Leadership Efficacy and Perceived Sport Performance of Highly Competitive Athletes

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INTRODUCTION

Hogan and Kaiser (2005) define leadership as a reciprocal process where the leader influences their collaborators, persuading them to achieve certain common goals. The study of leadership in sports is focused on the influence that coaches can have on teams and their athletes. This influence has been evaluated by using mostly subjective variables, analyzing how athletes feel (e.g., satisfaction; well-being), but have not paid as much attention to how athletes perceive their sport performance (Horn, 2008). Thus, to address this gap, this study examined the relationship between how athletes perceived the leadership of their coaches and how athletes perceived individual and collective sport performance. The analysis was based on the **Leadership Efficacy Model** (Gomes, 2021), which highlights three elements as central to explaining leadership efficacy: the need of congruence between the conceptual and practical leadership cycles, the need of using positive leadership styles, and the need of adapt leadership to antecedent factors of leadership (see Figure 1). This analysis also considered the potential influence of gender and type of sport.

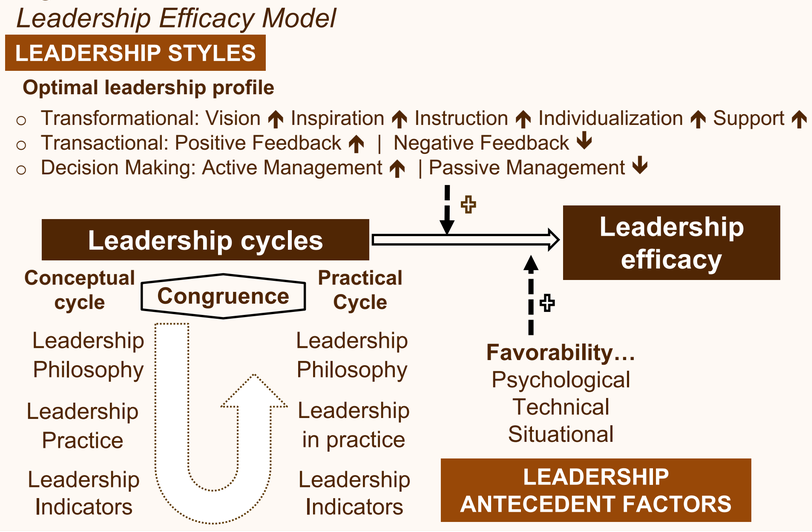
Considering these aspects, two hypotheses were tested in this study:

H1. Optimized Congruence Hypothesis: Higher levels of congruence between the conceptual and practical cycles of leadership predict higher perceptions of individual and collective sport performance, and this relationship is influenced by leadership styles and antecedent factors of leadership.

H2. Optimized Congruence Invariance Hypothesis: the Optimized Congruence Hypothesis occurs regardless of the gender and the sport of the athletes.

Figure 1

Leadership Efficacy Model



METHOD

The sample of this study was obtained by convenience, with the following criteria: athletes competing in the First National Division of the main championships of Volleyball and Basketball. A total of 255 athletes participated, being 109 male (43%) and 146 female (57%). Athletes played Basketball (*n* = 96; 38%) and Volleyball (*n* = 159; 62%).

Measures

Demographic Questionnaire: used to obtain data regarding personal and sport variables.

Leadership Efficacy Questionnaire (**LEQ;** Gomes, 2016): Evaluated (a) leadership philosophy (α_{study} = .90); (b) leadership practice (α_{study} = .86); (c) leadership indicators (α_{study} = .90). This instrument was used to calculate the congruence between leadership cycles by calculating **the Leadership Cycles Congruence Index (LCCI).**

Multidimensional Scale of Leadership in Sport (MSLS; Gomes et al., 2021): Evaluated (a) vision (α_{study} = .95); (b) inspiration (α_{study} = .91); (c) instruction (α_{study} = .91); (d) individualization (α_{study} = .89); (e) support (α_{study} = .85). (f) positive feedback (α_{study} = .90); (g) negative feedback (α_{study} = .91), (h) active management (α_{study} = .84), and (i) passive management (α_{study} = .82). This instrument was used to calculate the **Optimal Profile of Leadership Index (OPLI).**

Leadership Antecedent Factors Questionnaire (**LAFQ;** Gomes, 2018): Evaluated (a) task orientation (α_{study} = .83); (b) people orientation (α_{study} = .79); (c) technical maturity (α_{study} = .69); (d) psychological maturity (α_{study} = .59); (e) context (α_{study} = .67. This instrument was used to calculate **Leadership Favorability Index (LFI).**

Sport Performance Perception Questionnaire (**SPPQ**; Gomes et al., 2020): Evaluated (a) perception of individual sport performance (α_{study} = .92); (b) perception of collective sport performance (α_{study} = .92).

The data was collected during the months of January to March of 2021 and athletes had access to the questionnaires in digital format.

