

# The Importance of the Leaders' and Coaches' Motivating Style for Sports Club Members' Motivation to Participate in Organized Sports: Study of Trickle-Down Effects

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A considerable amount of research based on self-determination theory has provided evidence for the pivotal role of the coaches' motivating style in predicting sports club members' motivation to participate in organized sports. This study also investigated the importance of the sports club leaders' motivating style for members' motivation. Specifically, it focused on the relation between the leaders' motivating style and members' motivation via the coaches' motivating style (i.e., trickle-down effect), hereby relying on the perceptions of sports club members ( $N = 210$ ). Results pointed to the existence of a trickle-down effect, showing that the leaders' motivating style was reflected in the coaches' motivating style, which in turn related positively to members' autonomous motivation and negatively to members' amotivation. This study provides a proof of principle of the trickle-down effect in sports clubs, urging researchers to further explore this effect in the sports context.

**Keywords:** need support, motivational environment, self-determination theory, structural equation modeling

Sports participation, whether nonorganized or organized, is associated with increased health benefits, like well-being and vitality (Bouchard et al., 2012), and psychological benefits including life satisfaction and happiness (An et al., 2020). Furthermore, organized sports participation (i.e., sports participation in sports clubs) can provide additional benefits such as improved peer relations, social skills, and diminished shyness (Findlay & Coplan, 2008). Given the number of benefits associated with organized sports participation, several studies have focused on the antecedents of the members' motivation to engage in organized sports participation. Most studies have revealed the crucial role of coaches who, due to their high interaction and proximity with the sports club members, have an important impact on people's motivation to be a member of the sports club (e.g., Hodge & Lonsdale, 2011). Yet, also the role of the sports clubs leaders (i.e., volunteer board members and, in larger sports clubs, executives or CEOs) cannot be underestimated. Namely, leaders can indirectly influence members' motivation via their impact on coaches (i.e., trickle-down effect). Specifically, the trickle-down effect suggests that leaders can (through their reliance on a motivating style) create a motivational environment in which coaches will be more likely to rely on a motivating style in their frequent interactions with the sports club members themselves, which in turn will affect members' motivation (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003; Morbée et al., 2020; Figure 1). For instance, leaders adopting an open attitude toward opinions regarding the sports club management may stimulate coaches to be more responsive to members' input themselves.

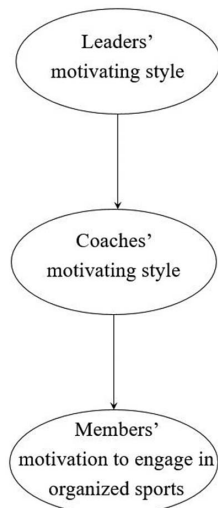
However, despite their important role in the sports clubs, an assessment of how the leaders' motivating style indirectly (via the coaches) relates to members' motivation for organized sports participation is currently lacking in the extant literature. In this

study, we investigate this trickle-down effect for the first time. To this end, we rely on self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000), a broad and empirically based metatheory of human motivation that addresses motivational behavior within and across life domains (Ryan & Deci, 2017), including sports (Standage & Ryan, 2020).

## Sports Club Members' Motivation for Participation in Organized Sports: A SDT Perspective

According to SDT, a sports club member may be driven by different qualitative types of motivation to participate in organized sports (Deci & Ryan, 2000). SDT differentiates between motivational regulations on a continuum ranging from more self-determined to less self-determined (Langan et al., 2016). Self-determined motivations are referred to as autonomous forms of motivation. Sports club members are autonomously motivated when they experience volition, psychological freedom, and self-endorsement when engaging in a sports activity. SDT further suggests that sports club members may also experience controlled motivation, which is considered to be a less self-determined form of motivation as it entails pressured reasons to engage in a sports activity. Finally, sports club members may feel amotivated, which involves a lack of motivation to engage in sports (Gillet et al., 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Previous SDT studies have revealed the importance of the quality of motivation for sports club members' continued participation in organized sports, indicating that autonomously motivated members had lower intentions to leave the sports club (Gillet et al., 2012; Pelletier et al., 2001), whereas controlled motivated and amotivated members showed elevated levels of dropout behavior (Calvo et al., 2010).



**Figure 1** — Theoretical trickle-down model

## Sports Club Members' Motivation: The Importance of the Coaches' Motivating Style

SDT points to the environment of the sports club as an important factor influencing members' motivation (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). More precisely, SDT suggests that the sports club environment needs to support the members' basic psychological needs for autonomy (i.e., the need to act volitionally, in line with one's own values), competence (i.e., the need to be effective and having the adequate ability), and relatedness (i.e., the need to be socially interconnected with valued others). SDT further indicates that three aspects of the environment contribute to members' need satisfaction: autonomy support, structure, and involvement.

