developed.

Inter-organizational cues indicate identity signals resulting from differences between organizations. Four inter-organizational cues were used. *Organizational distinctiveness* differentiates an organization from others, enabling members to better recognize their organization and identify with it (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Tajfel, 1978). This was measured using the perceived distinctiveness scale developed by Oja and Bass (2020). *Organizational prestige* refers to the accumulation of past successes over significant periods. Because the prestige of an organization can enhance self-esteem, members are more likely to identify with it (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Oja & Bass, 2020). This was measured by adapting Oja and Bass's (2020) scale to the VSC context. Todd and Kent (2009) hypothesized that a sports organization's *reputation* would enhance sport employees' organizational identification. Reputation is defined by outsiders' perceptions of an organization (Carmeli & Freund, 2002). In this study, it was measured by asking respondents to rate how non-member tennis players would perceive their club. *Organizational rivalry* refers to the perceived competition between an organization and its peers (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Interorganizational competition is a key feature of sports organizations, reinforcing their distinctiveness (Oja et al., 2020). This was measured using the perceived interorganizational competition scale of Mael and Ashforth (1992), adapted to the context of VSCs.

Intra-organizational cues include identity signals within the organization. Four intra-organizational cues were used. *A congruence of values* is believed to enhance organizational identification because when members' values align with those of the organization, they are more likely to define themselves in terms of the organization (Cable & DeRue, 2002). This was measured using one item from the Person-Organization (PO) fit scale developed by Cable and DeRue (2002), adapted to the context of VSCs. *Governance* refers to the strength of leadership within the organization. In the focus groups, it was noted that when members were dissatisfied with or unaware of the club's strategic direction, they felt less connected



to the VSC. This was measured using a newly developed scale. *Identity strength* pertains to beliefs about various facets of the organization's cultural values (Gioia & Thomas, 1996). This was measured using the identity strength scale developed by Gioia and Thomas (1996), adapted to the VSC context. Finally, this study included a construct to assess whether members *participate in competitive sports* for their club. According to Mael and Ashforth (1992), "during competition, group boundaries are drawn more sharply, values and norms are underscored, and we/they differences are accentuated" (p. 107).

Organizational character

Organizational character can be defined as a personality of the organization "composed of habits, dependencies, interests, and values" (Selznick, 1994). With the concept of character, Selznick emphasizes the historical, holistic and value-driven nature of identity (Kraatz et al., 2016), which evolves out of a "historical process of making commitments and institutionalization" (King, 2015, p. 160). This study took an inductive approach to capture elements of the organization's personality, asking respondents to describe their VSCs' character in terms of its most defining values.

Control variables

Membership duration and age were included as control variables, as member involvement behavior may be influenced by how long individuals have been members and their age. Value derived from club goods (as discussed in Chapter 4) was included as variable in the analysis to identify the significance of organizational identification beyond the value members derive from club goods. Value from club goods is defined as "the value members obtain through the sensation of satisfaction and subjective goal attainment" from the use of or involvement in the club goods (Brupbacher, 2017, p. 17). Club goods refer to all tangible items (hardware), sport opportunities and activities (orgware) and relationships (software) of a VSC that are exclusively available to the members of that VSC. Five-point scales were used to assess the importance (1 = not at all important; 5 = very important) and the experienced fulfillment (1 = not at all fulfilled; 5 = very fulfilled) of 27 club goods, which were identified and categorized as hardware (e.g., courts, park/club house, pricing), orgware (e.g., level, activities), and software (e.g., atmosphere, people, history).

Data analyses

Logistic regressions show the relationship between organizational identification and the separate member involvement behavior indices (loyalty, volunteering, WOM). The data on foci of identification were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations and correlation coefficients between the separate foci of identification. A linear regression was performed to show the relationship between the identity cues and organizational identification. Statistical significance was accepted in an alpha level of $p < .05$. Before regressions were run, Confirmatory Factor Analyses (CFA) were conducted to evaluate how well the data fit to the constructs of WOM, organizational identification and the identity cues. Cronbach's Alpha were all satisfactory: WOM (.853; 5 items), Organizational identification (.839; 5 items), Personal relationships (.735; 5 items), Relationships within VSCs (.783; 5 items), Perceived organizational prestige (.801; 3 items), Perceived organizational rivalry (.771; 3 items), Governance (.912; 4 items), Strength identity (.858; 5 items).



The data on members' description of organizational character were classified into major categories based on a general classification of theme substance and displayed according to how often it was mentioned.

Table 5.1 Overview of variables.

Variable	Items	Scale
Organizational identification	I feel that I belong to [club]. I like being at [club]. I enjoy going to our club events. I am proud to say that I belong to [club]. I often discuss club matters with other members. (1= not at all, to 5= completely)	Metric
Foci of identification		
Sport Club Team Board/commission Sporting group	Tennis is an important part of my life. [club] is an important part of my life. The team I compete with is an important part of my life. The board and/or committee of which I am a part is an important part of my life. The group I play tennis with is an important part of my life. (1= not at all, to 5= completely)	Metric
Member involvement behavior		
Loyalty	Have you ever thought about canceling your membership with [club] in the past year? (1= often, to 5= never)	Metric
Volunteering	Do you volunteer at [club]? (1=yes, 0=no)	Dummy
WOM	I encourage my friends to join [club]. I like to inform people about [club]. I tell others about [club]. I am positive about [club] towards others. If people ask, I recommend them to join [club]. (1= not at all, to 5= completely)	Metric
Identity cues		
Social cues		
Personal relationships	I know a lot of people at [club]. I consider some of the people who are members here to be good friends. [club] is important to me because of the people who are members. [club] is one of the most important social places in my life. I make social contacts in many places other than [club]. (1= not at all, to 5= completely)	Metric
Relationships within VSC	Members of [club] are willing to help each other. This is a tight-knit association. [club] members can generally be trusted. [club] members generally get along well with each other. [club] members do not share the same values (R). (1= not at all, to 5= completely)	Metric



Inter-organizational cues		
Perceived organizational distinctiveness	I have the feeling that [club] is very different from: [other club 1] [other club 2] [other club 3] (1= not at all to, 5= completely, 6= I don't know)	Metric
Perceived organizational prestige	Tennis players in general have a high regard for [club]. It is considered prestigious in Nijmegen to be associated with [club]. [club] is considered one of the best tennis clubs in the region. (1= not at all, to 5= completely, 6= I don't know)	Metric
Perceived organizational reputation	How do you think other tennis players (non-members) would rate [club] in general: (1 = not at all positive; 5 = very positive)	Metric
Perceived organizational rivalry	There is rivalry between [club] and the other [city] tennis clubs. [club] often indicates why it is the best/nicest tennis club. [club] often tries to show that it has the nicest members. (1= not at all to, 5= completely, 6= I don't know)	Metric
Intra-organizational cues		
Congruence of values	The values that I find important in life are very similar to the values of [club]. (1= not at all to, 5= completely, 6= I don't know)	Metric
Governance	I am satisfied with [club]' board. I am satisfied with the direction of [club]. [club] has a clear direction in mind. [club] has a clear mission and vision. (1= not at all to, 5= completely, 6= I don't know)	Metric
Strength identity	I have a strong sense of the history of the association. I am well aware of the traditions of the association. I am well aware of the goals of the association. I feel that the association has taken an important place in the community. [club] has a strong identity. (1= not at all to, 5= completely, 6= I don't know)	Metric
Competition	Plays competitive activities for [club]. (1=yes, 0=no)	Dummy
Control variables		
Duration membership	How many years have you been a member of [club]? If there is an interval in between, you may deduct those years.	Metric
Age	What is your age?	Metric
Total value from club goods	5-point scales were used to assess the importance (1 = not at all important; 5 = very important) and the experienced fulfillment (1 = not at all fulfilled; 5 = very fulfilled) of 27 club goods (Chapter 4)	Metric



5.4 Results

Member involvement behavior

The descriptive statistics are summarized in Table 5.2. The descriptive statistics for member involvement behavior show that most members are loyal ($M=.80$), do not volunteer ($M=.43$), but do perform WOM behavior ($M=.90$) and identify with the VSC to some extent ($M=3.52$). The average age of the sample members is 49 years, with a mean membership duration of 12 years.

Table 5.2 Descriptive statistics main variables.

Variables		N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Member involvement behavior	Loyalty	306	0	1	.80	.40
	Volunteering	306	0	1	.43	.50
	WOM	306	0	1	.90	.31
Organizational identification		306	1	5	3.52	.70
Foci of identification	Sport	306	1	5	3.78	.92
	Club	306	1	5	3.12	1.01
	Team	153	1	5	3.60	.88
	Board/commission	67	1	5	3.19	.89
	Sporting group	223	1	5	4.00	.75
Identity cues	Personal relationship	306	1	5	3.18	.65
	Relationships within VSCs	306	1	5	3.34	.88
	Perceived organizational distinctiveness	306	1	5	2.09	.64
	Perceived organizational prestige	306	1	5	2.70	1.08
	Perceived organizational reputation	306	1	5	3.66	.68
	Perceived organizational rivalry	306	1	5	2.45	.70
	Congruence values	306	1	5	3.27	.79
	Governance	306	1	5	2.93	1.09
	Attractive identity	306	1	5	2.70	.80
	Competition	306	0	1	.50	.50
Control variables	Duration membership	305	1	67	12.41	11.79
	Age	306	18	85	49.11	16.39
	Total value from club goods	306	1	27	17.39	2.12



Organizational identification and member involvement behavior

The outcomes of the logistic regressions between organizational identification and the three indices of member involvement behavior are displayed in Table 5.3. In all three models, a significant positive relationship is found between organizational identification and member involvement behavior, controlling for total value from club goods, membership duration, and age. Members with higher levels of organizational identification have a higher odds of being loyal (odds ratio = 2.06), volunteering (odds ratio = 2.13) and performing positive WOM (odds ratio = 5.44), with the highest odds ratio observed for positive WOM. This means that there is a positive relationship between organizational identification and member involvement behavior of VSCs' members beyond the value members derive from club goods. Interestingly, no significant relationship was found between total value from club goods and volunteering. This suggests that while both aligning club goods with members' interests and fostering collective identities are crucial for loyalty and WOM, collective identities play a key role in encouraging volunteering.

Table 5.3 Results of the logistic regressions between organizational identification and member involvement behavior, in odds ratios ($\text{Exp}(\beta)$).

	Loyalty	Volunteering	WOM
Organizational identification	2.062**	2.129***	5.437***
Total value from club goods	1.257**	.982	1.581***
Duration membership	.984	1.012	.999
Age	1.023	.991	.986
Nagelkerke R ²	.169	.085	.376

* $p < .05$ / ** $p < .01$ / *** $p < .001$

Different foci of identification

In Table 5.4 the mean values of and correlation coefficients between the foci of identification are displayed. For team ($n=153$), board/commission ($n=67$), and sporting group ($n=223$), these results apply only to members within those social groups. The descriptive statistics for foci of identification show that for members of those social groups, the sporting group is the most important focus of identification ($M=4.00$), followed by the sport ($M=3.78$), team ($M=3.60$), board/commission ($M=3.12$) and club ($M=3.12$). Correlation coefficients furthermore show that there is a medium or strong positive correlation ($r > .30$, Cohen, 1988) between sporting group and sport, team and club; between sport team and club; between team and board/commission and club; and between board/commission and club. This does not suggest that members have multiple distinct identities within VSCs, but rather that these identities seem to converge into a coherent set of key foci (Ashforth et al., 2008).

**Table 5.4 Mean values (S.E.) of and correlation coefficients between the separate foci of identification.**

	Mean (S.E.)	Sporting group	Sport	Team	Board/commission	Club
Sporting group	4.00 (.05)	1.00				
Sport	3.78 (.05)	.446**	1.00			
Team	3.60 (.07)	.582**	.305**	1.00		
Board/commission	3.12 (.11)	.228	.289*	.310*	1.00	
Club	3.12 (.06)	.395**	.651**	.370**	.611**	1.00

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed). **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

Identity cues and organizational identification

The descriptive statistics of the social, inter-organizational and intra-organizational cues are summarized in Table 5.2. On average, members score perceived organizational reputation ($M=3.66$), relationships within VSCs ($M=3.34$), congruence of values ($M=3.27$) and personal relationships ($M=3.18$) the highest. Exactly half of the sample members ($M=0.50$) are involved in competitive activities for their club. The outcomes of the linear regressions between the identity cues and organizational identification are displayed in Table 5.5. The analysis shows that the regression model accounts for 63% of the total variance in organizational identification. For the social cues, a significant positive relationship is found between personal relationships ($B=.41$) and relationships within VSCs ($B=.09$) with organizational identification. For the intra-organizational cues, congruence of values ($B=.15$), identity strength ($B=.30$) and competition ($B=.20$) are found to be significant positively related to organizational identification. Surprisingly since its significance is indicated in the literature, no significant relationships are found for the inter-organizational cues and for the intra-organizational cue governance. This may be explained by the relatively low average score members gave for perceived organizational distinctiveness ($M = 2.09$), as well as the fact that a relatively large number of members were not aware of the governance of the VSC, reflected in a high proportion of neutral responses. This means that in the context of VSCs, only social and intra-organizational identity cues seem to stimulate organizational identification processes of members.

Table 5.5 Results of the linear regression (B and S.E.) between identity cues and organizational identification.

	Organizational identification
Social cues	
Personal relationships	.405*** (.06)
Relationships within VSCs	.091* (.04)
Inter-organizational cues	
Perceived organizational distinctiveness	.080 (.05)
Perceived organizational reputation	.023 (.05)
Perceived organizational rivalry	-.056 (.05)
Perceived organizational prestige	-.006 (.03)
Intra-organizational cues	
Congruence values	.149** (.04)
Governance	.021 (.03)
Strength identity	.298*** (.05)
Competition	.197** (.06)
Adjusted R2	.604

Note: Regression coefficients included in the table are non-standardized. Duration membership, Age and Total value from club goods were included as control variables.

* $p < .05$ / ** $p < .01$ / *** $p < .001$

Organizational character and distinctiveness

In Table 5.6 the main themes of the most important values that define the character of the VSC are shown and displayed according to how often this was mentioned as a percentage of the members of the four VSCs. The analysis shows that organizational character is mostly described by values that refer to atmosphere, such as pleasant and convivial. It also refers to classifications of fellow members' involvement behavior, such as inclusive and committed, and their sociodemographic characteristics, such as their age, class and level of education. Lastly, respondents also mention characteristics of the club, such as appearance of the park and quality of the facilities, and the scale of the club. When comparing the themes among the four VSCs, results indicate that there is some distinctiveness in mentioned characteristics between VSCs. While respondents across all VSCs expressed varying values regarding atmosphere in the club, involvement behavior of fellow members and characteristics of the club, the most pronounced differences are noticeable in sociodemographic characterizations of fellow members and the organizational size of the VSC.

**Table 5.6 The main themes (%) of organizational character of the four VSCs.**

	Club A	Club B	Club C	Club D
Atmosphere in the club				
Pleasant	22%	2%	26%	22%
Convivial/informal	13%	14%	16%	8%
Behavior of fellow members				
Open/inclusive	23%	12%		9%
Committed/social	12%	8%	12%	8%
Characterizations of fellow members				
Young			5%	4%
Old		32%		
Upper class				15%
Students	9%			
Lesbians	5%			
High educated			5%	
Characteristics of the club				
Appearance of the park	5%	2%	8%	12%
Quality of the facilities	5%	7%	8%	15%
Scale of the club				
Small scale/intimate	4%	23%		
Large/professional			5%	4%
Other	2%	2%	15%	3%

Note: Themes with a minimum value of 2 percent are included in the table.

5.5 Discussion and implications

This study explores the effects and factors that shape collective identities within VSCs. As the role and development of collective identities in VSCs remain poorly understood, CIT is combined with SIT to identify the micro- and organizational-level factors that shape these identities. This approach allows VSCs to leverage collective identities more effectively, improving resource allocation and maintaining appeal to both current and potential members. The results indicate significant positive relationships between members' organizational identification and their loyalty, volunteering, and positive WOM, controlling for total value from club goods, membership duration, and age. Given that VSCs rely heavily on member involvement for their performance, this suggests that both providing club goods that align



with members' interests and fostering a collective identity are crucial for their ability to thrive and endure. Furthermore, to understand how collective identities are fostered, this study examined which social groups are key in shaping collective identities within VSCs and identifies the organizational factors that trigger organizational identification processes. Finally, this study explored the extent to which a collective identity distinguishes VSCs from its peers – and can be strategically leveraged by management to counter growing competition. Results show that the organization is just one of several social groups with which VSC members identify. The sport, team, and sporting group are the most salient, indicating that organizational identification in VSCs is multi-dimensional and shaped by various subgroups. Results also show that different identity cues like relationships with members, shared values, a strong sense of identity, and participation in competitive activities drive organizational identification in VSCs. The results further suggest that values related to organizational character vary between VSCs. These values are primarily associated with the atmosphere, members, venue, and scale of the organization.

High value of CIT for the context of VSCs

The conclusion that both organizing club goods and fostering collective identities are crucial for VSCs, aligns with Schlesinger and Nagel's observation that VSCs are not just "beneficial organizations for recreational activities", but also "important identity vehicles for individuals" (Schlesinger & Nagel, 2015, p. 71). As a result, CIT provides a valuable framework for understanding the ability of VSCs to thrive and endure, as it integrates the functional role of organizations with the development of collective identities to explain their long-term survival (Selznick, 1957). The central tenet of CIT is that organizational survival largely depends on the value core constituencies attach to the organization as something more than a socially engineered tool (Selznick, 1957). Although Chandler (2015) argued that it is difficult to test these assumptions empirically, the combination with SIT offers a robust theoretical framework for further empirical investigations of VSCs' long-term survival. What makes the combination with SIT particularly compelling is its ability to attach meaning to an organization by intertwining the identities of both the individual and the organization. As Ashforth and Mael (2008, p. 303) explain: "in defining oneself in terms of the identity of the relevant collective, one becomes a microcosm of the collective, ready and willing to enact its identity and act in its best interests even at the expense of oneself". This aligns with Selznick's assertion that when organizations provide members with meaning "beyond the technical requirements at hand" (Selznick, 1957, p. 17), members are more likely to "conduct the work necessary to solidify the organization's place as an enduring institution" (Chandler, 2015, p. 200). Given that sport is "a space where individuals experience intense emotional attachment to a group" (Wegner, 2020, p. 326), VSCs can serve as a vibrant context for organizational identification processes.

Embeddedness in social relationships and groups breathe life into VSCs

Based on this research it can be concluded that primarily the embeddedness in social relationships and groups within VSCs drive organizational identification processes and breathe life into the VSC. Results show that relationships with fellow members are most important for organizational identification processes to emerge. This is in line with Wegner's studies (2019; 2020) who identified that social connections and relationships formed by volunteers



provided a sense of solidarity and collective identity. Wegner explained that through shared participation in activities members internalize organizational identities and co-produced cues that simultaneously perpetuated it. Social relationships are therefore highly effective cues of organizational identification because organizational identification processes are systematically repeated and stimulated through participation in social relationships. In addition to dyadic relationships with fellow members, results show that VSCs consist of different kinds of social groups where members feel part of and where members vest their identity in (Ashforth et al., 2008, p. 359). In addition to the organization itself, which is the primary focus of most studies on social identification processes in VSC research, members appear to be embedded in the sport itself, the sporting group and the team as distinct yet interconnected social groups within the context of VSCs. This suggests that social relationships within VSCs should not only be viewed as social capital for society or individuals (Putnam, 2000) but also as vital for the long-term survival of VSCs.

Additionally, this study differs from the literature on identity cues where inter-organizational differences are argued to drive the tendency of members to identify with it (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Surprisingly, the results indicate that organizational identification within VSCs is primarily influenced by internal factors, and members, on average, rating perceived organizational distinctiveness relatively low. One reason might be that VSCs frequently collaborate with other local VSCs, making a distinctiveness strategy less prominent. Additionally, the focus on tennis in this study may also play a role, as tennis involves considerable interaction with players from other clubs and is typically associated with less rivalry compared to sports like football (De Kwaatsteniet et al., 2025).

Organizational character through members' sociodemographic traits and atmosphere

In accordance with the expectations of CIT, organizational character seems to make VSCs distinctive among their peers. The most substantial differences are noticeable in the sociodemographic characteristics of fellow members. McPherson's (1983) model of ecological competition among voluntary associations may help explain this finding. A core principle of this model is homophily – the tendency for individuals with similar sociodemographic characteristics to form and sustain relationships (McPherson et al., 2001) – a pattern also observed in VSCs (Van Haaften, 2022). However, the relatively low average ratings of perceived organizational distinctiveness in this study suggest that VSCs are not effectively leveraging their distinctive identity in a strategic manner. By tailoring their identities to appeal to specific sociodemographic groups, VSCs could carve out distinct niches, fostering a sustainable competitive advantage over their rivals.

Furthermore, the results of this study imply that it is important for VSCs to gain deeper insight into what leads their members to describe their VSC as pleasant and/or convivial. This study shows that members of all four VSCs characterize their club as pleasant and convivial. However, the specific factors contributing to this perception could differ across VSCs, distinguishing them from one another and potentially making their atmosphere a key asset for VSCs to strategically differentiate themselves from rival VSCs. However, at present, the atmosphere of VSCs remains a relative black box, and further research on this topic is warranted.



Limitations and future research

This study's limitations can guide future research. First, the multiple case study is limited to only four VSCs of the same sport. Tennis is a sport with a specific competitive structure. Players compete for their own VSC, but also play tournaments at other VSCs and with members of other VSCs. The competitive activities also feature a high degree of interaction with opponents, with teams often having drinks and/or eating together before and after matches. As a result, tennis appears to be associated with less rivalry compared to sports like football (De Kwaatsteniet et al., 2025). This may lead to inter-organizational cues being less deeply ingrained in tennis compared to other sports. Further research across sports characterized by greater rivalry and less interaction between opponents could therefore deepen our understanding of the processes surrounding organizational identification and inter-organizational identity cues. Additionally, it is possible that the questionnaires were predominantly completed by individuals who strongly identify with the VSC, potentially skewing the perceived importance of organizational identification. Descriptive results indicate that respondents demonstrate a satisfactory level of diversity in terms of age, gender, level of involvement, and membership duration. Additionally, membership duration and age were included as control variables, as member involvement behavior may be influenced by the length of membership and age. Nonetheless, further research with a larger and more diverse sample would be beneficial.

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the combination of CIT and SIT provides a valuable framework for understanding VSCs' ability to thrive and endure. VSCs should focus on encouraging stronger identification among members with the various groups within the organization's context. However, more research is needed to investigate how organizational identification processes can be stimulated and how management can play a role in this. Social identity management and social management might be relevant new management approaches in this regard. By embedding the organization with organizational identity cues, social identity management can enhance the salience of an individual's membership and offer compelling images of what the group or organization represents. Additionally, the results of this study suggest a shift towards a form of social management, which can be defined as management focused on fostering the development of social relationships among members. While these approaches may help VSCs retain their current members, they can limit appeal and inclusion of diverse socio-economic groups in VSCs (Nagel et al., 2020). Therefore, to further develop strategies within these management approaches, more research should be conducted into the effects of these approaches. In many countries with a VSC sporting infrastructure, a lot of governmental budget goes to club support. With more insights into strategies that work, they could better advise VSCs on how to remain meaningful and attractive to members and society.

Policy implications

Based on this research, it can be concluded that current government policy aimed at promoting the long-term survival of VSCs appears to be misaligned with the ways in which the ability of VSCs to thrive and endure can be effectively supported. Governmental policy is mainly aimed at stimulating VSCs to professionalize, to broaden their services and to contribute to the realization of public goals (Hoeijmakers & Van der Roest, 2023). This focus on fulfilling members' interests might drive VSCs from solidarity-oriented to more

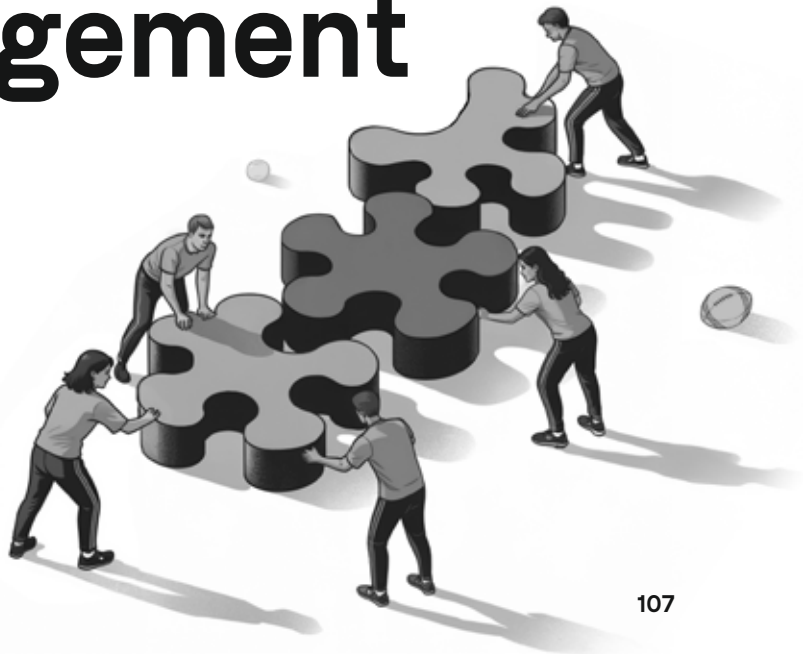


service-oriented organizations (Schlesinger, Klenk & Nagel, 2015), shifting from functioning as a collective of members to operating as service providers delivering sports activities to customers (Bodet, 2009). This transformation is seen as potentially weakening ties, as the emphasis on individual member needs may undermine the collective identity essential for the functioning of VSCs (Enjolras, 2009).

Governmental policy aimed at supporting and strengthening VSCs should therefore be more focused on stimulating social identity management and social management. Whereas professionalism can be defined “as an organizational process of transformation leading towards organizational rationalization, efficiency and business-like management” (Nagel et al., 2015, p. 407) social identity and social management are based on the idea that VSCs must be “infused with value beyond the technical requirements at hand” (Selznick, 1957, p. 17). Therefore, not only efficiency, but also meaning, should be the central focus of VSC management. National governments could provide funding to sport federations, to develop practical tools that support the formation of collective identities of VSCs and actively promote these tools within VSCs.

