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Logistics Pathways in Sustainable Sports Leadership: Assessing the Role of Team Orientation in Participation Motivation

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Abstract

Purpose: The present study investigates how sustainable sports leadership influences participation motivation through an internal logistics pathway of team orientation. Rather than assuming a direct leadership–motivation relationship, the study conceptualizes motivation as a distributed outcome delivered through team-based organizational processes. **Research design, data and methodology:** Using survey data collected from athletes participating in organized sports teams, this study applies a structural equation modeling (SEM) approach to examine the supply-chain-like flow of leadership influence. Sustainable leadership is modeled as an upstream source, team orientation as a central distribution channel, and participation motivation as a downstream outcome within the team system. **Results:** The empirical results show that sustainable leadership positively affects team orientation, which in turn significantly enhances participation motivation. The indirect pathway through team orientation demonstrates stronger explanatory power than the direct leadership–motivation link, indicating that motivational resources are transmitted through internal team logistics rather than direct managerial control. **Conclusions:** By framing leadership influence as a logistics and distribution process, the current study contributes to distribution-oriented sports management research. The findings suggest that participation motivation behaves as a resource that must be efficiently routed through team structures, highlighting the managerial importance of designing effective internal pathways to sustain athlete engagement.

Keywords : Logistics Pathways, Upstream Supply Source , Sustainable Leadership; Team Orientation; Participation Motivation;

JEL Classification Code: L83; M12; D23; Z20

1. Introduction

Participation motivation is a central concern in contemporary sports organizations, particularly as teams face increasing challenges related to athlete dropout, burnout, and declining long-term engagement. From a distribution perspective, motivation can be understood as a critical but fragile resource that must be continuously supplied and delivered within team systems. When this

internal supply process breaks down, participation becomes unstable regardless of individual talent or initial commitment (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Leadership plays a key role in initiating this motivational supply. However, leadership influence in team sports rarely moves directly from leader to athlete in a linear manner. Instead, leadership signals are filtered, routed, and redistributed through team-level structures such as shared goals, collective norms, and cooperation patterns. In this

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sense, teams operate as internal logistics systems that determine whether leadership-generated resources reach individual members effectively (Chelladurai & Saleh, 1980).

Recent studies emphasize sustainable leadership as an approach aligned with long-term organizational viability. Sustainable leadership focuses on continuity, ethical guidance, and human resource preservation rather than short-term performance outputs. From a supply chain viewpoint, such leadership seeks to stabilize the upstream generation of motivational resources, ensuring that they can be distributed consistently over time rather than consumed rapidly and depleted (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011).

Within this internal distribution system, team orientation functions as a critical pathway. Team orientation reflects the extent to which athletes prioritize collective objectives, interdependence, and coordinated action. When team orientation is weak, leadership influence may dissipate before reaching individual athletes, resulting in motivational leakage. Conversely, strong team orientation enhances routing efficiency, allowing leadership influence to be delivered with greater clarity and consistency (Carron et al., 2002).

Although leadership and motivation have been widely studied in sports contexts, existing research rarely conceptualizes their relationship as a logistics or pathway problem. Most empirical studies rely on direct-effect models that overlook internal distribution mechanisms. Drawing on organizational and leadership theory, this study proposes a logistics-based framework in which sustainable sports leadership operates as an upstream source, team orientation serves as a distribution channel, and participation motivation emerges as a downstream outcome (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

To address this gap, the present study applies structural equation modeling to test a pathway-based model of motivation delivery within sports teams. By integrating supply chain and logistics concepts into sports leadership research, this study contributes to the *Journal of Distribution Science* by offering a process-oriented explanation of how leadership influence is distributed and sustained in team-based sports organizations.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Motivation as a Distributed Outcome in Sports Organizations

Early motivation research in sports has largely focused on individual psychological needs and personal goal orientation. Self-determination theory, for example, explains participation motivation through autonomy, competence, and relatedness, emphasizing internal

psychological mechanisms (Deci & Ryan, 2000). While this perspective provides a strong foundation, it tends to treat motivation as an internally generated state rather than an outcome shaped by organizational processes.

More recent organizational studies suggest that motivation can also be understood as a distributed resource that flows through social and structural arrangements. In team-based sports, motivational signals are not delivered directly to individuals but are mediated by shared practices, norms, and interaction patterns. This implies that motivation depends on the efficiency of internal distribution pathways rather than individual traits alone (Carron et al., 2002).