Most empirical SDT studies in sports clubs focused on the relevance of the coaches' *autonomy support*. When coaches rely on an autonomy-supportive style, they adopt a curious, open, and flexible attitude, hereby engaging in autonomy-supportive strategies such as providing opportunities for members to make certain choices themselves (within specific limits and rules), explaining and justifying their decisions, inquiring about and acknowledging members' feelings, allowing opportunities to take initiatives and to do independent work, and preventing ego involvement from taking place (Bartholomew et al., 2011; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003).

Previous empirical studies indicated, consistent with SDT, that an autonomy-supportive coaching style related positively to adaptive member outcomes, including autonomous motivation (Haerens et al., 2018; Hodge & Lonsdale, 2011; Jösaar et al., 2012) and negatively to maladaptive member outcomes such as amotivation (Pelletier et al., 2001). Results regarding the relation between an autonomy-supportive coaching style and members' controlled motivation were less consistent, with studies pointing to a negative relation between an autonomy-supportive coaching style and controlled motivation (Hodge & Lonsdale, 2011), while other studies also found no connection between coaches' autonomy-supportive style and controlled forms of motivation (Pelletier et al., 2001).

Whereas research on the importance of an autonomy-supportive coaching style dominated past SDT research, more recent SDT literature has pointed to the relevance of the provision of *structure* (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). Indeed, without structure, a highly

autonomy-supportive coaching style may confuse sports club members about what they should do and even hinder members in their skill development (Curran et al., 2013; Delrue et al., 2019). Structuring practices include providing information and constructive feedback, outlining clear and consistent guidelines, offering challenging tasks, and expressing confidence so that sports club members feel competent to master the sports activities they are involved in (Reynders et al., 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Similar to autonomy-support and structure in previous studies have shown that a structuring coaching style connected positively to members' autonomous motivation (Reynders et al., 2019; Delrue et al., 2019) and negatively to members' amotivation (Delrue et al., 2019). However, no connection was found between a structuring coaching style and members' controlled motivation (Delrue et al., 2019).

Finally, SDT also considers *involvement* to be a component of a need-supportive environment (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). Yet, since this style overlaps to a certain extent with autonomy support (Ryan & Deci, 2017), we focused on autonomy support and structure in this study.

## Sports Club Members' Motivation: The Importance of the Leaders' Motivating Style

Our literature review so far revealed that a considerable amount of SDT-based research has provided evidence for the relevance of the coaches' motivating style in the sports clubs for members' motivation. In this study, we suggest that also the sports club leaders play an important role in the motivation of the sports club members. We follow hereby the (theoretical) ideas of SDT researchers that the leaders' reliance on a motivating style can indirectly influence members' motivation via the coaches' motivating behaviors (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003; Morbée et al., 2020). Scholars refer to this as a trickle-down or cascading effect, suggesting that coaches observe, imitate, and learn from the behavior of leaders while forming their own attitudes, behaviors, and interaction styles (i.e., social learning process; Bandura & Walters, 1977; Morbée et al., 2020). In turn, coaches' motivating behaviors may determine members' quality of motivation (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). Empirical evidence for this trickle-down effect was found in the for-profit context, indicating that higher level leaders' reliance on transformational and empowering leadership, which are both connected to SDT's motivating leadership styles (Deci et al., 2017), affected the lower level leaders' own reliance on these respective leadership styles (Byun et al., 2020; Voorn et al., 2013). Lower level leadership behaviors subsequently influenced employees' functioning and feelings, including their task performance (Byun et al., 2020).

Within the sports context, existing SDT studies on (possible) trickle-down effects have mainly focused on the first part, outlining the relations between the leaders' motivating style and coaches' motivating style (as perceived by the coaches themselves). Specifically, these studies indicated that the leaders' creation of a motivating environment, which included input in decision making, the freedom to conduct sports programs (Rocchi & Pelletier, 2017), and opportunities to develop skills or achieve a good work-life balance (Stebbing et al., 2012), related to the coaches' provision of autonomy support (e.g., Iachini, 2013; Rocchi & Pelletier, 2017; Stebbings et al., 2012) and structure (Rocchi & Pelletier, 2017).

However, although these SDT-based studies provide useful insights into the leadership style as an antecedent of the motivating style of coaches, the question of whether leaders can indirectly

influence sports club members' motivation via the coaches' motivating style (i.e., the trickle-down effect) remains unanswered.