Part four:

Presenting and discussing a new systems perspective on organizations and a novel approach to their management



Chapter 6

A value co-creation systems perspective on organizations

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I outline the contours of a new systems-theoretical perspective on organizations. To develop this perspective, the specific organizational structures of VSCs are used as an illustrative case, offering insights that can be applied to understand and study organizations more broadly. I begin by integrating the theoretical and empirical insights from this dissertation to conceptualize a coherent and interrelated set of core processes that enable VSCs to thrive and endure, using Weber's (1949) concept of the ideal type as a guiding tool. A fundamental premise of this conceptualization is that VSCs represent a distinct organizational type. The main purpose of VSCs is to provide value for a group of people who voluntarily decide to collectively pursue shared interests (Toepler & Anheier, 2004). Additionally, VSCs are increasingly perceived by governments as instruments of value for society at large (Waardenburg, 2016a). This dual role not only means that VSCs must fulfill multiple roles, but also ensures that they operate in a specific way. As vehicles of value for both their members and society, VSCs become important and valuable parts of members' lives and the public infrastructure. As a result, both members and public bodies commit to the organization and its continued existence. This enables VSCs to operate based on (1) the prosocial organizational behavior of members, (2) public resources, (3) competitive balance with rival VSCs, and (4) dynamic conservatism.

The recognition that the technical requirement of the task at hand for VSCs is to be infused with value for members and society calls for a different systems-theoretical perspective on how organizations function than is typically found in organizational theory. The interplay between VSCs' formal organizational structures and multi-level social dynamics as a foundation for long-term organizational survival proposes a fusion of the rational and natural systems perspectives on organizations. I refer to this approach as the *value co-creation systems perspective* on organizations. In this perspective, a value co-creation rationale is central, where formal, standardized, and regulatory structures are not merely mechanisms to control the behavior of individuals, but also serve to facilitate, sustain, and enhance members' participation and embeddedness within relational networks in the organization. With the aim of ensuring that members voluntarily co-create the value and continued existence of the organization for both individual and collective benefit. While this perspective is grounded in the specific core processes that allow VSCs to thrive and endure, the underlying logic of how they operate is equally relevant to other organizations that (aim to) operate sustainably through the commitment of various stakeholders to support the organization's continued existence.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will discuss the distinctiveness of VSCs (6.2), their dual purpose (6.3), the core organizational processes that enable VSCs to thrive and endure (6.4), and the value co-creation systems perspective on organizations (6.5).



6.2 VSCs are unique organizations

In essence, organizations are social structures created by people to collectively pursue specific goals (Scott & Davies, 2016). All organizations share three core characteristics (*ibid.*). First, each organization serves a specific purpose, often expressed through formal goals. Second, organizations consist of individuals who perform the necessary tasks to achieve these goals. Third, they develop structures that organize how these tasks are carried out. These structures can range from informal arrangements, with loosely defined roles, to formal systems characterized by explicit rules, tasks, and responsibilities. Nonetheless, every organization possesses some form of structural framework (*ibid.*). Through these structures, organizations achieve durability, enabling them to persist over time; reliability, allowing them to consistently execute a range of activities; and accountability, ensuring participants' actions align with organizational objectives (Hannan & Carroll, 1995). Consequently, organizations have become the primary means for coordinating the complex activities of modern social life and are indispensable to the functioning of society (*ibid.*). Moreover, they are recognized as legal entities in their own right (Scott & Davies, 2016), with the capacity to initiate actions, own property, utilize resources, and enter into contracts.

Despite sharing common features, organizations encompass a bewildering variety of forms (Scott & Davies, 2016). A common approach to classifying them distinguishes among business, public, and non-profit organizations, reflecting the different purposes they serve and the diverse ways in which they are structured. To illustrate these differences, scholars have developed typologies of organizational characteristics and constructed ideal-typical comparisons among the three sectors (Horch, 1992; Kramer, 1981; 1987; Najam, 1996; Toepler & Anheier, 2004; Zimmer, 1996). However, given the considerable diversity within the non-profit sector, “the validity of the concept of a unified sector is frequently questioned” (Toepler & Anheier, 2004, p. 259). In Chapter 2, I argued that understanding how different types of organizations thrive and endure requires examining three key dimensions of organizational processes that support long-term survival. These are: (1) the internal dimension, which encompasses critical organizational processes that direct the behavior of members essential for survival; (2) the external dimension, which refers to the organization-environment relationships influencing survival; and (3) the dynamic dimension, which focuses on the dynamic capabilities that safeguard survival over time. These dimensions provide a basis for classifying how organizations function and for comparing whether different types operate in fundamentally distinct ways.

Drawing on my literature review and empirical research on these dimensions, I argue that VSCs constitute a distinct organizational type in the Weberian sense of ideal-typical conceptualization. Although VSCs display considerable diversity in size, facilities, activities, and structural arrangements (Nagel et al., 2015; 2020), they share common features rooted in their dual purpose and core organizational processes. These core characteristics distinguish VSCs from business, public, and membership organizations in other sectors of society. As membership organizations, VSCs serve a fundamentally different purpose and rely on distinct patterns of member behavior and dynamic capabilities essential for survival, setting them apart from business and public organizations. Additionally, VSCs differentiate themselves from organizations outside the sport domain by adhering to instrumental and expressive meanings and structures that are not found in other sectors. Besides an own sport-specific meaning, sport is viewed as an instrument for achieving public goals and is



evaluated according to the values and norms dominant in society. As a result, VSCs must navigate and balance multiple institutional logics. Moreover, given that a competitive pyramid is essential for competitive play, VSCs require competitors to thrive and endure. While this suggests that VSCs are a unique organizational type, I do not claim that their core processes for long-term survival are “unique, as this implies being one of a kind or unlike anything else” (Dowling et al., 2024, p. 412). What sets VSCs apart is not the uniqueness of their organizational processes, which also apply to other types of organizations, but the coherence and interrelatedness of these processes, which are crucial for their long-term survival. Therefore, portraying VSCs as a unique organizational type should be understood as an ideal-typical description, as defined by Weber (1949). This ideal type is not meant to capture reality in its exact form but rather to highlight the most essential and defining characteristics of VSCs. This leads to the first proposition:

Proposition 1: VSCs represent a distinct type of organization, with organizational structures that fundamentally differ from those of business, public, and membership organizations in other sectors of society. This distinctiveness arises from their dual purpose for existence and a coherent, interrelated set of core organizational processes that enable them to thrive and endure.

6.3 The dual purpose of VSCs' existence

As membership organizations, VSCs historically emerged to address needs that were not met by either the state or the market (Weisbrod, 1988). Government focuses on optimizing social welfare through resource redistribution and meeting basic needs, business firms aim for profit maximization by producing goods for sale. In contrast, membership organizations originated as vehicles to pursue the shared interests of a group of people who voluntarily chose to pursue those interests collectively (Toepler & Anheier, 2004). Although VSCs typically emerged as value vehicle for the members of their organization, VSCs have become increasingly public in nature. Today, they are assigned value and tasked with addressing problems that affect the welfare of society as a whole (Nagel et al., 2020; Waardenburg, 2016a). However, unlike public organizations, which are primarily focused on serving society, VSCs serve both an internal and an external social world (Selznick, 1957). As a result, VSCs have a dual purpose: they not only exist as value vehicles for their members but also as instruments of value for society at large. This dual function makes VSCs complex organizations, as they must fulfill multiple roles. This leads to the following proposition:

Proposition 2: VSCs have a dual purpose: they function both as value vehicles for their members and as instruments of value for society at large.

Below I explain what VSCs' dual purpose for existence – as value vehicle for members and instrument of value for society – means.

VSCs' role as a value vehicle for members

As value vehicles, VSCs function not only as venues for members to engage in sports activities or access (sport-related) services, but also as platforms for fostering relationships – both among members (Chapter 4) and between members and the organization as a whole



(Chapter 5). This means that members derive value from VSCs not only through transactional exchanges but, more importantly, through the social and collective relationships they cultivate within the organization. Transaction-oriented members see the organization primarily as a provider of services or activities for personal consumption (Brupbacher, 2017), deriving value that is typically short-term and focused on immediate, tangible benefits. These members are generally “focused only on the specific transaction at hand, rather than on fostering a long-term relationship” (Winer & Dhar, 2014, p. 449). In contrast, by applying and integrating social exchange theory (SET) and social identity theory (SIT), this dissertation highlights how social relationships and collective identities offer deeper, long-term value to members, demonstrating that VSCs go beyond the transactional perspective of membership.

Chapter 4, in particular, demonstrates that members view not only engagement in sports activities or access to (sport-related) services as benefits of their membership, but also social relationships as integral components of these benefits. Given that competitive play is central to the logic of sport, it follows that “sport is rarely, if ever, a purely personal pursuit” (Rees et al., 2015, p. 1091). Furthermore, VSCs provide an environment rich in opportunities for social interaction (Tacon, 2019). As a result, VSC members form both strong ties (e.g., close friendships) and weak ties (e.g., looser acquaintanceships) (Granovetter, 1973), both of which provide significant value. While strong ties foster deep personal connections that enhance trust, mutual support, and social capital – vital for emotional well-being – weak ties within VSCs are equally valuable (Tacon, 2019). They offer emotional benefits that, while less demanding than those linked to close personal relationships, still provide significant support (ibid.). Participants in my focus groups frequently highlighted the unique sense of connectedness they feel simply by recognizing or knowing many people by name or face—something they described as unmatched in other contexts. This underscores that members derive significant value from VSCs by cultivating connections with a diverse range of fellow members.

Chapter 5 demonstrates that VSCs are not only organizations where members build relationships with one another, but also vibrant environments where they develop strong and multiple collective identities which carry significant personal meaning. Beyond their identification with the VSC itself, Chapter 5 demonstrates that members also develop collective identities with the sport, the sporting group, and the team. As such, VSCs consist of distinct yet interconnected social groups in which members invest their identities (Ashforth et al., 2008). Through social identification processes, these identities become central to members’ self-concept, fostering belonging, support, purpose, and engagement, which in turn enhances their emotional and social well-being (Ashforth et al., 2008). Literature suggests that sport, in particular, is “a space where individuals experience intense emotional attachment to a group” (Wegner, 2020, p. 326). Especially in the sporting context, organizations are seen as key facilitators of collective identities, driven by passionate commitment to a sport, competition, or team (Oja et al., 2023). Beyond these emotional aspects, my findings reveal that social relationships in VSCs serve as powerful cues for organizational identification. Through shared participation in activities, members internalize organizational identities and co-create reinforcing cues that further strengthen these identities. This makes VSCs an ideal environment for the emergence of social relationships and collective identities, which are key determinants of the value members derive from these organizations.



VSCs' role as instruments of value for society

VSCs are not only value vehicles for their members but, by fulfilling public objectives, also function as instruments of value for society at large. This dual role reflects a significant shift in government perspectives on VSCs. Until the early 1970s, VSCs operated largely in relative autonomy from both the state and the market (Lucassen & Van Kalmthout, 2015; Waardenburg, 2016a). However, from the mid-1970s onward, governments began to recognize and assign a more explicit role to VSCs within public policy, particularly in promoting sports participation (Lucassen & Van Kalmthout, 2015). A further shift occurred in the mid-1990s, when governments in many European countries began viewing VSCs as key tools for addressing broader public issues across various policy domains. This process, through which sports, education, and culture are employed to achieve instrumental objectives, is referred to as instrumentalization (Waardenburg, 2016a). The instrumentalization of civil society organizations reflects a wider trend in governmental policy, where civil society organizations are increasingly encouraged to contribute to the achievement of public goals (Osborne & McLaughlin, 2002). This shift is part of a broader move toward more pluralistic governance, in which governments recognize the need to collaborate with a diverse array of actors to achieve effective policymaking (Brandsen et al., 2014). Particularly after acknowledging the decline of civil society as a significant threat to the democratic function of Western states (Brandsen et al., 2014; Putnam, 2000; Waardenburg, 2016a), governments began to encourage civil society organizations to take a larger role in revitalizing social cohesion.

While other civil society organizations are also instrumentalized, VSCs are increasingly seen by governments as ideal partners for achieving a wide range of public objectives (Nagel et al., 2020). This stems from the high public value of sports activities and the dominant role VSCs play in civil society (Bergsgard et al., 2007; Boessenkool et al., 2011; Breuer et al., 2015; Skille, 2011b; Stenling & Fahlén, 2009; Waardenburg, 2016a). VSCs are now being targeted by governments to help address various public goals, such as health promotion, the integration of minorities, democratic participation, tackling homophobia (Elling et al., 2003), and fostering good citizenship behaviors among refugees (Spaaij, 2015). Chapter 3 demonstrates that addressing social challenges has increasingly become a norm to which VSCs conform (Boessenkool et al., 2011; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Waardenburg, 2016a). Specifically, the chapter highlights that between 2007 and 2021, VSCs not only adopted more instrumental activities but that board members also increasingly viewed contributing to public goals as an essential aspect of being a VSC. In doing so, VSCs are not just meeting the needs of their members but are also addressing broader societal challenges. This shift enhances their legitimacy in the eyes of the government. Organizational legitimacy can be defined as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Consequently, through their instrumental activities, VSCs have become an integral and valuable part of public infrastructure.

6.4 VSCs' core processes for long-term survival

As we have seen, VSCs serve a dual purpose: they are both a value vehicle for their members and an instrument of value for society at large. This dual role shapes the way VSCs



operate. As vehicles of value for members and instruments of public value, VSCs become an important and valuable part of members' lives and the broader public infrastructure. Consequently, members and public bodies commit themselves to the VSC and its continued existence. In sum VSCs thrive and endure through four interconnected core processes: (1) fostering prosocial organizational behavior of members; (2) leveraging legitimacy to obtain public resources; (3) maintaining competitive balance with rivals; and (4) dynamic conservatism through member socialization. What distinguishes VSCs from business, public, and other membership organizations is not the uniqueness of these organizational processes, which are shared by other types of organizations. Rather, it is the coherence and interconnectedness of these processes that are essential for its long-term survival. The following sections explain each of these four core processes in more detail.

1) Fostering prosocial organizational behavior of members

As discussed, VSCs serve not only as value vehicles for members to participate in sports activities or access (sport-related) services, but also as platforms for cultivating relationships – both among members (Chapter 4) and between members and the organization as a whole (Chapter 5). Through social exchange and social identity processes, VSCs provide deeper, long-term value to members, becoming an integral and valuable part of their lives. This value-infusion acts as a powerful force for VSCs, as it directs members' behavior toward prosocial organizational actions (Selznick, 1957). Prosocial organizational behavior refers to voluntary actions of members that contribute to the effective functioning of the organization (Rodríguez-Montoya et al., 2021), but are not formally mandated (McNeely & Meglino, 1994). Chapters 4 and 5 show that members' loyalty to the organization and their likelihood of engaging in positive word-of-mouth about the VSC are positively influenced by the value members derive from VSCs through participation in sports activities or access to (sport-related) services, and their relationships with fellow members and the organization as a whole. Especially this collective embeddedness appears crucial to the functioning of VSCs. Chapter 5 demonstrates that members who strongly identify with VSCs are not only more loyal and more inclined to engage in positive word-of-mouth, but also more likely to volunteer for the organization. According to social identity theory (SIT), individuals who strongly identify with an organization internalize its collective interests and are therefore more willing to act voluntarily in service of the organization, without expecting tangible rewards in return (Avanzi et al., 2013; Tavares et al., 2016). This allows VSCs, by providing an environment rich in opportunities for the development of social relationships and collective identities, to harness members' prosocial behavior to help achieve the organization's objectives.

In contrast to business, public, and many other membership organizations, VSCs primarily rely on the prosocial organizational behavior of their members to achieve their goals (Misener et al., 2020). In Europe, the majority of VSCs are operated primarily – if not exclusively – by volunteers (Nagel et al., 2020). In the Netherlands, over 10 percent of members voluntarily contribute to the organization in 83 percent of VSCs (Hoeijmakers, 2022). This contribution includes both official and unofficial administrative and operational tasks (Cnaan et al., 1996). Official positions typically involve serving on the governing board or sub-committees. In all non-profit organizations, including VSCs, the governing board holds legal responsibility for organizational management. To support the board, many



VSCs operate sub-committees that focus on specific areas such as youth development, sports technical affairs, financial management, event organization, and commercial activities. Additionally, many members contribute voluntarily to administrative or operational tasks without holding designated roles. Larger VSCs or those with sufficient resources may employ paid staff. However, relative to members, the proportion of paid staff is much lower than the proportion of volunteers (Nagel et al., 2020). In the Netherlands, 15 percent of VSCs employ paid staff (Hoeijmakers, 2022), often in the roles of trainers or coaches. A smaller proportion (3%) employ a club manager, a relatively new and still somewhat undefined role, seen as central to mobilizing members, improving daily operations, and increasing efficiency. However, even in VSCs with paid staff, volunteers continue to perform the majority of the work. This demonstrates that VSCs, through value-infusion processes, achieve their objectives primarily by leveraging the prosocial behavior of their members. This leads to the following proposition:

Proposition 3a: As VSCs become infused with value for its members—through participation in sports activities, access to (sport-related) services, and embeddedness within networks of relationships—it can harness members' prosocial organizational behavior to achieve its goals.

2) Leveraging legitimacy to obtain public resources

As previously discussed, VSCs are not only value vehicles for their members but also serve as instruments of value for society at large by achieving public goals. This public function makes VSCs an essential and valuable component of public infrastructure, and it infuses them with legitimacy in the eyes of government (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). This legitimacy, in turn, becomes a powerful resource for VSCs. As providers of public services that contribute to societal welfare, VSCs can leverage their legitimacy to access public resources or protect themselves from potential liquidation. Chapter 3 demonstrates that, although individual VSCs do not need to fully conform to governmental norms to benefit from legitimacy, conformity at the level of the broader VSC population remains important, as its perceived legitimacy is essential for individual VSCs to access those benefits. VSCs are among the few types of private organizations in many European countries that receive government support (Hoekman et al., 2015). In the Netherlands, for example, local municipalities are significant contributors to VSCs. Although direct public funding constitutes only a small portion of VSCs' total revenue, most VSCs benefit from municipal rental discounts on their sports facilities of up to 50-80% (Waardenburg, 2016a). Moreover, during times of crisis, many VSCs gain access to public resources. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Dutch VSCs received substantial support from the national government (Hoeijmakers & Van Kalmthout, 2021).

However, contrary to what NIT suggests (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977), public appreciation of VSCs must be understood as a double-edged sword. While conformity to governmental norms is beneficial – given the government's power to allocate public resources (Scott, 2013) – Chapters 4 and 5 indicate that VSCs also have an internal social world, marked by relationships and collective feelings, that must be nurtured. The challenge lies in the fact that these social worlds can align, coexist, or, at times, clash. The increasing instrumentalization of VSCs to fulfill public policy goals warrants therefore a



more critical reflection. Governments in many countries have developed specific programs, strongly encouraging VSCs to act as policy implementers (Nagel et al., 2020; Skille, 2008; Vos et al., 2011; Waardenburg, 2016a). While this provides VSCs with a claim to public resources, it also imposes heightened normative expectations and regulatory burdens. In some cases, these expectations even manifest as formal tasks and regulations, leading VSCs to become more “greedy” organizations (Coser, 1974), demanding increasing administrative and operational efforts. This, in turn, makes it more difficult for VSCs to rely solely on prosocial organizational behavior from members (Nagel, Schlesinger, Wicker, et al., 2015; Stuij et al., 2023). Even more concerning is that the growing instrumentalization of VSCs often results in the imposition of tasks that diverge from the activities needed to nurture the internal social world of the organization. As VSCs focus on external policy goals, they risk distancing themselves from the activities that are critical for fostering social and collective relationships (Hoeijmakers & Van Kalmthout, 2019). When instrumental activities replace social and collective functions, prosocial behavior and member loyalty tend to decline (Boessenkool et al., 2011). Consequently, VSCs find themselves in a continual struggle to balance both internal and external demands (Nagel et al., 2020). This underscores the complexity of legitimacy-infusion processes. As Selznick (1996) indicates, serving public values must align with the values of the organization, to which it is hostage to. This leads to the following proposition:

Proposition 3b: As the population of VSCs becomes infused with legitimacy in the eyes of the government by fulfilling public goals, VSCs can access public resources to achieve its goals.

3) Maintaining competitive balance with rivals

Since individuals have limited time and resources to devote to organizational activities, membership organizations like VSCs face competition from other organizations vying for the same members (McPherson, 1983). However, VSCs also rely on their competitors to thrive and endure. Sporting competitions are only able to take place when opponents compete with each other under equal conditions (Wemmer et al., 2016). To achieve this, cooperation between VSCs is essential for organizing tournaments, standardizing rules and competition formats, and enforcing regulations. Most VSCs operate within a pyramid structure, embedded in networks that include other VSCs, regional sport federations, national umbrella organizations, and international sport federations (Hoeijmakers, 2022). This idiosyncratic element of sport implies that, in addition to a carrying capacity – which refers to the upper limit of organizations that can viably exist within a population (Boone & Van Witteloostuijn, 1995) – VSCs must also maintain a necessary critical mass of competitors. A shortage or low number of VSCs can lead to increased travel distances, fewer opponents in tournaments, greater disparities in skill levels, and less attractive competitions. Furthermore, Chapter 3 demonstrates that most VSCs collaborate with others in organizing events, sharing facilities, delivering services, and engaging in knowledge exchanges (Wemmer et al., 2016). As a result, the relationship between VSCs and their competitors is better described as coopetition – a blend of cooperation and competition (Wemmer et al., 2016). For VSCs, competition does not imply hostility; rather, it fosters mutual benefits for all parties involved.



The necessity for a critical mass of competitors implies that VSCs must maintain a competitive balance with other VSCs. Unlike Rottenberg's (1956) definition, which centers on the equal ability of teams to win games, championships, or titles, I define competitive balance in the context of VSCs as the need for VSCs to occupy distinct niches, thereby reducing direct competition for members. Rather than striving to outcompete or eliminate rivals, VSCs focus on ensuring a sufficient number of VSCs remain active, thereby sustaining sporting competitions. To achieve competitive balance with their rivals, VSCs differentiate themselves by going as much as possible beyond the isomorphic characteristics required to be recognized as legitimate members of the sports community. Chapter 4 highlights that competing VSCs often share similar club goods, such as facilities, activities, and services. This similarity in competition formats and surface types is necessary for VSCs to be integrated into the competition pyramid. Additionally, Chapter 5 indicates that VSCs align with sport-cultural values, adopting the core norms, customs, and practices inherent to their sport to remain attractive and recognizable within the sports community. Every type of sport has a more or less stable and self-defining core set of characteristics that give the sport meaning and enable participants to identify with the sports community (Hoeijmakers & Steenbergen, 2024). Chapter 5 also demonstrates how VSCs – while maintaining a high degree of similarity – (could) cultivate a distinct identity (Deephouse, 1999; Villadsen, 2013). Chapter 5 shows that it is the members' sociodemographic characteristics that primarily set VSCs apart from their peers. McPherson's (1983) model of ecological competition among voluntary associations may help explain this finding. A core principle of this model is homophily – the tendency for individuals with similar sociodemographic characteristics to form and sustain relationships (McPherson et al., 2001) – a pattern also observed in VSCs (Van Haaften, 2022). By tailoring their identities to attract specific sociodemographic groups, VSCs carve out distinct niches, reducing direct competition for members and allowing for a sustainable competitive balance.

This process of differentiation is not static. Although the typification of members is often deeply embedded in the organizational identity of VSCs – and the homophily principle ensures that new members are likely to share similar sociodemographic characteristics with existing ones – the sociodemographic makeup of members is continually evolving due to ongoing member turnover. Furthermore, competitive balance only holds in relatively stable environments. As changes occur within the population of VSCs or shifts in the composition of the local population, the competitive balance may be disrupted, necessitating a reassessment of how VSCs differentiate themselves. This leads to the following proposition:

Proposition 3c: By differentiating themselves as much as possible beyond the isomorphic characteristics necessary to be recognized as legitimate members of the sports community, VSCs can maintain a competitive balance with their competitors.

4) Dynamic conservatism through member socialization

Once VSCs are infused with value for their members and legitimacy in society, they safeguard their continuous existence through a specific capability known as dynamic conservatism. This capability refers to how organizations adapt to a changing environment while remaining true to their core values and competencies (Ansell et al., 2015). VSCs maintain their legitimacy by sensing, seizing, and transforming their organizational structures to



align with the public goals that society expects them to serve (Teece, 2007). The central challenge for VSCs to stay value-infused for their members, lies in the paradox of inflow. While it is inevitable that members will leave, the inflow of new members is essential to sustaining activities, social relationships, and collective feelings that keep the organization value-infused. However, the influx of new members alters group dynamics, putting pressure on the processes that maintain the value infusion. According to Li and Van Knippenberg (2021), changes in membership – whether through the departure of members or the arrival of new ones – influence relationships and interaction patterns. Scholars therefore agree that membership change should be treated as a “significant event” (Trainer et al., 2020, p. 223) that impacts the functioning of membership organizations. As a result, the inflow of new members becomes a necessary evil for VSCs: while essential for ensuring the organization’s ability to thrive and endure, it also places significant pressure on the value-infusion process, potentially threatening its long-term survival.

To address the paradox of inflow, VSCs rely on a specific capability of dynamic conservatism through the socialization of members. Socialization is the process by which both new and existing members become familiar with the organization’s value system, norms, and expected behavior patterns (Schein, 1990). Unlike most business and public organizations, VSCs impose few formal requirements on new members. As a result, the continuity of members’ relationships with one another and the collective identity of the VSC largely depends on the organization’s socialization efforts relative to the influx of new members. This dissertation shows that, due to their value-infused nature, VSCs demonstrate some informal mechanisms of socialization. First, the recruitment of new members is often not random. Chapters 4 and 5 show that when VSCs are deeply valued by their members, these members actively promote their VSC to friends, family, and acquaintances. This word-of-mouth recruitment is crucial for VSCs, as it allows them to draw in new members primarily through the social networks of existing ones. Consequently, new members are often already embedded in social relationships within the organization. Furthermore, according to the homophily principle, new members are likely to share similar sociodemographic characteristics with existing members. This increases the likelihood that they will form social ties more easily and adopt similar values and norms, reducing the need for formal socialization processes.

Secondly, Chapters 4 and 5 demonstrate that when VSCs are infused with value and become an integral part of their members’ lives, members show greater loyalty to the organization. This, in turn, ensures that new members often represent only a small proportion of the overall membership base. This is advantageous for VSCs, as the literature suggests that socialization processes are more effective when member turnover is limited. According to Harrison and Carroll (1991), socialization is more challenging in organizations where members “come and go more quickly, in larger relative numbers, and with less overlap in their periods of membership” (p. 553). This leads to the following proposition:

Proposition 3d: Through dynamic conservatism, VSCs safeguard their continuous existence.



