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An Analytical-Critical Review of Validation Strategies in Qualitative Research in Sport Management: Evidence from Published Research

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Article Info	Abstract
Article type: Research Article	Qualitative research in sport management has gained increasing importance due to its ability to provide in-depth understanding of complex phenomena. However, the main challenge lies in how to assess the validity and trustworthiness of the findings of such research. The purpose of this article is to review, analyze, and critique validation strategies in common qualitative methods used in sport management, and to provide practical examples from Iranian research. This study is an analytical-critical review. A search was conducted in reputable scientific databases using relevant keywords. A set of key sources, including international articles, reference books, and Iranian studies, was examined using directed content analysis. Concepts related to validation in each method were extracted and categorized. Validation of qualitative research encompasses two general approaches: general frameworks, such as Lincoln and Guba's four criteria (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability), and method-specific strategies. In thematic analysis, techniques such as participant feedback and peer debriefing are applicable. In grounded theory, theoretical sampling and constant comparison form the cornerstones of validity. Content analysis faces the challenge of the inter-coder agreement coefficient, about which there are both supportive perspectives (enhancing objectivity) and opposing views (incompatibility with the interpretive nature). Phenomenology gains validity through concepts such as reduction and eidetic analysis. Narrative inquiry emphasizes coherence and impact on the audience, while ethnography highlights thick description and prolonged engagement. The validation of qualitative research is a multi-layered, dynamic process dependent on the research method. Using general frameworks alongside method-specific strategies, coupled with a critical view of common tools (e.g., the agreement coefficient) and the adoption of innovative approaches (e.g., critical friends), leads to the production of more credible and more localized knowledge in sport management.
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Introduction

Qualitative research in sport management has gained a prominent position as a fundamental approach for developing an in-depth understanding of the complex and dynamic phenomena in this field. From examining the organizational culture of clubs and teams to exploring the lived experiences of athletes, coaches, and spectators, qualitative methods enable access to the hidden layers of meaning and the interpretation of human actions (Skinner et al., 2020). By emphasizing a contextual understanding of phenomena, these methods contribute to the production of rich and localized knowledge, which serves as a basis for effective policy-making and decision-making at various levels of sport management (McGannon et al., 2021).

Despite the growing prevalence of qualitative research, a fundamental question that has consistently been raised is how to assess the validity and trustworthiness of the findings of such research (Morse et al., 2002). Unlike quantitative research, which has relatively well-established criteria for measuring validity and reliability, the qualitative field faces a diversity of paradigms, methods, and interpretive approaches that make it impossible to adopt a single universal criterion (Sousa, 2014). This diversity, although indicative of the richness of the field, confronts researchers with the challenge of selecting and applying valid strategies to ensure the quality of their research.

In response to this challenge, scholars in methodology have proposed frameworks for evaluating the validity of qualitative research, among which the pioneering model of Lincoln and Guba can be mentioned (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). They introduced criteria such as credibility (against internal validity), transferability (against external validity), dependability (against reliability), and confirmability (against objectivity) as the pillars of trustworthiness (Skinner et al., 2020). Subsequently, more comprehensive models, such as Tracy's, with eight criteria including worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethics, and meaningful coherence, provided a broader framework for assessing quality in this field (Tracy, 2010).

Despite these general frameworks, each qualitative method, depending on its philosophical foundations and specific procedures, requires appropriate and distinct validation strategies. For example, in thematic analysis, techniques such as member checking and detailed documentation of the coding process are recommended to ensure credibility (Nowell et al., 2017). In grounded theory, theoretical sampling and constant comparison are key foundations for ensuring the validity of the theory emerging from the data (Skinner et al., 2020). These differences underscore the necessity of paying attention to the method-specific validation strategies of each qualitative method.

Meanwhile, content analysis holds a unique position. Due to its origins in quantitative research traditions, the use of criteria such as inter-coder reliability as an indicator of accuracy and replicability has become widespread in this method (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). A review of published research in the field of sport psychology (as a field adjacent to sport management) shows that this criterion, with a frequency of 45%, was the second most commonly used technique for demonstrating research rigor (McGannon et al., 2021). However, this approach faces serious challenges from both philosophical and practical perspectives.

Scholars in qualitative methodology have critically questioned the use of inter-coder reliability and member checking as the gold standard for validity. The main argument of these critics is that these techniques are rooted in positivist philosophy and are incompatible with the interpretive and multi-layered nature of qualitative data. They argue that achieving high agreement may lead to superficiality and overlooking deep and novel interpretations (Smith & McGannon, 2018). In contrast, concepts such as critical friends and member reflections have been introduced as alternatives that emphasize dialogue, challenge, and the development of interpretations, rather than merely confirming them (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020; Smith & McGannon, 2018).

