

## Does the organizational climate in a sports clubs matter? Management implications and intervention proposals

ESCAMILLA-FAJARDO, P.<sup>1</sup>, GARCÍA-PASCUAL, F.<sup>2</sup>, STASKEVICIUTE-BUTIENE, I.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup> Department of Physical Education and Sport, University of Valencia, SPAIN

<sup>3</sup> Lithuanian Sports University, Kaunas, LITHUANIA

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### Abstract:

The organizational climate is one of the most important factors in an organization to take into account since it has a direct and positive relationship with the final performance of employees. This construct has been widely studied in different fields; however, despite the economic, social, and sporting importance of non-professional sports clubs in Spanish society, practically no studies have focused on the organizational climate of non-professional Spanish sports clubs. This study analyzed 382 Spanish non-professional sports clubs, 63.6% of which are at a national–international competition level, and 70.2% are mainly privately funded. The instrument used has been previously validated and presented good psychometric properties in this study. To determine whether there are differences in the organizational climate of sports clubs according to the competition level and the type of funding, comparative analyses of averages were performed for independent samples. According to the results obtained, there were no differences in the organizational climate according to the type of funding, but the national–international sports clubs showed significantly higher levels of training, motivation, and overall organizational climate than in the regional–local sports clubs. This may have different causes and consequences that were determined in this article compared with those in the existing literature in organizational and sports fields. Thus, this study presented various management implications and proposals for useful interventions for management teams of sports clubs. However, the study has limitations, and future areas of research are discussed.

**Key Words:** Organizational climate, sports clubs, competition level, type of funding, management implications, performance, business management, employees.

### Introduction

Any organization, regardless of the field in which it operates, has important elements that can condition both the work process and its final success. Within these components, employees are the most precious commodity within an organization (Coda, da Silva, and Custodio, 2015) because any entity includes a group of people who develop their activities in complex and dynamic environments, and as a consequence, they have behaviors that influence the functioning of the organization (Segredo Pérez, 2013). All behaviors by a worker have a certain influence on the individual performance of that employee and on the general performance of the organization.

Regardless of the organization, workers spend considerable time in the workplace, devoting their personal and group effort to achieve objectives proposed by the direction and management of the entity (Podsakoff, LePine, and LePine, 2007); hence, the work environment has crucial importance in terms of the welfare of the person (Kim, Kim, Newman, Ferris, and Perrewé, 2019). The great difficulty of separating the organizational climate generated by workers from the organization's own employee welfare creates the need to focus attention and place importance on an organizational study of sports clubs as a priority.

However, due to the important influence that the staff of the organization has on the general behavior of the entity, knowledge and research has become a key factor within the organizational phenomenon. However, the Organizational Climate (OC) is one of the most important factors to take into account (Ahmad, Jasimuddin, and Kee, 2018) because it presents a direct positive relationship with the final performance of the workers (Berberoglu, 2018), and consequently, of the organization itself.

The OC has been widely studied in different fields; however, despite the social, economic, and sporting importance of sports clubs in Spanish society, studies that have analyzed the OC in the associative sports field are scarce (Escamilla-Fajardo, Núñez-Pomar, Prado-Gascó, and Ratten, 2019; Kojour, Razavi, and Taghipouryan, 2017), and there are even fewer practical applications or management implications that have been provided from academic and research fields.

Thus, the main objective of this study was to understand the OC in non-professional Spanish sports clubs and to determine if there are significant differences in OC depending on the competition level (CL) and the type of funding (TF) to create useful management strategies and implications for managers and sports directors.

### **Theoretical framework**

#### *Non-professional sports clubs in Spain*

Sport has gone from being an activity with no structure and little affiliation to having an economic, cultural, and social importance that was unthinkable a few years ago. As stated in the *Sports Statistics Yearbook 2019* from Spain, the total expenditure linked to sport has increased from 4.865,9 million euros in 2008 to 5.686,5 million euros in 2017. This is a growth of 16.86% in 9 years, which is a very high figure compared to other professional sectors. These data corroborate the significant growth that has taken place in Spanish society, which invests/expends 123,4€ on sports per person (MECS, 2019).

The demand for sport in society is evident; of the total Spanish population in 2018 (46,934,632 inhabitants) 8.24% had a federative license, in other words, they were involved in federated sport; however, if we take into account the people who are involved in sports weekly, the amount is even higher at 46.2%. Thus, 21,683,800 Spanish people are involved in sports weekly.