## The Present Study

In the present study, we aimed to provide a proof of principle of the existence of the trickle-down effect in sports clubs. Specifically, we investigated whether the leaders' motivating style (i.e., leaders' autonomy-supportive and structuring style) was related to the coaches' motivating style (i.e., coaches' autonomy-supportive and structuring style) and, in turn, sports club members' quality of motivation, hereby relying on the perceptions of sports club members. Consistent with studies focusing on the role of leaders (e.g., Rocchi & Pelletier, 2017; Stebbings et al., 2012) and coaches (e.g., Haerens et al., 2018; Pelletier et al., 2001) in sports clubs, we expected that the leaders' motivating style would relate to the coaches' motivating style and, in turn, positively to members' autonomous motivation and negatively to members' amotivation. Furthermore, based on the results of previous studies (e.g., Delrue et al., 2019; Hodge & Lonsdale, 2011), we were open to the possibility that the coaches' motivating style may be negatively related or unrelated to members' controlled motivation.

As an ancillary aim, we examined the relevance of members' quality of motivation for members' intentions to stay or drop out. We focused on the formal decision of members to stay or leave by investigating differences in the quality of motivation between three groups, which were sports club members who indicated that they would remain a member in the next season, members who doubted whether they would remain a member in the next season, and members who had the intention to leave the sports club in the next season.

## Method

### Sample and Procedure

In order to recruit sports club members for our research, a call to participate was included in the newsletter of the Flemish Sports Federation (located in Flanders, Belgium). When sports clubs agreed to participate, they were asked to spread an online questionnaire to members of their sports club. A total of 51 Flemish sports clubs were involved in our study, providing different sports, including football, gymnastics, and tennis. Coaches in these sports clubs were volunteers training sports club members on a nonprofessional level. Leaders of these sports clubs were the Board of Directors, a group of volunteers responsible for managing the sports club. Furthermore, most of these sports clubs also had a youth board or committee, which consisted of volunteers overseeing all youth sports activities in the sports club.

Our sample consisted of 210 sports club members (50% men;  $M_{\text{age}} = 28.01$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 15.82$ , range = 12–67 years). Participants had been members of the club for an average of 8.18 years ( $SD = 8.68$ ). Participating sports club members completed the questionnaires at home. Participants were asked to fill out three different questionnaires tapping into their motivation and perceptions of the coaches' and the leaders' (i.e., board's) motivating style (see "Measures" section). Furthermore, since 37% of our member sample comprised children and adolescents who were aged from 12 to 18 years, we used questionnaires that have been previously used in research involving children and adolescents. An exception was the questionnaire tapping into the (youth) board's motivating styles. The readability of this questionnaire for younger persons was tested in two sports clubs.

Furthermore, we asked younger participants to complete the questionnaires together with their parents.

This research was approved by the ethical committee of the faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences (Ghent University). All participants actively agreed that they were informed about the purpose of the research and gave permission to the researchers to use their answers for research purposes. Participants aged under 18 were asked to confirm that they filled out the questionnaire together with their parents. Participation in the study was voluntary and confidential. Participants could freely decide to complete the questionnaire at another time or dropout.

## Measures

### Sports Club Members' Quality of Motivation for Organized Sports Participation

Members' quality of motivation for organized sports participation was measured with the valid and reliable Behavioral Regulation in Sport Questionnaire (Lonsdale et al., 2008). The Behavioral Regulation in Sport Questionnaire is a self-report measure of three broad types of motivation as advanced by SDT, which is autonomous motivation, controlled motivation, and amotivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). We used the Dutch version of this questionnaire which has been used in a previous study (Assor et al., 2009, Part 2). This formal decision of members to stay or in sports at the sports club because ... used to measure autonomous motivation (eight items; e.g., "... I like it") and controlled motivation (16 items; e.g., "... I can only be satisfied with myself if I continue to participate"). In addition, amotivation was measured (without a stem) with four items (e.g., "The reasons why I participate are not clear to me anymore"). Participants responded to each of the 28 items via a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (*does not describe me at all*) to 7 (*does describe me extremely well*). Internal consistencies of the three scales assessed by Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ) were all good, ranging from .81 (amotivation) to .89 (autonomous/controlled motivation).