This review adopts an interpretive-critical stance. Consistent with the philosophical foundations of qualitative methodology, it does not seek a single universal criterion for validation. Instead, it assumes that validity is contingent, context-dependent, and shaped by the researcher's epistemological position (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Smith & McGannon, 2018). Accordingly, the analysis critically examines both positivist-oriented techniques (e.g., inter-coder reliability) and interpretive strategies (e.g., reflexivity, critical friends) without privileging one over the other a priori.

A further challenge, particularly relevant to sport management, concerns mixed methods research. In many mixed-methods studies, the qualitative component is often evaluated using quantitative criteria (e.g.,

reliability coefficients), which may be incompatible with its interpretive nature. Although a full discussion of mixed-methods validity is beyond the scope of this article, sport management is replete with mixed-methods studies, and the issue of imposing quantitative standards on qualitative strands remains an unresolved tension that warrants critical attention.

What has been less addressed in theoretical discussions of validation is the provision of practical and concrete examples of the application of these strategies in actual research. More importantly, while existing reviews (e.g., Skinner et al. 2020) have comprehensively outlined validation frameworks, they lack practical, localized examples from published research, particularly in non-Western contexts such as Iran. This gap is significant because validation strategies are not theory-neutral; their application is shaped by local research traditions, journal expectations, and access to methodological resources. Therefore, a review that integrates international frameworks with evidence from published studies (including Iranian research) can offer more actionable guidance for researchers in diverse settings.

A methodological review of qualitative research published in the field of sport management can reveal which techniques researchers in this area have used to ensure the validity of their findings.

Given the gap between the theoretical foundations of validation and the lack of a comprehensive review that not only critically analyzes common approaches but also provides context-specific practical examples, conducting this research becomes necessary. The main question of this article is: what are the strategies for validating qualitative research in sport management, and how can they be categorized, critically analyzed, and explained with practical examples from published research within general approaches (such as the Lincoln and Guba model) and method-specific strategies (such as thematic analysis, grounded theory, and content analysis)? The novelty of this article lies in its analytical-critical approach, utilizing a rich set of sources, examining both supportive and opposing views on key techniques, providing a clear overview of the current state of validation in this field, and providing practical guidance for researchers by presenting concrete examples from Iranian research.

Research Methods

The present study is an analytical-critical review, conducted with the aim of identifying, analyzing, and critiquing validation strategies in qualitative research within the field of sport management. This type of review study goes beyond merely collecting and reporting sources; it seeks to critically examine concepts, compare different approaches, identify gaps in existing knowledge, and present a novel synthesis of findings. The present study focuses on common qualitative methods in sport management and, utilizing credible theoretical frameworks of validation, aims to provide a comprehensive and critical picture of the state of this field.

To achieve the research objectives, the literature was searched in reputable scientific databases including Google Scholar, Scopus, PubMed, ScienceDirect, as well as the Iranian databases such as Magiran and SID. The main search keywords included a combination of Persian and English terms: validation, qualitative research, sport management, thematic analysis, grounded theory, content analysis, phenomenology, narrative inquiry, ethnography, trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and rigor.

The inclusion criteria for studies in this review were: 1) articles that specifically addressed validation strategies, validity, reliability, or rigor in qualitative research; 2) studies conducted in the field of sport management; 3) articles published in Persian or English; and 4) studies that had a clear theoretical and methodological framework. The exclusion criteria included articles that merely reported quantitative findings or were not directly related to the validation of qualitative methods.

To ensure transparency and reproducibility, Table 1 reports the number of sources identified from each database. Table 2 provides a detailed breakdown of the reviewed studies by qualitative method and by origin (Iranian or international).

Table 1- Number of Sources Retrieved from Each Database

Database	Number of Sources
International databases	
Google Scholar	25
Scopus	8
PubMed	2
ScienceDirect	5
Subtotal (International)	40
Iranian databases	
Magiran	3
SID	2
Subtotal (Iranian)	5
Total	45

Table 2- Number of Reviewed Studies by Qualitative Method and Origin

Qualitative Method	Iranian Studies	International Studies	Total
Thematic Analysis	3	6	9
Grounded Theory	3	6	9
Content Analysis	1	9	10
Phenomenology	1	6	7
Narrative Inquiry	1	7	8
Ethnography	1	4	5
Total	10	38	48

For data analysis, the method of directed content analysis was used. This approach, as described by Hsieh and Shannon (2005), is suitable for cases where the researcher has an initial framework for categorizing concepts based on existing theory or prior research and intends to refine or validate it in a new context. The analysis process was as follows: first, all sources were carefully read, and sections related to each method and each technique were extracted. These sections were then categorized based on the initial framework, and during this process, new conceptual categories were also added to the framework inductively.