These data corroborate the importance sport has in Spain at all levels and the heterogeneity of its practitioners. Progressively, users demand greater quality and quantity in the services offered, which has indirectly led to an increase in the number of sports organizations and, consequently, in the number of jobs. There were 34,529 companies linked to sports in 2018, of which 43.1% had no salaried personnel, 42.5% had between 1 and 5 salaried employees, 5.9% had between 6 and 9 salaried employees, 7.4% had between 10 and 49 salaried employees, and only 0.5% and 0.6% had between 50 and 99 salaried employees and more than 100 salaried employees, respectively. The average annual employment in the sports field included a total of 214,100 persons in 2018, which was 5.31% more than the total number of sports employees a year earlier in 2017 (MECS, 2019). This has had an impact on the Spanish economy and has had an important cultural and social influence.

Academics and researchers have focused their attention and work on analyzing private sports organizations, such as small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). However, sports clubs can be considered as the great forgotten organizations, despite their great weight in society (Escamilla-Fajardo, Núñez-Pomar, and Prado-Gascó, 2018). Based on the 2019 Yearbook of Sports Statistics in 2018, Spain had a total of 67,512 sports clubs, which was 12.03% more than in 2011. This important increase was also evident in the number of federative licenses, which have increased from a total of 3,548,118 in 2011 to a total of 3,866,867 in 2018 (MECS, 2019). This growth in the sports field has been widely accepted by researchers and academics as well as by professionals (García Ferrando and Llopis Goig, 2017).

However, in the sports field, as in any other field, human capital is the basis of organizations (Kim et al., 2019). Employees of sports organizations are those who deal directly and daily with clients and users. Normally, they are the ones who create, organize, and impart the services offered by the organization. However, despite their importance, do we know the employees of the organizations that offer sports services? Does the organizational climate in which they work matter and what does it mean for the overall performance of the organization?

#### *Organizational climate in sports organizations*

Considerable time and effort is often devoted to searching for, selecting, and hiring personnel who will become employees of a sports organization. However, after this recruitment stage, attention of the internal client is often dissipated to move towards the perception of the end user. Therefore, in the sports field, numerous studies have been related to the quality of service perceived by users or the future intentions they have to perform the service (Calabuig, Núñez-Pomar, Prado-Gascó, and Añó, 2014); however, studies have been typically scarce when it comes to analyzing the workers of non-profit sports organizations (Escamilla-Fajardo et al., 2019).

This gap in the literature can generate a problem because any service or sports product, before reaching the user, is performed, coordinated, and taught by the workers of sports organizations. Otherwise, the quality of the services or products offered would be greatly reduced.

Among the organizational constructs studied, the OC is one of the most important because, according to Bauer, Bodner, Erdogan, Truxillo, and Tucker (2007), the behavior and attitude of workers have an extensive influence on the performance of the organization and its commitment to the entity. The worker's commitment to the organization is an aspect that is of increasing interest for the organization because recruiting, training, and maintaining a worker who makes an effort for the organization and its projects is not an easy task. Among the variables that have a direct and positive relationship on the employee's commitment, the organizational climate perceived by the employee plays a major role (Berberoglu, 2018).

In general, the OC can be understood based on the individual perception of the social framework in which the person works (Rousseau, 1988). According to Vega, Partido, and Rodrigo (2010), the OC is based on the worker's own experiences. This perception is individual and personal, referring only to the worker himself; however, it is based directly on the group environment that is generated by managers and workers. This construct

does not only refer to the environment generated in the organization but also to the performance and productivity of the personnel (Ghavifekr and Pillai, 2016).

The OC changes and depends to a large extent on the organization (Ahmad et al., 2018) and the professional moment in which it is framed, but it can be important to focus attention on because it is largely malleable, often without the need for expensive strategies.

The OC is composed of different aspects, such as (i) supervision by superiors of the work done by their workers, including recognition after the introduction of an improvement, (ii) motivation of workers, which includes both the encouragement of motivation by superiors and personal motivation with the organization and work performed, (iii) the organization's resources, including the availability of resources, such as ease of access, (iv) safety in the organization with regard to environmental conditions and the comfort and safety of the workplace, and (v) training in terms of education, training, and quality improvement programs (García-Tascón, 2008).

