



The Impact of Coaching Leadership Style on Motivation and Team Cohesion in Volleyball

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between coaching leadership style, athlete motivation, and team cohesion in volleyball. The research was conducted with 28 female players from a local volleyball club in Shkodër, Albania, aged between 16 and 25 years. A mixed-methods design was employed, combining standardized questionnaires with semi-structured interviews to capture both quantitative and qualitative aspects of the athletes' experiences. The results indicate that democratic and transformational leadership styles are associated with higher levels of intrinsic motivation, greater athlete satisfaction, and stronger perceptions of team cohesion. In contrast, autocratic leadership was linked to lower motivation, reduced commitment, and weaker social bonds within the team. These findings reflect broader changes in Albanian sport, where the persistence of authoritarian coaching traditions inherited from the communist era is increasingly challenged by the expectations of younger athletes raised in a democratic environment. The study underlines the importance of coach education programs that emphasize inclusive, participatory, and supportive leadership, which not only enhance performance but also contribute to the personal development and long-term retention of players in volleyball.

Keywords: Leadership, volleyball, motivation, cohesion, coaching

1. Introduction

The role of the coach in modern sport extends beyond the design of training programs and the development of technical skills. Coaches are increasingly recognized as leaders whose style of interaction with athletes has a direct influence on motivation, cohesion, and ultimately performance. In volleyball, where teamwork and synchronized actions are crucial, the leadership style of the coach assumes a particular significance. Team morale, the willingness to commit to demanding training schedules, and the ability to function as a cohesive unit on court are all shaped by the quality of leadership.

Leadership in sport is frequently categorized by democratic and autocratic behaviors (Chelladurai & Saleh, 1980), whereas transformational leadership has been shown to influence athlete motivation, cohesion, and performance (Mach et al., 2022).

Democratic leadership emphasizes participation, shared decision-making, and communication, creating a sense of ownership among athletes. Autocratic leadership, on the other hand, is directive and authority-based, often efficient in the short term but potentially detrimental to long-term motivation. Transformational leadership focuses on inspiration and personal development, encouraging athletes to transcend individual limits and contribute to collective success. These leadership behaviors are closely linked to athletes' motivational processes and the quality of the coach-athlete relationship, particularly through the satisfaction of basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). Previous research has also highlighted the role of leadership processes in fostering shared identity, cohesion, and collective functioning within team sport environments (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016). While these distinctions are well studied in international literature, limited research has addressed their specific impact within volleyball in Albania.

The Albanian context offers a particularly interesting background for the study of coaching leadership. During the communist period, sport was strongly influenced by centralized structures and authoritarian practices, reflecting the political system of the time. Volleyball was among the most popular sports, especially for women, but its development was guided by rigid discipline and hierarchical authority. In the three decades since the transition to democracy, volleyball has continued to occupy an important place in Albanian sporting life, yet the expectations of athletes have changed. Younger generations are less receptive to authoritarian coaching and more motivated by inclusive and supportive approaches that recognize their autonomy.

Against this background, the present study investigates how different coaching leadership styles affect the motivation and cohesion of volleyball players in Shkodër. Team cohesion is commonly defined as a multidimensional construct reflecting both task- and social-related bonds among athletes, and it plays a central role in team functioning (Caron & Brawley, 2000). By combining quantitative data from questionnaires with qualitative insights from interviews, the study seeks to clarify whether democratic and transformational approaches provide measurable benefits over autocratic styles in the Albanian setting. The findings are intended to contribute to both the academic understanding of sport leadership and to the practical improvement of coaching education in volleyball.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

The study sample consisted of 28 female volleyball players from the Vllaznia Volleyball Club in Shkodër, Albania. The athletes were between 16 and 25 years of age (mean age 19.8 ± 2.4 years). All participants had at least three years of competitive experience at the regional or national level. None reported recent injuries or medical conditions that could have influenced their responses. Participation in the study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all athletes prior to data collection.

2.2. Instruments

Quantitative data were collected using standardized self-report questionnaires derived from well-established instruments in sport psychology, adapted linguistically and contextually for use with Albanian volleyball players.

Coaching leadership style was assessed using an adapted version of the Leadership Scale for Sports (LSS) developed by Chelladurai and Saleh (1980). The scale measures athletes' perceptions of their coach's leadership behaviors, with subscales reflecting democratic behavior, autocratic behavior, and transformational-oriented behaviors. Items were adapted to reflect the volleyball training and competition context. Participants responded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). Sample items included: "*My coach encourages players to participate in decision-making*" (democratic leadership) and "*My coach makes decisions without consulting players*" (autocratic leadership).