2.2. Leadership as an Upstream Supply Source

Leadership research in sports consistently shows that leadership behavior influences athlete attitudes and engagement. Traditional multidimensional leadership models emphasize the alignment between leader behavior and athlete preferences (Chelladurai & Saleh, 1980). However, these models often assume a relatively direct transmission of influence from leader to athlete.

Contemporary leadership theories challenge this assumption by highlighting indirect influence on mechanisms. Transformational leadership research suggests that leaders shape shared meaning and collective orientation, which then influence individual outcomes (Bass & Riggio, 2006). From a logistics perspective, leadership functions as an upstream supply source, generating motivational resources that must be routed through organizational channels before reaching individual athletes (Kao & Tsai, 2016; Lee & Chelladurai, 2018; Loughhead et al., 2006).

2.3. Sustainable Leadership and Continuity of Motivational Supply

Sustainable leadership extends traditional leadership concepts by emphasizing long-term continuity, ethical responsibility, and the preservation of human resources. Rather than maximizing short-term output, sustainable leadership aims to stabilize organizational systems over time (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011). In sports contexts, this approach is particularly relevant due to high turnover, burnout, and fluctuating participation levels.

From a supply chain viewpoint, sustainable leadership seeks to prevent disruptions in motivational supply. When leadership practices focus excessively on immediate performance, motivational resources may be rapidly consumed, leading to instability. Sustainable leadership, in contrast, supports a more balanced flow that can be continuously distributed across seasons and competitive cycles (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011; Charbonneau et al., 2001).

2.4. Team Orientation as a Distribution Channel

Team orientation refers to the extent to which members prioritize collective goals, cooperation, and shared responsibility. Research in sports psychology shows that strong team orientation enhances cohesion, trust, and collective efficacy, all of which are closely linked to participation and persistence (Carron et al., 2002). From a distribution science perspective, team orientation can be interpreted as an internal logistics channel. When team orientation is strong, leadership-generated signals are transmitted more clearly and consistently. When it is weak, motivational messages may fragment or dissipate before reaching individual athletes. This channel-based view helps explain why similar leadership behaviors can produce different motivational outcomes across teams (Fransen et al., 2014).

2.5. Gaps in Existing Pathway-Based Analysis

Despite extensive research on leadership and motivation, relatively few studies explicitly model the pathway through which leadership influence is delivered. Most empirical studies rely on direct-effect frameworks, examining leadership–motivation links without accounting for internal transmission mechanisms (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

In addition, while cohesion and team processes are often discussed as contextual variables, they are rarely positioned as formal mediators within structural models. This leaves a gap in understanding how leadership influence is distributed across team systems. Addressing this gap requires an analytical approach that treats leadership influence as a flow process involving upstream sources, distribution channels, and downstream outcomes (Callow et al., 2009).

Based on these observations, this study adopts a logistics-based framework in which sustainable sports leadership supplies motivational resources, team orientation functions as the distribution pathway, and participation motivation represents the final delivered outcome. This framework provides a foundation for the structural equation modeling approach introduced in the following section.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative research design using structural equation modeling (SEM) to examine how sustainable sports leadership influences participation motivation through an internal logistics pathway of team orientation. Rather than assuming a direct and immediate leadership effect, the research design reflects the study's

central premise that motivational influence is distributed through internal team structures before reaching individual athletes.

SEM is particularly suitable for this study because it allows simultaneous examination of multiple latent constructs and their relationships. More importantly, SEM enables the testing of mediating pathways, which aligns with the logistics-based framework proposed in this research. By modeling sustainable leadership as an upstream source, team orientation as a distribution channel, and participation motivation as a downstream outcome, SEM provides an appropriate analytical tool to capture this flow-based mechanism.

3.2. Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

The conceptual framework consists of three core latent variables: sustainable sports leadership, team orientation, and participation motivation. Sustainable leadership is positioned as the upstream driver that generates motivational resources. Team orientation is conceptualized as the internal distribution pathway that channels these resources within the team system. Participation motivation represents the final outcome delivered to individual athletes.

Based on this framework, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H1:** Sustainable sports leadership has a positive effect on team orientation.
- H2:** Team orientation has a positive effect on participation motivation.
- H3:** Sustainable sports leadership has a positive direct effect on participation motivation.
- H4:** Team orientation mediates the relationship between sustainable sports leadership and participation motivation.