Thus, the worker's perception of the organizational climate encompasses different aspects that may have an influence on their work and, therefore, on organizational results (Rogg, Schmidt, Shull, and Schmitt, 2001).

As with athletes, the organizational climate depends to a large extent on the discipline in which they participate (Castro-Sánchez, Zurita-Ortega, and Chacón-Cuberos, 2019), and the organizational climate in sports clubs is very different depending on the organization. Thus, because it is a moldable aspect, it is important to determine a starting point and establish proposals and strategies for action by the management and the direction of the organization to improve it.

The OC is able to offer us vital information about the potential productivity of the workers and the capacity to achieve previously planned objectives (Rodríguez Salvá et al., 2010). In addition, it is important to study this construct because it has a considerable influence on the workers' commitment to the organization (Berberoglu, 2018) and on his motivation towards work (Chaparro Espitia, 2006).

However, the main objectives of this study were: (i) to carry out a diagnosis of the OC in non-professional Spanish sports clubs and (ii) to determine if they exist.

## Material and methods

### Participants

The sample included 382 non-professional Spanish sports clubs. These were characterized by a certain competition level and type of funding. Of the sample analyzed, 63.6% (n = 243) were sports clubs at the national-international competition level, that is, they compete in state (Spain) or international leagues, tournaments, and competitions, and 36.4% (n = 139) of the sample were sports clubs at the autonomic-local competition level, that is, their teams or top-level sportsmen compete in autonomous categories. Of the sample analyzed, 70.2% (n = 268) had a majority of private funding and 29.8% (n = 114) of the sports clubs had a majority of public funding. The total number of sports clubs analyzed were Spanish and compete in Spanish leagues at different levels without ever becoming professional sports clubs or competing in professional leagues.

### Instruments

The instrument used consisted of the OC perception questionnaire PSCLADE created by García-Tascón (2008). The questionnaire was made up of 12 items grouped into five categories (training, motivation, supervision, safety, and resources) with a Likert-type response scale of 1 "very disagreeable" to 7 "very agreeable". The general scale has a Cronbach alpha of 0.89, which was considered by George and Mallery (1995) as a good value because it is in the range of values between 0.80 and 0.90.

Table 1. Reliability main author scale and present study

	Nº items	$\alpha$ author (García-Tascón, 2008)	$\alpha$ present study
Training	3	.89	.85
Motivation	3	.90	.84
Supervision	2	.80	.70
Safety	2	.77	.92
Resources	2	.83	.87

### Data collection and analysis

First, the 66 Spanish national sports federations were contacted by telephone, and six showed interest in the study. This represents a response and interest rate of 9.09%, a normal percentage if we take into account that the contact was made via telephone with sending of a cover letter online.

Afterward, the federations that had accepted the collaboration with the University of Valencia were sent a letter of presentation of the study with a link to the online questionnaire that had to be filled in using the platform of the University of Valencia, LimeSurvey, which generated a database automatically. The national federations themselves sent the letter of presentation of the study together with this link to the clubs included in their database. There were several requirements for completion of the questionnaire for it to have validity: (i) the staff members had to be a technical, manager, or executive of the organization, and (ii) this technician, manager,

or executive had to have a minimum seniority of 3 years so as to have a general vision and faithful reality regarding the sport from both economic and social aspects.

The sample was collected from July to November 2018 with a reminder to the sports clubs that had not replied on September 17, 2018. The approximate time for completing the questionnaire was 10–12 min. Then, statistical analysis was carried out using the statistical package SPSS 24.0.

To carry out the statistical analysis, the methodology used was carried out using SPSS 24.0. To analyze the data and the normality of the sample, a descriptive analysis was performed to determine the mean, the standard deviation, the skewness, and the kurtosis. In this way, the main characteristics of the sample and the normality of the data could be determined.

In determine the mean differences in the dimensions of the OC scale, taking into account the competition level (national-international and autonomic-local) and the type of funding (mostly public and mostly private), Student t tests were carried out for independent samples because there were only two comparable groups. For this purpose, it was necessary to analyze the general averages and the averages for the different groups and Cohen's D, which showed the difference of the effect.