Athlete motivation was measured using items adapted from the Sport Motivation Scale II (SMS-II), grounded in Self-Determination Theory. The instrument assesses different types of motivation, with the present study focusing primarily on intrinsic motivation. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale. A sample item was: "*I participate in volleyball because I enjoy improving my skills.*"

Team cohesion was assessed using items adapted from the Group Environment Questionnaire (GEQ) developed by Carron et al. (2000). The questionnaire evaluates athletes' perceptions of social and task cohesion within the team. Items were tailored to the volleyball team setting, with example statements such as: "*Our team works together to achieve common goals.*" Responses were provided on a five-point Likert scale.

All instruments were translated into Albanian and reviewed by two experts in sport sciences to ensure clarity and content validity. Internal consistency reliability for the adapted scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. In the present sample, reliability coefficients were acceptable, with α values exceeding 0.70 for leadership, motivation, and cohesion subscales, indicating satisfactory internal consistency given the exploratory nature and sample size of the study.

2.3. Qualitative Data Collection

To complement the quantitative findings, a qualitative component was included to explore athletes' experiences and perceptions of coaching leadership in greater depth. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive subsample of ten athletes selected from the larger group, ensuring variation in age, playing experience, and tenure within the team.

An interview guide was developed to ensure consistency across interviews while allowing participants to elaborate freely on their experiences. Key interview topics included:

1. athletes' perceptions of their coach's leadership style;
2. perceived effects of coaching behavior on individual motivation;
3. the influence of leadership on team relationships, communication, and cohesion;
4. comparisons between supportive and authoritarian coaching behaviors.

Interviews were conducted in person in a quiet setting at the training facility, lasted approximately 20-30 minutes, and were audio-recorded with participants' consent. All interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

2.4. Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Analysis proceeded through six phases: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of preliminary themes, review and refinement of themes, definition and naming of themes, and production of the final narrative.

Coding was conducted independently by two researchers with expertise in sport psychology. An initial coding framework was developed after analysis of three transcripts and subsequently applied to the remaining data. Discrepancies in coding were discussed until consensus was reached. Inter-coder agreement was assessed using Cohen's kappa and indicated substantial agreement ($\kappa > 0.70$). This process enhanced the credibility and dependability of the qualitative findings.

To strengthen trustworthiness, several strategies were employed, including maintenance of an audit trail, regular peer debriefing among the research team, and the use of illustrative participant quotations to support each theme.

2.5. Procedure

The questionnaires were administered during a regular training session, under the supervision of the research team, to ensure clarity and consistency in responses. Interviews were scheduled separately and conducted in person, lasting between 20 and 30 minutes each. All interviews were recorded with participant permission and transcribed for analysis.

2.6. Ethics, Sampling Strategy, and Contextual Covariates

Ethical considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards for research involving human participants and followed the guidelines of "Luigj Gurakuqi" University, Shkodër. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. For participants under the age of 18, consent was also obtained from a parent or legal guardian. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured by assigning numerical codes to participants, and all data were stored securely and used exclusively for research purposes.

Sampling strategy and contextual variables

Participants were recruited using a convenience sampling strategy from a single competitive volleyball club (Vllaznia Volleyball Club, Shkodër). Inclusion criteria were: female gender, active participation in competitive volleyball, a minimum of three years of playing experience, and regular involvement in team training sessions. Athletes with recent injuries or medical conditions that could have influenced their responses were excluded.

To account for potential contextual influences, several background variables were recorded, including age, years of competitive experience, playing position, and length of time working with the current coach. These variables were considered in the interpretation of results and, where appropriate, included as covariates in exploratory quantitative analyses.

2.7 Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics and group comparisons to identify trends in motivation and cohesion according to perceived leadership style. Qualitative data from interviews were examined using thematic analysis to highlight recurring patterns and contextual explanations. The integration of both sources allowed for a comprehensive interpretation of how coaching leadership style affects motivation and team cohesion in volleyball.

3. Results

3.1. Preliminary Analyses

Data were screened for completeness and distributional assumptions prior to inferential analysis. No missing data were observed. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were calculated for all main variables. Normality was assessed using Shapiro–Wilk tests and inspection of skewness and kurtosis. Given the relatively small sample size ($N = 28$), minor deviations from normality were observed for some variables; therefore, both parametric and non-parametric analyses were considered, with consistent patterns of results.

3.2. Differences in Motivation and Team Cohesion by Leadership Style

To examine differences in athlete motivation and team cohesion across perceived coaching leadership styles (democratic, transformational, autocratic), one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted. Leadership style was treated as a between-subjects factor based on athletes' dominant perceptions.

3.2.1. Athlete Motivation

Results revealed a statistically significant effect of leadership style on athlete motivation, $F(2, 25) = 9.12$, $p = .001$, with a large effect size ($\eta^2 = .42$).