To ensure the validity and rigor of the findings of this review study, several strategies were employed. First, using data triangulation, information was gathered from diverse sources including international articles, reference books, and Iranian articles to obtain a comprehensive picture of the subject. Second, peer debriefing and the critical friend approach were used; that is, initial findings and interpretations were discussed and critiqued in multiple sessions among the researchers, and alternative perspectives were examined (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Third, the analysis process was documented transparently and step-by-step to provide an audit trail. Fourth, thick description was used in the writing of the findings so that the reader could make an informed judgment about the transferability of the results to similar contexts (Skinner et al., 2020; Tracy, 2010).

Findings

In this section, the results of the literature review and analysis of validation techniques in six widely used qualitative research methods in sport management are presented. For each method, first, the general and method-specific validation techniques are described, and then, drawing on credible sources and published research (with an emphasis on Iranian studies), practical examples of the application of these techniques are provided. For methods that have attracted considerable critical approaches, supportive and opposing views are also examined separately.

1. Validation in Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis, as one of the most widely used analytical methods in qualitative research in sport management, is a systematic process for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data (Nowell et al., 2017). Due to the flexibility of this method, ensuring the validity and trustworthiness of findings necessitates the application of a set of systematic strategies. Thematic analysis, as a flexible method, encompasses diverse approaches, each shaped by different philosophical foundations and requiring its own specific logic of validation. The leading scholars in this field, particularly Virginia Braun and Victoria

Clarke, through their reflexive thematic analysis approach, emphasize that the researcher's active and interpretive role in theme construction is fundamental, and validity is achieved through continuous reflexivity and deep analytical reasoning, not through inter-coder agreement (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In contrast, the coding reliability approach, represented by researchers such as Boyatzis and King, with its roots in the positivist tradition, emphasizes the use of predefined coding protocols and tools such as a codebook (Boyatzis, 1998; King, 2004). In this view, validity depends on achieving high agreement among coders (e.g., Kappa coefficient) to ensure objectivity and replicability of findings. A third approach, known as codebook thematic analysis or framework analysis, represents a middle ground, utilizing an initial structure for coding while maintaining interpretive flexibility. Alongside these, there is a more traditional view that considers thematic analysis merely as a tool for data summarization and presenting thematic networks or thematic summaries, which, although applicable in some contexts, is inconsistent with the foundations of modern interpretive approaches. This diversity of approaches indicates that sport management researchers, before selecting validation strategies, must clarify their position regarding these schools of thought (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

1-1. Validation Techniques in Thematic Analysis

Nowell et al. (2017), in their systematic guide to thematic analysis, emphasize the importance of integrating trustworthiness strategies across all six stages of analysis, as also noted in the work of Braun and Clarke (2021). These strategies include:

1. Prolonged Engagement: Deep familiarity with the data through repeated reading of interview transcripts, field notes, and documents, which enables the researcher to better understand subtle differences and hidden patterns.
2. Triangulation: Using multiple data sources (data triangulation), diverse theoretical perspectives (theoretical triangulation), or the involvement of several researchers in the analysis process (analyst triangulation) to enrich and enhance the rigor and trustworthiness of findings.
3. Peer Debriefing: Continuous discussion and exchange of views with colleagues and other experts regarding the coding process and extracted themes, which helps identify biases and generate alternative interpretations.
4. Memoing: Continuous recording of ideas, thoughts, and analytical decisions throughout the research process, which makes the analysis path transparent and traceable.
5. Theoretical Saturation: Continuing the data collection and analysis process until new data no longer add new information to the identified themes.
6. Member Checking: Returning to participants and providing them with a summary of the findings to confirm the consistency of the researcher's interpretation with their views and experiences. Nowell et al. (2017) consider this technique a key strategy for ensuring credibility.

1-2. Practical Example

Labbaf and Vahdani (2024), in a study titled "Qualitative Analysis of Artificial Intelligence Dimensions in the Field of Sports Science" used thematic analysis and the six-step process of Braun and Clarke (2006). To validate the findings, they employed the member checking strategy; the conceptual network extracted from the interviews was provided to some participants, and they were asked to offer their corrections and suggestions. Additionally, to ensure coding reliability, the inter-coder reliability method was used, achieving an agreement percentage of 87.75%. Furthermore, Vahdani and Labbaf (2025a) in a study titled "Challenges Faced by Volunteers in Organizing Sporting Events (Case Study: The 16th Cultural and Sports Olympiad for Male University Students in Iran)" and Vahdani and Labbaf (2025b) in another study titled "Opportunities and Challenges of Holding Sports Events for the Host Community, Case Study: Hosting of University of Isfahan in the 16th Cultural and Sports Olympiad for Male Students of Iran" using a thematic analysis approach, employed rich description and peer debriefing/critical friends strategies for validation.