### Perceived Coaches' Motivating Style

For the measurement of the sports club members' perceptions of the coaches' motivating style, we relied on the validated Situations-in-Sport Questionnaire (Delrue et al., 2019). Specifically, we used this questionnaire to evaluate the coaches' autonomy-supportive and structuring style (as perceived by members) within a broad variety of concrete situations in the sports season. The situations referred to the training context (five situations), the competition context (five situations), and the pedagogical role of coaches (five situations). The situations either concern a problem situation, which requires an intervention from the coach, or a nonproblematic situation, which requires proactive behavior from the coach. For each of the 15 situations, sports club members were provided with different coach responses, corresponding to an autonomy-supportive (15 items,  $\alpha = .92$ ) and a structuring (15 items,  $\alpha = .93$ ) coaching style. For example, the following responses were related to the situation "The training session begins": "The coach is interested to hear which specific skill you would like to practice and provides the necessary space for them to do so" (autonomy-supportive) and "The coach provides a clear and easy to follow structure and communicates the goals of the training" (structuring). Members were asked to respond on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*does not describe my coach at all*) to 7 (*does describe my coach extremely well*).



### Perceived Leaders' Motivating Style

In order to measure sports club members' perceptions of the leaders' (i.e., board's) motivating style, we relied on the questionnaire developed by De Clerck et al. (2021). More specifically, we used this questionnaire to assess the leaders' autonomy-supportive and structuring style (as perceived by members) within seven management situations derived from an influential management model, The Competing Values Framework (Quinn & Rohrbaugh, 1981) (for more details, see De Clerck et al., 2021). For the purpose of this study, some items and situations of the original questionnaire were (slightly) adapted. For example, since De Clerck et al. (2021) focused on the volunteers' perceptions of the leaders' motivating style, we replaced "volunteers" with "sports club members" in the management situations. To illustrate, the original management situation, "You, as a volunteer, have expectations regarding the sports club's management," was replaced with "You, as a sports club member, have expectations regarding the sports club's management." Items related to this management situation were "The (youth) board recognizes that it is important that you communicate your perspective and listens curiously to how you experience things" (autonomy-supportive) and "The (youth) board answers specific questions regarding the current sports club's management" (structuring). In total, the questionnaire consisted of eight items tapping into an autonomy-supportive style ( $\alpha = .92$ ) and five items relating to a structuring style ( $\alpha = .77$ ). Sports club members were asked to indicate for each response to what extent the behavior described what the (youth) board would do in that specific situation by rating a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = *does not describe my (youth) board at all* to 7 = *does describe my (youth) board extremely well*.

### Intentions to Stay Member

In order to measure sports club members' intentions to remain a member (or dropout) in the next season, we used a single item with the stem "I want to remain a member in the next season," followed by three possible answers: "yes," "maybe," or "no."

### Plan of Analyses

Preliminary statistics were calculated to provide an overview of the means and SDs of all study variables, and correlations coefficients among these study variables.

As for our primary analyses (i.e., study of trickle-down effects), a series of models with latent constructs was tested using structural equation modeling based on maximum likelihood estimation with 5,000 bootstrap samples in Mplus (Version 8.5; Muthén & Muthén, 2020). Given the hierarchical structure of the data with sports club members being nested within 51 sports clubs, two-level models were tested. Three-level analyses (with members being nested within sports teams and sports clubs) were not considered since almost one third of our sample participated in individual sports (e.g., tennis, athletics) and were thus not nested within sports teams. Furthermore, the average team size in our sample was small, which may lead to estimation problems (Hox & Maas, 2001). In order to determine whether nonindependence of observations within clusters (i.e., sports clubs) needed to be accounted for, we calculated the design effect of the study variables (Hox & Maas, 2001) using the statistical program MLwin (version 3.04; Centre for Multilevel Modelling, University of Bristol, 2019). The design effect is a function of the size of the intraclass correlation coefficient (i.e., percentage of the variance located at

the sports club level) and average cluster size. It is approximately equal to  $1 + (\text{average cluster size} - 1) \times \text{intraclass correlation coefficient}$ . If the design effect is smaller than 2, using single-level analysis on multilevel data does not lead to misleading results (Muthén & Satorra, 1995). For instance, the variance of the coaches' motivating style at the sports member level was equal to 1.060, while the variance at the sports club level was equal to 0.074. The intraclass correlation coefficient of the coaches' motivating style was therefore equal to  $0.065$  (i.e.,  $0.074 / [1.06 + 0.074]$ ). Given an average cluster size of 4.12 members per sports club, the design effect was calculated as follows:  $1 + (4.12 - 1) \times 0.065 = 1.20$ . Also, the design effects of the other variables were smaller than 2, ranging from 1 (members' controlled motivation, and amotivation) over 1.01 (autonomous motivation) to 1.15 (leaders' motivating style). Therefore, we proceeded with single-level analyses.