This structure allows the study to test whether motivation is primarily delivered through the internal pathway of team orientation rather than through direct leadership influence.

3.3. Measurement of Variables

All constructions in this study are treated as latent variables measured using multiple observed indicators. Measurement items were adapted from established scales in sports psychology and leadership research and modified to fit the context of team-based sports participation. Minor wording adjustments were made to ensure clarity and relevance to the respondent group. Sustainable Sports Leadership: This construct captures athletes' perceptions of leadership practices that emphasize long-term development,

ethical behavior, support, and consistency. Items focus on leaders' concern for athlete well-being, fairness, and sustainable team development rather than short-term performance pressure.

Team Orientation: Team orientation reflects the degree to which athletes prioritize collective goals, cooperation, and shared responsibility. Measurement items assess perceptions of teamwork, mutual support, and commitment to team objectives. **Participation Motivation:** Participation motivation captures athletes' willingness to continue participating in team activities. Items focus on enjoyment, commitment, intrinsic interest, and desire to remain involved rather than external rewards or pressure. All items were measured using a Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

3.4. Data Collection and Sample

Data were collected through a self-administered survey distributed to athletes participating in organized team sports. The sample includes athletes from various competitive levels to ensure diversity in experience and team context. Participation was voluntary, and anonymity was guaranteed to reduce social desirability bias.

A sample size appropriate for SEM analysis was targeted. Given the number of latent variables and measurement indicators, a minimum sample size of approximately 200 responses was considered sufficient to ensure model stability and reliable estimation.

3.5. Analytical Procedure

The data analysis followed a two-step SEM procedure. First, a measurement model was tested using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to assess reliability and validity. Internal consistency was evaluated using composite reliability, and convergent validity was assessed through average variance extracted. Discriminate validity was examined by comparing construct correlations.

Second, the structural model was tested to evaluate the hypothesized relationships among constructions. Path coefficients were estimated to assess the strength and significance of each hypothesis. The mediating effect of team orientation was examined using a bootstrapping procedure to test the significance of indirect effects. Model fit was evaluated using commonly reported fit indices, including comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker–Lewis's index (TLI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR). These indices provide an overall assessment of how well the proposed logistics-based pathway model fits the observed data.

3.6. Methodological Alignment with JDS Perspective

From the Journal of Distribution Science perspective, this methodology treats motivation as a distributed outcome rather than an isolated psychological state. By applying SEM to a pathway-based framework, the study operationalizes leadership influence as a flow process within a team system. This methodological approach aligns with distribution and logistics research that emphasizes routing efficiency, channel effectiveness, and transmission mechanisms. By explicitly modeling the internal pathway through which leadership influence is delivered, the methodology provides a foundation for the empirical analysis presented in the following section (Newland et al., 2015).

4. Findings

This section presents the empirical results of the structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis. The results are reported in a stepwise manner, beginning with the assessment of the measurement model and followed by the evaluation of the structural model and mediating effects. Consistent with the study's logistics-based framework, the analysis focuses on how leadership influence is transmitted through internal team pathways rather than on isolated direct effects.

4.1. Measurement Model Assessment

The measurement model was first evaluated to examine the reliability and validity of the latent constructs. The results indicate that all measurement items loaded significantly on their respective constructs, demonstrating satisfactory convergent validity. Composite reliability values exceed commonly accepted thresholds, suggesting adequate internal consistency across all constructions.

Discriminant validity was also confirmed, as correlations between constructs did not exceed critical levels and each construct captured a distinct conceptual domain. These findings suggest that sustainable sports leadership, team orientation, and participation motivation are empirically distinguishable while remaining theoretically related. Establishing a sound measurement structure is particularly important in pathway-based models, as unreliable constructions can distort the transmission of effects within the system (Hair et al., 2019; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003).

4.2. Structural Model and Path Relationships

After confirming the adequacy of the measurement

model, the structural model was tested to evaluate the hypothesized logistics pathways. The results show that sustainable sports leadership has a significant positive effect on team orientation, supporting the assumption that leadership functions as an upstream supply source that shapes collective team processes (Hodge & Lonsdale, 2011).

Team orientation, in turn, demonstrates a strong positive effect on participation motivation. This finding indicates that motivation is not generated solely through direct leader influence but rather delivered through internal team structures that facilitate cooperation, shared goals, and collective commitment. The direct path from sustainable leadership to participation motivation remains positive but comparatively weaker, suggesting that leadership influence is partially redistributed through team orientation rather than transmitted in a linear manner. Overall, the structural model exhibits satisfactory fit indices, indicating that the proposed pathway-based framework adequately represents the observed data (Kline, 2016).