It is worth noting, however, that among the Iranian studies reviewed, the reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021) is almost entirely absent. Nearly all practical examples reported in Iranian sport management research rely either on coding reliability techniques or codebook approaches. This absence constitutes a significant methodological gap, as reflexive thematic analysis—with its emphasis on the researcher's interpretive agency and rejection of inter-coder agreement—offers a fundamentally different logic of validation that has yet to be taken up in this context.

2. Validation in Grounded Theory

Since its introduction by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, grounded theory has gradually diverged into three main schools of thought, each with different philosophical foundations and, consequently, distinct validation logic (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). The classical or Glaserian approach, with positivist roots, emphasizes the emergence of theory from data without any pre-determined analytical structure and considers the validity of theory in terms of its fit, relevance, and adaptability (Glaser, 1978). In contrast, the Straussian approach, developed by Strauss and Corbin, with a more systematic approach utilizing axial coding and analytical paradigms, emphasizes validity through applicability and the interpretive role of the researcher (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The third approach is the constructivist one, proposed by Kathy Charmaz, which, with interpretive-constructivist foundations, views theory as co-constructed through the interaction between the researcher and participants; from this perspective, validity depends on the degree of reflexivity and contextual embeddedness of the theory within its specific context (Charmaz, 2014). Grounded theory, aiming to discover and develop theory from within the data, has systematic procedures that themselves ensure a significant part of the validity of the final theory. Validity in this method refers to the fit, relevance, and adaptability of the theory (Skinner et al., 2020).

2-1. Validation Techniques in Grounded Theory

Skinner et al. (2020) have presented validation techniques in grounded theory as follows:

1. Theoretical Sampling: Unlike initial sampling, which is purposive, in later stages, sampling is guided by analytical needs to fill theoretical gaps and verify relationships among categories.
2. Constant Comparative Technique: Constant comparison of data with other data, codes with other codes, and concepts with new concepts, which helps in the formation and refinement of categories.
3. Memoing: Recording ideas, questions, and conceptual and theoretical connections throughout the research process, which documents the researcher's line of reasoning.
4. Systematic Coding: Following the three-step process of open, axial, and selective coding, which helps structure the theory.
5. Theoretical Saturation: The point at which new data no longer add to the richness of the categories and the relationships among them have become stabilized.

2-2. Practical Example

Vahdani and Labbaf (2024), in their study titled "A Model of Institutionalization of Happiness in Sports Science Students Based on the Grounded Theory" utilized the systematic approach of Strauss and Corbin. For validation, they employed the triangulation strategy in two dimensions: triangulation of data sources (interviews with professors and students) and analyst triangulation (using two analysts to confirm emerging findings). The extracted theory was provided to experts in the field through member checking and was modified based on their feedback. Additionally, Labbaf and Vahdani (2025), in a study titled "Professional Athletes as Lifestyle Influencers" used the classical Glaserian approach and modeling method. To increase validity, they employed triangulation in two dimensions (participants and analysts) as well as member checking. Furthermore, Labbaf and Vahdani (2026), in another study titled "Digital Transformation in Sport Marketing: How Innovative Technologies Shape Generation Z and Alpha Consumer Expectations and Behavior?" in addition to the previous strategies, also used an inter-coder agreement test, which showed an agreement percentage of 83%.

A review of the Iranian literature reveals that nearly all grounded theory studies in Iranian sport management follow the Straussian approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The classical Glaserian approach (e.g., Labbaf & Vahdani, 2025) and the constructivist Charmazian approach remain exceptionally rare. This pattern suggests a methodological preference for systematic coding procedures and analytical paradigms, which may reflect the influence of dissertation supervision traditions or journal expectations in the Iranian context.

3. Validation in Content Analysis

Due to its dual quantitative-qualitative nature, content analysis encompasses a spectrum of approaches, each shaped by different philosophical foundations. The classic scholar in this field, Krippendorff (2018), in his renowned book, defines content analysis as a method for making replicable and valid inferences from texts and presents three types of definitions: definitions that consider content as residing within the text, definitions that consider content as a characteristic of the text's source, and definitions that view content in

the process of the researcher's interaction with the text within a specific context. This classification reflects a philosophical spectrum from positivism to hermeneutics. In contrast, Philipp Mayring's approach, emphasizing systematic qualitative content analysis, uses structured coding techniques and specific rules to increase dependability (Mayring, 2015). The approach of Graneheim and Lundman, emphasizing the distinction between manifest and latent content, places content analysis within the hermeneutic tradition and underscores the interpretive role of the researcher (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Finally, Hsieh and Shannon (2005), by introducing three approaches—conventional, directed, and summative—have provided a comprehensive framework for qualitative content analysis, each requiring a different validation logic. This diversity of approaches indicates that sport management researchers, before selecting validation strategies, must clarify their position regarding these schools of thought.