First, we created the measurement model with the leaders' and coaches' autonomy-supportive, structuring style, members' autonomous controlled motivation, and amotivation as latent variables. In order to reduce measurement model complexity, we relied on the parceling technique (Little et al., 2002). Specifically, we created parcels for scales with more than five items (leaders' autonomy-supportive style, coaches' autonomy-supportive and structuring style, members' autonomous and controlled motivation) through aggregating weaker loading items with stronger loading items and using those aggregates (i.e., parcels) as indicators of the latent variables. Only items with factor loadings higher than .40 were retained (see Little et al., 2002). This resulted in four 2-item parcels (leaders' autonomy-supportive style, autonomous motivation), two 4-item and two 3-item parcels (coaches' autonomy-supportive style), three 4-item and one 3-item parcels (coaches' structuring style), and one 4-item and three 3-item parcels (controlled motivation). In this measurement model, the leaders' and coaches' autonomy-supportive and structuring style were loaded onto a second-order variable, which is (respectively) the leaders' and coaches' motivating style.

Next, we tested the theory-based structural model in which we investigated indirect or trickle-down effects between the leaders' motivating style and members' quality of motivation via the coaches' motivating style. To this end, we relied on the 95% confidence interval (CI) obtained by bootstrapping (Hayes et al., 2009). The indirect or trickle-down effect is significant at  $p < .05$  if the 95% CIs do not include the value of zero. In addition, we controlled for the direct relation between the leaders' motivating style and members' quality of motivation. We included members' age, gender, and the number of years' membership as covariates in this model.

To evaluate the fit of the model being tested, we relied on the comparative fit index (CFI), the root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA), and the standardized root means square residual (SRMR). Concerning CFI, a critical value above .90 is acceptable, whereas values above .95 are good. Regarding the SRMR and RMSEA, a value between .06 and .08 is considered reasonable and a value below .06 is considered good (e.g., Hu & Bentler, 1999).

As an ancillary analysis, we investigated the importance of members' quality of motivation for their intentions to stay member or dropout. We relied on a multivariate analysis of covariance to determine whether significant differences in members' motivation were present between members who planned to remain members of the sports club in the next season, those who doubted whether they would remain a member, and those who planned to stop their membership. Also in this analysis, we controlled for the influence of the members' age, gender, and the number of years' membership on the results.

## Results

Means, *SD*s, and correlations among study variables are presented in Table 1.

To investigate the trickle-down effect, we first created the measurement model. In this model, the structuring item “The (youth) board points to the norms and expectations regarding teamwork within the sports club” related to the situation “There are tensions between sports club members” was excluded from further analysis as it loaded poorly onto the latent variable structuring style ( $<.40$ ; see Hair et al., 2010). The final measurement model provided a good fit to the data,  $\chi^2(336) = 542.18$ ,  $p < .001$ ; RMSEA = .05; CFI = .96; SRMR = .05.

The results of the indirect or trickle-down model (Figure 2), which also showed a good fit to the data,  $\chi^2(408) = 653.97$ ,  $p < .001$ ; RMSEA = .05; CFI = .95; SRMR = .05, revealed a positive indirect or trickle-down effect of the leaders' motivating style on members' autonomous motivation, via the coaches' motivating style ( $\beta = 0.33$ , CI [0.18, 0.54]) and a negative indirect or trickle-down effect of the leaders' motivating style on members' amotivation, via the coaches' motivating style ( $\beta = -0.21$ , CI [-0.42, -0.03]). The indirect or trickle-down effect of the leaders' motivation style and members' controlled motivation via the coaches' motivating style was nonsignificant ( $\beta = -0.11$ , CI [-0.32, 0.05]).<sup>1</sup>

The findings of the constituent paths pointed to a positive relation between the leaders' motivating style and the coaches' motivating style ( $\beta = 0.73$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and between the coaches' motivating style and members' autonomous motivation ( $\beta = 0.46$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Furthermore, the results also revealed a negative relation between the coaches' motivating style and members' amotivation ( $\beta = -0.28$ ,  $p = .03$ ). However, the relation between the coaches' motivating style and members' controlled motivation was nonsignificant ( $\beta = -0.15$ ,  $p = .24$ ). Also the direct relations between the leaders' motivating and members' autonomous motivation ( $\beta = -0.00$ ,  $p = .99$ ), controlled motivation ( $\beta = -0.03$ ,  $p = .83$ ), and amotivation ( $\beta = -0.13$ ,  $p = .37$ ) were nonsignificant.