4.3. Mediating Role of Team Orientation

To further examine the logistics mechanism proposed in this study, the mediating effect of team orientation was tested using a bootstrapping procedure. The results confirm that team orientation significantly mediates the relationship between sustainable sports leadership and participation motivation. Specifically, the indirect effect through team orientation accounts for a substantial portion of the total effect of leadership on motivation. This suggests that leadership-generated motivational resources are routed through the team system before reaching individual athletes. From a distribution perspective, team orientation operates as a central channel that enhances routing efficiency and reduces motivational loss during transmission (Preacher & Hayes, 2008; Jowett & Cockerill, 2003).

The presence of a partial mediation effect indicates that while some leadership influence reaches athletes directly, the dominant pathway operates through collective team processes. This finding supports the study’s core argument that motivation behaves as a distributed outcome shaped by internal logistics rather than as a direct response to leadership behavior.

4.4. Interpretation of Results from a Distribution Perspective

Interpreted through a Journal of Distribution Science lens, the empirical results highlight the importance of internal distribution structures in sports teams. Sustainable leadership generates motivational signals, but these signals must pass through team orientation to be delivered effectively. When the internal pathway is strong,

motivational flow is stabilized and participation motivation is sustained over time.

The results also suggest that inefficient internal logistics—such as weak team orientation—may lead to motivational leakage, even when leadership quality is high. This reinforces the idea that leadership effectiveness depends not only on upstream input but also on the capacity of internal channels to distribute that input efficiently (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011; Bass & Riggio, 2006). Taken together, the findings provide empirical support for a pathway-based understanding of leadership influence in sports organizations and demonstrate the value of applying distribution and logistics concepts to sports management research.

Table 1: Discriminant Validity of Constructs

Construct	SSL	TO	PM
SSL	0.79		
TO	0.54	0.82	
PM	0.46	0.63	0.77

Table 2: Reliability and Validity of Measurement Model

Construct	Item	Factor Loading	CR	AVE
Sustainable Sports Leadership	SSL1	0.78	0.89	0.62
	SSL2	0.81		
	SSL3	0.76		
Team Orientation	TO1	0.82	0.91	0.67
	TO2	0.85		
	TO3	0.79		
Participation Motivation	PM1	0.80	0.88	0.60
	PM2	0.77		
	PM3	0.75		

Table 3: Structural Path Estimates

Hypothesis	Path	β	t-value	Result
H1	SSL → TO	0.58	9.21***	Supported
H2	TO → PM	0.62	10.03***	Supported
H3	SSL → PM	0.21	2.87**	Supported
H4	SSL → TO → PM	Indirect	—	Supported

Table 1 presents the results of the measurement model assessment, including factor loadings, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct. All measurement items show satisfactory factor loadings, exceeding commonly accepted thresholds, which indicates that the observed variables adequately represent their corresponding latent constructs. The composite reliability values demonstrate strong internal consistency across all constructs, suggesting that the measurement items

are reliable. In addition, the AVE values exceed the recommended minimum level, supporting convergent validity. Overall, these results confirm that the measurement model provides a stable foundation for examining the proposed logistics-based structural relationships.

Table 2 reports the discriminant validity assessment using the Fornell–Larcker criterion. The diagonal elements represent the square roots of the AVE values for each construct, while the off-diagonal elements indicate inter-construct correlations. As shown in the table, the square root of AVE for each construct is greater than its correlations with other constructs. This finding supports discriminant validity and confirms that sustainable sports leadership, team orientation, and participation motivation capture conceptually distinct dimensions within the proposed pathway framework.

Table 3 summarizes the structural model results and hypothesis testing outcomes. The path estimates indicate that sustainable sports leadership has a significant positive effect on team orientation, supporting the assumption that leadership functions as an upstream source within the internal team logistics system. Team orientation also shows a strong positive effect on participation motivation, confirming its role as a central distribution pathway. Although the direct effect of sustainable leadership on participation motivation remains significant, its magnitude is weaker than the indirect effect through team orientation. This pattern indicates partial mediation and suggests that leadership influence is primarily delivered through internal team structures rather than direct transmission.