Post-hoc comparisons (Tukey HSD) indicated that athletes perceiving their coach as adopting a democratic leadership style ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 0.50$) and a transformational leadership style ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 0.60$) reported significantly higher motivation than those perceiving an autocratic leadership style ($M = 3.10$, $SD = 0.70$; $p < .01$ for both comparisons). No statistically significant difference was found between democratic and transformational leadership styles ($p > .05$).

3.2.2. Team Cohesion

A significant effect of leadership style was also observed for team cohesion, $F(2, 25) = 11.47$, $p < .001$, with a large effect size ($\eta^2 = .48$).

Players in the democratic ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 0.40$) and transformational ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 0.30$) leadership groups reported significantly higher cohesion compared with the autocratic leadership group ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 0.80$; $p < .001$). Differences between democratic and transformational leadership styles were not statistically significant ($p > .05$).

Table 1 presents the mean scores and standard deviations for motivation and cohesion by perceived leadership style.

Table 1. Mean scores of motivation and cohesion according to perceived leadership style

Leadership Style	n	Motivation (Mean \pm SD)	Team Cohesion (Mean \pm SD)
Democratic	10	4.30 ± 0.50	4.40 ± 0.40
Transformational	9	4.20 ± 0.60	4.50 ± 0.30
Autocratic	9	3.10 ± 0.70	3.00 ± 0.80

Note. Scores were measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Leadership style groups were based on athletes' dominant perceptions of coaching behavior.

3.2.3. Exploratory Analyses Including Contextual Covariates

Exploratory analyses were conducted to examine whether the observed relationships remained consistent when accounting for relevant contextual variables, including age, years of competitive experience, and length of time working with the current coach. When these variables were included as covariates in ANCOVA models, the overall pattern of results remained unchanged. Leadership style continued to show a significant association with both motivation and cohesion, while covariates did not reach statistical significance. Given the limited sample size, these analyses are interpreted as exploratory.

3.3. Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of interview data identified three overarching themes illustrating how coaching leadership style influenced athletes' motivation and team cohesion.

3.3.1. Theme 1: Autonomy and Voice as Sources of Motivation

Athletes consistently emphasized that being consulted and having a voice in training-related decisions enhanced their intrinsic motivation and engagement. Democratic leadership behaviors were described as fostering responsibility and enjoyment in training.

3.3.2. Theme 2: Inspirational Leadership and Collective Identity

Transformational leadership behaviors, such as encouragement, individual support, and the articulation of shared goals, were perceived as strengthening trust and unity among teammates. Athletes described feeling part of a collective effort rather than isolated performers.

3.3.3. Theme 3: Authoritarian Control and Psychological Strain

Autocratic coaching behaviors were associated with increased stress, fear of making mistakes, and reduced communication within the team. Athletes reported that excessive control undermined confidence and weakened interpersonal relationships.

Representative quotations supporting each theme are provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Qualitative themes, descriptions, and representative quotations

Theme	Description	Representative Athlete Quotations
Autonomy and voice as sources of motivation	Democratic leadership behaviors that encouraged athlete participation and shared decision-making enhanced intrinsic motivation and enjoyment of training.	“When the coach listens to us and asks for our opinion, I feel more motivated and responsible for the team.”
Inspirational leadership and collective identity	Transformational behaviors such as encouragement, vision sharing, and individual support fostered trust, unity, and a strong sense of collective identity within the team.	“Our coach motivates us by making us believe in our common goal. It makes us feel like one team.”
Authoritarian control and psychological strain	Autocratic leadership behaviors were perceived as creating fear of mistakes, psychological pressure, and reduced communication, negatively affecting motivation and cohesion.	“When everything is controlled and you are afraid to make mistakes, you lose confidence and the team feels divided.”

Note. Quotations are translated from Albanian and anonymized to protect participant confidentiality.

3.4. Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Integration of quantitative and qualitative results revealed strong convergence between data sources. Quantitative findings showing higher motivation and cohesion under democratic and transformational leadership styles were supported by qualitative themes emphasizing autonomy, inspiration, and collective identity. Conversely, lower quantitative scores associated with autocratic leadership aligned with qualitative reports of psychological strain and reduced team cohesion. Together, these findings provide a coherent mixed-methods explanation of how coaching leadership style shapes both motivational and social dynamics in volleyball teams.

4. Discussion

This study examined the relationship between coaching leadership style, athlete motivation, and team cohesion in a volleyball context using a mixed-methods design. The findings indicate that democratic and transformational leadership styles are associated with higher levels of intrinsic motivation and stronger perceptions of team cohesion, whereas autocratic leadership is linked to less favorable outcomes in both domains.

Leadership style and motivation

Athletes who perceived their coach as democratic or transformational reported significantly higher motivation compared to those who perceived an autocratic leadership style. These results are consistent with Self-Determination Theory, which emphasizes the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in fostering intrinsic motivation. Democratic coaching behaviors, such as involving athletes in decision-making and encouraging open communication, are likely to support autonomy, while transformational behaviors promote competence through encouragement and individualized support.