6.5 VSCs as an exemplar of a new systems perspective on organizations

As previously discussed, VSCs constitute a unique organizational type in the Weberian sense of an ideal type. They operate through a coherent and interconnected set of core processes that enable them to thrive and endure. To better understand this, a systems-theoretical lens is useful. Comparing my ideal-typical conceptualization of VSCs with prevailing systems-theoretical perspectives in organizational literature reveals key differences, pointing to the need for a renewed theoretical understanding of organizational functioning. The previous section illustrates that the long-term survival of VSCs depends on the interplay of both rational and deeper institutional forces. Institutional forces encompass the cultural, informal, and deeply embedded social dimensions of organizational life – such as social and collective relationships, norms, and practices – that shape the behavior of organizational members (Scott, 2013). Through the development of social relationships, collective identities and the adherence of members to societal norms, VSCs become embedded in both the personal lives of their members and the wider public infrastructure, generating enduring commitment from members and public bodies to support the organization's continued existence. Yet what sets the functioning of VSCs apart from dominant perspectives in organizational theory is its formal structure – comprising officially sanctioned rules, procedures, and routines (Scott & Davis, 2016) – which is deliberately designed to reinforce and elevate the influence of cultural, informal, and deeply embedded social dynamics on member behavior. Given the ongoing disconnect in the literature regarding the interplay between formal structures and social processes in organizations (Hunter et al., 2020; McEvily et al., 2014; Scott & Davis, 2016), there is a need for an approach that integrates the core logics of both rational and natural systems perspectives on organizations.

A rational systems perspective on VSCs

At present, little attention is paid in organizational science to the coherence between formal and informal organizational structures (Hunter et al., 2020; McEvily et al., 2014; Scott & Davis, 2016). Scholars agree that both formal and informal structures direct the behavior of organizational members. However, all the debates seem to hinge on how much influence formal, in contrast to informal, elements in organizational contexts have on behavior (Scott & Davis, 2016). Scholars who view organizations as rational systems tend to prioritize formal structures over informal ones. Rational systems theorists argue that through the design of formal procedures and routines, informal processes can be controlled. They therefore stress the importance of formal structure over people participating in the organization. By formalizing, standardizing and regulating rules, procedures and roles, the behavior of participants is made more predictable and independent of personal attributes and relationships of the participants. This is considered to allow each member of the group to form stable expectations, which ensures that the organization's goals are achieved as efficiently as possible (Scott & Davis, 2016). Although VSCs require a certain degree of formal rules, procedures, and roles for organizing their activities and running the organization, a rational systems perspective is clearly only a one-sided perspective on the ability of VSCs to thrive and endure. Since VSCs operate on prosocial organizational behavior, stake claims to public resources, maintain competitive balance and ensure their existence through dynamic conservatism, integrating a natural systems perspective is essential for conceptualizing how VSCs function.



A natural systems perspective on VSCs

Scholars who conceptualize organizations as natural systems, argue that formal, standardized and regulating rules, procedures and roles can “never succeed in conquering the nonrational dimensions of organizational behavior” (Selznick, 1948, p. 25). This is because the behavior of organizational participants is frequently not guided by formal rules, procedures and roles. Natural systems theorists stipulate that organizational participants often do not act merely in terms of their formal roles, but as part of a collective. The real behavior of participants is shaped by the relationships and informal norms of behavior within the organizational context. This is referred to as the informal organizational structure. As a result, natural systems theorists argue that informal organizational structures often have a greater influence on behavior than formal ones, which “often serve only as a decorative façade concealing the real agenda and structure” (Scott & Davis, 2016, p. 30). As we have seen, VSCs are an organizational context in which members develop relationships and informal norms of behavior that shape their actions and influence how the organization operates. To further explore the social and informal processes in VSCs, it is useful to delve deeper into the natural systems perspective on organizations. In doing so, I recognize that Selznick’s conceptualization of institutions offers a compelling characterization of VSCs.

Selznick’s institutional perspective applied to VSCs

In the 1950s, Selznick developed its own unique natural systems theory that has recently been described as newly alive and well (Kraatz, 2009; Rafaelli & Glynn, 2015). In summary, the core of Selznick’s argument is that organizations develop a distinctive competence through the way in which organizational members participate and interact with each other within their organizational context. He refers to this process as institutionalization and explains it by contrasting two archetypes of organizations “which might be thought of as its input and output” (Kraatz, 2009, p. 62). The ‘organization’ can be understood as “a socially engineered device that was rationally designed in order to achieve particular, limited objectives” (Kraatz, 2009, p. 62). It operates in a machine-like fashion as “an expendable tool, a rational instrument engineered to do a job” (Selznick, 1957, p. 5). It is likely to be terminated “when its goals were achieved or its function became obsolete” (Kraatz, 2009, p. 62). The ‘institution’, in contrast, refers to those organizations that are valued in the eyes of their stakeholders because they embody values that make life meaningful (Chandler, 2015). As Selznick famously wrote, it is “infuse[d] with value beyond the technical requirements of the task at hand” (1957, p. 17).

As a natural systems theorist, Selznick describes institutionalization as a social process that takes place outside the formal structures of the organization. According to Selznick, the “more precise an organization’s goals, and the more specialized and technical its operations, the less opportunity there will be for leeway for personal and group interaction” (Selznick, 1957, p. 16). And this leeway is important, because it creates relationships and informal norms of behavior that crystalize into a unique social structure (Selznick, 1957). In Selznick’s view, this unique social structure must be recognized as a distinctive competence or source of strength. The more fully developed its social structure, the greater the infusion of value. The organization becomes valued in and of itself – “not as a tool, but as a valued source of personal satisfaction” (Selznick, 1957, p. 17). As a result, the organization acquires a distinctive competence (Selznick, 1996). If an organization is merely an instru-



ment, “it will be readily altered or cast aside when a more efficient tool becomes available” (Selznick, 1957, p. 18). However, when it serves as a vehicle for personal satisfaction, organizational members experience a sense of personal loss without it and are “reluctant to let it perish for this reason” (Kraatz, 2009, p. 63).

I follow Selznick’s natural systems theory in recognizing that personal participation and group interaction within the organizational context are crucial for how VSCs are able to thrive and endure. However, I disagree with his observation that this is a social process that only occurs outside the formal structures of the organization. The primary purpose of VSCs is to serve as a vehicle for value, which for members is found in personal participation in sports, the consumption of services, and the formation of social relationships and collective feelings. Therefore, organizing personal participation and group interactions is a core process and, for VSCs, a formal part of the technical requirements needed to fulfill the task of being a VSC. VSCs are therefore not infused with value beyond the technical requirements of the task at hand as Selznick conceptualizes organizations. Instead, the technical requirement of the task at hand for VSCs is to be infused with value. In other words, contrary to Selznick’s view, VSCs are not meaningful organizations because of a rich social environment outside their formal structures. Rather, the formal structure of VSCs is designed to reinforce and enrich their social structure, making personal participation and group interactions an integral part of the formal organization. This implicates a combination of a rational and natural systems perspective on organizational functioning. While the rational systems perspective emphasizes the importance of formal structures over the people within it, the natural systems perspective reverses this priority. To such an extent that the natural systems perspective can be criticized for portraying organizations as “people without organizations” (Bennis, 1959, p. 266). This leads to the following proposition:

Proposition 4: The technical requirement of the task at hand for VSCs is to be infused with value.

A value co-creation systems perspective on organizations

Thus, conceptualizing the interplay between VSCs’ formal organizational structures and multi-level social dynamics as a foundation for long-term organizational survival suggests a paradigm shift in organizational systems thinking. What differentiates VSCs from dominant systems-theoretical approaches in organizational theory is that their institutional dimensions are deliberately crafted and nurtured to ensure the organization’s durable, reliable, and accountable functioning (Hannan & Carroll, 1995). As argued earlier, the core task of VSCs is to be infused with value for both members and society. This means that their formal structure – comprising officially sanctioned rules, procedures, and routines (Scott & Davis, 2016) – functions to reinforce and enrich the cultural, informal, and deeply embedded social dimensions of organizational life that give VSCs its value and foster its continued existence. Through the development of social relationships, collective identities and the adherence of members to societal norms, VSCs become embedded in both the personal lives of their members and the wider public infrastructure. This cultivates enduring commitment among members and public bodies to support the organization’s continued existence. While the rational systems perspective views formalized rules, procedures, and roles as instruments for controlling individual behavior within organizations (Scott & Davis, 2016),



understanding how the institutional dimensions of VSCs – those that infuse the organization with value and ensure its continuity – are deliberately activated requires a shift in focus. This shift entails moving beyond viewing organizational members as isolated individuals to emphasizing their embeddedness within networks of relationships.

Until now, a theoretical framework that explicitly addresses the interplay between formal organizational structures and social processes has been lacking (Hunter et al., 2020; McEvily et al., 2014). To address this gap, I suggest that a fusion of the rational and natural systems perspectives should be integrated into organizational thinking. It is only when formal organizational structures reinforce and enrich the cultural, informal, and deeply embedded social dimensions of organizational life – those that imbue the organization with value and foster continued existence – that they truly complement each other with converging roles and forces that are essential for long-term survival. I introduce this school of thought as the ‘*value co-creation systems perspective on organizations*’. While this perspective is grounded in the specific core processes that allow VSCs to thrive and endure, the underlying logic of how they operate is equally relevant to other organizations that (aim to) operate sustainably through the commitment of various stakeholders to support the organization’s continued existence.

A value co-creation rationality

The value co-creation systems perspective on organizations is grounded in a value co-creation rationale, which serves as the core conceptual foundation for understanding the organizational structures of VSCs. In 2014, Woratschek et al. introduced the Sport Value Framework to highlight that value creation in sport organizations depends on the cooperation of multiple actors – including home and away fans, volunteers, members, and other stakeholders – who co-create value through their contributions. Translating this insight into an organizational rationale gives rise to a logic that captures how the organizational structures of VSCs function. Unlike traditional rational systems approaches, VSCs’ formal structures are not aimed at maximizing the efficient delivery of products and services (Scott & Davis, 2016). Instead, formal organizational structures are intentionally designed to serve as the most effective instruments to engage members in co-creating value for both individual and collective benefit. These specific organizational structures, which foster the co-creation of sports activities, services, and social relationships that offer individual benefits to members, collective identities that become integrated into members’ self-concept, and legitimacy in the eyes of the government, commit members and public bodies to the organization and its continued existence. Accordingly, within a value co-creation rationale, formal, standardized, and regulatory structures are not merely mechanisms to control the behavior of individuals, but also serve to facilitate, sustain, and enhance members’ participation and embeddedness within relational networks in the organization. With the aim of ensuring that members voluntarily co-create the value and continued existence of the organization for both individual and collective benefit. Here, rationality is understood in the restricted sense of functional rationality (Mannheim, 1950), wherein rationality is attributed to the organizational structure rather than to the behavior of individual actors.

As a result, a value co-creation rationale counterbalances the dominant goal-oriented mindset that VSCs’ organizational structures should mirror those of for-profit organizations – optimizing sports as a product with maximum efficiency – or those of public agencies



focused on contributing to social issues in the most effective way (Van Eekeren, 2016). It also challenges the prevailing notion that the organizational structures of VSCs merely need to strike a balance between small group-like and organization-like characteristics (Horch, 1998; 2018). In contrast to Horch (1998), who suggests that the organizational structures of VSCs aim to pursue specific goals while accommodating “plenty of room for diffuse, expressive relationships” (p. 49), I argue that these are rationally designed to actively shape and sustain members’ participation and their embeddedness within relational networks, thereby co-creating value for both individual and collective benefit. Accordingly, they are better understood as value co-creation structures – purposefully designed to meet the technical requirement of the task at hand for VSCs to be infused with value for members and society. The value co-creation rationality also highlights the limitations of Hall et al.’s dimensions of organizational capacity, which are widely used by scholars as indicators of VSC strength. Hall et al.’s (2003) model conceptualizes organizational capacity as a system resource model comprising five key dimensions: (1) human resources, (2) financial resources, (3) relationships and networks, (4) infrastructure and processes, and (5) planning and development. These resources are considered essential for VSCs to successfully accomplish their mission (Elmose-Osterlund et al., 2021). However, from a value co-creation rationality perspective, the most critical capacity for the long-term survival of VSCs lies in organizational structures that promote personal satisfaction – whether through participation in sports activities or the use of services – and those that cultivate social and collective relationships within the VSC. These forms of capacity, however, are not explicitly addressed in the Hall et al.’s (2003) organizational capacity model. This leads to the following proposition:

Proposition 5: VSCs should be conceptualized as value vehicles with value co-creation structures intentionally designed to facilitate member participation and embeddedness within relational networks, thereby enabling members to co-create the value and continued existence of the organization for both individual and collective benefit.

This new value co-creation systems perspective on organizations, not only deepens our understanding of VSCs and other organizations that (aim to) operate sustainably through the commitment of various stakeholders to support the organization’s continued existence, its primary rationale also offers a foundation for developing an alternative management approach. One that differs from mainstream management and sport management sciences. The next chapter will elaborate on this further.

Chapter 7

Management of Meaning

7.1 Introduction

This new systems-theoretical perspective on organizations introduced in Chapter 6 calls for a management approach that differs from those typically found in mainstream and sport management sciences. The main issue with current mainstream and sport management approaches is that they are largely based on a goal-oriented rationale. The primary purpose of goal-oriented management approaches is to make organizations more efficient and effective in achieving their objectives (Nagel et al., 2015). However, the logic of efficiency loses its relevance when we consider VSCs as value vehicles. For value vehicles, the primary goal of organizational structures is not merely efficiency in achieving goals, but rather to infuse the organization with maximum value for both its members and society at large. This allows the organization to secure the commitment of its members and broader society to its continued existence. The problem with efficiency-based thinking for VSCs is that it focuses too much on how goals are achieved, neglecting the importance of defining and protecting their diverse and evolving goals. Additionally, the organizational structures of VSCs designed to achieve goals often become goals themselves, as personal participation and group interaction within these structures generate value for members. Therefore, creating meaning – not efficiency – should be the central focus of VSC management.

To support VSCs in this effort, I used the value co-creation rationale outlined in Chapter 6 as the foundational logic for developing a novel management approach that guides organizations in fulfilling their core task of infusing the organization with value. This management approach, referred to as *Management of Meaning (MoM)*, consists of a strategic blueprint designed to guide management in making informed decisions about the allocation of scarce resources, supported by a coherent set of management practices to reinforce their strategic choices. As a result, MoM is best described as a management philosophy comprising a coherent set of strategies and practices aimed at transforming and sustaining an organization as a meaningful and enduring entity. Although MoM is specifically designed toward enabling VSCs to thrive and endure, its core philosophy also applies to other organizations that (aim to) operate sustainably through the commitment of various stakeholders to support the organization's continued existence.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will introduce MoM as a novel management approach for organizations (7.2) and discuss the strategic triangle (7.3) and management practices of MoM for VSCs (7.4).

7.2 A novel management approach for organizations

As shown in Chapter 6, this new value co-creation systems perspective on organizations provides a theoretical framework for understanding how VSCs operate. Furthermore, and importantly, it provides the foundational framework necessary for developing effective management strategies that help VSCs thrive and endure. Management is the process of planning, organizing, leading, and controlling organizational actions, processes or systems of an



organization. It refers to all activities aimed at defining, monitoring, developing, adapting or maintaining organizational structures to enable organizations to achieve its goals (Thiel & Mayer, 2008). For a long time, VSCs were able to thrive and endure without much emphasis on how they were managed. In the Netherlands, the need for more effective management emerged as both the national government and NOC*NSF recognized that volunteers were unable to meet the growing complexity of organizing a VSC. Based on the idea that VSCs need to provide more services due to changing needs of members and to contribute to public policy goals, policymakers assumed that the organization of VSCs has become more complicated, specialized and extensive. VSCs are therefore stimulated to improve their organizational structures toward producing their sports activities and services as efficiently as possible (Boessenkool et al., 2011; Nichols et al., 2015; Perck et al., 2016; Seippel, 2019). Goal rationality management concepts such as formal policy plans, mandatory tasks for members, standardized rules and procedures, and hiring paid workers (Boessenkool et al., 2011; Lucassen & Van der Roest, 2018) were emphasized.

Not only in policies aimed at promoting the long-term survival of VSCs, but also when examining management approaches developed for the VSC context, it becomes clear that goal-oriented management approaches, rooted in a rational systems perspective on organizations, dominate. One of the most important management topics in sport management literature is volunteer management (Wicker, 2017). However, in his review of volunteer management, Einolf (2018) found that most volunteer management approaches are essentially components of mainstream human resources management (HRM). Volunteers are treated like unpaid employees, with traditional HRM tools employed to closely monitor and supervise them (ibid.). Other management topics discussed in the literature on VSCs, such as sponsor management (e.g., Schulz et al., 2024) and total quality management (e.g., De Knop et al., 2004), are also strongly influenced by a goal-rationality logic. In sport management practice, there appears to be some emphasis on management approaches grounded in a value co-creation systems perspective on organizations. For example, in the Netherlands, B2B has begun developing a management approach for VSCs that fits within this perspective (B2B, 2024). Excessive goal rationality has been criticized, with the argument that managing VSCs is more about shaping and fostering organizational culture. However, value co-creation management approaches have not yet been fully developed and these practice-based perspectives are not yet widely supported by scholarly literature.

Beyond the logic of efficiency

Given that the natural systems perspective on organizations emphasizes emergent organizational processes, most management literature is grounded in rational systems approaches. What makes management approaches from a rational systems perspective on organizations particularly unsuitable for the context of VSCs is their focus on efficiency (Thiel & Mayer, 2009). The primary purpose of goal-oriented management approaches, rooted in a rational systems perspective on organizations, is to make organizational structures more efficient and effective in achieving organizational goals (Nagel et al., 2015). Effectiveness refers to the degree to which organizational actions, processes or systems help accomplish organizational goals. It is often described as “doing the right things” (Robbins et al., 2015, p. 7). Or, in other words, it is about how well the end goal of the organization is achieved, regardless of the means that are used. However, from a rational systems perspective on organizations

it is not enough for organizational structures simply to be effective. Given that organizations have scarce resources such as time, energy, money, and equipment, it is also considered essential that organizational goals are achieved using the least amount of resources. In other words, efficiency refers to achieving organizational goals in the most productive way possible without wasting resources. Whereas “effectiveness is concerned with the ends, or the attainment of organizational goals”, efficiency is concerned with “the means of getting things done” (Robbins et al., 2015, p. 7). It entails directing organizational actions, processes or systems to get the most output from the least amounts of inputs. When an organization’s goals are defined and the primary methods for achieving them are clear, goal-oriented management approaches can offer valuable tools.

However, the logic of efficiency loses its power when we begin to view VSCs as value vehicles. For value vehicles such as VSCs, the limits of goal-oriented management approaches become clear for two reasons. Firstly, organizational goals of VSCs cannot be taken as a given. In order to commit members and public bodies to the organization and its continued existence, VSCs have to serve multiple purposes. Due to shifts in the VSCs’ internal or external social world, these purposes are constantly under pressure and subject to change. The most fundamental and challenging task for VSCs is therefore defining and protecting their goals. As a result, the logic of efficiency that focuses on means rather than ends is ill-suited for VSCs. It ignores the importance of defining and safeguarding their multiple and changeable goals. Secondly and most importantly, while it is certainly worthwhile for VSCs “to aim at optimizing the available resources to create the best possible conditions for its members”, it is unnecessary for VSCs “to operate effectively and efficiently” (Thiel & Mayer, 2008, p. 93). This contradicts the fundamental philosophy of goal rationality management approaches and how business organizations are run. Even when the goals of VSCs are defined, the organizational structures designed to achieve these goals often become goals in themselves. As we have seen, VSCs function as value vehicles by organizing personal participation in sports, the consumption of services and the formation of social relationships and collective feelings within their organizational context. Organizational structures are therefore not only means for organizing sports or to produce services as efficiently as possible. They are also ends in themselves, as participation in these structures fosters social relationships and collective feelings. This means that for value vehicles such as VSCs, creating meaning instead of efficiency is the central purpose of organizational structures. Meaning refers to the extent to which organizational activities, roles, relationships or practices have intrinsic significance. This significance is always personal and contextual, varying across different organizational structures.

Management as an enrichment process of the organization

To develop a management approach that moves beyond the logic of efficiency to embrace a logic of fostering meaning, Selznick’s (1957) theory of institutional leadership is extremely helpful. By focusing on creating meaning, instead of efficiency, it can be argued that a value co-creation management approach resembles institutional leadership. Selznick was interested in how organizations become value infused and labelled the work of its leaders as institutional leadership (Selznick, 1957). He recognized that leaders often become “preoccupied with technical matters and lose sight of the broader values on which the success of the institution rests” (Besharov & Khurana, 2015, p. 8). To prevent this, and to ensure that



values are embedded in the social structure of the organization, he cautioned leaders about the risk of being absorbed by operational demands. His writings on leadership serve as a “pragmatic guide”, urging leaders to focus not only on the technical tasks of management but also on the political, cultural, and value-based demands essential for sustaining a strong social structure (Besharov & Khurana, 2015, p. 10). Although Selznick’s work on leadership “appears to remain frozen in the 1950s” (Kraatz, 2009, p. 60), his views about how leaders infuse organizations with value are particularly compelling and suitable to enrich the understanding of how VSCs should be managed. Selznick’s reminder that true leadership transcends mere efficiency may be even more relevant today in the age of excessive capitalism and organizational rationalization than when he first introduced it in 1957. It is a valuable voice of resistance to the culture of efficiency, goal rationality and business-like management approaches in organizational thinking. Especially for value vehicles like VSCs, his institutional leadership approach is particularly relevant, emphasizing that management “goes beyond efficiency” (Selznick, 1957, p. 138) and focuses on fostering a value-infused character.

The further development of an effective management approach for VSCs to thrive and endure is therefore based on this Selznickian approach to institutional leadership. However, for developing such an approach, Selznick’s ideas must be translated into management principles, strategies, and practices. Since management is responsible for the organizational structures designed to achieve the technical purposes of organizations, Selznick argues that it is not management but leaders who are responsible for the enrichment process of organizations. Specifically, he warns leaders to become preoccupied with technical matters. As a result, he steps “outside the area where administration can be made routine” and inside “the field where leadership counts” (Selznick, 1957, p. 36). However, unlike Selznick’s conceptualization of organizations, where value is infused beyond technical requirements, for value vehicles such as VSCs the technical task of the organization is to be infused with value. This implies that management’s central task is organizing activities, roles, relationships or practices that embed this value. Therefore, by adapting Selznick’s ideas to a management approach, I shift from the field where leadership and critical decisions are central for value infusion processes, to one where management of meaning can become routine. This leads to the following proposition:

Proposition 6: When conceptualizing VSCs as value vehicles, specific management requirements become apparent, focusing not just on efficiency, but on fostering meaning.

Management of Meaning as an effective management approach for organizations

As already argued, to reach an effective management approach that helps VSCs thrive and endure, the principles of Selznick’s institutional leadership theory should be translated into a value co-creation rationality management approach. Building on the tradition of organizational thinking at the Utrecht School of Governance (e.g., Koot et al., 2003), I refer to this management approach as *Management of Meaning (MoM)*. As a management approach, MoM offers the overarching philosophy that guides how organizations should approach their core task of infusing the organization with value. MoM has been introduced earlier in the literature on leadership. It refers to the actions and utterances of leaders that “frame and shape the context of action in such a way that the members of that context are able to

use the meaning thus created as a point of reference for their own action and understanding of the situation” (Smirich & Morgan, 1982, p. 261). Following this understanding, MoM “means the management of schemas and perceptions” (Scroggins, 2006, p. 87). My approach is closer to a later stream of work where MoM refers to leadership aimed at providing employees with meaningful work (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009). In my approach, MoM encompasses the strategies, practices, and tools that shape organizational structures to imbue the organization with value for both its members and society. It consists of a strategic blueprint designed to guide management in making informed decisions about the allocation of scarce resources, and a coherent set of management practices designed to reinforce their strategic choices. As a result, MoM is best described as a management philosophy comprising a coherent set of strategies and practices aimed at transforming and sustaining an organization as a meaningful and enduring entity. Although MoM is specifically designed toward enabling VSCs to thrive and endure, its core philosophy also applies to other organizations that (aim to) operate sustainably through the commitment of various stakeholders to support the organization’s continued existence.

7.3 The strategic blueprint of MoM for VSCs

To apply MoM in the context of VSCs, its overarching philosophy is distilled into a strategic blueprint that guides VSC management in making informed decisions about the allocation of scarce resources. In the VSC context, (1) human resources, (2) finances, (3) relationships and networks, (4) infrastructure and processes, and (5) planning and development are the resources considered essential for VSCs to fulfill their mission (Elmose-Østerlund et al., 2021). These resources are collectively referred to as the organizational capacity of the VSC (Hall et al., 2003). However, VSCs often face significant challenges in managing these resources effectively (Seippel et al., 2020), with human (e.g., volunteers) and financial resources frequently perceived as particularly scarce (Nagel et al., 2015; Wicker & Breuer, 2011). Given these resource constraints, the strategic blueprint of MoM offers a structured framework for assessing and formulating policies or high-level plans, and for allocating limited resources effectively to support the organization’s core task of infusing value and building the capacity to respond to challenges in this regard. Inspired by Moore’s (2000) framework, originally developed for managers and policymakers in the public sector, the strategic blueprint of MoM directs managerial attention to four essential assessments. Specifically, it supports the alignment and development of strategies related to valuable sports activities and services, social embeddedness of members, collective identities, and organizational legitimacy. As demonstrated in Chapter 6, providing club goods – consisting of sports activities, services, and social relationships – that offer individual benefits to members, fostering collective identities that become integrated into members’ self-concept, and establishing legitimacy in the eyes of the government, represent the essential elements to infuse the VSC with value in order to commit members and public bodies to the organization and its continued existence. These four distinct evaluations, each essential for infusing the organization with value and ensuring the long-term survival of VSCs, are presented as components of a blueprint for a vital VSC in Figure 7.1.