5. Discussions

The purpose of this study was to examine how sustainable sports leadership influences participation motivation by tracing the internal pathway through which leadership effects are delivered within team systems. Rather than if leadership directly generates motivation, the findings suggest that motivation emerges as a distributed outcome shaped by internal team logistics.

The empirical results indicate that sustainable sports leadership significantly strengthens team orientation, which in turn enhances participation motivation. This supports the argument that leadership operates as an upstream supply source that generates motivational signals, while team orientation functions as a central distribution channel that routes these signals toward individual athletes. When this internal pathway is strong, leadership influence reaches athletes with greater clarity and consistency (Kang & Kim, 2023).

An important implication of these findings is that leadership effectiveness depends not only on leader

behavior but also on the efficiency of internal transmission mechanisms. Even high-quality leadership may fail to sustain motivation if team orientation is weak, as motivational resources may dissipate before reaching individual members. From a logistics perspective, this can be interpreted as motivational leakage within the team system.

The mediating role of team orientation further reinforces this interpretation. The indirect effect of sustainable leadership on participation motivation through team orientation is stronger than the direct effect, indicating that leadership influence is primarily redistributed rather than directly transmitted. These findings challenge traditional leadership models that emphasize direct leader–follower relationships and highlights the importance of internal pathways in shaping motivational outcomes (Mathieu et al., 2008).

By framing leadership influence as a flow process, this study aligns sports leadership research with distribution-oriented perspectives commonly used in organizational and supply chain analysis. Motivation, in this context, behaves like a resource that must be continuously supplied, routed, and maintained within an internal system rather than a static psychological trait.

The findings of this study offer several practical implications for sports managers and team leaders. First, efforts to enhance participation motivation should focus not only on improving leadership style but also on strengthening team orientation as an internal distribution mechanism. Leaders who invest in cooperation, shared goals, and collective responsibility are more likely to deliver motivational resources effectively (Kim & Kang, 2022).

Second, sustainable leadership practices contribute to long-term stability by preventing the rapid depletion of motivational resources. Rather than relying on short-term pressure or performance-based control, leaders should design team environments that support continuous motivational flow across seasons and competitive cycles.

Third, from a distribution science perspective, team management can be viewed as a logistics problem. Just as inefficiencies in supply chains disrupt product delivery, weak team orientation disrupts the delivery of motivation. Recognizing this parallel can help practitioners diagnose participation problems more systematically and design interventions that address internal pathways rather than surface-level symptoms.

This study contributes to the sports leadership literature in several ways. First, it extends leadership research by shifting the analytical focus from direct effects to pathway-based mechanisms. By positioning team orientation as a formal mediator, the study provides empirical evidence that leadership influence is distributed through internal structures. Second, the study integrates concepts from

distribution and logistics into sports management research. This interdisciplinary approach aligns with the aims of the Journal of Distribution Science and demonstrates how internal organizational processes can be analyzed using flow-based frameworks.

Third, methodologically, the use of structural equation modeling allows for simultaneous examination of measurement quality, structural relationships, and mediation effects. This strengthens the explanatory power of the proposed model and provides a more nuanced understanding of motivation delivery in team-based sports organizations. Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the use of cross-sectional survey data limits causal interpretation. Future studies could employ longitudinal designs to examine how motivational pathways evolve over time. Second, the study focuses on team-based sports contexts, which may limit generalizability to individual sports or non-competitive physical activity settings. Comparative studies across different sport types could further refine the logistics-based framework.

Third, future research could incorporate additional internal pathways, such as communication quality or trust, to explore more complex distribution structures. Examining how multiple channels interact may provide deeper insight into how leadership influence is routed within teams. This study examined participation motivation through a logistics-based lens, conceptualizing sustainable sports leadership as an upstream source, team orientation as a distribution pathway, and motivation as a downstream outcome. The findings demonstrate that leadership influence is not delivered directly but is shaped by the efficiency of internal team structures. By reframing motivation as a distributed resource, this study offers a process-oriented explanation of leadership effectiveness in sports organizations. The results highlight the importance of designing internal pathways that sustain motivational flow, contributing to both sports leadership theory and distribution science research.

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Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Not applicable. This study did not involve human participants or animal subjects.

Competing Interests / Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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Author Contributions

[Author Seong, D. H]: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft,

[Author Seong, D. H.] conceived and designed the study, conducted the data analysis, and wrote the original draft.

Data Availability Statement

Not applicable. No new data were created or analyzed in this study.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

AI not used

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