*Ethical considerations*

This study was performed under the supervision of the Experimental Research Ethics Committee of the University of Valencia with identification number H143223838308289. All participants were previously informed in detail regarding the confidentiality and anonymity of the data obtained. These data were processed solely for academic and research purposes.

**Results**

According to our results, the data representing skewness oscillated between -1.15 and -0.49 and those representing kurtosis were between -0.45 and 1.57. In no cases, were the values of -2 and 2 exceeded; thus, a normal distribution of the obtained data was found (Table 1). The values of skewness and kurtosis obtained were adequate because they were below 3.00 for the items analyzed (Chou and Bentler, 1995).

Table 2. General statistics of the analyzed scale

	M	SD	S	K
Motivation: $\alpha = .84$				
1. Generally, people are satisfied with the organisation they work for.	5.86	.87	-.62	.72
2. People are motivated to do their job in our organisation.	5.89	.93	-.75	1.01
3. The organisation fosters good working relationships between people.	5.91	1.12	-1.15	1.57
Training: $\alpha = .85$				
4. Individuals receive training and continuing education related to their roles.	5.01	1.62	-.68	-.23
5. People receive information about the work carried out and the objectives achieved..	5.29	1.38	-.83	.47
6. The organisation implements programmes to improve the quality of people's performance.	4.61	1.66	-.49	-.45
Supervision: $\alpha = .70$				
7. The organization recognizes when a person introduces an improvement in their work.	5.73	1.24	-1.09	1.32
8. I consider that in the organization, the improvement of the quality of the services offered is a priority.	5.76	1.23	-.93	.50
Safety: $\alpha = .92$				
9. The environmental conditions (air conditioning, cleaning, lighting, noise, ventilation, etc.) are adequate for the development of daily tasks.	5.00	1.58	-.68	-.06
10. The organisation's workplace is safe and comfortable.	5.16	1.55	-.76	.07
Resources: $\alpha = .87$				
11. The organization has adequate material resources for the proper development of people's work.	5.23	1.50	-.82	.12
12. There is ease of access and comfort in the use of material to carry out the work correctly.	5.39	1.44	-.90	.35

Note: N= sample; M= mean; SD= standard deviation; S= skewness; K= kurtosis;  $\alpha$ = Cronbach's alpha.

However, taking into account the general results of the organizations, the dimensions of motivation (M = 5.88; SD = 0.85) and supervision (M = 5.74; SD = 1.08) showed higher scores with respect to the dimensions of training (M = 4.97; SD = 1.37) and safety (M= 5.08; SD= 1.50), which exposed lower general values.

However, taking into account the competition levels of the sports clubs, there were only significant differences in the training dimension ( $t(380) = -2.21, p = 0.03, d = 0.24, r = 0.12$ ) with national category clubs (M = 5.09; SD = 1.31) having higher values than regional competition level clubs (M = 4.76; SD = 1.45), in the motivation dimension ( $t(380) = -3.02, p = 0.01, d = 0.30, r = 0.15$ ), showing national clubs (M = 5.98; DT = 0.71) scores were higher than regional clubs (M = 5.71; DT = 1.04) and OC general ( $t(380) = -2.45, p = .02, d =$

0.25,  $r = 0.13$ ) with national level clubs ( $M = 5.49$ ;  $SD = 0.83$ ) having higher scores than regional level clubs ( $M = 5.25$ ;  $SD = 1.05$ ) (Table 3). However, despite the fact that the other dimensions showed no significant differences, higher scores were also been obtained for sports clubs at the national–international competition level than sports clubs at the regional–local competition level. Regarding the supervision dimension, the national–international sports clubs ( $M = 5.83$ ;  $SD = 1.00$ ) had values that were significantly higher than those of the regional level sports clubs ( $M = 5.60$ ;  $SD = 1.19$ ). Additionally, for the safety dimension, the national–international sports clubs ( $M = 5.12$ ;  $SD = 1.48$ ) showed higher values than the regional–local sports clubs ( $M = 5.00$ ;  $SD = 1.55$ ). Similarly, for the resources dimension, sports clubs at the national–international competition level ( $M = 5.37$ ;  $SD = 1.32$ ) showed slightly higher results than sports clubs at the regional–local competition level ( $M = 5.20$ ;  $SD = 1.48$ ).

