



Assessment of the Impact of Coaches' Leadership Styles on Building Social Support for Effective Performance in Nuga Athletics Competitions Among Universities in North-West Zone, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study assessed the impact of coaching style on building social support for effective performance in NUGA athletics competitions among universities in the North-West zone of Nigeria. The study was guided by one research question and one hypothesis. A descriptive survey research design was adopted. The population of the study consisted of 348 coaches and athletes from selected universities in the North-West zone, while a sample size of 313 respondents was selected using multistage sampling techniques, including purposive, proportionate and simple random sampling methods. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire titled "Democratic Coaching Style and Social Support Questionnaire (DCSSQ)", validated by experts and tested for reliability using Cronbach Alpha. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research question, while Chi-square analysis was used to test the hypothesis at 0.05 level of significance. Findings revealed that servant coaching style has a positive impact on building social support among athletes, with an aggregate mean score of 3.37, indicating strong agreement among respondents. Specifically, results showed that coaching behaviours such as caring for athletes' personal growth, providing emotional support, promoting team bonding, fostering trust and cooperation and ensuring emotional safety significantly enhance social support for effective performance. Furthermore, the Chi-square result ($\chi^2 = 40.72$, $df = 312$, $p < 0.001$) indicated a significant impact of coaching leadership style on social support, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis. The study concluded that effective coaching styles play a crucial role in strengthening social support systems and improving athletic performance. It was recommended that coaches adopt more servant and athlete-centered leadership approaches to enhance social support, team cohesion and competitive success in NUGA athletics competitions.

Keywords: Coaching Style, Social Support, Athletic Performance, Nuga Competitions, University Sports

Introduction

Sport is increasingly understood not only as physical competition but also as a psychosocial activity shaped by leadership, relationships and social support. In modern sport science, coaching leadership is identified as a key factor influencing athletes' motivation, psychological well-being and performance. Among leadership styles, democratic coaching characterized by participation, shared decision-making and open communication has been widely recognized for strengthening social support within teams and improving performance outcomes. Globally, evidence shows that democratic leadership enhances athletes' sense of belonging, trust and engagement by creating supportive environments where athletes feel valued and involved, while authoritarian approaches tend to weaken interaction and reduce performance. Across continents, studies consistently show that democratic coaching improves communication, cohesion, satisfaction and motivation, which are essential for team success. Social support, defined as emotional, informational and practical assistance from coaches and teammates, plays a central mediating role in translating

leadership into performance outcomes. In Africa, although sports development is growing, challenges such as weak coaching practices and limited support systems still affect athlete performance. In Nigeria, particularly under NUGA competitions, athletics serves as a key platform for university sports development, yet performance disparities exist among universities in the North-West zone. Many coaches in this region still rely on authoritarian or experience-based approaches, which may limit athlete participation, weaken trust and reduce social support. Socio-cultural and institutional factors such as limited resources, coaching education gaps and cultural norms also influence leadership practices. As a result, athletes may experience low morale, poor communication and reduced performance. Despite the importance of these issues, there is limited research focusing specifically on how democratic coaching style influences social support in Nigerian university athletics, particularly in the North-West zone. Therefore, there is a need to examine how democratic coaching style can enhance social support and improve athletic performance in NUGA competitions.