Four distinct evaluations for effective allocation of scarce resources

The first and second assessment, labeled ‘valuable sports activities and services’ and ‘social embeddedness of members’, directs managerial attention to deploying scarce resources that enable members to co-create club goods, thereby generating value for both themselves and others. Club goods refer to all shared benefits of membership of a VSC that are exclusively available to the members of that VSC. Chapter 4 shows that club goods encompass various facets of membership benefits (Kolbl et al., 2022; Nagel, 2008; Schijns et al., 2016; Schlesinger & Nagel, 2015). Members value not only tangible products or services (hardware) and sports opportunities (orgware) at VSCs, but also the relationships (software) they co-create themselves. Since members’ loyalty to the organization and their likelihood of engaging in positive word-of-mouth about the VSC are positively influenced by the value members derive from club goods, it is crucial for management to facilitate the co-production of club goods that align with members’ interests. In the strategic blueprint for VSCs, valuable sports activities and services, and the social embeddedness of members are presented as distinct dimensions of assessment. This distinction reflects that facilitating the co-production of sports activities and services is primarily aimed at meeting individual members’ needs and preferences, whereas facilitating the co-production of social embeddedness emphasizes the relationships among members, viewed through the lens of a social network perspective.

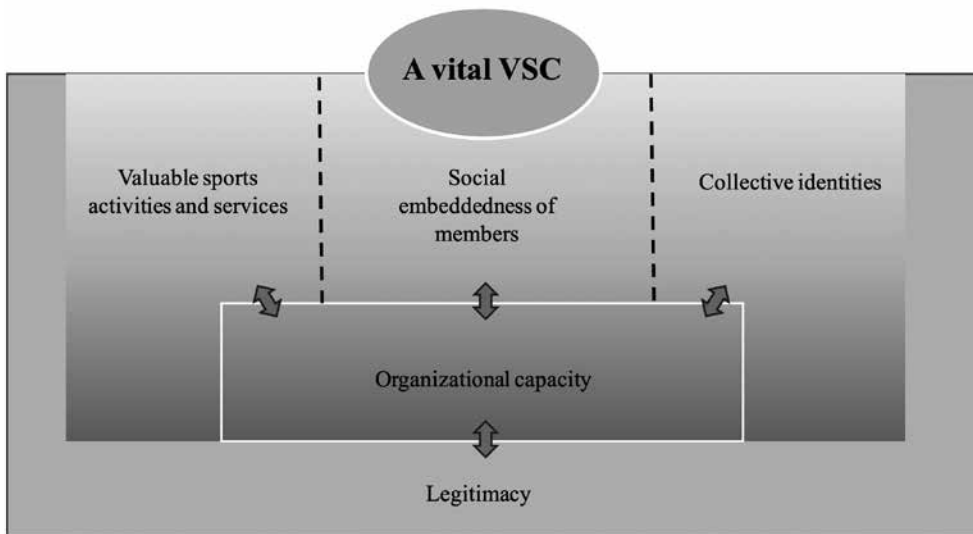
The third assessment, labeled ‘collective identities,’ directs managerial attention to deploying scarce resources that enable members to co-produce collective identities that lead to members identifying with the organization, the sport and diverse groups within the organization in order for them being unified into a joint entity. Collective identities refer to a shared sense of belonging and self-definition among members of a group, community or category (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Chapter 5 shows that, besides organizational identities (Kolbl et al., 2022; Schlesinger & Nagel, 2013; 2015), which relate to a VSC membership (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), members develop a sense of identification and belonging to the sport, the sporting group and the team as distinct yet interconnected social groups within the context of VSCs. Since members who strongly identify with their VSC are not only more loyal and more inclined to engage in positive word-of-mouth, but also more likely to volunteer in service of the VSC, it is crucial for management to facilitate the co-production of different collective identities in the context of VSCs. Here attention is warranted to maintain a delicate balance between collective sport identities to be an attractive and a recognizable part of the sports community and embracing an organizational identity that makes VSCs distinctive from rival VSCs.

The fourth assessment labeled ‘legitimacy,’ directs managerial attention to deploying scarce resources in ways that ensure members act in alignment with public expectations and the demands of policymakers. As previously discussed, VSCs are not only value vehicles for their members but also serve as instruments of value for society at large by achieving public goals. This public function makes VSCs an essential and valuable component of public infrastructure, and it infuses them with legitimacy in the eyes of government (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). This legitimacy, in turn, becomes a powerful resource for VSCs. As providers of public services that contribute to societal welfare, VSCs can leverage their legitimacy to access public resources such as subsidies or reduced rates

for sports facilities or protect themselves from potential liquidation. Although Chapter 3 indicates that individual VSCs do not need to fully conform to governmental norms to benefit from legitimacy, it is still important for management to promote conformity, as perceived legitimacy at the broader VSC population level is crucial for individual VSCs to access these benefits. This leads to the following proposition:

Proposition 7: VSCs should make informed decisions about the allocation of scarce resources based on a strategic blueprint that guides managerial attention toward members co-producing sports activities, services, and social relationships that provide individual benefits, fostering collective identities that become integrated into members' self-concept, and establishing legitimacy in the eyes of the government.

Figure 7.1 The strategic blueprint for a vital VSC.



A distinct approach to strategy development

As previously discussed, VSCs constitute a distinct organizational type in the Weberian sense of an ideal type. Recognizing that the core task of VSCs is to be infused with value for both members and society, implies that the primary task of VSC management is to shape organizational structures that facilitate the co-creation of valuable sports activities and services, social embeddedness of members, collective identities, and organizational legitimacy – elements that collectively imbue VSCs with value. As a result, the strategic blueprint of MoM suggests that VSCs may require their own approach to strategy development, distinct not only from business organizations and government agencies in general (Moore, 2000), but also from for-profit sports organizations and local sports authorities (Vos, 2012). Although the strategic assessments within the strategic blueprint of MoM may also be applicable to other types of membership organizations, such as cultural or music associations, what makes it distinctive in the context of VSCs is the unique nature of competitive play.



Consequently, more than other membership organizations, VSCs face the dual challenge of differentiating themselves to address growing competition from rival VSCs – threatening their long-term survival – while simultaneously maintaining recognition as legitimate members of the broader sports community. Table 7.1 outlines the key differences in strategy formulation between for-profit organizations, public organizations, and VSCs.

Moore (2000) has already highlighted the distinction between core strategic concepts in the private and public sectors. For-profit organizations operate within a well-established framework to strategy development (Moore, 2000), driven primarily by the goal of maximizing long-term shareholder wealth (Jensen, 1998). Because their continued existence depends on generating returns for shareholders, customers play a central role. Their financial transactions are essential for sustaining organizational performance over time (Moore, 2000). Consequently, the overall value-creating performance of for-profit organizations is effectively captured through financial statements, which document production costs and sales revenues. In preparing for the future, these organizations typically analyze products, markets, and competitors to strategically position both current and prospective offerings.

While the only way for for-profit organizations to stay in business is by maintaining their financial performance over time, this alignment between financial outcomes and long-term survival does not necessarily apply to non-profit and governmental organizations (Moore, 2000). This distinction marks a key difference between strategic assessments in the non-profit and governmental sectors compared to the for-profit world. For non-profit and governmental organizations, long-term survival depends not only on financial performance but also on the creation of social value. Governmental organizations exist to address specific public problems as mandated by citizens and their representatives, with funding typically provided through compulsory taxation. As a result, their value-creating performance is assessed in terms of their efficiency and effectiveness in delivering public value, defined by the extent to which they fulfill an important social mission. When evaluating specific initiatives, management focuses on how these actions contribute to the achievement of the organization's overarching purpose.

For VSCs, the organization's objectives are not mandated by citizens or their representatives, but are instead defined by members who pursue shared goals. VSCs differ from for-profit and public organizations in the way they generate resources. Their primary revenue stems from the voluntary pooling of resources by members to achieve shared objectives. In recent years, however, governments have increasingly recognized VSCs as vehicles for delivering public value, providing them with access to public resources such as subsidies, subsidized facility use, and support during crises (Waardenburg, 2016a). Therefore, to secure commitment from both members and public bodies to the organization and its long-term survival, the primary goal of VSCs is members co-creating value for both individual and collective benefit. As a result, their overall value-creating performance is assessed by their effectiveness in enabling members to co-create value, for which they pool resources and for which public resources are allocated by citizens and their representatives. When evaluating specific initiatives, management focuses on how these actions contribute to members co-creating value for both individual and collective benefit.

Table 7.1 Core strategic concepts in the private, public and VSC context.

	For-Profit Sector	Public Sector	VSCs
Goal of the organization	Achieve shareholder wealth	Achieve public value	Achieve value co-creation
Principal source of revenue	Revenues earned by sale of products and services	Taks appropriations	Member-contributed and public resources
Measure of performance	Financial bottom line	Efficiency and effectiveness in public value creation	Effectiveness in value co-creation
Key calculation	Find better ways to sell products/services	Find better ways to achieve public value	Find better ways to achieve value co-creation

Source: adapted from Moore, 2000; extended with VSCs.

7.4 Management practices of MoM for VSCs

To translate the overarching philosophy and strategic blueprint of MoM into effective action, I adapt the principles of Selznick's institutional leadership theory into a coherent set of management practices aimed at optimizing the four core processes for long-term survival of VSCs. Yet, while intuitively compelling, it is argued that much of Selznick's work "remains somewhat anecdotal" (Chandler, 2015, p. 201). His understanding of institutional leadership is therefore combined with management ideas from other disciplinary fields and refined to the context of VSCs. Although these management practices are referred to as being distinct and independent, they are linked to each other and might be more influential during different periods of time or in different contexts. They are furthermore never-ending because value-laden organizations "are not a fait accompli but ongoing accomplishments" (Raffaelli & Glynn, 2015, p. 298). The management practices that I contend are crucial for VSCs to thrive and endure are summarized in Table 7.2. Each management practice is subsequently explored in depth, with clear distinctions drawn between the internal, external, dynamic, and holistic dimensions of VSCs.



Table 7.2 The management practices of Management of Meaning for VSCs.

Dimension:	What?	Why?	How?	Effective management practice:
Internal	Infusing value for members	To enable prosocial organizational behavior of members	Through customization, social tie building and sensegiving	Member knowledge management, social management and social identity management
External: institutional	Infusing legitimacy for society	To enable resources from society	Through maneuvering between conformity and passivity to public demands	Legitimacy management
External: task	Infusing social distinctiveness	To enable competitive balance	Through occupying different organizational niches from competitors	Social differentiation management
Dynamic	Infusing dynamic conservatism	To safeguard VSCs' continuous existence	Through transferring organizational knowledge	Socialization management
Holistic	Infusing statesmanship	To prevent or solve internal conflict	Through social identity leadership	Leadership management

I Management of Meaning in the internal dimension of VSCs

Infusing the organization with value for members

As we have seen, when VSCs are infused with value for members – through their participation in sports activities, access to (sport-related) services, and embeddedness within networks of relationships – it can leverage members' prosocial organizational behavior to achieve its goals. In Selznick's view, leadership is responsible for the task of transforming the organization from purely a technical tool into a meaningful and enduring organization (Raffaelli & Glynn, 2015). This process is described as an organizational enrichment process, where the organization's initial value is transformed into greater value. Leadership is deemed effective for “offering a guiding hand to a process that would otherwise occur more haphazardly” (Selznick, 1957, p. 27). In Selznick's view, the character of an organization – “composed of habits, dependencies, interests, and values” (Selznick, 1994) – forms the foundation for fostering greater value. For VSCs, it is not just organizational character, but primarily the embeddedness of their members in social relationships and groups within the organizational context that drives organizational identification processes and brings the organization to life (see Chapter 5). To help VSCs become value vehicles that foster meaningful action and life within them, their management must ensure that the organization serves as more than just a tool for sports activities or the consumption of services. It should also function as a platform for members to co-create social relationships and collective feelings within the VSC. To provide in this, member knowledge management, social management and social identity management are effective management practices for VSCs. This leads to the following proposition:

Proposition 8: To enable VSCs to operate based on the prosocial organizational behavior of members, member knowledge management, social management and social identity management are effective management practices for the context of VSCs.

Member knowledge management

For VSCs to become and remain effective tools for sports activities or the consumption of services, it is important to apply a strategy of customization. A strategy of customization refers to a carefully designed approach for customizing activities, facilities and services to members' wishes (Winer & Dhar, 2014). This is not a new strategy for VSCs. In the last decades, VSCs are stimulated through sport policies to broaden their services and making membership forms more flexible (Van der Roest et al., 2015). The idea is that members have different wishes and needs regarding membership and offering more services and flexibility in membership, attracts more members. However, research shows that this is a false understanding of what members value in membership (Van der Roest, 2015). My empirical analysis (Chapter 3) also indicates that broadening services does not contribute to the ability of VSCs to thrive and endure. Therefore, a strategy of customization in the context of VSCs does not involve replicating the activities, facilities, and services of commercial sport providers. Instead, it focuses on identifying and providing activities, facilities, and services that provide the greatest value to the largest number of members.

To coordinate and direct VSCs' actions, processes and systems towards customization, Member Knowledge Management (Behnam et al., 2020) is an effective management practice for VSCs. Knowledge Management can be defined as the process of planning, organizing, leading, and controlling organizational structures for "identifying and leveraging the collective knowledge in an organization" (Alavi & Leidner, 1999, p. 113). Many knowledge management systems rely on IT. This also seems useful for the context of VSCs. Chapter 4 shows that VSCs' most important value-adding activities, facilities and services are not highly exploited by VSCs. This implies that the ability of VSCs' management to identify and strategically exploit their most important value-adding assets is limited. This might be the result of poorly functioning democratic processes and communication channels (Thiel & Mayer, 2008). General meetings are poorly attended (Hoeijmakers, 2022) and the management of VSCs is mainly described as an oligarchy of the few (Michels, 1970). Once it becomes clearer which activities, facilities, and services matter most to members, more informed decisions can be made about leveraging assets to maximize value for as many members as possible.

Social management

For VSCs to become and remain a platform for social relationships, it is important to apply a strategy of social tie building. A strategy of social tie building refers to a carefully designed approach regarding the formation of social relationships between members. The formation of social relationships within VSCs can be viewed as a three-phase process. Li (2007) highlights (1) "the weak-tie phase from strangers with no ties to acquaintances with weak ties", and (2) "the strong-tie phase from acquaintances with weak ties to friends with strong ties" (p. 235). I add a third process that is particularly important in the context of VSCs: (3) the compartmentally-tie phase from acquaintances with weak ties to clubmates with strong ties but limited to the context of the VSCs (Tacon, 2019). Although organizations cannot directly compel members to form social relationships, research on tie formation suggests



that they can act as brokers by establishing organizational structures that facilitate interactions (Jones & Hamilton Volpe, 2011; Methot et al., 2018; Soltis et al., 2018; Tacon, 2019).

To coordinate and direct VCS' actions, processes and systems towards social tie building, Social Management is an effective management practice for VSCs. Social Management can be defined as the process of planning, organizing, leading, and controlling organizational structures for social interactions. Despite the increased interest in social network research in management literature (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011, Brass, 2012), and a call for a paradigm shift from human resource management to social resource management (Methot et al., 2018; Soltis et al., 2018), the management of social relationships is still a little explored area. What social management therefore exactly entails in the context of VSCs, needs to be further explored.

Social identity management

For VSCs to become and remain a platform for developing collective identities within the VSC, it is necessary to apply a strategy of sensegiving. A strategy of sensegiving refers to a carefully designed approach regarding social identification processes within the organizational context of VSCs. Although social identification is a fundamental construct in organizational theory, the process by which it occurs has received limited scholarly attention (Ashforth et al., 2008). As a result, there is still much to be understood about how members come to identify with an organization (Lam et al., 2016). Ashforth et al. (2008) conceptualize social identification as a dynamic cycle between the individual and the organization. Organizational members integrate the organization into their sense of self by enacting identities and interpreting feedback from these enactments (ibid.). Organizations can influence this process through sensebreaking and sensegiving. Sensebreaking involves the deliberate deconstruction of an identity, while sensegiving refers to efforts of the organization aimed at shaping the meaning construction of members toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality (Ashforth et al., 2008).

To coordinate and direct VCS' actions, processes and systems towards sensegiving, Social Identity Management is an effective management practice. Social Identity Management can be defined as the process of planning, organizing, leading, and controlling organizational structures to guide the meaning construction of organizational members of what the organization represents and how it functions (Ashforth & Mael, 1996). According to the literature, this can be done by (1) formulating organizational identity claims and (2) imbuing the organization with organizational identity cues. Identity claims refer to the way in which the organization is deliberately portrayed (Ashforth & Mael, 1996). Identity claims are usually coherent and somewhat idealized descriptions of an organization's identity and give sense to audiences about what the organization is and represents (Ashforth & Mael, 1996; Gioia et al., 2013). While organizational identity claims help members understand what the organization is and represents, it is equally important for organizations to encourage members to cognitively categorize themselves as part of the organization (Scott & Lane, 2000). Identity cues are elements in the organization's fabric that "spur the potential enactment of organizationally relevant identities" (Ashforth et al., 2008, p. 332). In the context of VSCs, this includes ceremonies, symbols, dress norms, traditions, and rituals that help remind people that they are members of a collective (Dutton et al., 1994).

II Management of Meaning in the external dimension of VSCs

Infusing the organization with legitimacy for society at large

As we have seen, when the population of VSCs becomes infused with legitimacy in the eyes of the government by fulfilling public goals, VSCs can access public resources to achieve its goals. In Selznick's view (1957), to be a truly meaningful and enduring organization, it is essential to be trusted to fulfill the needs of society. The societal significance Selznick refers to is in the organizational literature described as the legitimacy of organizations. Organizational legitimacy is to be understood as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Although Selznick recognized the importance of legitimacy for organizations, he warned that public appreciation must be handled sensitively (Hinings & Greenwood, 2015). It requires a delicate balance of what Selznick (1957) termed 'responsiveness' and 'autonomy'. On the one hand, organizations must remain responsive to the demands and expectations of the broader society on which they depend and whose well-being they influence. At the same time, organizations must be faithful to the values that make up their metaphorical soul. This requires a certain degree of autonomy from external pressures.

This delicate balance appears to be especially true for VSCs. Since the purpose of VSCs is to serve as a value vehicle for members and an instrument of value for society, part of VSC management's job is to convey that the organization is indeed both. However, being overly responsive to external pressures can backfire when it conflicts with tasks that serve the internal world of VSCs. This can lead to a drift away from activities that enable value-infusing processes or, if responsiveness leads to too many additional tasks, cause the organization to overextend itself in terms of member involvement. To help VSCs maintain this delicate balance, management must uphold core values, avoid overburdening members, and remain responsive to societal needs and demands. To provide in this, legitimacy management is an effective management practice for VSCs. This leads to the following proposition:

Proposition 9: To enable VSCs to maintain a delicate balance between upholding core values, avoiding the overburdening of members, and remaining responsive to societal needs and demands, legitimacy management is an effective management practice for VSCs.

Legitimacy management

For VSCs to maintain the delicate balance between upholding core values and avoiding overburdening members, while remaining responsive to societal needs and demands, it is necessary to apply a strategy of strategic maneuvering. A strategy of strategic maneuvering refers to a carefully designed approach regarding the level of conformity to new activities, projects or government requirements. The literature about organizational legitimacy, indicates that organizations can use different strategies to deal with tasks, demands and expectations from wider society (Deephouse et al, 2017; Oliver, 1991; Suchman, 1995). To coordinate and direct VCS' actions, processes and systems towards public appreciation, Legitimacy Management is an effective management practice for VSCs. Legitimacy Management can be defined as the process of planning, organizing, leading, and controlling organizational structures to guide public perceptions of desirability, propriety, and appro-



priateness (Suchman, 1995). Management can choose different strategies to deal with tasks, demands and expectations from broader society. Oliver (1991) mentions the following five: which vary from full conformity to full resistance: acquiescence, compromise, avoidance, defiance, and manipulation. Skillful legitimacy management in the context of VSCs requires choosing the highest level of conformity possible depending on its congruence with VSCs' core values and the pressure it puts on member involvement.

Infusing the organization with social distinctiveness from competitors

As we have seen, VSCs sustain a competitive balance with competitors by differentiating themselves as much as possible beyond the isomorphic characteristics necessary to be recognized as legitimate members of the sports community. Since a competition pyramid is essential for competitive sport, VSCs require competitors to thrive and endure. The necessity for competitors implies that VSCs need to be in competitive balance with other VSCs. Competitive balance means that VSCs do not aim to outcompete or eliminate their rivals. Instead, they occupy distinct organizational niches, reducing direct competition for members and ensuring that a sufficient number of VSCs remain active, thereby sustaining sporting competitions. To achieve a competitive balance, their management must ensure that the organization embraces a high degree of similarity to be an attractive and recognizable part of the sports community, while also fostering a distinct identity from their competitors (Deephouse, 1999; Villadsen, 2013). In Selznick's view, the character of an organization – “composed of habits, dependencies, interests, and values” (Selznick, 1994) – makes organizations distinctive. For VSCs it is primarily members' sociodemographic traits that differentiate VSCs (Chapter 5). As a result, VSCs are less vying for the same kind of member and therefore able to sustain a competitive balance with competitors. To provide in this, social differentiation management is an effective management practice for VSCs. This leads to the following proposition:

Proposition 10: To enable VSCs to achieve a competitive balance with competitors, social differentiation management is an effective management practice for VSCs.

Social differentiation management

For VSCs to maintain a competitive balance with competitors, it is crucial to apply a strategy of strategic balancing. A strategy of strategic balancing refers to a carefully designed approach regarding embracing a high degree of similar assets and sport-cultural values to be an attractive and a recognizable part of the sports community and the need for occupying different organizational niches from competitors. Deephouse (1999) developed a theory of strategic balance by arguing that for organizations to thrive and endure they “should be as different as legitimately possible” (p. 247). As we have seen, the strategic balance point for VSCs seems to lie in the sociodemographic traits of members (Chapter 5).

To coordinate and direct VSCs' actions, processes and systems towards occupying different organizational niches from competitors, Social Differentiation Management is an effective management practice for VSCs. Social Differentiation Management can be defined as the process of planning, organizing, leading, and controlling organizational structures to guide perceptions of how the VSC is different in the sociodemographic traits of members from direct competitors. According to organizational identity literature, organizations incre-

ase inter-organizational differences by incorporating identity cues that differentiate organizations from direct competitors. Perceptions of inter-organizational differences are argued to differentiate the organization (Mael, 1988) and to increase the tendency of members to identify with the organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). By profiling itself as such, a VSCs' identity becomes clearer. This can ensure that new members can make a better choice for membership and VSCs are less vying for the same kind of member.

III Management of Meaning in the dynamic dimension of VSCs

Infusing the organization with dynamic conservatism

As we have seen, VSCs safeguard its continuous existence through dynamic conservatism. Selznick stipulates that once organizations are meaningful organizations, they are not considered to stay that way by accident. While infusing the organization with value and legitimacy is a significant challenge, Selznick (1957) argues that sustaining it is even more difficult, given the turnover of organizational members and leaders. This challenge may be even greater in the context of VSCs, where few formal requirements are imposed on new members, resulting in minimal formal selection criteria. Therefore, the main struggle for VSCs to remain a value vehicle lies in the paradox of inflow. Since it is inevitable that members drop out, inflow of new members is necessary to maintain activities, social relationships and collective feelings. However, the inflow of new members changes group dynamics. It therefore also puts pressure on the activities, social relationships and collective feelings that infuse the VSC with value. According to Selznick, an organization infused with value can only maintain that value if it is able to sustain its character through changing cohorts of members (Ansell et al., 2015). As we have seen, for VSCs it is not only organizational character but above all the embeddedness of their members in social relationships and groups within VSCs that breathe life into the organization (Chapter 5). Therefore, to safeguard its continuous existence as a value vehicle, their management must ensure the persistence of social relationships and collective identities within the VSC. To provide in this, socialization management is an effective management practice for VSCs. This leads to the following proposition:

Proposition 11: To enable VSCs to safeguard their continuous existence, socialization management is an effective management practice for VSCs.

Socialization management

For VSCs to ensure the persistence of social relationships and collective identities within the VSC, it is important to apply a strategy of transferring organizational knowledge. This strategy refers to a carefully designed approach regarding how both new and incumbent members become aware of the organization's formal activities, processes or systems and its informal value system, norms, and behavior patterns of the organization. To coordinate and direct VSCs' actions, processes and systems towards the transfer of organization's formal and informal patterns on new and incumbent members, Socialization Management is an effective management practice. Socialization Management can be defined as the process of planning, organizing, leading, and controlling organizational structures to transfer knowledge, traditions, behaviors and norms on new and incumbent members.



Research shows that organizational socialization consists of two phases (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). First, a critical factor in maintaining a long-lasting organization is helping new members adjust to the organization's climate and culture when they are first introduced. This process involves the transfer of organizational knowledge towards new members. This knowledge refers to understanding the organization's rules, practices, norms, and skills to perform specific roles within the organization. For example, skills might include the ability to participate in a committee or manage a shift in the canteen. Second, since organizations are dynamic and constantly evolving, socialization is an ongoing process, regardless of how long an individual has been a member (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). This ongoing socialization involves the continual teaching of knowledge, traditions, behaviors and norms that are socially acceptable and customary within the organization (Ahumada, 2015).

IV Management of Meaning in the holistic dimension of VSCs

Infusing the organization with statesmanship

As we have seen, VSCs function as a value vehicle for members of the organization and as an instrument of value for society at large. As a result, VSCs have multiple purposes and must ensure that the organization fulfills multiple goals. Selznick (1957) realizes that multiple goals can lead to internal conflicts and potential problems. He therefore attributes leadership an important task in “adjudicating, dampening, or eliminating these political contests” (Raffaelli & Glynn, 2015, p. 302) and in holding things together (Ansell et al., 2015). He also noticed that this is no easy task. To be an institutional leader, Selznick argues that it is not enough to infuse values into the social structure of the organization. It is also needed “to internalize those values within oneself and to publicly represent them in one's conduct with others” (Besharov & Khurana, 2015, p. 26). Since VSCs also have an internal and external social world to serve with multiple goals that might conflict, their management must also ensure that their leaders serve as statesman who embody the organization's identity and purpose (Raffaelli & Glynn, 2015). To provide in this, formalizing social identity leadership is an effective management practice for VSCs. This leads to the following proposition:

Proposition 12: To enable VSCs to prevent or solve internal conflicts, leadership management is an effective management practice for VSCs.

Leadership management

For VSCs to minimize the risk on internal conflicts and political contests to arise in the organizational context of VSCs, it is important to apply a strategy of social identity leadership. A strategy of social identity leadership refers to a carefully designed approach regarding how leaders must act as a prototype of VSCs' norms, values, and aspirations. The social identity theory of leadership is fundamentally a follower-centric perspective on leadership (Van Knippenberg, 2023). According to the social identity literature, when a leader embodies the group prototype, followers become more receptive to the leader's influence, making the leader more effective in shaping follower attitudes and behaviors (Van Knippenberg, 2023). In the context of VSCs, this means that leaders should act as in-group prototypes by consistently aligning their actions with the organization's norms, values, and aspirations (Haslam et al., 2011; Slater et al., 2014). Since a leader's actions are interpreted

both within and outside the organization, leadership must reflect the organization's core values and purpose, not only within its organizational context but also externally.