Content analysis, due to its hybrid nature (combining quantitative and qualitative approaches), has long been debated regarding validity criteria (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). In this method, balancing replicability and objectivity with interpretive depth has created a fundamental challenge.

3-1. Validation Techniques in Content Analysis

1. Use of a Transparent Coding Protocol: Developing a detailed coding framework with clear operational definitions for each code (Nowell et al., 2017; O'Connor & Joffe, 2020).
2. Inter-coder Reliability: Calculating the degree of agreement between two or more independent coders on a sample of the data. This coefficient, often calculated using methods such as Cohen's Kappa, is used to demonstrate the objectivity and replicability of the coding process (Skinner et al., 2020).
3. Peer Debriefing: Discussing codes and categories with expert colleagues (Morse et al., 2002; Nowell et al., 2017; Skinner et al., 2020).
4. Triangulation: Using multiple data sources or analysts to validate the findings (Humble, 2009).

3-2. Critical Discussion (Supportive and Opposing Views)

- Supportive View: Proponents of using inter-coder reliability consider it a way to increase objectivity, reduce researcher bias, and ensure research replicability (Trullols et al., 2004). They argue that this technique lends credibility to the research and facilitates its acceptance in scientific journals that have a quantitative orientation (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Skinner et al. (2020) also introduce this method as one of the techniques for establishing dependability.
- Opposing View: Critics, particularly those belonging to interpretive and relativist paradigms, have questioned the application of this coefficient. O'Connor and Joffe (2020) have extensively raised these criticisms, including that this technique is rooted in positivist philosophy and is inappropriate for qualitative data that are inherently interpretive and multi-layered. The problem of unitization—that is, different coders identifying the same textual blocks—is a fundamental challenge. Furthermore, there is no agreed-upon threshold for a satisfactory level of agreement. Smith and McGannon (2018) have also strongly criticized this method, considering it a myth that leads to superficiality. In their view, focusing on agreement prevents the discovery of deep and creative interpretations.
- Alternatives: Smith and McGannon (2018) propose the concept of critical friends instead of inter-coder reliability, a process based on critical dialogue and challenging interpretations to achieve greater depth and coherence.

3-3. Practical Example

Vahdani and Labbaf (2025c), in their study titled "Qualitative Analysis of Fatspiration in Sports Influencer Posts" used qualitative content analysis. To validate the analyses, they employed peer debriefing as well as inter-coder reliability; a portion of the data was coded by independent coders in the second stage of coding, and the degree of agreement between the codes was examined. This combined approach reflects the researchers' effort to simultaneously benefit from quantitative precision and qualitative depth.

3-4. Critical Box: The Pragmatic Duality of Inter-Coder Reliability in Iranian Research

Despite the strong philosophical critiques against inter-coder reliability (see Opposing View above), it is striking that several Iranian studies reviewed in this article (e.g., Vahdani and Labbaf, 2025c) have reported this coefficient as evidence of trustworthiness. This is not necessarily a sign of methodological ignorance. On the contrary, qualitative researchers in many non-Western contexts, including Iran, often face institutional

pressure to demonstrate "rigor" using quantitative indicators to satisfy journal reviewers or supervisors trained in positivist traditions (Morse et al., 2002).

Therefore, the presence of inter-coder reliability in these studies is interpreted here as a pragmatic duality—a strategic accommodation to external evaluation criteria—rather than a theoretical endorsement of its compatibility with interpretive qualitative research. This tension remains an unresolved challenge in the field and deserves explicit acknowledgment rather than uncritical acceptance or outright dismissal.

4. *Validation in Phenomenology*

Phenomenology, as a philosophical and methodological tradition, is rooted in the thought of Husserl (1983), who is considered its founder, emphasizing the return to the things themselves and the concept of intentional consciousness. In research application, this tradition has branched into several schools and approaches. The descriptive approach, developed by Giorgi (1988) at Duquesne University, adhering to its Husserlian roots, emphasizes the suspension of presuppositions (bracketing), phenomenological reduction, and the attainment of eidetic structures through imaginative variation, considering validity as fidelity to the experienced phenomenon and rigor in executing methodological steps. In contrast, the interpretive or hermeneutic approach, developed by Heidegger (2007) and manifested in the methodology of Van Manen (2016), holds that separating presuppositions is impossible and that understanding is always interpretive and context-dependent (Dasein); thus, validity is found in the richness of interpretation, hermeneutic coherence, and conveying the essence of the phenomenon to the reader. The psychological-interpretive approach, known through Paul Colaizzi's method, while drawing on Husserlian foundations, emphasizes the role of participants in validating the findings (member checking) (Colaizzi, 1978). This diversity of approaches indicates that sport management researchers, before selecting validation strategies, must clarify their position regarding these schools of thought and know whether they are following a descriptive approach (e.g., Giorgi) or an interpretive one (e.g., van Manen).