Qualitative findings reinforce this interpretation. Athletes described feeling more motivated when they were listened to and when the coach showed trust in their abilities. In contrast, autocratic leadership was associated with pressure, fear of mistakes, and reduced enjoyment of training, which are known to undermine intrinsic motivation.

Leadership style and team cohesion

The results also show a clear association between leadership style and team cohesion. Democratic and transformational leadership styles were linked to higher cohesion scores, while autocratic leadership was associated with lower cohesion. This finding is consistent with established models of team cohesion, which highlight the role of communication, shared goals, and interpersonal relationships in team sports.

Transformational leadership appeared particularly relevant for fostering collective identity, as athletes emphasized feelings of unity and shared purpose. Conversely, authoritarian coaching behaviors were perceived as limiting communication and trust among teammates, negatively affecting both social and task cohesion.

Interpretation within leadership models

From the perspective of Chelladurai's Multidimensional Model of Leadership, the findings suggest an alignment between athletes' preferred leadership behaviors and positive psychological outcomes. When coaching behavior matched athletes' preferences for participatory and supportive leadership, motivation and cohesion were higher. Autocratic leadership, which appeared misaligned with athletes' expectations, was associated with poorer outcomes.

Contextual considerations

The findings should be interpreted within the Albanian sporting context, where coaching practices have traditionally been influenced by hierarchical and authoritarian models. While such approaches may promote discipline, the present results suggest that they are less effective in supporting motivation and cohesion among contemporary athletes. Younger players appear to value leadership styles that emphasize dialogue, support, and shared responsibility.

Mixed-methods contribution

A strength of this study is the convergence of quantitative and qualitative findings. Statistical differences across leadership styles were supported by athletes' narratives describing how specific coaching behaviors influenced their motivation and relationships within the team. This integration strengthens the interpretation of the results and highlights the usefulness of mixed-methods approaches in sport leadership research.

Limitations and future research

The study has limitations that should be acknowledged. The sample was small and drawn from a single volleyball club, limiting generalizability. The use of self-report measures introduces the possibility of common-method bias, and the presence of a single coaching context raises the risk of single-coach effects. Future research should include multiple teams and coaches, larger samples, and longitudinal designs to examine changes over time.

Practical implications

The results of this study suggest that coaching leadership should be considered an essential component of coach education in volleyball, alongside technical and tactical preparation. The clear differences observed between democratic, transformational, and autocratic leadership styles indicate that the way coaches interact with athletes has direct consequences for motivation and team cohesion.

From a practical perspective, coach education programs could benefit from placing greater emphasis on participatory leadership practices. Training activities that encourage coaches to involve athletes in goal setting, to communicate openly during training, and to provide constructive feedback may help foster higher levels of motivation and engagement. Such practices could be evaluated through athlete feedback questionnaires and structured observation of coaching behavior during training sessions.

In addition, the positive association between transformational leadership and team cohesion suggests the value of training coaches to focus on team identity and collective goals. Coaches could be supported in developing strategies that promote trust, shared responsibility, and a sense of belonging within the team. Changes in team cohesion could be monitored through regular assessments and informal feedback from athletes over the course of the season.

Finally, the less favorable outcomes associated with autocratic leadership highlight the need for reflection on traditional authoritarian coaching approaches that are still present in some sporting contexts. Coach education initiatives could address alternative ways of maintaining discipline and structure without relying on fear or excessive control. Indicators such as athlete satisfaction, training attendance, and long-term retention may provide useful information on the impact of such changes in coaching practice.

Overall, these findings underline the importance of integrating leadership and communication skills into coach education. Such integration may contribute not only to improved performance but also to athlete well-being and sustained participation in volleyball.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrated that coaching leadership style has a measurable impact on the motivation and cohesion of female volleyball players at Vllaznia Volleyball Club in Shkodër. Democratic and transformational approaches were associated with higher motivation levels, greater satisfaction, and stronger perceptions of unity within the team, while autocratic leadership was linked to reduced enthusiasm, weaker communication, and lower trust among athletes. The findings confirm that leadership in volleyball extends beyond tactical and technical expertise, influencing the psychological and social dimensions that sustain performance.

These results have practical implications for the development of coaching practice in Albania. The persistence of authoritarian methods, inherited from earlier periods of centralized sport organization, appears increasingly incompatible with the expectations of today's athletes. Younger generations respond more positively to leadership that encourages dialogue, inspiration, and collective responsibility. To meet these expectations, coach education programs should integrate training in leadership and communication skills, equipping coaches to adopt democratic and transformational practices. Such an approach would not only improve team performance but also contribute to athlete well-being, retention in sport, and the broader modernization of volleyball in Albania.

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