To coordinate and direct social identity leadership, Leadership Management is an effective management practice for VSCs. Leadership Management can be defined as the process of planning, organizing, leading, and controlling organizational structures to direct the behavior of leaders, such as board members, trainers, coaches or club managers, towards social identity leadership. For this, it is important that the tasks and competencies required for social identity leadership are translated into formal tasks associated with these roles. Additionally, it is important that when recruiting or appointing individuals to these central positions within the VSC, candidates are also evaluated based on social identity leadership competencies.



Chapter 8

Discussion, conclusions and recommendations

8.1 Introduction

With this dissertation, I have developed a new systems-theoretical perspective on organizations. To develop this perspective, the specific organizational structures of VSCs have been used as an illustrative case, offering insights that can be applied to understand and study organizations more broadly. This new value co-creation systems perspective on organizations, not only deepens our understanding of VSCs and other organizations that (aim to) operate sustainably through the commitment of various stakeholders to support the organization's continued existence, its primary rationale also served as the foundation for developing a novel management approach aimed at guiding VSCs in their efforts to thrive and endure. This represents a significant contribution, as the fields of organization and management science lack distinct organizational theories and management approaches tailored to VSCs. In addition to the absence of a systems-theoretical framework grounded in the specific dynamics of VSCs, there is a notable gap in the literature concerning membership organizations (Anheier, 2000; Toepler & Anheier, 2004) and sport organizations more broadly (Gammelsæter, 2021). This gap is particularly problematic, not because VSCs are “simple, trivial organizations,” but precisely because they are inherently complex (Anheier, 2000, p. 13). They furthermore operate within a complex domain of society, characterized by both instrumental and own expressive meanings and structures that set it apart from other sectors (Gammelsæter, 2021; Thiel & Mayer, 2009). This dissertation thus advances the field of organization and management studies by offering valuable insights into the core organizational processes and management of VSCs, while also moving beyond theories and approaches developed for organizations in other sectors. This enhances the legitimacy of the sport management research field, as a valuable, standalone field within the organization and management sciences. Most importantly, by deepening the understanding of VSCs, this dissertation equips sport management practitioners and policymakers to more effectively address the challenges faced by VSCs. Given the downward spiral many VSCs are currently experiencing, it is evident that effective management tools and public policies are necessary to help VSCs overcome challenges and emerge from troubled waters. My dissertation centered on the following main research question:

What are the core organizational processes that enable VSCs to thrive and endure, and which management approaches can effectively enhance these processes in the context of VSCs?

To answer this question, I employed a mixed-methods research design. I began by constructing a theoretical framework that addresses the core processes enabling the long-term survival of VSCs (Chapter 2). I used the Sport-Management Theory Development Framework (Lachance et al., 2024) as a tool. Rather than starting from scratch, this framework allowed



me to simultaneously draw upon and apply concepts and theories from other research fields, while extending them with variables, relationships, and explanations specific to the context of VSCs. This approach helped avoid reinventing the wheel and ensured sensitivity to the organizational context of VSCs. Following this approach, I conducted an extensive literature review on the long-term survival of organizations. Given the distinctive nature of VSCs' structures – which are designed not only to deliver club goods but also to contribute to broader public interests while fostering diffuse, expressive relationships (Horch, 1998) – I combined insights from NIT, the RBV and CIT as the basis for the framework. In doing so, I integrated two distinct streams of organizational theory: one that conceptualizes organizational processes in rational terms, and another that frames them in terms of cultural and informal aspects of social structure. After critically reviewing this literature and reflecting on the relevance of the central concepts from the borrowed theories in the context of VSCs, I expanded my search for relevant concepts from other disciplinary streams. By blending the three theories with assumptions about prosocial organizational behavior, multiple institutional logics, competitive balance, dynamic capabilities of responsiveness, cultural transmission, and social transmission, I developed a holistic framework for theorizing the core processes that enable VSCs to thrive and endure.

Next, I empirically tested the theoretical assumptions of the framework in the context of VSCs (Chapters 3-5). For this purpose, I used cross-sectional and longitudinal panel data from Dutch VSCs between 2007 and 2021, and conducted a multiple case study of four Dutch voluntary tennis clubs, each with different identities, resources, and located in close proximity. To approach this in a structured way, each chapter focused on one of the three organizational theories – NIT, RBV, CIT – that are considered most relevant for understanding the core processes of VSCs. These theories were blended with additional concepts to make them applicable to the VSC context. This approach provided theoretical contributions regarding the core processes that enable VSCs to thrive and endure, as well as insights into the three organizational theories used. I concluded that conforming to the values and norms that dominate society – as NIT implies – offers a one-sided view of VSCs' long-term survival. Although legitimacy in the eyes of the government enhances VSCs' access to public resources for achieving its goals, VSCs remain highly dependent on member-contributed resources, such as membership fees and voluntary labor (e.g., Nagel, 2008; Nagel et al., 2015; 2020). For VSCs, it is therefore also important to create meaningful relationships with members. In terms of understanding these meaningful relationships, the RBV, which views VSCs as providers of club goods – such as sports and social activities – that generate value for members and foster their involvement, while also providing them with a competitive advantage over rival VSCs, proved only partly valuable. It needed to be extended with a more sociological approach that explains commitment beyond the value members obtain from VSCs through club goods. I concluded that CIT is a valuable extension of the RBV, as my research showed that VSCs have value “beyond the technical requirements at hand” (Selznick, 1957, p. 17) by cultivating collective identities that lead to members identifying with the organization, the sport and diverse groups within the organization in order for them being unified into a joint entity.

Lastly, by combining the theoretical and empirical insights from this dissertation, I conceptualized a coherent and interrelated set of core processes that enable VSCs to thrive and endure, drawing on Weber's (1949) concept of the “ideal type” (Chapter 6). An ideal type is



a conceptual tool that highlights the essential and defining characteristics of a phenomenon. To deepen the understanding of VSCs, I contrasted this ideal type with existing systems perspectives on organizations in organizational science and used it as an exemplar to develop a new systems-theoretical perspective on organizational functioning. After characterizing this new perspective, I employed its primary rationale as a foundational framework for developing a novel management approach (Chapter 7). This management approach consists of a strategic blueprint designed to guide VSC management in making informed decisions about the allocation of scarce resources, supported by a coherent set of management practices to reinforce their strategic choices. This was achieved by applying and enhancing Moore's strategic triangle (2000) to VSCs, and by translating Selznick's theory of institutional leadership (1957) into a coherent set of management approaches designed to optimize the core processes essential for VSCs' long-term survival.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will discuss the primary conclusions of this dissertation (8.2), the main recommendations for policymakers and organizational and (sport) management scholars (8.3), a research agenda (8.4), the limitations of this dissertation (8.5) and some closing remarks (8.6).

8.2 Primary conclusions

The following section presents the key conclusions of this research, derived from both the theoretical and empirical insights, as well as the development of a new systems-theoretical perspective on organizations and a novel approach to their management, as discussed throughout the dissertation.

VSCs as an exemplar of a new systems perspective on organizations

The most important conclusion of this dissertation is that VSCs represent an organizational type that requires a different systems-theoretical perspective on how organizations thrive and endure than is typically found in organizational theory. The primary purpose of VSCs is to provide value to a group of people who voluntarily and collectively pursue shared interests (Toepler & Anheier, 2004). However, VSCs are increasingly seen by governments as instruments of value for society at large (Waardenburg, 2016a). This dual purpose – serving as a value vehicle for members and an instrument of societal value – means that VSCs must fulfill multiple roles. It also means that VSCs operate in a specific way. As vehicles of value for members and instruments of value for society, VSCs become important and valuable parts of members' lives and the public infrastructure. As a result, both members and public bodies commit to the organization and its continued existence. This commitment enables VSCs to function based on four key elements: (1) prosocial organizational behavior of members, (2) public resources, (3) competitive balance with other VSCs, and (4) dynamic conservatism. VSCs are therefore not infused with value beyond the technical requirements of the task at hand as Selznick conceptualizes organizations. Instead, the technical requirement of the task at hand for VSCs is to be infused with value for members and society.

This interplay between VSCs' formal organizational structures and multi-level social dynamics as a foundation for long-term organizational survival calls for a different systems-theoretical perspective on how organizations function than is typically found in organizational theory. I call this a *value co-creation systems perspective*. In this perspective, a



value co-creation rationale is central. VSCs' specific organizational structures, which foster the co-creation of sports activities, services, and social relationships that offer individual benefits to members, collective identities that become integrated into members' self-concept, and legitimacy in the eyes of the government, commit members and public bodies to the organization and its continued existence. Accordingly, within a value co-creation rationale, formal, standardized, and regulatory structures are not merely mechanisms to control the behavior of individuals, but also serve to facilitate, sustain, and enhance members' participation and embeddedness within relational networks in the organization. With the aim of ensuring that members voluntarily co-create the value and continued existence of the organization for both individual and collective benefit. While this perspective is grounded in the specific core processes that allow VSCs to thrive and endure, the underlying logic of how they operate is equally relevant to other organizations that (aim to) operate sustainably through the commitment of various stakeholders to support the organization's continued existence.

A novel view on effective management approaches for VSCs

The second main conclusion of this dissertation is that this new systems perspective on organizations calls for management approaches that differ from those commonly found in mainstream and sport management thinking. Current mainstream and sport management approaches are particularly problematic for VSCs because they are grounded in a rational systems perspective, where a goal-oriented rationality is central. The primary purpose of goal-oriented management approaches is to make organizations more efficient and effective in achieving their objectives (Nagel et al., 2015). However, for VSCs the logic of efficiency loses its relevance. For these organizations, the main goal of organizational structures is not merely efficiency in achieving goals, but rather to infuse the organization with maximum value for both its members and society at large. This allows the organization to secure the commitment of its members and broader society to its continued existence. By focusing primarily on efficiency, goal-oriented management approaches focus too much on how goals are achieved, neglecting the importance of defining and protecting their diverse and evolving goals. Moreover, the organizational structures of VSCs designed to achieve goals often become goals themselves, as personal participation and group interaction within these structures generate value for members. Therefore, creating meaning – not efficiency – should be the central focus of VSC management. To support VSCs in this, I used the value co-creation rationale as a foundational logic to develop a novel management approach that guides organizations in fulfilling their core task of infusing the organization with value. This management approach, referred to as *Management of Meaning* (MoM), consists of a strategic blueprint designed to guide management in making informed decisions about the allocation of scarce resources, supported by a coherent set of management practices to reinforce their strategic choices. As a result, MoM is best described as a management philosophy comprising a coherent set of strategies and practices aimed at transforming and sustaining an organization as a meaningful and enduring entity. Although MoM is specifically designed toward enabling VSCs to thrive and endure, its core philosophy also applies to other organizations that (aim to) operate sustainably through the commitment of various stakeholders to support the organization's continued existence.



Growing need for effective management

The third main conclusion of this dissertation is that this new systems perspective highlights the growing need for VSCs to adopt effective management approaches. However, contrary to the assumptions of many policymakers, this need does not solely arise from the expectation that members have different wishes regarding membership and VSCs should extend their services to attract and retain more members. As discussed, members of VSCs are not simply consumers who pay membership fees in exchange for sports activities and services. Rather, for VSCs to thrive and endure, they also need to participate in social structures to co-create relationships with fellow members and collective identities. Social and collective relationships embed the organization with value and ensure that both members and public bodies commit to the organization and its continued existence. Therefore, I argue that the main challenge for VSCs is the erosion of naturally emerging social and collective relationships within them. For a long time, VSCs thrived because civic organizations, rooted in traditional value systems, were central to social life (Lucassen & Van der Roest, 2018). However, that era appears to be over. In the 20th century, the processes of individualization and depillarization, particularly in Western welfare states, led to the breakdown of these traditional value systems. As a result, people were liberated from rigid cultural norms and social groups, giving them greater freedom in choosing the types of activities and relationships in which to participate (Borgers, 2015). This shift has brought greater dynamism to the social relationships and groups people engage with (Putnam, 2000), increasing the pressure on VSCs to cultivate and maintain strong social and collective bonds among their members. As a result, in today's more individualistic culture, which is less bound by traditional value systems, VSCs now more than ever require an effective management approach that fosters these social processes and ensures their long-term survival.

Wrong management approaches promoted in public policies

The fourth main conclusion of this dissertation is that this new systems perspective on organizations calls for a different policy approach by the government and sport federations to promote the long-term survival of VSCs. Based on the findings of this dissertation, I conclude that, in recent years, policymakers have been promoting management strategies that are not effective in helping VSCs thrive and endure. As explained in Chapter 3, the management approaches promoted by policymakers can be summarized into three key logics. First, based on the idea that VSCs face increasing competition from commercial sport providers and that members have different preferences regarding membership, VSCs are encouraged to broaden their services and offer more flexible membership options (Van der Roest, 2015). The idea is that offering more services and greater flexibility in membership will attract more members. Second, due to their instrumental value to society and their organizational dominance in civil society, VSCs are increasingly stimulated to contribute to a variety of public goals (Nagel et al., 2020; Waardenburg, 2016a). By expanding their activities and playing a larger role in society, policymakers believe that VSCs can attract and retain more members. Third, because VSCs must adapt to members' changing needs and fulfill a broader role in society, it is assumed that their organization has become more complex, specialized, and extensive. As a result, VSCs are encouraged to adopt more formal structures to organize activities more efficiently (Nagel et al., 2015). For VSCs, this has led to a greater emphasis on goal-oriented management concepts, including formal policy



plans, mandatory member tasks, more standardized rules and procedures, and the rise of paid staff (Boessenkool et al., 2012; Lucassen & Van der Roest, 2018).

Although Chapter 3 demonstrates that organizing VSCs based on these three logics neither strengthens nor weakens VSCs, this dissertation shows that these logics conflict with how the core processes required for VSCs to thrive and endure can be effectively enhanced. First, a broad range of services and flexible membership options seem to play only a minor role in the value members derive from their membership and should be viewed as a misunderstanding of what members truly value (Van der Roest, 2015). As we have seen in Chapters 4 and 5, VSCs become value-infused primarily through the social relationships and collective sense of belonging that members experience within the organization. It is therefore a significant shortcoming that the social and collective aspects of VSCs are barely reflected or promoted in public policies aimed at helping VSCs to thrive and endure. In Chapter 3, I stipulated that the transformation of VSCs into more service-oriented organizations might even be seen as weakening social ties and collective feelings. Literature suggests that activities which benefit individual members most often contradict those that foster social or collective relationships (Bodet, 2009; Schlesinger et al., 2015). The idea of fulfilling a broader role in society should also be viewed critically. Taking on more public tasks often brings increased normative expectations, and in some cases, even explicit tasks and regulations. Since volunteers are scarce in the context of VSCs, VSCs drift away from activities that foster social and collective relationships (Hoeijmakers, 2022). And lastly, as extensively stipulated in Chapter 6, the logic of efficiency loses force, as we approach VSCs as value vehicles. When the main goal of the organization is to become infused with value to commit members and larger society to the organization and its continued existence, not efficiency but meaning should be the central concern of management. This completely contradicts the fundamental philosophy of goal-oriented management approaches and how VSCs are currently supported to thrive and endure through public policies.

Sport is a legitimate field within the organization and management sciences

The fifth main conclusion of this dissertation is that the development of theory about sport organizations and their management does not necessarily require a grounded theory or sport-specific theory development approach. Since its formation as an academic discipline, scholars have debated how sport management should be developed as a standalone field (Dowling et al., 2023; Slack, 1998). Central in this debate has been the question whether to borrow mainstream theories from broader organizational and management sciences or to adopt a grounded theory approach (Dowling et al., 2023; Lachance et al., 2024). Proponents of mainstream theory borrowing argue that sport management scholars should not reinvent the wheel, suggesting that existing theories from other fields can be effectively applied to sport phenomena (Doherty, 2013a; 2013b; Gerrard, 2015; Slack, 1996, 1998; Stewart, 2014). This perspective emphasizes the application and development of existing theories within the sport context. In contrast, proponents of grounded theory argue that sport management must develop theories that are grounded in sport to establish itself as a distinct field (Chalip, 2006; Costa, 2005; Mills, 2021; Newman, 2014; Pitts, 2001; Smith & Stewart, 2010). According to this view, sport management cannot rely on theories from other disciplines because sport has its own specific logic, meanings, and structures that are not found in other domains of society (Lachance et al., 2024).



With this dissertation, I have demonstrated that for theory development within the scholarly field of sport management, we do not necessarily need new theory ‘grounded’ in sport. By borrowing, combining, and advancing mainstream theories from the broader organizational and management sciences, I have advanced knowledge about VSCs. Additionally, this approach allowed me to contribute to mainstream organizational and management sciences by using VSCs as an exemplar of how to combine these theories to develop a new systems-theoretical perspective on organizations and management. This suggests that the scholarly field of sport management does not necessarily need theories grounded in sport to build knowledge about sport organizations or equip management practitioners with the tools to understand and solve problems in these organizations. In my view, it is not a “distinct body of knowledge that is not covered by another discipline” (Doherty, 2013, p. 5) that legitimizes sport management as a distinct scholarly field. Rather, its legitimacy as a valuable, standalone field within the organization and management sciences comes from the application of mainstream organizational and management theories in the context of sport, as well as the use of sport’s distinctive features to advance theories of organization and management. I therefore argue it is necessary to distinguish between the distinctiveness and uniqueness of sport management (Dowling et al., 2023). Although sport has distinctive logics, organizations and structures (e.g., Gammelsæter, 2021), this does not mean the organizational processes of sport organizations and the management of these organizations are “unique”, as this would imply being one of a kind or unlike anything else (Dowling et al., 2023, p. 412). As Dowling et al. (2023, p. 412) have noted, viewing sport as a unique field within the organization and management sciences presents a “false dichotomy” that is damaging to the contributions sport management can make to both theory and practice. Sport management is neither entirely unique nor merely a copy of other domains within the organization and management sciences. Rather, “it exists between these two extremes” (ibid., p. 413).

Institutional theory is highly relevant in the context of VSCs

The sixth main conclusion of this dissertation is that institutional theory is particularly relevant to the context of VSCs. This dissertation not only demonstrates that micro, meso, macro, and temporal institutional processes occur within VSCs, but also shows that these processes significantly shape how VSCs thrive and endure. In this regard, it aligns with the dominant view among sport management scholars that institutional theory is well-suited to the field of sport (e.g., Nite & Edwards, 2021; Robertson et al., 2022; Washington & Petterson, 2011). Due to the highly emotional environments fueled by passionate devotion to a sport, competition, or team (Oja & Bass, 2021; Oja et al., 2023), sport is a domain par excellence where its organizations and structures acquire meaning that extends beyond purely technical goals. As such, sport is “a unique context for examining pertinent institutional issues” (Nite & Edwards, 2021, p. 18) and an excellent field for contributing to the theoretical development of institutional theory (Washington & Petterson, 2011). However, Robertson et al. (2022), based on their review, recently argued that the relationship between sport management and institutional theory is better described as a “diffusion of ideas” (p. 459) rather than a joint venture, as suggested by Washington and Patterson (2011). This highlights a shortcoming, as it implies that sport management scholars are not fully leveraging the explanatory potential that contemporary institutional scholarship offers for



phenomena in sport (Robertson et al., 2022). Moreover, this limits the ability of sport management scholars to advance institutional theory and engage with ongoing debates within mainstream organizational and management sciences.

A new era of organizational thinking where not efficiency but meaning is central

The seventh and final main conclusion of this dissertation is that VSCs serve as an exemplar for a new era of organizational thinking, where not only efficiency but also meaning is central. In order for organizational studies “to remain a vigorous and relevant enterprise into the twenty-first century” (Scott & Davis, 2016, p. 369), I argue that a value co-creation systems perspective on organizations should be nurtured and advanced. Although rooted in VSCs, an approach that addresses how members and public bodies commit to the organization and its continued existence is also highly relevant for understanding the long-term survival of other organizational types. Developing relationships with citizens that foster engagement and trust, as well as with broader stakeholders such as regulatory bodies, NGOs, community groups, and businesses, is considered foundational for the functioning of every public organization (e.g. Boin et al., 2021; Greenwood & Hinings, 1996; Kraatz, 2009). Similarly, in business organizations, the idea of providing employees with meaningful work (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009) and building quality relationships with customers and employees to foster satisfaction and loyalty (Winer & Dhar, 2014) is increasingly recognized as essential. Yet, what my perspective adds to these existing perspectives is its holistic view and emphasis on how formal and informal organizational structures depend on and reinforce one another. In contrast to most other perspectives, I consider the social relationships and the collective sense of belonging that members experience within the organization to be most crucial for its functioning. To activate the social processes of personal and group interactions within organizations, this perspective marks a shift in focus for most scholars – from viewing organizational members as individuals to emphasizing their embeddedness in relationships. It is only when formal structures reinforce social processes that they align with compatible roles and dynamics.

Viewing organizations from a value co-creation systems perspective could start a new chapter in organizational thinking. It counterbalances the far-reaching, goal-oriented rationale that organizational structures should aim to produce products and services as efficiently and effectively as possible. In this sense, it serves as a voice of resistance to the culture of efficiency and business-like management approaches in organizational thinking. Moreover, as it is built on disparate paradigms, this new systems perspective marks a shift from multiparadigm thinking in organizational science (Lewis & Grimes, 1999; Scott & Davis, 2016). From the 1960s to the 1990s, many central paradigms in organizational science were developed, each in opposition to others, often as critiques with the assumption that the new paradigm would subsume all others (Fligstein, 2021). As a result, the field of organizational science became fragmented, giving rise to a “multiparadigm world” (Scott & Davis, 2017, p. 371), with like-minded scholars gathering evidence to validate their respective paradigms (Fligstein, 2021; Lewis & Grimes, 1999). Consequently, organization and management sciences have largely overlooked the interrelation of rational and institutional processes. VSCs, in particular, demonstrate that organizations are complex systems (Scott & Davis, 2016) and can only be fully understood by identifying how different processes interact and reinforce each other. If organizational and management scholars continue to act as defen-



ders of their own paradigms, they will talk past each other and replicate existing knowledge rather than advancing a deeper understanding of organizations. My perspective aims to shift the focus from debating the relative influence of formal versus informal organizational structures to exploring their interplay.

8.3 Main recommendations

Drawing from the primary conclusions of this dissertation, the following recommendations are presented for policymakers to consider in fostering the long-term survival of VSCs and organizational and (sport) management scholars in their research.

Recommendations for policymakers seeking to promote the long-term survival of VSCs

Given that social relationships and collective feelings in VSCs are now developing less naturally, it is essential for their long-term survival to adopt management strategies that actively nurture these processes. Now that a coherent set of effective management approaches has been developed to help VSCs foster these processes, the next challenge is to implement them effectively within VSCs. As autonomous organizations, VSCs are typically managed by their members, who often lack formal training for such tasks. Without formal educational opportunities, it becomes challenging to encourage them to organize and manage based on the principles of MoM. While I have criticized policymakers for promoting management approaches that may have weakened VSCs' ability to thrive and endure, I argue that the national government, alongside sport federations and local municipalities, remains the key actor in supporting their long-term survival. Although sport has traditionally been a domain strongly shaped by civil society, VSCs are now an integral part of public policy in nearly all European countries (Elmose et al., 2020; Hoekman et al., 2015; Scheerder et al., 2017). In Western and Northern European countries, where VSCs are more prevalent and membership rates are higher, this process began earlier, giving VSCs a stronger role in public policy (Hoekman et al., 2015). However, Eastern and Southern European countries are catching up. In countries such as Greece, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, where the focus of government has traditionally been on elite sport, the recognition of VSCs and the 'sport for all' ambition is growing (Elmose et al., 2020; Hoekman et al., 2015).

Considering the differences in the relatively autonomous position of VSCs and how they are currently approached by policymakers, it is clear that no single, uniform structure of the sport system exists across European countries. While the overall structure of the sport system is broadly similar, with municipalities, sport confederations, and national, regional, and local sport federations supporting VSCs (Hallman & Petry, 2013; Scheerder et al., 2017), significant diversity exists across European countries in terms of power relationships, regulations, and the responsibilities of these actors (Scheerder et al., 2017). Differences in political ideologies and the historical development of sport across European countries have led to varying sport system structures. Camy et al. (2004) identified four primary configurations within European sport systems. A bureaucratic structure is evident in Belgium, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Spain. This system is characterized by a high level of government intervention, with public authorities playing an active and decisive role in the sport system. An entrepreneurial structure is visible in Ireland and the United



Kingdom, where the sport system is driven by supply and demand, with market actors playing a dominant role. A missionary configuration can be observed in Austria, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, and Sweden, where sport is organized largely by an independent voluntary sector. Lastly, a social configuration, which is unique to the Netherlands, involves collaboration between civil society, government, and the market to organize and manage sport. While Camy et al. (2004) note that the bureaucratic and missionary configurations dominate across Europe, Hoekman et al. (2015) identify a shift. They highlight that although the national government remains a key player in many European countries, its role is less dominant than it once was. VSCs are becoming increasingly integrated with market actors, local governments and civil society organizations.

If national governments in European countries are to effectively support the long-term survival of VSCs, they must consider the (evolving) position of VSCs within the broader configuration of their sport system. Through their authority as highest policymaking body, national governments can set preconditions to help VSCs function, either through legislation and regulation or by offering financial incentives (Hendrix et al., 2023). However, given the relatively autonomous position of VSCs, their embeddedness within the pyramid structure of national, regional, and local sport federations, and their increasing integration with the market, civil society organizations, and municipalities, relying heavily on top-down regulations is not the most effective approach. If the national government takes a more prominent role than these other actors, it risks undermining the initiative and expertise of these parties (Hendrix et al., 2023). Therefore, I argue that a more effective strategy for national governments to help VSCs thrive and endure is to foster cooperative networks with municipalities, sport federations at the national, regional, and local levels, sport service organizations, the market, other civil society organizations, and educational and research institutions. In addition, they should support initiatives already undertaken by these stakeholders (Hendrix et al., 2023). Together with these partners, the national government can help develop MoM tools, educate future sport management professionals in MoM, and promote communication throughout the entire sport system about the importance of MoM. Additionally, I argue that financial incentives are necessary to further develop MoM tools, enhance sport management education, and improve VSCs' monitoring.