Additionally, for the type of majority funding of the organization, there were no significant differences in the dimensions of CO. However, for the motivation dimensions, sports clubs with private funding ( $M = 5.90$ ;  $SD = 0.82$ ) showed slightly higher values than sports clubs with mostly public funding ( $M = 5.87$ ;  $SD = 0.92$ ); additionally, for the Safety dimension, sports clubs with mostly private funding ( $M = 5.12$ ;  $SD = 1.53$ ) showed slightly higher values than sports clubs with mainly public funding ( $M = 5.10$ ;  $SD = 1.36$ ).

However, the training dimension showed higher values for publicly funded sports clubs ( $M = 5.00$ ;  $SD = 1.41$ ) than majority privately funded sports clubs ( $M = 4.96$ ;  $SD = 1.36$ ). Similar results were obtained for the supervision dimension in which the majority of clubs financed publicly showed higher results ( $M = 5.76$ ;  $SD = 1.15$ ) than clubs financed by mainly private entities ( $M = 5.75$ ;  $SD = 1.03$ ). The resources dimension showed notably higher results for sports clubs with a majority of public funding ( $M = 5.39$ ;  $SD = 1.37$ ) than sports clubs with mainly private funding ( $M = 5.29$ ;  $SD = 1.37$ ). Finally, the overall OC construct showed slightly higher values for sports clubs with mostly public funding ( $M = 5.43$ ;  $SD = 0.95$ ) than sports clubs financed by mainly private entities ( $M = 5.41$ ;  $SD = 0.90$ ) (Table 3).

Table 3. Differences in Organizational Climate by Dimensions according to Competition level and Type of Funding

	National-International		Regional-Local		Public funding		Private funding		Overall	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Training	5.09**	1.31	4.76**	1.45	5.00	1.41	4.96	1.36	4.97	1.37
Motivation	5.98**	.71	5.71**	1.04	5.87	.92	5.90	.82	5.88	.85
Supervision	5.83	1.00	5.60	1.19	5.76	1.15	5.75	1.03	5.74	1.08
Safety	5.12	1.48	5.00	1.55	5.10	1.36	5.12	1.53	5.08	1.50
Resources	5.37	1.32	5.20	1.48	5.39	1.37	5.29	1.37	5.31	1.38
Overall OC	5.49**	.83	5.25**	1.05	5.43	.95	5.41	.90	5.41	.92

Note: \* =  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\* =  $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p \leq .001$ ; M= mean; SD= standard deviation.

**Discussion and conclusions**

Diagnosis of the OC of sports clubs is of vital importance because it will offer a concrete view of attitudinal and behavioral variables from both individuals and the group, knowledge of which is necessary for the success of the organization (Kojour et al., 2017). Through this diagnosis, it is possible to obtain relevant information on potential productivity (Rodríguez Salvá et al., 2010), establishing the point where the workers as a whole and the organization in particular are located so decisions can be made regarding strategies that can be carried out to improve the organizational and motivational aspects of the sports club.

The OC has a close positive relationship with important variables of the organization, such as the perception of quality of services rendered (González, Melo, and Limón, 2015), an increase in productivity, a reduction of absenteeism by employees, and commitment to the organization (Piiirainen, Räsänen, and Kivimäki, 2003), and even the ethical behavior of the organization (Agarwal and Malloy, 1999).

According our results, for non-professional Spanish sports clubs, the type of funding is not a differentiating variable in terms of OC; however, the competition level is. This could be due to the greater organizational development and degree of professionalism of clubs at the highest competition level (Nichols, Wicker, Cuskelly, and Breuer, 2015); thus, there are significant differences. The national–international sports clubs showed higher scores in training, motivation and general OC compared to clubs at the regional–local level.

Although it is very difficult to unify all sports clubs into a homogeneous group because the sports field is commonly characterized by heterogeneity, intangibility, and difficulty in separating production and consumption (Gallagher, Gilmore, and Stolz, 2012), there are common characteristics and different typologies to which these clubs could belong. The competition level is an undeniable characteristic of sports clubs because in most cases the teams that compose them compete in well-differentiated categories. Professional sports clubs or sports corporations (SCs), as they are called in Spain, were not included in this study. Thus, the sports clubs studied compete and carry out their sporting activity in national (Spain), international, regional, or local tournaments, competitions, or state leagues but not in professional leagues.