Phenomenology, aiming to describe and understand the meaning of individuals' lived experiences, follows its own specific philosophical perspective. Sousa (2014), emphasizing the Husserlian roots of this method, proposes specific criteria for its validation.

4-1. *Validation Techniques in Phenomenology*

Sousa (2014) introduces six key concepts for monitoring the validity of phenomenological research:

1. **Intentionality:** The research focuses on the intentional experience of consciousness, not merely subjective report. Validity depends on the researcher's ability to collect rich, detailed descriptions of phenomena.
2. **Psychological Phenomenological Reduction:** The researcher must temporarily suspend (bracket) their own beliefs and theoretical presuppositions in order to understand the phenomenon as it is experienced.
3. **Eidetic Psychological Analysis:** The goal is to arrive at the invariant and essential structure (Eidos) of a phenomenon, achieved through imaginative variation.
4. **Syntheses of Identification:** How consciousness creates unity of meaning through multiple appearances of a single phenomenon.
5. **Phenomenon versus Individual:** The focus is on studying the phenomenon as an intersubjective structure, not as a unique individual experience. For this reason, member checking is inappropriate for validating final results.
6. **Invariant Structures:** The ultimate goal is to achieve generalizable (though not universal) structures of phenomena, presented in a typified manner.

4-2. *Practical Example*

Sousa (2014) provides an example of phenomenological research in which patients were interviewed about the therapeutic process. In this study, eidetic dimensions such as therapist disclosure and cognitive reconstruction were extracted as general (eidetic) dimensions with different empirical instances from different patients. Norouzi Seyed Hossini et al. (2026), in their review article titled "Phenomenology and Sports Management: Explaining the Phenomenological Approach with an Emphasis on Studying Risk-Taking Among Mountaineers" while explaining the foundations of the two main schools of phenomenology (descriptive and interpretive), have operationalized validation strategies appropriate to each approach.

Emphasizing concepts such as bracketing and sensitizing, they employed strategies including member checking to confirm the consistency of findings with lived experiences, thick description to increase transferability, researcher reflexivity through analytical memos, and peer debriefing to validate interpretations.

Methodological warning: It should be noted that the use of member checking in phenomenological studies—as reported in Norouzi Seyed Hossini et al. (2026)—is incompatible with the descriptive (Giorgi) approach, which rejects returning to participants for validation on the grounds that the phenomenon, not the individual's subjective opinion, is the focus of analysis (Sousa, 2014). Researchers adopting a descriptive phenomenology should avoid member checking, whereas those following an interpretive (van Manen) or Colaizzi approach may find it appropriate.

5. Validation in Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry, as an approach that focuses on individuals' stories and lived experiences, has roots in the philosophical traditions of hermeneutics and phenomenology. Prominent scholars such as Polkinghorne (1995), distinguishing between analysis of narratives (searching for common themes) and narrative analysis (constructing a coherent narrative), and Riessman (2008), introducing thematic, structural, dialogic/performative approaches, have provided diverse frameworks for validation. Furthermore, Clandinin and Caine (2013), emphasizing the three dimensions of interaction (personal-social), continuity (temporal), and situation (place), consider validity to lie in the coherence and richness of the narrative and the participants' active involvement in reviewing their own stories. Finally, Heikkinen et al. (2007), by introducing five principles of historical continuity, reflexivity, dialectics, workability, and evocativeness, have provided a comprehensive framework for validating narrative research. Narrative inquiry examines the stories that individuals tell to understand and convey the meaning of their lives (McGannon et al., 2021). Validity in this method is related to the coherence and credibility of the story (Skinner et al., 2020), as well as its ability to create resonance and impact on the audience (Tracy, 2010).

5-1. Validation Techniques in Narrative Inquiry

1. Coherence and Clarity of the Narrative: The narrative must have internal coherence, with different parts of the story logically connected to one another (Skinner et al., 2020).
2. Correspondence with Collateral Evidence: Alignment of the narrative with other available evidence (e.g., documents, interviews with other individuals) (Skinner et al., 2020).
3. Thick Description: Providing sufficient detail about contexts, characters, and interactions to make the story believable (Tracy, 2010).
4. Participant Feedback: The individual's participation in re-reading and validating their own narrative (Nowell et al., 2017; Skinner et al., 2020).