Following this strategy, I have five recommendations for national policymakers to consider when shaping public policies to promote the long-term survival of VSCs.

1) Recognize VSCs in public policy for its dual function in society

The first recommendation for national policymakers to support the long-term survival of VSCs is to fully recognize their dual function in society. While VSCs are now an integral part of public policy in nearly all European countries, the majority of policy attention and resources directed towards VSCs focus on their role in addressing a wide range of societal issues (Elmose et al., 2020; Hoekman et al., 2015). This is evident in the political aims and objectives set out in public policy on VSCs across Europe. Elmose et al. (2020) identify four primary societal goals that VSCs are encouraged to serve: health promotion, social integration, democratic participation, and active citizenship. Which goals are emphasized differs among European countries. For example, in Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Germany, France, Northern Ireland, England, Sweden, and Belgium, the focus is on the contribution of VSCs to social inclusion, health, and safety (Hoekman et al.,



2015). This one-sided focus on the instrumental role of VSCs is also evident in policymakers' approach to targeted subsidies. While the level of funding for VSCs through such subsidies varies across European countries, Elmoose et al. (2020) note that national and local governments are increasingly using public subsidies as tools to steer VSCs more directly to enhance their instrumental value for society. These subsidies are typically awarded to VSCs with specific conditions, often aimed at increasing sport participation among underrepresented groups.

The limited attention given by national policymakers in European countries to the dual purpose of VSCs represents both a shortcoming and a risk. It is a shortcoming because VSCs are not only valuable for advancing societal goals, but also for making life meaningful for a significant portion of the population. Since VSCs must be infused with value to commit members and society to the organization and its continued existence, their formal structures are designed to make members' lives meaningful. Meaningfulness, defined as "the amount of significance something holds for an individual" (Rosso et al., 2010, p. 95), is considered a crucial aspect of well-being by scholars. Experiencing greater meaningfulness enhances "the subjective experience of the existential significance or purpose of life" (Lips-Wiersma et al., 2009, p. 492). With approximately 700,000 VSCs and an estimated 60 million members across Europe (Steinbach & Elmoose-Østerlund, 2017), these organizations play a central role in making life meaningful for many in European countries (Nagel et al., 2020). This limited focus on the role of VSCs as value vehicles for members also poses a risk. As previously noted, taking on more public tasks often brings increased normative expectations, and in some cases, even explicit tasks and regulations. This can cause VSCs to drift away from the activities that foster social relationships and collective identities, making it harder for them to function effectively. As demonstrated, social and collective relationships are crucial for VSCs to thrive and endure, and, consequently, for fulfilling societal goals. It is therefore essential for public policy to acknowledge and nurture both purposes. This requires the formulation of clear, explicit policy goals that reflect the dual purpose of VSCs, as well as the reduction of one-sided subsidies that focus solely on stimulating instrumental activities.

2) Stimulate municipalities to provide sports facilities and public services to VSCs

The second recommendation for national policymakers in developing public policies to support the long-term survival of VSCs is to stimulate municipalities to allocate public resources for sports facilities and establish public service organizations dedicated to supporting VSCs. Since sport is a voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary barriers, nearly every sport requires specific facilities designed to address those challenges (Hoeijmakers & Steenbergen, 2024). Different types of sports demand different kinds of spaces, which can range from sports halls and gymnasiums to fields, tracks, swimming pools, parks, and even public roads. Therefore, access to appropriate sports facilities is critical for VSCs to thrive and endure. Research shows that when VSCs face difficulties with their facilities, they often perceive this as a direct threat to their survival. However, space is limited, and its allocation is often managed by local governments (Hoekman et al., 2013). In most European countries municipalities build and maintain sports facilities and they typically offer them to VSCs free of charge or at reduced fees (Hoekman et al., 2015). This makes sports facilities the most significant financial tool used by policymakers to support VSCs in Europe (ibid.). This



is extremely important. For example, in Hungary, Poland, and Spain, one in five VSCs reports experiencing facility-related issues that endanger their existence (Elmose et al., 2020). These challenges are argued to be the result of lower public investment in sports facilities compared to other European countries, where the proportion of VSCs facing facility issues is significantly lower (ibid.).

In addition to supporting their sports facilities, VSCs can greatly benefit from public assistance in implementing and complying with laws and regulations (Stuij et al., 2023). Over the past few decades, VSCs have faced an increasing number of legal and administrative tasks, placing a growing burden on volunteers and requiring more specialized knowledge (Hoekman et al., 2015; Stuij et al., 2023). Hendrix et al. (2023) identify six categories of laws and regulations that VSCs have to deal with: (1) General laws, including criminal and liability law; (2) Regulations governing associations, such as rules for establishment, general meetings, and annual accounts; (3) Employment-related laws, covering issues such as working conditions, pensions, working hours, and volunteer compensation; (4) Laws regulating sport canteens and catering, such as hygiene standards; (5) Sports-specific rules and codes of conduct for board members, athletes, coaches, and officials; and (6) Disciplinary regulations agreed upon by sport federations through the Institute for Sports Law (ISR) or the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS). While the exact legal requirements vary by sport, the organizational structure of the VSC, and the legal issues at hand, research shows that the complex web of regulations deters volunteers from taking on tasks (Stuij et al., 2023). To address this, the introduction of a ‘club desk’ could be highly valuable. A ‘club desk’ could serve as a public service organization for VSCs, offering advice, services, and support, as well as facilitating collective activities. This would ease operational burdens, reduce volunteer workload, and allow VSCs to focus on fostering social relationships and collective feelings. An example of this is the Verenigingsloket built by the Department of Culture, Youth and Media in Flanders. The Verenigingsloket is a digital platform that simplifies and centralizes information and services to VSCs.

I recommend that municipalities take responsibility for allocating public resources to provide sports facilities and establishing public service organizations dedicated to supporting VSCs. In many European countries, municipalities are already tasked with building and maintaining sports facilities (Hallmann & Petry, 2013; Hoekman, 2018). This aligns with the principle of subsidiarity, which holds that social and political issues should be addressed at the most local level capable of resolving them (Hendrix et al., 2023). Decentralizing responsibility for sports facility provision and public service organizations for VSCs at the local level is beneficial, as it ensures that issues are dealt with where they arise and can be addressed more effectively (Hendrix et al., 2023). However, European countries differ in how the responsibility for sports facilities is legally defined. For example, in the Netherlands, there is no legal framework for government involvement in sport, meaning municipalities are not obligated to address it and can implement sport policy using their own resources (Hoekman, 2018). While this approach offers flexibility, it also creates inconsistency and uncertainty. With roles and responsibilities not legally defined, municipalities have the autonomy to decide how to implement sport policy, leaving VSCs vulnerable, particularly during financial cutbacks.

3) Stimulate sport federations to develop MoM tools through financial incentives



The third recommendation for national policymakers to support the long-term survival of VSCs, is to position sport federations at the center of efforts to develop practical MoM tools, programs, and activities. While I have outlined a comprehensive set of management practices designed to transform and sustain VSCs as meaningful and enduring entities, little has been said about the specific activities involved or how they can be practically implemented. Additionally, MoM introduces different assumptions and implications for managing VSCs compared to traditional thinking in mainstream management and sport management. Although some products and services align with the MoM approach, they have yet to be developed in a structured, holistic, or widespread way. In all European countries, most VSCs are part of a pyramid structure. Within this model, VSCs are embedded in sport federations that not only regulate and organize sporting competitions but also support VSCs with a wide range of products and services (Scheerder et al., 2017). Sport federations are organizations that govern, promote, and regulate specific sports or groups of sports at various levels, typically local, regional, national or international. They play a key role in organizing competitions, setting rules and standards, supporting development programs, and representing their sport(s) to the public and to other governing bodies. Due to this role and their expertise, sport federations are the most effective organizations for developing practical tools that help implement these management approaches and actively promote them within VSCs.

Although the position of sport federations within the sport system varies across European countries, their role and relationship with VSCs, as well as their expertise and initiatives already undertaken to support VSCs, make them valuable partners for national policymakers in promoting the long-term survival of VSCs. According to Scheerder et al. (2017), there is significant variation in the extent to which sport federations actively engage with public policy goals. At one end of the spectrum, sport federations operate independently with no involvement in executing public policy. At the other end, they function much like government agencies. In both cases, national governments could provide funding to sport federations in exchange for developing MoM tools that support the long-term survival of VSCs and actively promote these tools within VSCs.

4) Invest in professionalizing sport management education

The fourth recommendation for national policymakers is to allocate public resources for professionalization programs in sport management education. These programs should support sport management educational institutions in improving the quality of their education related to the functioning and management of VSCs. A defining characteristic of VSCs across Europe is that they are primarily organized and operated by their members, who volunteer their time and effort in service of the organization, without receiving tangible rewards in return. However, in countries like Switzerland, Sweden, Norway, Italy, and Finland, there has been a rise in the employment of paid staff within VSCs (Hoekman et al., 2015). Additionally, in the Netherlands, 71% of VSCs rely on professional club supporters (Hoeijmakers, 2022). Professional club supporters are external individuals who provide organizational or administrative support to the VSC (Lucassen & Van der Maat, 2018). These professionals, who have been a part of the VSC landscape for over 30 years, help VSCs with challenges related to organization, policy, and marketing (Lucassen & Van der Maat,



2018). Since the turn of the century, the role of professional club support has expanded significantly, with sport federations, local sport service organizations, and municipalities increasingly offering such support to VSCs.

Although the increasing number of professionals in VSCs presents a significant opportunity to implement effective management approaches, this potential remains largely unrealized. Concerns have been raised about the competencies of professionals working in the VSC context (Fahrner & Schüttoff, 2020; Horch & Schutte, 2003; Lucassen et al., 2022; Lucassen & Van der Roest, 2018). Research indicates that these professionals primarily have backgrounds in sports technical skills or business management, rather than in the management of membership organizations (Lucassen & Van der Roest, 2018). Furthermore, Miragaia and Soares (2017) argue that competencies have not been a major focus of sport management research or education. However, effective management in different occupational fields demands distinct competencies (Fahrner & Schüttoff, 2020). Competencies are defined as “the sets of behavior that a person must display to perform the tasks or functions of a job” (Hayes et al., 2000, p. 93). This is particularly relevant for VSCs, which are complex organizations with multiple roles and core processes that require effective management. This raises questions about the ability of sport management professionals to manage VSCs effectively and may explain the lack of a direct relationship between VSCs with professionals and VSC strength, as found in Chapter 3. Given these challenges, I argue that there is a clear need to enhance sport management education for professionals working in the context of VSCs. The ideal approach would involve educating these professionals on how VSCs function and equipping them with the necessary skills to manage their core processes effectively. Since MoM is designed to support effective management in VSCs, the frameworks presented in Chapters 6 and 7 could serve as valuable tools in this educational effort.

5) Invest in professionalizing VSC monitoring by research institutions

The fifth recommendation for national policymakers is to allocate public resources to research institutions for the development of an effective VSC monitoring system. Such a system is essential for assessing the performance of VSCs in relation to their core processes and management, as well as identifying the most effective ways national governments, municipalities, sport federations, sport service organizations, and other stakeholders can support them. To achieve this, research institutions must first establish a monitoring system. For example, in the Netherlands, a non-profit scientific research institute manages a panel of approximately 2,000 VSCs, which are periodically monitored through an online survey. Secondly, research institutions should develop an effective measurement tool. In studies of VSCs, many scholars use dimensions of organizational capacity as indicators of organizational strength, performance, and challenges (e.g., Elmoose et al., 2021; Millar & Doherty, 2016). The organizational capacity approach is based on the resource dependency theory, which suggests that organizations require certain resources to fulfill their mission (Wicker & Breuer, 2011). While scholars have used various conceptualizations of organizational capacity, the most commonly applied classification is that of Hall et al. (2003). Hall et al.’s (2003) organizational capacity model is a system resource model with five key dimensions of organizational capacity: (1) human resources, (2) finances, (3) relationships and networks, (4) infrastructure and processes, and (5) planning and development. These resources



are considered essential for VSCs to successfully accomplish their mission (Elmose-Osterlund et al., 2021).

However, unlike these models, I argue that organizational capacity models for VSCs should focus not on the resources needed to fulfill the VSC mission, but on the critical infrastructure required for their long-term survival. As previously mentioned, it is the often-overlooked concept of organizational survival that is “the bedrock of long-term organizational health” (Eapen & Finkenstadt, 2024, p. 27). However, this goal is often absent from VSC mission statements, which typically focus on performance. While organizational survival and performance may seem interconnected over time, they are distinct aspects of organizational functioning, driven by different factors (Pajunen & Järvinen, 2018). Furthermore, what I find problematic about Hall et al.’s organizational capacity dimensions is that they do not align with the three dimensions that encompass the core processes essential for long-term survival. These are: (1) the internal dimension, which refers to critical organizational processes that direct the behavior of members necessary for survival; (2) the external dimension, which covers organization-environment relationships influencing survival; and (3) the dynamic dimension, which focuses on the dynamic capabilities of organizations that safeguard survival. Based on my research on these dimensions, I conclude that the most critical infrastructure for long-term survival of VSCs are organizational structures that foster personal satisfaction through participation in sports activities or the consumption of services and those that foster social relationships and a collective sense of belonging within the VSC. These structures are not explicitly included in Hall et al.’s organizational capacity model. Moreover, structures that foster legitimacy in the eyes of government, competitive balance with rivals, and dynamic conservatism are also underrepresented in the organizational capacity model. Therefore, I argue that to effectively monitor VSCs, the concept of organizational capacity must be further developed and operationalized in a way that aligns with the critical infrastructure needed for long-term survival. The core processes discussed in this dissertation could provide a valuable starting point.

Recommendations for scholars seeking to legitimate sport management as a standalone field

The conclusion that sport management is not a unique, but rather a distinct, domain within organizational and management sciences calls for a different approach from scholars seeking to legitimize it as a standalone field. Specifically, it suggests that sport management is not a separate body of knowledge in its own right, but rather a field committed to applying insights from mainstream scholarship to understand phenomena in sport, while also leveraging the sport context to contribute to the broader organizational and management sciences. This stands in contrast to the arguments often made in the literature that sport management must develop theories that are grounded in sport to establish itself as a distinct field (Chalip, 2006; Costa, 2005; Mills, 2021; Newman, 2014; Pitts, 2001; Smith & Stewart, 2010). In light of this, I offer three recommendations for how sport management can evolve into a valuable and legitimate standalone scholarly discipline.

1) Start research from a multi-theory systems perspective

The first recommendation for advancing sport management as a legitimate, standalone scholarly field is for scholars to approach their research from a systems-theoretical per-



spective on the phenomenon under investigation. In this dissertation, systems theory has proven to be a valuable approach for conceptualizing VSCs as systems composed of a set of interrelated structures that enable their long-term survival. Sport organizations, due to their embeddedness in highly emotional environments fueled by passionate devotion to a sport, competition, or team (Oja & Bass, 2021; Oja et al., 2023), are particularly complex, with formal and informal organizational structures that both depend on and reinforce each other for long-term survival. Given the interplay of these rational and institutional forces, viewing phenomena in sport through a systems perspective offers a crucial framework for identifying which organizational theories are most relevant, need to be integrated, or require further development to enhance our understanding of sport organizations and their management. It also provides a framework for developing knowledge about how management practitioners can be equipped with the tools necessary to address and solve problems within these organizations. Furthermore, I argue that adopting a systems perspective is key to understanding the distinctiveness of sport organizations, especially compared to those in other sectors. This helps determine how sport management can contribute to broader organizational and management debates (Dowling et al., 2023).

To conduct research from a systems-theoretical perspective on phenomena in sport, the Sport-Management Theory Development Framework has proven to be a valuable tool (Lachance et al., 2024). This dissertation demonstrates that the framework effectively facilitates the borrowing and application of concepts and theories from other fields, while also extending them with context-specific variables, relationships, and explanations. In doing so, the framework helps scholars avoid reinventing the wheel, while remaining sensitive to the specific context of sport. However, to enhance its utility for sport management scholars, I recommend placing greater emphasis on multi-theory approaches within the framework. Given the critical interplay between rational and institutional forces, which both depend on and reinforce each other in sport organizations, I argue that sport management scholars would benefit from a framework that integrates diverse theoretical perspectives, offering a more comprehensive understanding of phenomena within the sport context. As shown in this dissertation, while single-theory frameworks are valuable, they often provide only partial insights. Drawing on multiple perspectives allows for more robust and nuanced explanations (e.g., Slack & Hinings, 1992; Vos et al., 2011; Wicker & Hallmann, 2013).

2) Engage with the latest advancements of mainstream organization and management sciences

The second recommendation for advancing sport management as a legitimate, standalone scholarly field is for scholars to engage with the latest advancements in mainstream organizational and management sciences. Recently, Dowling et al. (2023) highlighted that sport management and mainstream organizational and management sciences are increasingly “talking past each other, akin to ships passing in the night” (p. 404). They referred to this as the “paradox of distinctiveness” (ibid., p. 404). While sport management seeks to establish itself as a distinct field, scholars in the discipline are citing less work from other domains of scholarship. This trend is problematic because it risks overlooking or ignoring contemporary developments within the general organization and management literature and could lead to sport management being “somewhat left behind in terms of knowledge base compared to larger, more mainstream disciplines” (Dowling et al., 2023, p. 411). To address this, it



is crucial to bridge the gap between sport management and mainstream organizational and management sciences, creating a more integrated “joint venture” (Washington & Patterson, 2011, p. 1). Strengthening the relationship between these fields requires sport management scholars to have a broad and contemporary understanding of both the historical origins and evolution of theoretical concepts, as well as the most recent theoretical advancements in mainstream organization and management literature (Dowling et al., 2023). This will ensure that sport management scholarship stays aligned with broader theoretical developments, enabling scholars to make stronger contributions to understanding sport phenomena and the broader organization and management sciences.

3) Engage with debates within mainstream organization and management sciences

The third recommendation for advancing sport management as a legitimate, standalone scholarly field is for scholars to engage in dialogue with mainstream organization and management sciences. Recently, Dowling et al. (2023) stipulated that sport management research often “does not directly consider its broader implications or have any influence on larger research traditions” (p. 412). They pointed out that sport management scholars tend to produce “research bricks” without much attention to how their work contributes to “pushing the boundaries of knowledge” (p. 412). Despite the applied nature of sport management as a discipline, I argue that scholars in the field should be more mindful of how their work contributes to mainstream organization and management sciences. Simply adopting existing theories and applying them to sport only suggests that a particular theoretical perspective or concept is relevant in another empirical domain. It does not, however, constitute a meaningful theoretical contribution. As this dissertation demonstrates, sport offers a valuable context for developing and advancing mainstream organizational and management theory. Sport management scholars should therefore leverage the distinctive features of sport to expand the boundaries of knowledge and engage in contemporary theoretical debates within organization and management sciences. Such dialogue with broader disciplines allows the field of sport management to contribute to mainstream theoretical advancements, making it a relevant and insightful domain through which the assumptions and boundaries of contemporary theoretical knowledge can be empirically tested and advanced. Without this, there remains an inherent risk that sport management scholars “replicate – rather than extend – what is known within a given theoretical domain” (Dowling et al., 2023, p. 404).

Recommendations for scholars seeking to employ or advance institutional theory

As previously mentioned, while institutional theory is particularly relevant to the sport management field – given that sport is a domain par excellence where its organizations and structures acquire meaning that extends beyond purely technical goals – it has not been fully leveraged by sport management scholars to explain phenomena within the sport sector. To help realize the benefits of a joint venture between sport management and institutional theory, I offer three recommendations for sport management scholars to consider as they seek to employ or further develop institutional theory in their research.

1) (Re)turn to the core purpose of institutional theory

The first recommendation for sport management scholars, as they seek to employ or advance institutional theory within their research, is to (re)turn to its core purpose. As we have seen,



institutional theory is not a singular theoretical lens, but rather “a big tent community with its own set of internal differences and, at times, confusing concepts” (Ocasio & Gai, 2020, p. 262). The success of institutional theory has led it to grow significantly over the decades and to be stretched far beyond its original purpose (Suddaby, 2010). As Ocasio and Gai (2020, p. 266) point out, institutional theory has been blended with “various theoretical perspectives from sociology, psychology, political science, economics, and organization studies”. The problem with this is not so much that institutional theory fails to add anything important, but that scholars neglect “to answer the question of which exactly are the institutional mechanisms and which are not” (ibid., p. 266). While this dissertation has shown that it is highly useful to combine different strands of institutional thinking with ideas from other theoretical streams, sport management scholars can only benefit from institutional theory when they remain true to its central purpose. One way to do this is for sport management scholars to be more precise about the core concepts they seek to understand through institutional theory (Ocasio & Gai, 2020). Rather than automatically adopting an institutional perspective, scholars need to clearly define its purpose and what the institutional lens adds to their research. While there is considerable debate within different strands of institutional thinking about what its core purpose should be, historically, it has emerged as a perspective that focuses on why organizations adopt activities and behaviors that have meaning beyond functional purposes. I therefore argue that scholars seeking to employ or advance institutional theory in their research should (re)turn to its core purpose: “to understand how organizational structures and processes acquire meaning and continuity beyond their technical goals” (Suddaby, 2010, p. 14). Taken together, I follow Buchanan (2020) and Ocasio and Gai (2020) in calling for scholars to adopt stricter definitions and clearer rationales for using institutional theory. As Ocasio and Gai point out, “institutions are everywhere but not everything” (2020, p. 262).

2) *Bring Selznick back into institutional research*

The second recommendation for sport management scholars, as they seek to employ or advance institutional theory within their research, is to bring Selznick back into institutional research. Reviews of the current application of institutional theory in sport management scholarship reveal a notable absence of CIT (e.g., Robertson et al., 2022; Nite & Edwards, 2021). This is not surprising, as Robertson et al. (2022) demonstrated that sport management scholars are following the broader movements in institutional scholarship. After the introduction of NIT, many institutional scholars began focusing on higher-level institutional processes that lead to homogeneous organizations. As a result, Selznick’s central argument – that organizations have unique characters – became less emphasized (Kraatz & Flores, 2015). DiMaggio and Powell (1991) even actively distanced their institutional perspective from Selznick’s, arguing that “the notion of character implied a high degree of symbolic and functional consistency within each institution”, and that “because the character-formation process operated at the organizational level, it could only increase interorganizational diversity” (ibid., p. 14). Their focus on homogeneity led, of necessity, to an emphasis on institutional processes outside the organization and in the broader organizational field (Kraatz & Flores, 2015). Thus, as new institutional concepts such as legitimacy and isomorphism gained prominence, the sport management literature followed suit (Robertson et al., 2022).

However, as this dissertation shows, to truly “understand how organizational structures and processes acquire meaning and continuity beyond their technical goals” (Suddaby,



2010, p. 14), sport management scholars must also adopt an internal perspective. While macro-level institutional processes are undoubtedly important for sport organizations, they also have an internal world with core values and beliefs. Especially in a sporting context, organizations are seen as fostering a deep sense of value for their members, driven by enthusiastic devotion to a sport, competition, or sports team (Oja & Bass, 2021; Oja et al., 2023). Selznick's concept of organizational character remains a valuable tool for understanding how organizations develop and function as entities with distinct values and ways of operating. As King (2015) notes, while organizational theory has evolved significantly since Selznick introduced the concept of organizational character, it still has the potential to revitalize the study of organizations, providing a rich framework for understanding what is "most central to an organization's being" (King, 2015, p. 167). This makes it especially relevant for sport organizations.

3) Focus on multi-level institutional processes

The third recommendation for sport management scholars seeking to employ or advance institutional theory in their research is to focus on multi-level institutional processes. Different established strands of institutional theory have already highlighted that institutional processes operate at multiple analytical levels. This dissertation underscores the importance of examining these multi-level processes. As demonstrated, micro, meso, macro, and temporal institutional processes not only occur within VSCs but, due to the expressive and instrumental meanings of sport, their interplay significantly determines how VSCs thrive and endure. This makes Selznick's classic institutional theory somewhat limited in the context of sport, as it focuses primarily on the internal dynamics of organizations, offering little insight into the socially constructed aspect of the organizational environment and its implications for legitimacy (Kraatz & Flores, 2015, p. 362). However, as previously noted, theories that focus exclusively on macro-level institutional processes also face similar limitations. I therefore align with Kraatz and Flores (2015), by arguing that the challenge and opportunity for sport management scholars lie "in maintaining a dual focus" and "viewing Selznick's organizational institution within its broader institutional context" (p. 362). This dual focus is essential for understanding both the internal and external institutional dynamics of sport organizations, calling for a multi-level institutional analysis.

Recommendations for scholars seeking to enter a new era of organizational thinking

As we have seen, my value co-creation systems perspective represents a shift not only away from the far-reaching goal rationality that dominates organizational thinking, but also from the current phase of multiparadigm consolidation in organization and management sciences. To move forward, I offer two recommendations for scholars as they seek to enter a new era of organizational thinking, where not only efficiency but also meaning is central.

1) Engage in metaparadigm theory building by using VSCs as research context

My first recommendation for organizational scholars entering this new era of thinking, where not only efficiency but also meaning is central, is to engage in metaparadigm theory building. The value co-creation systems perspective highlights that the traditional distinction between formal and informal organizational structures is better understood as deeply intertwined and mutually reinforcing, with compatible roles and forces. Therefore, to fully



embrace or advance a value co-creation systems perspective in their research, organizational scholars could adopt a metaparadigm theory building approach. Unlike single-paradigm theory building, metaparadigm theory building operates at a higher level of abstraction. This requires researchers to move beyond the current “multiparadigm world” (Scott & Davis, 2017, p. 371), where scholars with similar perspectives focus on collecting evidence to validate a single, unified theory. Instead, it calls for scholars who are capable of “comprehending paradigmatic differences, similarities, and interrelationships” (Lewis & Grimes, 1999, p. 675) to develop theories that transcend the dominant and often conflicting paradigms in organizational science. As Mintzberg (1978, p. 584) notes, theory building requires “creative leaps,” in which scholars go beyond existing explanations to offer fresh insights. For metaparadigm theory building, these creative leaps involve overcoming paradigm dualisms and “considering conflicting views simultaneously” (Lewis & Grimes, 1999, p. 683). Ultimately, the goal of organizational scholars should be to develop a richer, more holistic, and contextually nuanced understanding of organizations. Given the inherent complexity of organizations, integrating multiple paradigms seems crucial for achieving this.