Finally, a multivariate analysis of covariance revealed significant differences in quality of motivation between members who planned to remain a member of the sports club in the next season ( $n = 171$ ; 81.4%), those who doubted whether they would remain a member ( $n = 36$ ; 17.1%), and those who planned to stop their membership ( $n = 3$ , 1.4%), Wilks' Lambda = .88,  $F(6, 396) = 4.55$ , and  $p < .001$ . Follow-up univariate tests for autonomous motivation,  $F(2, 200) = 6.96$ ;  $p < .01$ , and amotivation,  $F(2, 200) = 11.38$ ;  $p < .01$ , were significant, with Bonferroni's post hoc tests revealing

that sports club members who planned to stay at the sports club experienced higher levels of autonomous motivation ( $M = 6.62$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ) and lower levels of amotivation ( $M = 1.54$ ,  $SD = 0.79$ ) than those who doubted whether they would stay (who reported relatively low levels of autonomous motivation,  $M = 5.65$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ , and relatively high levels of amotivation,  $M = 2.39$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ). No other differences in quality of motivation were found. Importantly, these results need to be interpreted with care due to the uneven distribution of sports club members between these three groups, with the vast majority of sports club members indicating that they would stay at the sports club.

## Discussion

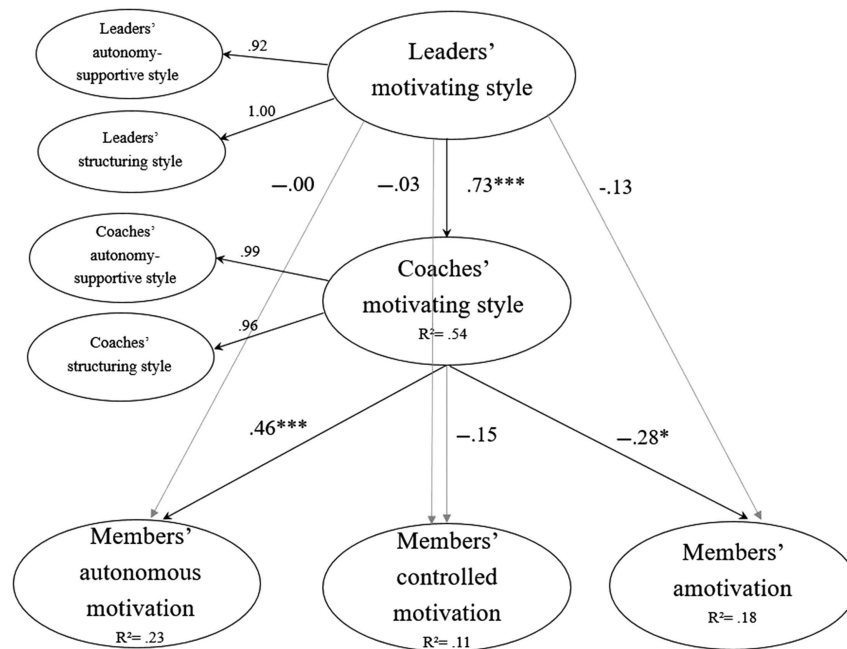
In this study, we investigated the importance of social agents' motivating behaviors within the sports club for members' quality of motivation. While a considerable number of studies already revealed the importance of the coaches' motivating style for members' motivation (e.g., Haerens et al., 2018; Hodge & Lonsdale, 2011; Reynders et al., 2019), this study contributes to the existing literature by exploring for the first time whether also sports club leaders have a role to play in members' motivation. Consistent with previous SDT literature (e.g., Mageau & Vallerand, 2003; Morbée et al., 2020; Rocchi & Pelletier, 2017), we expected that the leaders' motivating style would trickle down to members' quality of motivation via the coaches' motivating style.

Results provided evidence for this trickle-down effect, hereby suggesting that leaders in sports clubs can have a strong indirect influence on members' quality of motivation by creating a motivational environment in which coaches are likely to rely on a motivating style in their interaction with the sports club members. Leaders of sports clubs can do so by adopting an open and flexible style (i.e., an autonomy-supportive style) and a process-oriented approach (i.e., a structuring style). This result confirmed research of Iachini (2013), Rocchi and Pelletier (2017), and Stebbings et al. (2012) which revealed the importance of the creation of a motivational club environment (for instance, involvement in management decisions) for the coaches' own reliance on a motivating style. It is important to note that the findings of these previous studies were based on coaches' perceptions, while our results were based on members' perceptions. Future research may combine these perspectives, using a multiinformant approach to investigate how the leaders' motivating style as perceived by coaches relates to their own motivating style as perceived by members of their team.