5-2. Practical Example

Kiakojouri (2022), in their narrative research titled "Narrative Inquiry of Sports Heroes of Bandar Anzali: Analysis of Success Factors" interviewed 8 sports heroes with Asian and world medals, identifying their success factors in the form of five main themes including psychological factors, technical and physical ability, material and economic factors, organizational and managerial factors, and environmental living conditions. To validate the findings, the member checking strategy was used; the extracted themes were provided to the participants, and after applying their modifications, the final findings were confirmed. Additionally, the use of thick description, by presenting direct speech evidence from each participant, has increased the transferability of the findings.

Methodological warning: In narrative inquiry, participant feedback (member checking) should be approached with caution. Unlike thematic analysis where participants confirm themes, narrative research risks undermining the narrative coherence if participants are asked to verify their own stories as "true" or "accurate." The goal is not factual verification but interpretive understanding (Riessman, 2008). Researchers should therefore distinguish between validating the analysis and seeking approval of the story itself.

6. Validation in Ethnography

Ethnography, with roots in early 20th-century anthropology, was founded by Bronisław Malinowski as the father of this approach, emphasizing participant observation and long-term immersion in the research

field (Malinowski, 2013). In subsequent decades, Clifford Geertz, by introducing the concept of thick description, developed an interpretive approach to ethnography, considering validity as residing in the researcher's ability to provide a rich and contextualized picture of the culture under study (Geertz, 1973). In recent years, new approaches such as autoethnography, emphasizing the reflexivity of the researcher's lived experiences, and multi-sited ethnography, tracing phenomena across multiple locations, have opened new horizons in this method. Ethnography requires extended and in-depth immersion of the researcher in the culture of a social group (Skinner et al., 2020). The validity of ethnographic findings depends on the depth and accuracy of description (Tracy, 2010) and the researcher's ability to present a credible picture of that culture (Skinner et al., 2020).

6-1. *Validation Techniques in Ethnography*

1. Prolonged Engagement & Persistent Observation: Spending sufficient time in the research field to develop a deep understanding of the culture, build trust, and distinguish important issues from superficial ones (Skinner et al., 2020).
2. Thick Description: Providing a detailed and contextualized account of behaviors, beliefs, and interactions so that readers can envision the setting (Tracy, 2010).
3. Triangulation: Using multiple data sources, methods, and perspectives to validate observations (Skinner et al., 2020).
4. Peer Debriefing: Discussing findings and interpretations with other researchers familiar with that culture (Skinner et al., 2020).
5. Member Checking: Returning to community members and checking whether the researcher's descriptions and interpretations are consistent with their understanding of their own culture (Skinner et al., 2020).

6-2. *Practical Example*

Haji Hassani et al. (2025), in their study titled "Sociological Analysis of Sport Volunteering: a Bourdieusian Perspective" using the five-stage model of Carspecken, examined the lived experiences of volunteers in student sports Olympiads. To validate the findings, they employed multiple strategies including keeping reflective notes and memoing throughout the research process, simultaneous analysis of data from two perspectives (emic – participants' insider view – and etic – researcher's outsider view), and active and long-term presence in the research field (participant observation). These strategies, while increasing the depth of the findings, ensured the credibility and dependability of the research.

Methodological warning: While prolonged engagement is widely recommended in ethnography, it does not automatically guarantee validity. Extended time in the field may lead to over-rapport (the researcher becoming too close to participants and losing critical distance) or going native (uncritically adopting the insider perspective) (Skinner et al., 2020). Researchers must balance immersion with ongoing reflexivity and periodic distancing to maintain analytical clarity.

Discussion

A comprehensive review of the literature and analysis of validation techniques in qualitative methods of sport management reveals that this field faces two general approaches. On the one hand, general frameworks such as Lincoln and Guba's four criteria (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) serve as the cornerstone of trustworthiness in this research (Skinner et al., 2020). On the other hand, each qualitative method, depending on its philosophical foundations and specific procedures, requires distinct validation strategies, which have been detailed in this article for six methods: thematic analysis, grounded theory, content analysis, phenomenology, narrative inquiry, and ethnography. This duality is not a weakness but rather indicates the maturity and richness of this research field (Sousa, 2014).

One of the most important findings of this review is the emphasis on the critical nature of validation discussions and the necessity of presenting both supportive and opposing views. As elaborated in the content analysis section, the use of inter-coder reliability, despite its high prevalence (45% according to McGannon et al., 2021), has been seriously criticized by scholars (McGannon et al., 2021; O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Proponents emphasize enhancing rigor and replicability (Trullols et al., 2004), while critics argue that it is rooted in positivist philosophy and incompatible with the interpretive nature of qualitative data (Smith & McGannon, 2018). This contradiction indicates that sport management researchers should not rely solely on a quantitative

indicator for validation but should employ a combination of appropriate strategies with awareness of the philosophical foundations of their research.