To further develop a richer, and more holistic view of organizations that transcends paradigms (Lewis & Grimes, 1999), the organizational context of VSCs offers a valuable empirical domain for research. This dissertation demonstrates that VSCs are particularly useful for developing organizational and management theory, especially regarding the interplay of formal and informal structures. As we have seen, the technical requirement of the task at hand for VSCs is to be infused with value. As a result, their organizational structures are not solely focused on producing products or services as efficiently as possible. Instead, they are primarily designed to foster social and collective relationships that embed the organization with value. This makes VSCs one of, if not the most, paradigmatic types of organizations for which the value co-creation systems perspective applies, and therefore an extremely valuable context for developing metaparadigm insights into the interplay between different organizational processes. This means VSCs have the potential to enrich mainstream organizational understanding and could be positioned more centrally within organizational science as a valuable research context for theory development.

2) Scrutinize the value co-creation systems perspective's assumptions for different contexts

The second recommendation for organizational scholars entering this new era of thinking, is to scrutinize the assumptions of the value co-creation systems perspective in different organizational contexts. As we have seen, my value co-creation systems perspective on organizations is built on two – rational and institutional – streams of organizational thinking about long-term survival. However, through my literature review, I concluded that while these paradigms are widely used in fields such as sociology, organizational theory, strategic management, and sport management, their underlying assumptions have never been thoroughly tested or examined across different types of organizations. Furthermore, my empirical research revealed that the often taken-for-granted assumptions of the theories within those paradigms seem to apply differently to distinct types of organizations. As Scott and Davis (2016) note, one characteristic of the multiparadigm world in organizational science is that theorists within each stream tend to “employ language sufficiently general to imply that the ideas are applicable to all types of organizations and to all or most conditions” (p. 370). Consequently, theorists often overstate both the novelty and scope of their



arguments (Scott & Davis, 2016). Therefore, to advance and expand the value co-creation systems perspective across other organizational domains, I argue that it is useful to carefully consider the contexts and circumstances in which its assumptions remain valid.

To define the contextual and temporal boundaries of the value co-creation systems perspective, the Sport-Management Theory Development Framework (Lachance et al., 2024) is also a valuable tool for scholars beyond the field of sport. This framework allows organizational scholars to advance the value co-creation perspective by incorporating context-specific variables and relationships, helping them stay attuned to their specific organizational context. The three dimensions I identified, which capture the core processes for long-term survival, proved to offer a useful framework in the search for additional, context-specific concepts. These are: 1) the internal dimension, which refers to critical organizational processes that direct the behavior of members necessary for survival; (2) the external dimension, which covers organization-environment relationships influencing survival; and (3) the dynamic dimension, which focuses on the dynamic capabilities of organizations that safeguard survival. By integrating context-specific concepts within these dimensions with the assumptions of the value co-creation systems perspective, scholars can develop a theoretical framework that generates testable hypotheses on how organizations thrive and endure in their specific research contexts. These hypotheses are useful as they enable scholars to empirically scrutinize the framework's assumptions across diverse organizational contexts. This is needed to build consensus on the underlying assumptions of the value co-creation systems perspective, and vital for advancing and strengthening the perspective within organizational theory.

8.4 Research agenda

Building on the previous discussion of conclusions and recommendations, several avenues for further research can be identified, some of which I am currently pursuing or actively involved in.

First and foremost, this dissertation has demonstrated the value of adopting a systems-theoretical perspective when researching how organizations in the field of sport thrive and endure. Today, the organization of sport is characterized by a complex mix of non-profit entities (e.g. VSCs), governmental bodies (e.g. local sports authorities), and for-profit organizations (e.g. fitness clubs) (Vos, 2012), with sector boundaries increasingly becoming blurred (Misener & Misener, 2017). Applying this approach to further theory-building across these diverse types of organizations enhances our understanding of how they function, how they differ from one another, and how they are distinct from organizations in other sectors of society. This helps expand the scholarly field of sport management beyond the established organizational and management theories developed for organizations in other domains, offering insights that are specifically tailored to these specific organizations. It also provides a foundation for the development of management tools and public policies that can support the long-term survival of these organizations. For instance, adopting a systems-theoretical perspective to explore the core processes essential for the long-term survival of professional football organizations could offer valuable insights into how these complex organizations operate. Like VSCs, professional football organizations face similar challenges in balancing their multiple roles, as they, too, rely on their legitimacy in the eyes of government and are driven by the passionate devotion of their fans to the sport, competi-



tion, or team. Yet there is limited theoretical understanding of how they thrive and endure. Such insights would not only improve the management of professional football organizations and inform public policy, but they would also contribute to advancing a value co-creation systems perspective in organizational scholarship. As previously noted, further research across different organizational contexts is useful for deepening our understanding of the interplay between formal and informal structures. Exploring other paradigmatic organizational types, such as professional football organizations, to which this perspective can be applied is therefore highly valuable.

Future research could also build upon this study by further advancing institutional theory. As previously mentioned, sport is “a unique context for examining pertinent institutional issues” (Nite & Edwards, 2021, p. 18) and an excellent domain for contributing to the theoretical development of institutional theory (Washington & Petterson, 2011). In this regard, I have recommended that sport management scholars, in their efforts to apply or advance institutional theory, focus on three key areas: (1) returning to the core purpose of institutional theory, which is to understand how organizational structures and processes acquire meaning beyond technical goals, (2) reintroducing Selznick’s work into institutional research, as it provides a rich conceptualization of the internal social world of organizations, and (3) emphasizing multi-level institutional processes by situating Selznick’s concept of organizational character within its broader macro-level institutional context. For sport management scholars, this implies shifting the focus of institutional theory from an exclusive emphasis on the socially constructed aspect of the organizational environment and its implications for legitimacy to also incorporating the internal social dynamics of organizations. While macro-level institutional processes are crucial for sport organizations, it is equally important to recognize the internal world of organizations, where core values and beliefs shape how they respond to external pressures. Selznick’s concept of organizational character offers a valuable starting point for understanding how organizations develop and act based on specific values. To make this shift, it is useful to move beyond the prevailing quantitative focus in sport management research and adopt a more qualitative approach, such as in-depth case study research, similar to the work of early institutional scholars like Selznick, Blau, Crozier, and Gouldner. Today, most institutional research in sport management is quantitative, with scholars treating organizations as black boxes that focus mainly on the effects of macro-level institutional processes, while neglecting the institutional processes within organizations (Suddaby, 2010). As a result, much of the research remains “quite distant from the meaning systems that we really want to understand” (Suddaby, 2010, p. 16).

Next, much work could be done in the further development of MoM. As we have seen, MoM is a management philosophy grounded in a value co-creation systems perspective, where the idea that the technical requirement of the task at hand for organizations is to be infused with value is central. This makes MoM a novel approach in both mainstream management and sport management sciences, as well as in the context of VSCs, where more business-like management practices have traditionally been applied and promoted. To help VSCs effectively implement MoM, I have recommended that sport federations take a central role in developing tools, programs, and initiatives focused on cultivating meaning rather than just efficiency. In this regard, design-based research on the creation, implementation, and evaluation of such initiatives, grounded in the MoM approach, would be valuable. Additionally, I have recommended that education programs for professionals working in



VSCs should emphasize the core processes of VSCs and the essentials of MoM. Research on how MoM can be translated into competencies for (future) professionals would therefore be especially useful. Furthermore, I have suggested improving the monitoring of VSCs by operationalizing their critical infrastructure into measurable indicators. This would be beneficial for determining how VSCs can be supported or advised in the most effective and efficient ways. The core processes identified in this dissertation, which enable the long-term survival of VSCs, could serve as a starting point for developing these indicators.

8.5 Limitations of the dissertation

This dissertation has provided valuable insights into the core organizational processes of VSCs that enable long-term survival, along with effective management approaches for enhancing these processes. However, a number of limitations can be identified within this study.

The first limitation concerns the choice of organizational theories that form the basis of this research. In doing so, I have drawn upon and integrated two distinct streams of thought within organizational theory. One offers a conception of organizational processes in rational terms, with management viewed as purely utilitarian. The other depicts organizational processes in terms of cultural and informal aspects of social structure, with management seen as symbolic and political. By focusing on these particular streams, I have deliberately excluded other theoretical perspectives, such as theories on power dynamics within organizations (e.g., Van Slobbe) and macro-sociological explanations related to the changing positions of social classes in society (e.g., Van Bottenburg, 2001). While these perspectives could also offer valuable insights into VSCs, I contend that by focusing on the rational and institutional streams, I have developed a theoretical framework that outlines the core processes for long-term survival, providing a foundation for future refinements. In addition, while I constructed a metaparadigm framework that emphasizes the interplay between rational and institutional structures, which imbue the organization with value, the different streams of thought were empirically tested separately. This approach provided insights into the significance and boundaries of the individual theories within the context of VSCs. However, this design did not allow for a comprehensive test of the relationships between the different single-lens theories. Unfortunately, this was beyond the scope of the empirical research. Therefore, this new systems perspective – based on the core processes of VSCs that enable long-term survival – along with effective management approaches to enhance these processes, was not entirely built on empirical insights but rather on a combination of theoretical and empirical insights gathered throughout this dissertation.

The second limitation of this dissertation concerns the research methods. The study is limited to a single country: the Netherlands, which has one of the highest membership rates and the greatest density of VSCs in Europe. As a result, VSCs play a significant role in Dutch civil society, possibly more so than in other European countries. For the empirical research, cross-sectional and longitudinal panel data on Dutch VSCs from 2007 to 2021 were used, along with a multiple case study conducted among four Dutch voluntary tennis clubs. Several limitations can be identified in the panel data study. First, the strength of VSCs is measured based on board members' subjective perceptions rather than more objective indicators. Second, due to the inability to track VSCs that disappeared over the past 15 years, the sample is biased toward VSCs that have survived. Third, the longitudinal study is limited to the 158 VSCs that participated in both the 2007 and 2021 panel surveys.



This is a relatively small sample size, and compared to the cross-sectional dataset, it shows some differences in terms of VSC size. Fourth, the scales used for the conformity measures are primarily data-driven, and future research could focus on validating these scales. The multiple case study also has several limitations. First, it is based on only four VSCs. Second, tennis is a sport with specific resources, such as its specific playing surfaces, and specific competitive structures, where players compete both as part of teams for their VSC and individually in tournaments. The sport's culture also fosters significant social interaction, with teams often socializing before and after matches. This may foster stronger social and collective relationships, while leading to weaker inter-organizational cues compared to other sports. Therefore, further research into other types of sports would offer valuable insights into the development of social and collective relationships, as well as the role of products and services. Third, it is possible that the questionnaires were primarily completed by individuals who strongly identify with their VSC, which could distort the perceived importance of organizational identification. Conducting research with a larger and more diverse population would therefore be desirable.

8.6 Closing remarks

Overall, the purpose of this dissertation is to contribute to a deeper understanding of how VSCs function and to establish a foundation for effective management practices that support a thriving and enduring sector. This aims to provide sport management practitioners and policymakers with valuable insights for shaping policies that help VSCs overcome challenges and navigate turbulent waters. After all, VSCs are highly valuable organizations, with core structures designed to make the lives of their members meaningful and to contribute to broader societal goals. They are furthermore highly fascinating organizations. While their organizational structures may not be the most efficient for developing products and services, they are highly effective at building relationships and ensuring long-term survival. We must not overlook the fact that VSCs are among the most durable organizational forms in society and that a culture of rich social and collective relationships seems highly effective for organizations to thrive and endure. What sets VSCs apart is that social and collective relationships are not merely built through informal interactions outside formal structures; rather, the formal structures themselves are designed to reinforce and enrich these relationships. This enables VSCs to become central to both their members' lives and the broader public infrastructure, fostering commitment from both members and public bodies to the organization's continued existence. In an era marked by individualization and polarization, we can learn much from organizations that succeed in forging meaningful social relationships and collective identities. As such, VSCs offer valuable insights that can enrich mainstream organizational and management theory, potentially exemplifying a new era in organizational thinking – one where meaning, not just efficiency, lies at the heart of an organization's ability to thrive and endure.

Notes

1. This chapter builds on a published article together with Jan-Willem van der Roest, with certain adaptations made: Hoeijmakers, R. & van der Roest, J. W. (2023). 'Conformity to institutional logics and organizational strength of voluntary sport clubs', in: *European Sport Management Quarterly*. 24(4):934-956.
2. This chapter is based on an article under review: Hoeijmakers, R. (submitted). *The strategic management of club goods: A Resource-based View*.
3. This chapter builds on a published article, with certain adaptations made: Hoeijmakers, R. (2025). 'Collective Identities of VSCs: Influencing Factors and Impact', in: *European Journal for Sport and Society*. 1-19.

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Samenvatting (in het Nederlands)

Deel 1: Sportverenigingen in zwaar weer

Vrijwillige sportverenigingen vervullen een centrale rol in de samenleving, maar staan steeds vaker onder druk. Eén op de vijf sportverenigingen in negen Europese landen kampt met aanzienlijke problemen op het gebied van het werven en behouden van vrijwilligers (27%), coaches en instructeurs (24%), leden (21%) en financiële stabiliteit (24%) (Seippel et al., 2020). Onderzoek in Nederland toont aan dat sportverenigingen steeds grotere uitdagingen ondervinden, met name wat betreft de betrokkenheid van leden (Van Kalmthout & Hoeijmakers, 2023; Stuij et al., 2023). De toename van uitdagingen was voor de coronapandemie al zichtbaar en lijkt sindsdien verder toe te nemen (Van Eldert & Van Kalmthout, 2024).

Als reactie op de uitdagingen waarmee sportverenigingen worden geconfronteerd, hebben beleidsmakers in veel Europese landen initiatieven genomen om sportverenigingen te ondersteunen in hun groei en dienstverlening. Echter, deze vorm van ondersteuning blijkt niet toereikend om de levensvatbaarheid van sportverenigingen te verbeteren. De literatuur toont aan dat kortetermijnprestatiedoelen, zoals groei en het uitbreiden van diensten, niet automatisch leiden tot een verbeterde levensvatbaarheid van organisaties (Eapen & Finkensmidt, 2024). Problematischer nog is dat deze ondersteuningsmaatregelen zijn gebaseerd op de werking van bedrijven en publieke organisaties. Sportverenigingen zijn geen verlengstuk van de overheid (Toepler & Anheier, 2004) of vermomde winstorganisaties (Weisbrod, 1988). Ze vervullen andere functies en kennen andere organisatiestructuren (Toepler & Anheier, 2004). Bovendien zijn sportverenigingen ingebed in een uniek maatschappelijk domein, met publieke verwachtingen en sport-specifieke betekenissen en structuren die in andere sectoren niet voorkomen (Gammelsæter, 2021; Steenbergen, 2004).

Hoewel problematisch, is het niet vreemd dat beleid ter ondersteuning van sportverenigingen vaak gebaseerd is op kennis van het functioneren van organisaties uit de bedrijfswe-reld of de publieke sector. Hoewel er theoretische disciplines bestaan die het functioneren en management van bedrijven (bedrijfskunde) en overheidsinstanties (bestuurskunde) bestuderen (Stokvis, n.d.), is er tot op heden beperkte kennis over hoe sportverenigingen hun levensvatbaarheid effectief (kunnen) waarborgen. Gezien de neerwaartse spiraal waarin veel sportverenigingen zich momenteel bevinden, is deze kennis belangrijk voor het ontwikkelen van effectieve managementtools en overheidsmaatregelen die sportverenigingen helpen hun uitdagingen te overwinnen en te kunnen voortbestaan.

Doelstellingen en centrale onderzoeksvraag

Dit proefschrift heeft als doel een systeemtheoretisch kader te ontwikkelen dat inzicht biedt in de kernprocessen die eraan bijdragen dat sportverenigingen kunnen bloeien en voortbestaan. Dit kader dient als basis voor de ontwikkeling van effectieve managementstrategieën en overheidsbeleid voor sportverenigingen. De volgende onderzoeksvraag stond centraal:

Wat zijn de kernprocessen die ervoor zorgen dat sportverenigingen bloeien en voortbestaan, en welke managementstrategieën kunnen deze processen effectief stimuleren binnen de context van sportverenigingen?

Methodologische aanpak

Om deze vraag te beantwoorden heb ik gebruik gemaakt van een mixed-methods-onderzoeksonderwerp. Ik ben gestart met het bouwen van een theoretisch raamwerk dat de kernprocessen die ervoor zorgen dat sportverenigingen bloeien en voortbestaan, beschrijft. Vervolgens heb ik de theoretische uitgangspunten van het raamwerk empirisch getoetst. Hiervoor heb ik cross-sectionele en longitudinale panelgegevens van Nederlandse sportverenigingen tussen 2007 en 2021 gebruikt. En een meervoudige casestudy uitgevoerd naar vier Nederlandse tennisverenigingen, met verschillende identiteiten en aanbod, die dicht bij elkaar gevestigd zijn.

Door de theoretische en empirische inzichten uit dit proefschrift te combineren, heb ik vervolgens een reeks kernprocessen geconceptualiseerd die aangeeft hoe sportverenigingen hun levensvatbaarheid waarborgen. Hiervoor heb ik Webers (1949) concept van het ‘ideaaltype’ toegepast. Een ideaaltype is een hulpmiddel dat de belangrijkste kenmerken van een fenomeen benadrukt. Om de kernprocessen die ervoor zorgen dat sportverenigingen bloeien en voortbestaan verder te duiden, heb ik dit ideaaltype vergeleken met bestaande systeemtheoretische perspectieven uit de organisatiewetenschappen en het gebruikt als basis voor de ontwikkeling van een nieuw systeemperspectief op het functioneren van organisaties. Om dit perspectief te ontwikkelen, heb ik de specifieke organisatiestructuren van sportverenigingen gebruikt als illustratief voorbeeld. Ze bieden inzichten die breder toepasbaar zijn voor het begrijpen en bestuderen van organisaties in het algemeen.

Na een uitgebreide uiteenzetting van dit perspectief heb ik de belangrijkste uitgangspunten vertaald naar een fundamentele logica, die de basis vormt voor een nieuwe managementfilosofie voor organisaties in het algemeen, en sportverenigingen in het bijzonder.

Deel 2: Bouwen aan een theoretisch raamwerk

Bestaande literatuur laat zien dat in sportverenigingen rationele structuren en sociale processen op meerdere niveaus met elkaar in wisselwerking staan. Daarom heb ik twee verschillende denkrichtingen binnen de organisatiewetenschap centraal gesteld en met elkaar geïntegreerd om tot een theoretisch raamwerk te komen.

De eerste stroming is het rationele perspectief. Dit perspectief legt de nadruk op doelgerichte managementbenaderingen (Scott & Davies, 2016), waarbij organisaties worden beschouwd als instrumenten om zo efficiënt en effectief mogelijk specifieke doelstellingen te bereiken. Om dit te theoretiseren, heb ik de inzichten van de *resource-based view* (RBV) (Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984) toegepast, die beschrijft hoe sportverenigingen hun middelen efficiënt en effectief kunnen inzetten.

De tweede denkstroom is het institutionele perspectief, dat organisatieprocessen uitlegt in termen van culturele en informele structuren binnen en buiten de context van organisaties. Het institutionele perspectief is bijzonder geschikt voor sportverenigingen, omdat hun betekenis verder reikt dan alleen het efficiënt en effectief organiseren van sport (bijv. Robertson et al., 2022; Nite & Edwards, 2021; Washington & Petterson, 2011). Sportver-

enigingen worden steeds meer gewaardeerd in de samenleving en door de overheid gestimuleerd om bij te dragen aan bredere publieke doelen dan waarvoor ze oorspronkelijk zijn opgericht. Gezien deze betekenis en druk vanuit de samenleving heb ik de *neo-institutionele theorie* (NIT) toegepast, omdat deze de invloed van de perceptie van de omgeving van sportverenigingen theoretiseert (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

Sportverenigingen hebben ook een interne sociale wereld, gekarakteriseerd door kernwaarden, relaties en ongeschreven regels die bepalend zijn voor hun functioneren. Om ook deze interne institutionele processen te theoretiseren, heb ik de *klassieke institutionele theorie* (CIT) nieuw leven ingeblazen. Hoewel het institutionele perspectief sinds de introductie van CIT in de jaren vijftig aanzienlijk is geëvolueerd, biedt CIT nog steeds waardevolle inzichten voor het begrijpen van de interne sociale structuren van organisaties.

Aanvullende concepten die ingaan op de specifieke structuren van sportverenigingen

Vanwege de specifieke kenmerken van sportverenigingen heb ik aanvullende theoretische concepten aan het raamwerk toegevoegd:

- Hoewel het betalen van contributie een formele voorwaarde voor lidmaatschap is, zijn de rollen van leden binnen de sportvereniging vaak niet expliciet vastgelegd. Toch rusten er diverse normatieve verwachtingen op hen (Heinemann, 2004). Het concept van pro sociaal organisatiegedrag is daarom relevant. Pro sociaal organisatiegedrag verwijst naar gedrag dat wenselijk is maar niet door de organisatie kan worden afgedwongen.
- Sportverenigingen zijn ingebed in een uniek maatschappelijk domein, met publieke verwachtingen en sport-specifieke betekenissen en structuren die in andere sectoren niet voorkomen (Gammelsæter, 2021; Steenbergen, 2004). Het domein waarin sportverenigingen zich begeven laat zich het beste begrijpen als een sociale ruimte die wordt beïnvloed en gevormd door verschillende institutionele logica's. Institutionele logica's zijn veelal impliciete veronderstellingen en waarden over rollen, wat als gepast gedrag geldt en wat als succes wordt gezien (Kraatz et al., 2016).
- Sportverenigingen zijn afhankelijk van concurrenten om sportwedstrijden mogelijk te maken. Dit betekent dat sportverenigingen een competitief evenwicht moeten behouden met andere sportverenigingen. Het concept van competitief evenwicht houdt in dat sportorganisaties gelijkwaardig moeten zijn om succesvol te kunnen zijn.
- Om te begrijpen hoe sportverenigingen kunnen voortbestaan ondanks veranderingen in hun ledenbestand, is het concept van dynamisch conservatisme relevant. De essentie van dynamisch conservatisme draait om hoe organisaties zich blijven afstemmen op een veranderende omgeving, terwijl ze tegelijkertijd trouw blijven aan hun kernwaarden en kerncompetenties (Ansell et al., 2015).

Theoretisch raamwerk

Door deze aanvullende concepten te combineren met de drie organisatietheorieën heb ik een theoretisch raamwerk ontwikkeld met toetsbare hypothesen over de kernprocessen die ervoor zorgen dat sportverenigingen bloeien en voortbestaan:

- Sportverenigingen bereiken hun doelen op basis van het pro sociale gedrag van hun leden.

- Sportverenigingen opereren binnen een institutionele omgeving waarin zij meerdere, soms conflicterende, opvattingen over wat als gepast gedrag geldt, weten te balanceren.
- Sportverenigingen houden een competitief evenwicht in stand ten opzichte van hun directe concurrenten.
- Om te kunnen voortbestaan, behouden sportverenigingen hun kernwaarden en interne sociale structuren, terwijl ze zich aanpassen aan veranderende omstandigheden.

Deel 3: Empirische resultaten

In het derde deel van het proefschrift heb ik de aannames uit het theoretische raamwerk empirisch getoetst. Om dit op een gestructureerde manier aan te pakken, richtte elke deelstudie zich op een van de drie organisatie theorieën — NIT, RBV, CIT — die ik als het meest relevant beschouw voor het begrijpen van sportverenigingen. Deze theorieën zijn, zoals beschreven in het theoretisch raamwerk, gecombineerd met aanvullende concepten om ze toepasbaar te maken voor sportverenigingen.

Op basis van deze empirische analyse, concludeer ik dat het conformeren aan maatschappelijke overtuigingen over wat wenselijk, juist of gepast gedrag inhoudt – zoals NIT impliceert – een eenzijdige visie is op hoe sportverenigingen bloeien en voortbestaan. Voor sportverenigingen is het ook cruciaal om duurzame relaties met hun leden op te bouwen.

Om te begrijpen hoe duurzame relaties met leden ontstaan, is de RBV deels relevant. Mijn empirische analyse binnen dit kader laat zien dat sportverenigingen clubgoederen aanbieden – zoals sport- en sociale relaties – die waarde creëren voor leden, hun betrokkenheid versterken en hen mogelijk een concurrentievoordeel bieden ten opzichte van andere sportverenigingen. Op basis van mijn analyse concludeer ik ook dat dit perspectief moet worden aangevuld met een sociologische benadering die de betrokkenheid van leden verklaart, voorbij de waarde die leden ontleen aan de clubgoederen die sportverenigingen aanbieden. Op basis van mijn empirische analyse blijkt dat CIT een nuttige aanvulling is op de RBV, omdat het laat zien dat sportverenigingen ook waarde creëren buiten het aanbieden van clubgoederen door collectieve identiteiten te cultiveren die ertoe leiden dat leden zich identificeren met de organisatie, de sport en verschillende groepen binnen de organisatie. Op deze manier worden leden verenigd tot een gezamenlijke entiteit en ontstaat betrokkenheid.

Deel 4: Een nieuw perspectief op organisaties met een bijpassende managementfilosofie

Door de theoretische en empirische inzichten uit mijn onderzoek te combineren, heb ik in het vierde deel van dit proefschrift een nieuw systeemtheoretisch perspectief op hoe organisaties functioneren ontwikkeld. Hoewel dit perspectief is gebaseerd op de specifieke kernprocessen die sportverenigingen in staat stellen te bloeien en voort te bestaan, is de onderliggende logica van hun functioneren even relevant voor andere organisaties die duurzaam (willen) opereren dankzij de betrokkenheid van diverse stakeholders bij het voortbestaan van de organisatie. Dit nieuwe systeemtheoretische perspectief op organisaties, vraagt om een managementbenadering die afwijkt van de gangbare benaderingen binnen de organisatie- en sportmanagementwetenschappen. Om organisaties hierin te ondersteunen, heb ik de denkwijze van het nieuwe systeemperspectief gebruikt als fundament voor de ontwikkeling van een bijpassende managementaanpak die organisaties in het algemeen – en sportverenigingen in het bijzonder – helpt bij het creëren van binding en betekenis. Hieronder vat ik de belangrijkste uitgangspunten en implicaties samen.

Sportverenigingen zijn een uniek organisatietype

Ik ben gestart met het theoretiseren van de kernprocessen die sportverenigingen in staat stellen om te bloeien en voortbestaan. In tegenstelling tot bedrijven en overheden, is het belangrijkste doel van sportverenigingen om waarde te bieden aan mensen die vrijwillig samenkomen om gedeelde belangen na te streven (Toepler & Anheier, 2004). Maar overheden zetten sportverenigingen steeds meer in als instrumenten voor de samenleving als geheel (Waardenburg, 2016a). Dit tweeledige doel – dienen als een waarde-vehikel voor leden én een instrument van maatschappelijke waarde – zorgt ervoor dat sportverenigingen meerdere rollen vervullen.