**Table 1** Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations Among Study Variables ( $N = 210$  Members, Except for Members' Perceptions of Coaching Styles [4–6],  $n = 203$ )

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Leaders' autonomy-supportive style	4.41	1.29								
2. Leaders' structuring style	4.41	1.19	.79**							
3. Leaders' motivating styles	4.41	1.19	.97**	.91**						
4. Coaches' autonomy-supportive style	4.56	1.13	.64**	.62**	.66**					
5. Coaches' structuring style	5.06	1.08	.61**	.65**	.66**	.88**				
6. Coaches' motivating style	4.81	1.07	.64**	.65**	.68**	.97**	.97**			
7. Autonomous motivation	6.15	0.81	.20**	.24**	.25**	.38**	.40**	.40**		
8. Controlled motivation	3.27	1.01	-.10	-.03	-.08	-.06	-.15*	-.10	.04	
9. Amotivation	1.70	0.96	-.27**	-.29**	-.30**	-.36**	-.37**	-.38**	-.61**	.20**

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .



**Figure 2** — Trickle-down model (based on members' perceptions of the leaders' and coaches' motivating style, and members' quality of motivation)  
*Note.* Coefficients are standardized values. For parsimony reasons, observed variables are not represented.

\*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001. Black lines indicate significant relations. Gray lines indicate non-significant relations.

The relations between the coaches' motivating style (which consisted of the coaches' autonomy-supportive and structuring styles) and members' quality of motivation in the trickle-down model also provided further evidence for studies focusing on the important role of autonomy-supportive (e.g., Haerens et al., 2018) and structuring (Reynders et al., 2019) coaching. More specifically, the positive connection between the coaches' motivating style and members' autonomous motivation confirmed previous findings of Haerens et al. (2018) and Reynders et al. (2019) that the proximal relations between coaches and members, in which the coaches' autonomy-supportive and structuring behaviors can be regularly observed, serve as the ideal setting to foster and promote members' autonomously motivated engagement in an organized sports activity. In addition, these close motivational interactions may also serve as a buffer for the lack of motivation (i.e., amotivation) to engage in sports, as shown by the negative relation between the coaches' motivating style and members' amotivation (see also studies of Delrue et al., 2019; Pelletier et al., 2001). These are important findings as the current study's ancillary analysis, as well the results of other studies (e.g., Calvo et al., 2010; Gillet et al., 2012), revealed the role of the members' quality of motivation in their continued participation in organized sports.

As for the relation between the coaches' motivating style and members' controlled motivation, this relation was, in line with findings of previous studies (Delrue et al., 2019; Pelletier et al., 2001), nonsignificant in the trickle-down model, while bivariate correlations (Table 1) revealed a small negative correlation between the coaches' structuring style and members' controlled motivation. Overall, these results seemed to indicate that the structuring coaching style may have a more important, albeit limited negative relation with members' pressured engagement in organized sports when compared with the autonomy-supportive coaching style. Perhaps the

coaches' clear instructions and guidelines may attenuate members' feelings of pressure to perform during training and matches. This issue warrants further examination as it is inconsistent with previous findings of Delrue et al. (2019), which showed that especially demotivating coaching styles, and more specifically coaches' controlling behaviors (i.e., acting and thinking from one's own perspective) and chaotic behaviors (i.e., failing to adjust instructions to the members' competencies and growth potential) were positively related to controlled motivation.

Bivariate correlations further revealed that the leaders' motivating style, although unrelated to members' quality motivation in the trickle-down model, positively correlated with members' autonomous motivation, and negatively with members' amotivation. These small, yet significant correlations were consistent with the theorizing of Slemp et al. (2018) which suggested that leaders can, despite the organizational distance, have an (albeit limited) direct influence on the lowest "hierarchical" level in the organization. Our study was the first to provide empirical proof for this postulation in the sports context, revealing that the relevance of the (direct) role of leaders' motivating style for members' motivation indeed cannot be underestimated.

### Practical Implications: The Importance of Autonomy Support and Structure

The results of this study thus pointed to the important role of leaders' motivating style for members' quality of motivation to engage in organized sports. Since members' motivation was related to possible dropout behaviors, these findings have important practical implications for leaders in sports clubs. They showed that it is essential that leaders listen to proposals to improve the sports club's management and opinions regarding the sports season (i.e., autonomy-supportive style), and invest time and energy in



clarifying details regarding task distribution and business planning (i.e., structuring style). In turn, coaches will more likely be open to members' input during training and matches (i.e., autonomy-supportive style), and give guidance and direction so that members feel that they are able to perform well during the training and matches (i.e., structuring style).