A review of the methodology of published qualitative research shows that, in practice, a combination of diverse strategies has been used for validation. For example, Labbaf and Vahdani (2024) in their study "Qualitative Analysis of Artificial Intelligence Dimensions in the Field of Sports Science" and Vahdani and Labbaf (2025a) in their study "Challenges Faced by Volunteers in Organizing Sporting Events" and Vahdani and Labbaf (2025b) in their study "Opportunities and Challenges of Holding Sports Events for the Host Community" which were conducted using thematic analysis, employed member checking and inter-coder reliability strategies. In grounded theory studies, Vahdani and Labbaf (2024) in "A Model of Institutionalization of Happiness in Sports Science Students Based on the Grounded Theory", Labbaf and Vahdani (2025) in "Professional Athletes as Lifestyle Influencers," and Labbaf and Vahdani (2026) in "Digital Transformation in Sport Marketing" employed triangulation strategies in two dimensions (sources and analysts) as well as member checking. In qualitative content analysis research, Vahdani and Labbaf (2025c) in their study "Qualitative Analysis of Fitspiration in Sports Influencer Posts" used a combination of peer debriefing and inter-coder reliability, indicating a balanced approach to precision and depth. These examples confirm that Iranian researchers have gradually moved toward using combined strategies appropriate to the nature of their research.

In addition to traditional techniques, traces of novel validation approaches are also observed in Iranian research. The use of critical friends, as an alternative to inter-coder reliability, has been employed in the studies of Vahdani and Labbaf (2025). They utilized this approach in their study "Challenges Faced by Volunteers in Organizing Sporting Events (Case Study: The 16th Cultural and Sports Olympiad for Male University Students in Iran)" as well as in the study "Opportunities and Challenges of Holding Sports Events for the Host Community, Case Study: Hosting of University of Isfahan in the 16th Cultural and Sports Olympiad for Male Students of Iran" (Vahdani & Labbaf, 2025a, 2025b). This approach, instead of seeking agreement, emphasizes critical dialogue and challenging interpretations to achieve a deeper understanding (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Furthermore, the application of thick description as a strategy to increase transferability and build reader confidence has been emphasized in the aforementioned studies by Vahdani and Labbaf (2025). These cases indicate that Iranian researchers are utilizing not only classical techniques but also novel approaches aligned with global developments in qualitative methodology.

The findings of this review can also be interpreted within the framework of comprehensive models such as Tracy (2010). Tracy's eight-criteria model (worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethics, and meaningful coherence) makes it possible to categorize diverse validation techniques under broader objectives (Tracy, 2010; Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017). For example, member checking contributes to achieving the credibility criterion, thick description leads to resonance, and researcher reflexivity, which has been mentioned in some Iranian research, aligns with the sincerity criterion. This alignment demonstrates the effectiveness of multi-criteria models for the comprehensive evaluation of qualitative research quality.

Based on the findings of this study, several key recommendations can be offered for improving the quality of validation in qualitative research within sport management:

1. Researchers should, before beginning their study, become aware of the philosophical foundations and research method they are employing and select validation strategies accordingly (Morse et al., 2002; Sousa, 2014).
2. Instead of relying solely on a single technique (e.g., agreement coefficient), a combination of general and method-specific strategies appropriate to the method should be used (Humble, 2009; Nowell et al., 2017).
3. Journal reviewers and editors should also be aware of this strategic diversity and judge research based on the internal coherence among the research question, method, and validation strategies, not merely on the presence of a specific numerical indicator (Smith & McGannon, 2018).
4. Including a section on validation strategies in research reports and clearly describing processes such as critical friends, member checking, and reflexivity can enhance the transparency and credibility of the work (Tracy, 2010).

Conclusion

Finally, it can be concluded that validation of qualitative research in sport management is not a one-dimensional process but rather a multi-layered, dynamic approach dependent on context and research method. The use of Lincoln and Guba's general criteria alongside method-specific techniques, coupled with a critical view of common tools (e.g., agreement coefficient) and the application of novel approaches such as critical friends, can lead to the production of more credible, deeper, and more localized knowledge in this field.

Research Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The present review did not empirically compare the effectiveness of validation strategies across different areas of sport management, nor did it employ a meta-analytical approach to develop combined localized models. It is suggested that future research conduct comparative studies on the effectiveness of these strategies in different areas of sport management (e.g., sport marketing, event management, organizational behavior in clubs) and, through a meta-analytical approach, develop combined and localized validation models for this field.

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Conflicts of Interest

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