Dit betekent ook dat sportverenigingen op een specifieke manier functioneren. Als vehikels van waarde voor zowel leden als de samenleving, zijn sportverenigingen een belangrijk onderdeel van het leven van hun leden en van de publieke infrastructuur. Door dit belang raken zowel leden als publieke organisaties betrokken bij het voortbestaan van sportverenigingen en zetten zij zich in voor hun toekomst. Hierdoor functioneren sportverenigingen op basis van vier kernprocessen. Wat sportverenigingen uniek maakt, is niet dat hun kernprocessen uniek zijn, maar wel de combinatie en onderlinge samenhang hiervan.

1) Prosociaal organisatorisch gedrag van leden

Sportverenigingen zijn niet alleen een plek voor leden om te sporten of diensten af te nemen, maar ook een platform voor het opbouwen van relaties met andere leden en de organisatie zelf. Zo gaan veel leden graag met andere leden om en zijn ze onderdeel van teams of clubjes binnen de vereniging. Maar ook met de vereniging ontstaat binding. Veel leden identificeren zich met de club en ontwikkelen een zogenoemd clubgevoel. Deze sociale en collectieve binding is cruciaal voor het functioneren van de vereniging, omdat het leden motiveert tot loyaliteit, positieve mond-tot-mondreclame en vrijwillige inzet voor de vereniging. Dit doen ze omdat ze binding voelen met de vereniging en hun medeleden. In tegenstelling tot bedrijven, de publieke sector en veel andere ledenorganisaties, behalen sportverenigingen hun doelen vooral door vrijwilligerswerk van leden, zonder dat ze daar directe beloningen voor krijgen (Nagel et al., 2020).

2) Publieke steun door legitimiteit

Sportverenigingen zijn niet alleen waardevol voor hun leden, maar spelen ook een belangrijke rol in het realiseren van publieke doelen en hebben daardoor maatschappelijke waarde voor de samenleving. Deze rol maakt sportverenigingen een belangrijk onderdeel van de publieke infrastructuur en geeft hen legitimiteit in de ogen van de overheid (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Deze legitimiteit is belangrijk voor sportverenigingen omdat het toegang biedt tot publieke middelen, zoals gratis of tegen een gereduceerd tarief gebruik kunnen maken van sportvoorzieningen, verenigingsondersteuning of hulp in financieel moeilijke tijden, zoals tijdens de Covid-19-pandemie. Maar de publieke waardering brengt ook nadelen met zich mee, zoals hogere normatieve verwachtingen en meer regeldruk, waardoor ik het beschrijf als een tweesnijdend zwaard.

3) Competitieve evenwicht met andere sportverenigingen

Sportverenigingen concurreren om leden, maar zijn ook afhankelijk van elkaar voor het organiseren van sportcompetities (Wemmer et al., 2016). Om sportcompetities in stand te

houden, dienen sportverenigingen niet hun rivalen weg te concurreren, maar voor voldoende verschil tussen elkaar te zorgen zodat ze niet direct om dezelfde leden strijden. Hierdoor kunnen voldoende sportverenigingen blijven bestaan en sportcompetities plaatsvinden. Dit competitief evenwicht wordt behaald doordat sportverenigingen zich onderscheiden met een unieke identiteit, terwijl ze vasthouden aan gelijke sportvoorzieningen en herkenbare, sport-specifieke waarden (Deephouse, 1999; Villadsen, 2013).

4) Dynamisch conservatisme door het socialiseren van nieuwe leden

Sportverenigingen waarborgen hun voortbestaan door een specifieke vaardigheid, die in de literatuur ook wel ‘dynamisch conservatisme’ wordt genoemd (Ansell et al., 2015). Dit betekent dat sportverenigingen zich aanpassen aan veranderingen (Teece, 2007), zoals nieuwe maatschappelijke verwachtingen om hun legitimiteit te behouden, maar tegelijk trouw blijven aan hun kernwaarden. Aangezien bestaande leden onvermijdelijk uitstromen, werven sportverenigingen nieuwe leden. Dit is nodig om sport te kunnen organiseren en sociale en collectieve relaties te behouden. Maar de komst van nieuwe leden verandert de groepsdynamiek en zet bestaande relaties onder druk. Om dit te voorkomen, zorgen sportverenigingen ervoor dat kernwaarden blijven bestaan door zowel nieuwe als bestaande leden te socialiseren in de waarden, normen en de gebruiken van de vereniging (Schein, 1990).

Sportverenigingen als inspiratiebron voor een nieuw systeemperspectief op organisaties

Bovenstaande kernprocessen illustreren dat sportverenigingen bloeien en voortbestaan door een interactie tussen rationele en institutionele processen. Institutionele processen gaan over de culturele en informele structuur van organisaties, zoals sociale en collectieve relaties, normen en gewoonten (Scott, 2013). Deze culturele en informele structuren zorgen ervoor dat sportverenigingen een belangrijk onderdeel zijn van het leven van leden en van de samenleving. Dit maakt dat leden en publieke organisaties zich inzetten voor sportverenigingen. Wat het functioneren van sportverenigingen echter onderscheidt van gangbare perspectieven binnen de organisatie-theorie, is hun formele structuur – bestaande uit officieel vastgestelde regels, procedures en routines (Scott & Davis, 2016) – die doelbewust is ontworpen om de invloed van culturele, informele en diepgewortelde relaties, normen en gewoonten op het gedrag van leden te ondersteunen en te versterken.

De manier waarop formele en informele structuren in sportverenigingen samenhangen, vraagt om een ander systeemperspectief op hoe organisaties functioneren dan gangbaar in de organisatie-wetenschap. Om deze interactie tussen rationele processen en diepere institutionele krachten in sportverenigingen – en andere organisaties die duurzaam opereren dankzij de betrokkenheid van diverse stakeholders bij het voortbestaan van de organisatie – te duiden, heb ik een nieuw systeemperspectief op organisaties ontwikkeld. Dit noem ik het ‘systeemperspectief van waarde-cocreatie’. In dit perspectief staat een rationaliteit van gezamenlijke waarde creatie centraal. Formele regels, procedures en rollen dienen te worden ontworpen om zowel het individuele gedrag van leden als hun sociale en collectieve inbedding in de organisatie te bevorderen. Met als doel dat leden door participatie in deze informele structuren zelf en vrijwillig de waarde en het voortbestaan van de organisatie voor zichzelf en anderen tot stand brengen.

Een nieuwe kijk op effectief management

Dit nieuwe systeem perspectief op organisaties vraagt om andere managementbenaderingen dan gebruikelijk zijn in management en sportmanagement wetenschappen. Huidige benaderingen zijn veelal gebaseerd op een rationeel systeem perspectief, waarbij de efficiëntie en effectiviteit van organisatiestructuren voor het bereiken van specifieke doelen centraal staan (Nagel et al., 2015). Maar de logica van efficiëntie verliest haar relevantie als we sportverenigingen beschouwen als waarde-vehikels. Voor dit type organisaties is het belangrijkste doel van organisatiestructuren niet efficiëntie in het produceren van producten of diensten, maar het creëren van zoveel mogelijk waarde voor zowel leden als de samenleving als geheel. Deze waarde is nodig om de betrokkenheid van leden en publieke instanties voor het voortbestaan van de organisatie veilig te stellen. Daarom moet betekenis – en niet efficiëntie – de centrale focus van management zijn.

Om sportverenigingen hierin te ondersteunen, heb ik de rationaliteit van gezamenlijke waarde-co-creatie gebruikt als fundament voor de ontwikkeling van een vernieuwde managementfilosofie. Deze filosofie, die ik *'Management of Meaning'* (MoM) noem, omvat een strategische blauwdruk van een vitale sportvereniging die het management helpt om weloverwogen beslissingen te nemen over de toewijzing van schaarse middelen en een samenhangend geheel van managementpraktijken die in het verlengde van de strategische keuzes gebruikt kunnen worden om sportverenigingen te versterken.

Zet het managen van betekenis centraal in overheidsbeleid

Hoewel ik beleidsmakers verantwoordelijk houd voor het bevorderen van managementstrategieën die mogelijk hebben bijgedragen aan de groeiende problemen van sportverenigingen, blijft de nationale overheid samen met sportbonden en gemeenten, de belangrijkste actor in het stimuleren van de levensvatbaarheid van sportverenigingen. Dankzij hun gezag als hoogste beleidsorgaan kunnen nationale overheden randvoorwaarden creëren die het functioneren van sportverenigingen ondersteunen.

Gezien de relatief autonome positie van sportverenigingen, hun rol binnen de piramidestructuur van nationale, regionale en lokale sportbonden, en hun groeiende verwevenheid met de markt, andere maatschappelijke organisaties en gemeenten, is het van belang dat de overheid niet alleen vertrouwt op top-down regelgeving. Het is essentieel dat zij ook bestaande initiatieven van deze partijen ondersteunt. Daarom adviseer ik beleidsmakers bij het ontwikkelen van beleid ter bevordering van de levensvatbaarheid van sportverenigingen het volgende:

1. Erken de dubbele functie van sportverenigingen in de samenleving. Het grootste deel van het beleid en de beschikbare middelen voor sportverenigingen richt zich op hun rol in het aanpakken van uiteenlopende maatschappelijke vraagstukken. Om deze maatschappelijke functie goed te kunnen vervullen, is het in beginsel van belang dat sportverenigingen als waarde-co-creatie organisaties functioneren en hiervoor adequate structuren neerzetten. Beleidsmakers kunnen hierin ondersteunen door in hun ondersteuningsbeleid expliciet aandacht te besteden aan de verschillende managementpraktijken die hierbij effectief zijn.

2. Stimuleer gemeenten om te investeren in sportvoorzieningen en publieke dienstverlening voor sportverenigingen. Dit zou de operationele lasten verlichten, de werkdruk voor vrijwilligers verminderen en sportverenigingen in staat stellen zich te richten op het bevorderen van sociale relaties en een collectieve identiteit.
3. Stimuleer sportbonden door middel van subsidies om praktische MoM-tools te ontwikkelen voor hun verenigingen en verenigingsondersteuners.
4. Investeer in de kwaliteitsverbetering van het sportmanagementonderwijs waarin MoM een centrale plaats krijgt.
5. Investeer in de kwaliteitsverbetering van de monitoring van sportverenigingen, waarbij de in dit proefschrift geïdentificeerde kernprocessen een waardevol uitgangspunt kunnen vormen.

Sport is een belangrijk domein binnen de organisatie- en managementwetenschap

Sinds de oprichting als academische discipline woedt onder wetenschappers een debat over de vraag hoe sportmanagement zich als zelfstandig vakgebied kan ontwikkelen (Dowling et al., 2023; Slack, 1998). Het centrale vraagstuk in dit debat is of sportmanagement gangbare theorieën uit de bredere organisatie- en managementwetenschap zou moeten overnemen, of dat een grounded theory-benadering noodzakelijk is vanwege de specifieke structuren en betekenissen van sport (Dowling et al., 2023; Lachance et al., 2024).

Ik heb laten zien dat voor de ontwikkeling van sportmanagement niet per se nieuwe theorie vereist is die ‘gegrond’ is in sport. Door bestaande organisatie-theorieën te combineren en verder te ontwikkelen, heb ik een theorie over sportverenigingen kunnen opstellen. Dit betekent dat de legitimiteit van sportmanagement als wetenschappelijk vakgebied niet hoeft te berusten op eigenstandige organisatie- en managementkennis (Doherty, 2013a), maar op het feit dat het een uniek en waardevol domein is voor de toepassing en verdere ontwikkeling van organisatie- en managementtheorieën. Daarom raad ik sportmanagementwetenschappers aan het volgende te doen terwijl ze het vakgebied proberen te legitimeren:

1. Start onderzoek vanuit een multi-theoretisch systeem perspectief. Dit helpt om te bepalen hoe sport als domein kan bijdragen aan bredere organisatorische en managementvraagstukken.
2. Blijf op de hoogte van de nieuwste ontwikkelingen binnen de bredere organisatie- en managementwetenschap.
3. Meng je in debatten binnen de bredere organisatie- en managementwetenschap. Sport is een waardevol domein voor de verdere ontwikkeling van organisatie- en managementtheorieën.

De institutionele theorie is bij uitstek geschikt voor sportverenigingen

Sportverenigingen zijn een organisatietype waarbij de betekenis van de organisatie verder gaat dan het produceren van producten en diensten. En die betekenis bepaalt hoe sportverenigingen functioneren. Sportverenigingen zijn daardoor een context bij uitstek waar onderzoek kan bijdragen aan de theoretische ontwikkeling van de institutionele theorie. Maar op dit moment vindt tussen sportmanagement en institutionele theorie weinig uitwisseling plaats (Robertson et al., 2022). Dit is een tekortkoming, omdat sportmanagement hier-

door het potentieel van de institutionele theorie voor het begrijpen van de sportwereld niet volledig benut en een kans laat liggen om bij te dragen aan de verdere ontwikkeling van de institutionele theorie. Daarom adviseer ik sportmanagementwetenschappers om, wanneer zij de institutionele theorie willen toepassen of verder ontwikkelen, het volgende:

1. Keer terug naar het kerndoel van de institutionele theorie, namelijk begrijpen hoe organisatiestructuren en -processen betekenis krijgen die verder gaat dan het behalen van functionele doelen;
2. Betrek Selznicks werk opnieuw in institutioneel onderzoek, omdat de opvatting dat organisaties een eigen karakter met specifieke betekenissen en structuren hebben, leidt tot een diepere en rijkere kijk op organisaties die goed past bij sportorganisaties.
3. Richt het onderzoek op institutionele processen die zich zowel in de maatschappij als binnen organisaties voltrekken door Selznicks concept van organisatiekarakter te plaatsen binnen de bredere institutionele context van organisaties.

Sportverenigingen als voorbeeld voor een nieuw tijdperk van organisatiedenken

Omdat organisatie-theorie over de wisselwerking tussen formele structuren en institutionele processen ontbrak, biedt dit nieuwe systeemperspectief van waarde-cocreatie – geïnspireerd door hoe sportverenigingen functioneren – waardevolle inzichten die de bredere organisatie- en managementwetenschap kunnen verrijken. Hoewel dit perspectief is gebaseerd op de specifieke kernprocessen die sportverenigingen in staat stellen te bloeien en te blijven bestaan, is de onderliggende logica van hun functioneren even relevant voor andere organisaties die duurzaam (willen) opereren dankzij de betrokkenheid van diverse stakeholders bij het voortbestaan van de organisatie.

Dit perspectief vormt een waardevol tegenwicht voor de dominante benaderingen binnen de organisatie- en managementwetenschappen, waarin efficiëntie en effectiviteit bij het nastreven van concrete doelen centraal staan. Bovendien verschuift het de nadruk binnen de organisatiewetenschappen van het onderzoeken van de relatieve invloed van formele versus informele structuren op organisaties, naar het bestuderen van hun onderlinge wisselwerking. Organisaties zijn complexe systemen (Scott & Davis, 2016), en wat dit onderzoek naar sportverenigingen met name aantoont, is dat we dergelijke systemen alleen goed kunnen begrijpen door de dynamische interactie tussen rationele processen en diepere institutionele krachten te onderzoeken.

Om dit nieuwe tijdperk te omarmen, waarin niet alleen efficiëntie, maar ook binding en betekenis centraal staat, raad ik organisatiewetenschappers het volgende aan:

1. Gebruik sportverenigingen – of andere organisaties die opereren vanuit een vergelijkbare waarde-cocreatie rationaliteit –, als een rijke en relevante context voor onderzoek.
2. Onderzoek de aannames van het nieuwe systeemperspectief voor verschillende contexten, om de toepassing ervan in de organisatie- en managementwetenschap te bevorderen.

Slotwoord

Ik heb met dit proefschrift willen bijdragen aan meer kennis over het functioneren van sportverenigingen en een stevige basis willen leggen voor effectief bestuur en beleid, waarmee de weg wordt geopend naar een meer bloeiende en duurzame sportsector.

Wat sportverenigingen kenmerkt, is dat de sociale en collectieve relaties van leden waarop de organisatie kan bloeien en voortbestaan, niet alleen voortkomen uit informele verhoudingen binnen de organisatie, maar dat de formele structuren juist zodanig zijn ontworpen om deze relaties te bevorderen en te versterken. Juist in een tijdperk van toenemende polarisatie in de samenleving bieden organisaties die erin slagen om effectief sociale en collectieve banden te smeden, waardevolle lessen.

Ik ben er dan ook van overtuigd dat verder onderzoek naar hoe sportverenigingen erin slagen te bloeien en voort te bestaan, waardevolle inzichten kan opleveren die de bredere organisatie- en managementwetenschap verrijken. Om die reden beschouw ik sportverenigingen als een inspirerend voorbeeld van een vernieuwende organisatiebenadering, waarbij niet alleen efficiëntie, maar juist het creëren van binding en betekenis centraal staat.

About the author

Resie Hoeijmakers (1991) studied political science (BSc and MSc) and public administration (MSc) at Radboud University in Nijmegen. In 2016, she graduated with a master's thesis that critically assessed the moral value of physical education and the justification of competitive activities as part of the school curriculum. In the same year, she also participated in the Honours Programme "Reflections on Science" at Radboud University, where she was enrolled in the Think Tank Sport, commissioned by the Mulier Institute. After completing her master's degree in Political Theory, Hoeijmakers pursued a pre-master track in Business Administration and a minor in Sport & Exercise Sciences. During this time, she took courses in Sports Sociology, Sport History & Philosophy, and Sport Psychology. In 2017, she graduated with honours on a thesis that examined and provided recommendations for creating and implementing a good governance framework for Dutch voluntary sport clubs.

Following her second master's degree, Hoeijmakers began working as a junior researcher at the Mulier Institute, a Dutch scientific research institute focused on sports and exercise. At the Mulier Institute, she conducted several studies and specialized in voluntary sport clubs and the development of new sports. From March 2020 to November 2024, Hoeijmakers was a PhD candidate at the Mulier Institute and Utrecht University, where her research focused on constructing a theory of voluntary sport clubs and their management. During this time, she also continued to work on various studies related to Dutch voluntary sport clubs and the development of new sports. In addition to her research, Hoeijmakers was actively involved in teaching at Utrecht University. From 2020 onwards, she taught the course "Organizing Sport in Transition" and supervised several master's theses in the Sport Policy and Sport Management track. She currently works as a researcher at the Mulier Institute and as an assistant professor at Utrecht University.

Hoeijmakers is also a board member of her local tennis club, TV Rapiditas, where she has held various roles since 2014. In 2024, she became the chair of the club. TV Rapiditas is a voluntary tennis club in Nijmegen with approximately 1,000 members and, in her own words, was the biggest inspiration and motivation for her dissertation. In 2025, she also joined the members' council of the Dutch Tennis and Padel federation, where she contributes to strategic policy discussions at the national level.

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Dankwoord (in het Nederlands)

Vanaf mijn zevende ben ik actief bij sportverenigingen – eerst als lid, later ook als bestuurslid – en de afgelopen jaren mocht ik sportverenigingen fulltime bestuderen als junior onderzoeker en promovendus bij het Mulier Instituut en de Universiteit Utrecht. In die periode is mijn waardering voor deze organisaties alleen maar gegroeid. Dat werd me nog eens duidelijk toen ik in het laatste jaar van mijn promotieonderzoek te gast was bij RN7, de lokale radio van Nijmegen, om te praten over mijn nieuwe rol als voorzitter van TV Rapiditas.

Het was vroeg op zondagochtend, direct na de eerste dag van de Vierdaagsefeesten, dus ik neem het niemand kwalijk als dat optreden onopgemerkt voorbij is gegaan. Ik had zelf twee wekkers gezet en evenzoveel koppen koffie achter de kiezen om toch enigszins als een frisse en enthousiaste nieuwe voorzitter over te komen. Halverwege het gesprek merkte ik dat ik geraakt werd door een vraag die me sindsdien is bijgebleven. Uiteindelijk leidde het zelfs tot de ondertitel van mijn proefschrift.

Nadat ik vertelde dat ik me vier jaar lang had verdiept in hoe sportverenigingen bloeien en voortbestaan, vroeg de journalist of ik niet schrok van het amateurisme binnen sportverenigingen. Mijn spontane reactie was een vurig pleidooi vóór datzelfde amateurisme: ik vertelde dat ik sportverenigingen juist bewonder omdat ze draaien op de inzet en betrokkenheid van hun leden, en omdat ze zoveel betekenen voor mensen. Ze bestaan bij de gratie van vrijwillige inzet en gedeelde betekenis – iets wat in andere organisaties lang niet altijd vanzelfsprekend is.

Thuis bleef die vraag lang door mijn hoofd spelen. Waarom beschouwen we amateurisme eigenlijk zo vaak als iets negatiefs? Volgens de Dikke Van Dale betekent amateurisme “beoefening van iets uit liefhebberij” – en juist dat raakt, naar mijn idee, aan de kern van wat sportverenigingen zo bijzonder maakt. Ze bestaan en bloeien dankzij de diepere betekenis die ze voor mensen hebben, en doordat leden zich vrijwillig inzetten voor iets dat hen samenbrengt. Mijn proefschrift laat zien dat die waarde niet alleen in de sport zelf ligt, maar vooral in de relaties tussen mensen en de vereniging als geheel. Ook bijzonder aan dit organisatietype is dat de sociale betekenis van de vereniging niet een toevallig bijproduct is, maar een kernproces voor een vitale vereniging.

Tegelijkertijd zie ik dat sportverenigingen het vandaag de dag niet makkelijk hebben. Ze worden groter, de verwachtingen nemen toe, en het verenigingsleven verandert. Daarom is alle aandacht voor verenigingsondersteuning, de opkomst van verenigingsmanagement en de inzet van betaalde krachten die vanuit hun kennis en beroep werken aan het vitaliseren van sportverenigingen ontzettend waardevol. Naast de passie van alle vrijwilligers vind ik ook de bevologenheid en toewijding van deze professionals voor het verenigingsleven bewonderenswaardig. Maar het is wel belangrijk dat ze de juiste dingen doen. Met mijn proefschrift bekritiseer ik dan ook niet het amateurisme van sportverenigingen, maar vraag ik juist aandacht voor de professionalisering ervan. Ik hoop dat ik met een theorie over sportverenigingen en de uitwerking van *Management of Meaning* hierbij een kleine maar waardevolle bijdrage kan leveren.

Het schrijven van een theorie over sportverenigingen was vooraf niet mijn doel. Toch groeide het onderwerp me zo aan het hart dat ik me er steeds dieper in vastbeet. Hoewel mijn promotietraject nu formeel ten einde loopt, voelt het niet als een afsluiting, maar als

het begin van een nieuw hoofdstuk in mijn zoektocht naar het ontleden van de organisatieprocessen van sportverenigingen. Daarbij had ik dit traject natuurlijk nooit alleen kunnen afleggen. Graag wil ik een aantal mensen en organisaties bedanken die dit onderzoek – en mijn persoonlijke ontdekkingsreis in de verenigingskunde – mogelijk hebben gemaakt.

Allereerst wil ik het Mulier Instituut bedanken voor de kans die zij mij hebben geboden en voor het geduld dat ze toonden, vooral in de laatste twee jaar, waarin ik steeds weer verzekerde dat ik “echt bijna klaar was”. In het bijzonder wil ik Hugo van der Poel en Remco Hoekman bedanken voor hun vertrouwen in dit project, en Johan Steenbergen voor zijn geduld in de rol van leidinggevende, terwijl hij keer op keer heeft moeten aanhoren dat ik bijna klaar was. Uiteraard wil ik ook Janine van Kalmthout bedanken, mijn grootste supporter en aanjager, die de theorie van sportverenigingen al promootte terwijl die eigenlijk nog niet eens bestond. Ik heb het al eerder gezegd, maar onze tandem maakt mijn tijd bij Mulier fijn en waardevol. Het vertrouwen in de theorie heeft inmiddels al geleid tot mooie nieuwe projecten, zoals de ledenmonitor in Den Haag en de vernieuwde vitaliteitsindex voor sportverenigingen.

Mijn dank gaat ook uit naar USBO, waar ik als buitenpromovendus begon en later als universitair docent volop meedraaide. Ik heb me altijd zeer thuis gevoeld in de groep en ben er constant gestimuleerd om mijn ideeën verder te ontwikkelen en een alternatieve “eigen” visie te ontplooiën. Veel dank aan de onderzoeksgroep daarvoor, en in het bijzonder aan Michel van Slobbe. Michel, we hebben vijf jaar samen onderwijs gegeven en jij bent toch een beetje mijn vertrouwenspersoon binnen USBO geworden. Ik ben vooral ook heel trots op het vertrouwen dat jullie in mij hebben gesteld door het proefschrift centraal te stellen in de masteropleiding Sportbeleid en Sportmanagement. Het was geweldig om mijn ideeën met studenten te delen en daarover in gesprek te gaan. En zoals een Finse collega ooit tegen me zei: als je echt iets wilt veranderen in de sportwereld, moet je niet de huidige beleidsmakers proberen te overtuigen, maar de toekomstige — nog voordat ze dat worden.

Dank ook aan NOC*NSF, voor het omarmen van de ideeën uit mijn proefschrift, die nu de basis vormen voor de vernieuwde vitaliteitsindex en de definitie van een vitale sportvereniging. De kans om deze te presenteren tijdens het Nationaal Sportcongres gaf me veel vertrouwen in de kern van mijn proefschrift. Ik ben dankbaar dat ik mijn werk voor zo’n grote groep professionals mocht toelichten, al was het maar vijf minuten. Ook wil ik de consortia van de ZONMW-projecten Spot On en SportPro bedanken voor de kans om het onderzoek naar sportverenigingen verder uit te bouwen.

Een hele bijzondere dank gaat uit naar TV Rapiditas, en in het bijzonder naar het bestuur (Emiel, Rens, Rob en Annelies in spe) en de verenigingsmanager Maureen. TV Rapiditas was voor mij altijd een bron van inspiratie voor dit proefschrift, de basis van mijn passie om bij te dragen aan het vitaliseren van sportverenigingen en ook een beetje mijn speeltuin om de ideeën uit het proefschrift in de praktijk toe te passen. Het is een fantastische plek om onderdeel van te zijn en ik ben mijn medebestuurders ontzettend dankbaar voor het vertrouwen dat jullie in mij hebben gesteld, en voor jullie inzet en tijd.

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