Importantly, according to SDT, it is crucial that leaders combine both an autonomy-supportive and a structuring style. That is, without autonomy support, people in the sports club may feel continuously monitored and evaluated by leaders, while without structure, people may feel left to their own devices. The literature already indicated that when coaches experience these demotivating behaviors, they may be more likely to refrain from autonomy-supportive behaviors (Rocchi et al., 2013) or even emit demotivating behaviors (Morbée et al., 2020; Rocchi & Pelletier, 2017; Stebbings et al., 2012) when they interact with members. Similarly, it is important that also coaches balance their provision of guidance, expectations, and feedback (i.e., structure) in a way that respects members' volition (i.e., autonomy support) as it will optimize their influence on positive member outcomes such as autonomous motivation (Curran et al., 2013).

## Limitation and Future Directions

There are some limitations and future directions regarding the present study that should be noted. First, the present research used a cross-sectional design. As such, we cannot demonstrate causality. Thus, future investigations using experimental (longitudinal) designs should be conducted to replicate and confirm the causal role of the leaders' and coaches' motivating style for members' quality of motivation.

Second, data on all study variables were gathered with self-report measures of sports club members, hence same-source bias might be an issue (Podsakoff et al., 2003). In order to avoid common method bias, we followed the suggestions of Podsakoff et al. (2003) regarding anonymity, reduction of evaluation apprehension, and randomized question order. Despite these considerations, we urge researchers to replicate our findings in a multiinformant model, studying relations between the coaches' perceptions of the leaders' motivating style, and the members' perceptions of the coaches' motivating style and their motivation. This may be interesting as the members' perceptions of the leaders' motivating style may differ from the coaches' perceptions of the leaders' motivating style. Future research may also investigate whether the leaders' and coaches' own perceptions are different from the perceptions of other groups in the organization.

Third, as this study was the first to explore trickle-down effects in the sports context, we focused on the "bright" trickle-down effects in this study. This allowed us to better understand and interpret the (motivating) role of the leaders for members' motivation. Future research may build further on the findings of this study, assessing the role of demotivating styles such as the leaders' and coaches' controlling behaviors (e.g., Bartholomew et al., 2010) and chaotic behaviors (e.g., Delrue et al., 2019) in the trickle-down model.

Fourth, future research may explore the effect of social distance in sports clubs, defined as "differences in status, rank, authority, social standing, and power, which affect the degree of social intimacy and social contact that develops between followers and their leaders" (Cole et al., 2009). More specifically, it would be interesting to investigate the moderating effect of social distance on the relation between the leaders' and coaches' motivating style and member outcomes.

Fifth, in this study, we relied on single-level analyses. Future studies may use a multilevel design to explore relations at various levels (i.e., sports club, coach, member).

Sixth, in future research, it might be interesting to extend the investigation of the trickle-down effect by including other member outcomes such as performance, engagement, or dropout intentions (using a Likert scale).

Seventh, although we suggest that our findings were relevant for all leaders of sports clubs, an interesting novel research avenue is to further explore the trickle-down effects of the motivating style of paid leaders (e.g., executives, CEOs) in sports clubs.

## Conclusion

This study investigated the role leaders can play for members' motivation to engage in organized sports. Results pointed to an important role of leaders, revealing that their motivating style related positively to members' autonomous motivation and negatively to members' amotivation via the coaches' motivating style. In this study, we formulated practical suggestions leaders in sports clubs can use to implement a motivational environment in their sports club. Researchers can use the principles of this study (i.e., testing the trickle-down model in its entirety) to further explore trickle-down effects in the sports context.

## Note

1. Exploratory analyses of trickle-down models considering autonomy support and structure separately revealed similar results, pointing to a positive indirect effect of the leaders' autonomy-supportive style on members' autonomous motivation, via the coaches' autonomy-supportive style ( $\beta = 0.32$ , CI [0.19, 0.52]), and a negative indirect effect of the leaders' autonomy-supportive style on members' amotivation via the coaches' autonomy-supportive style ( $\beta = -0.21$ , CI [-0.40, -0.07]). The findings also revealed a positive indirect effect of the leaders' structuring style on members' autonomous motivation, via the coaches' structuring style ( $\beta = 0.28$ , CI [0.13, 0.45]), and a negative indirect effect of the leaders' structuring style on members' amotivation via the coaches' structuring style ( $\beta = -0.19$ , CI [-0.38, -0.02]).

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