RESULTS

The results showed that:

- 76% of athletes would like their coaches to explicit better their leadership practice.
- The central assumption of the Model was confirmed, i.e., the greater the congruence between the leadership cycles, the greater was the athletes' perception of individual and collective sport performance (see Figure 2);
- H1 was not confirmed by using moderation analysis but was confirmed by using mediation analysis, specifically:

✓ OPLI partially mediated the relationship between LCCI and perceived individual sport performance. On the other hand, the indirect effect of OPLI on the perception of collective performance was not significant. Thus, the higher the congruence, the greater the tendency of coaches to use optimal leadership styles, which in turn increased the perceived individual sport performance of athletes (see Figure 3);

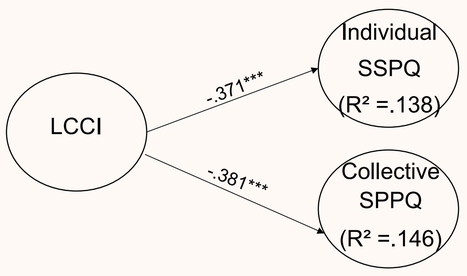
✓ LFI partially mediated the relationship between LCCI and perceived individual sport performance. The indirect effect of LFI on perceived collective performance was not significant. Thus, the higher the congruence, the more coaches tended to consider the antecedent factors of leadership, which in turn increased athletes' perceptions of individual sports performance (see Figure 4);

✓ In the test of double mediation of OPLI and LCCI, with all variables combined, only the indirect effect of OPLI on perceived individual sport performance was significant (see Figure 5). Thus, H1 was partially confirmed, in the dimension of perceived individual sports performance.

- As for hypothesis 2, it was confirmed that the dual mediation model is invariant according to the gender of the athletes and the sport practiced. That is, there was no moderation, neither of the sport nor of the gender of the athletes, in the relationship between the remaining variables under study.

Figure 2

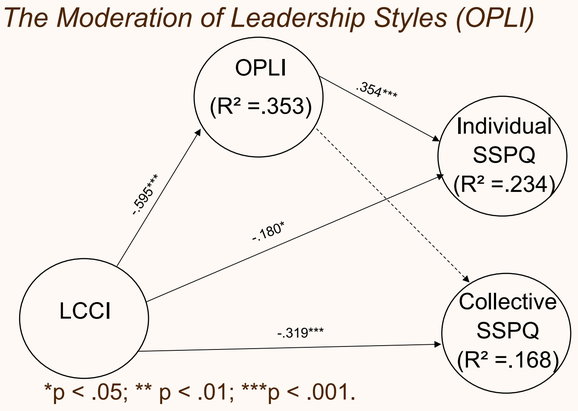
Direct Model LCCI - SSPQ



*p < .05; ** p < .01; ***p < .001.

Figure 3

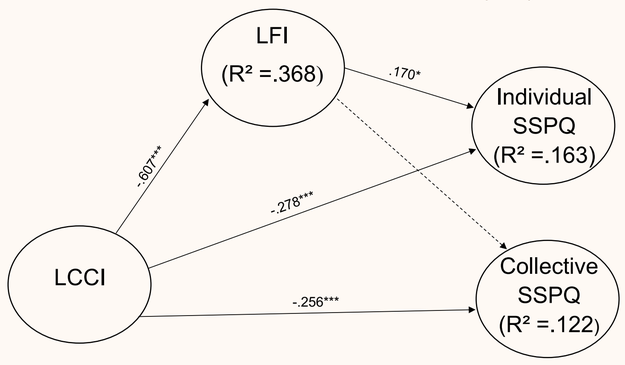
The Moderation of Leadership Styles (OPLI)



*p < .05; ** p < .01; ***p < .001.

Figure 4

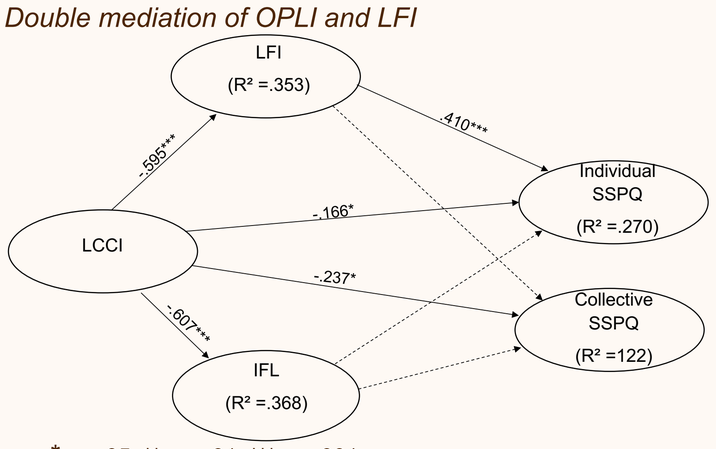
The Mediation of Antecedents Factors (LFI)



*p < .05; ** p < .01; ***p < .001.

Figure 5

Double mediation of OPLI and LFI



*p < .05; ** p < .01; ***p < .001.

CONCLUSION

Results confirm that the more proactive coaches are in planning/conceptualizing their leadership central ideas and building linear relationships between philosophy, practice and criteria (LCCI), the greater is the athletes' perception of performance. These linear relations between leadership cycles are associated with higher tendency to use optimal leadership styles (OPLI) and to consider antecedent factors of leadership (LFI) that, in turn, seem to stimulate athletes' perception of performance. It is quite interesting that these results did not differ according the sex and type of sport practiced by athletes, which reinforces the general assumptions of the Leadership Efficacy Model.

Future research should clarify if OPLI and LFI assume the status of moderator or mediation variables, although this does not compromise central assumptions of the Leadership Efficacy Model.

FUNDING

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