### **Management implications and intervention proposals**

According to our results, different management tactics should be carried out in two basic areas: (i) attention to maintaining strengths, and (ii) prioritize improvement of weaknesses. First, detailed knowledge of the organization and the situation in which it finds itself at the time of the study is essential. After obtaining the information regarding the starting point, later decision-making will be facilitated.

Typically, it is necessary to focus attention on important aspects of the entity or on those that have a greater influence on fundamental variables for the organization as opposed to others with less relevance. In this case, independent of the competition level of the sports club, emphasis should be placed on aspects related to staff training. According to our results, training was the dimension with the lowest values in the sports clubs analyzed and statistically significant in the sports clubs at the regional–local level as opposed to the sports clubs at the national–international level. Thus, it is necessary to analyze action strategies that can be incorporated and that will have as a direct effect on improving or benefiting the club.

For the training actions that an organization can offer to its employees, they could vary in logistical requirements and in economic cost. Independently, it is important that any training is adapted to the training needs and is closely related to the working activities of the sports club. Such training actions could be coordinated and carried out by personnel from outside the organization, normally resulting in high costs for the sports club, but an alternative option that can achieve excellent results is peer-to-peer training. In peer-to-peer training, a worker could train his or her peers or group of peers in the aspects he or she has worked on or been previously trained. Communication in this type of training has a more informal character so it can often have a positive impact due to the closeness in communication and treatment. However, a fundamental aspect of any training is joint planning in advance and coordination of hours and resources with the rest of the organization's staff.

However, safety in the organization is one aspect to improve globally. Safety encompasses aspects related to the safety and comfort of the workplace and the environmental conditions in which employees work. If, regarding the actions to be undertaken, there is a need to prioritize, first, we would focus attention on operations with lower logistical and economic costs. Ventilation of the working room, reduction of noise during working hours, improvement of air conditioning and lighting, and improving the cleanliness of the place could significantly increase the perception of the OC by sports club workers.

The actions mentioned above could have a minimum cost that would be even non-existent for the organization, while producing tremendous benefits. A worker devotes many hours per week to the organization in which he or she works (Podsakoff et al., 2007); thus, it is advisable to adapt and customize the workplace to the tastes and priorities of the staff. On many occasions, top management does not even know the preferences of its workers; thus, communication and obtaining the opinions of workers is key to improving well-being during working hours. The location of the desk in the room, the orientation of the computer screen, and the lighting of the room are some examples. All these aspects can be modified without a high cost. Thus, top management of small sports clubs should take these types of changes into account.

The influence of motivation and supervision on employees plays an important organizational role. Although they are different dimensions of the OC, they are broadly related. One of the common links that is highlighted here is recognition by the management team.

To motivate or maintain a worker's motivation, recognizing their work is fundamental. When a worker introduces improvements or does a satisfactory job, positive reinforcement should be provided and be habitual. Spoken or written recognition does involve a cost or additional financial compensation and can result in motivation and an improved sense of identification with the organization.

In addition, employees have their own motivations, objectives, and goals; thus, top management should try to combine the goals and motivations of workers with the objectives and purposes of the sports club by increasing involvement and identifying with their work (Davis and Newstrom, 1991).

Finally, the sports clubs should value employees who in addition to being valuable to the organization, provide it with added value. Thus, clubs must maintain good relationships and communication with workers. If the size of the club prevents direct relationships, the management team should delegate tasks of supervision and motivation to managers who will communicate effectively with the workers.

### **Limitations and future areas of research**

This study involved a relatively small sample because the total number of sports clubs in Spain was 67,512 sports clubs in 2018 (MECS, 2019), and the sample analyzed was 382. However, the response method was online; thus, the response rate was lower.

Another limitation of this study was that the OC diagnosis was only made by taking into account two variables (competition level and type of funding). Thus, in the future, it would be interesting to study the relationships of OC with different variables, such as commitment to the organization or user satisfaction with set variables the competition level and the type of funding.

Finally, in future research, it would be interesting to carry out a transnational study to determine the OC of clubs in different countries. In this way, we could determine if the socio-cultural or developmental level of the country has an influence on non-professional sports clubs. In addition, an analysis of the relationship between

OC and organizational variables, such as the worker's commitment to the organization or the quality of service perceived by customers, could provide new information to this field of study.

**Conflicts of interest.** The authors have no conflict of interest

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