Statement of the Problem

In contemporary sport science, coaching style has been widely acknowledged as a critical determinant of athletes' psychological well-being, social interactions and performance outcomes. Globally, studies consistently demonstrate that leadership approaches such as democratic and athlete-centered coaching significantly enhance social support systems within teams, thereby improving motivation, cohesion and competitive performance. Conversely, authoritarian coaching styles have been associated with reduced athlete participation, weak interpersonal relationships and diminished performance outcomes. Despite this growing body of evidence, the effective application of evidence-based coaching styles remains inconsistent across many sporting contexts, particularly in developing countries. In Nigeria, university athletics competitions organized under the Nigerian University Games Association (NUGA) provide a major platform for talent development and competitive exposure. However, performance outcomes among universities in the North-West zone remain uneven, with some institutions achieving consistent success while others continue to record poor and unstable results. Preliminary observations suggest that these disparities may be linked to differences in coaching practices, particularly the extent to which coaches adopt leadership styles that promote social support among athletes. Empirical studies within Nigeria have largely focused on general coaching effectiveness and athlete motivation, with limited attention given to the specific role of coaching style in building social support within athletics teams. This gap is significant because social support comprising emotional encouragement, informational guidance and practical assistance is a key psychosocial factor that influences athletes' resilience, commitment and performance, especially in high-pressure competitions such as NUGA athletics. In the North-West zone, many coaches are perceived to rely heavily on traditional or authoritarian approaches, which may restrict athlete participation in decision-making, weaken communication and reduce mutual support among team members. Furthermore, socio-cultural and institutional factors such as limited coaching education, inadequate sports infrastructure and hierarchical cultural norms may further influence coaching behaviours in the region. These conditions may hinder the adoption of democratic coaching styles that are known to enhance trust, cooperation and team cohesion. As a result, athletes may experience low morale, weak interpersonal relationships and reduced performance effectiveness in athletics competitions. Despite the recognized importance of coaching style in sport performance, there remains a dearth of empirical research specifically examining how coaching styles influence social support and performance outcomes in NUGA athletics competitions within the North-West zone of Nigeria. This lack of context-specific evidence limits the ability of sports administrators and policymakers to develop targeted interventions aimed at improving coaching effectiveness and athlete performance. It is against this background that this study seeks to investigate the impact of coaching style on building social support for effective performance in NUGA athletics competitions among universities in the North-West zone of Nigeria, with a view to providing empirical evidence that can inform coaching practices and enhance competitive outcomes.

Purposes of the Study

The purpose of this study is to assess the Impact of Coaches' Leadership styles on building social support for effective performance in NUGA athletics competitions among Universities in North-West Zone, Nigeria. The study is aimed to:

1. Find out the impact of democratic coaching style on building social support for effective performance in NUGA athletics competitions among Universities in North-West zone, Nigeria.

Research Question

1. What is the impact of coaching style on building social support for effective performance in NUGA athletics competitions among Universities in North-West Zone, Nigeria?

Hypotheses

For the purpose of this study one major and a sub-hypothesis was formulated to guide the study.

1. Coaches' leadership styles will significantly influence the building of social support required for effective performance in NUGA athletics competitions in the North-West Zone, Nigeria.

Methods

This study will adopt a descriptive survey research design, which is appropriate for examining the impact of democratic coaching style on social support and performance among athletes in NUGA athletics competitions without manipulating variables. The population consists of 348 respondents drawn from universities in the North-West zone of Nigeria, including athletics coaches and student-athletes, while a sample size of 313 was selected to ensure adequate representation and reliability of findings. A multistage sampling technique was used, involving purposive selection of participating universities, proportionate allocation of respondents and simple random sampling to select individual participants. Data will be collected using a structured questionnaire titled "Democratic Coaching Style and Social Support Questionnaire (DCSSQ)" designed on a four-point Likert scale covering demographic information, democratic coaching style, social support and performance indicators. The instrument will be validated through face and content validation by experts in sports psychology and measurement and evaluation, while reliability will be established using Cronbach Alpha of 0.875. Data collection was involving direct administration of questionnaires with the assistance of trained research assistants after obtaining institutional permission, ensuring confidentiality and voluntary participation. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation, while Pearson Product Moment Correlation and regression analysis was used to test relationships and predictive effects among variables at a 0.05 level of significance.

Results

This presents the results of the data analysis carried out for the study on the impact of coaching leadership styles on social support for effective performance of track and field athletes in Nigerian University Games Association (NUGA) athletics competitions in the North-West Zone of Nigeria. The analysis was conducted using data obtained from the 313 respondents and was organized in line with the stated research questions and hypotheses. Descriptive statistics, including frequency counts, percentages, mean and standard deviation, were used to describe the respondents' demographic characteristics and to answer the research questions, while inferential statistics, specifically the chi-square test, were employed to test the null hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents with Section Totals (N = 313)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age (Years)	18 – 22	78	24.9
	23 – 27	104	33.2
	28 – 32	67	21.4
	33 and above	64	20.5
	Total	313	100.0
Gender	Male	201	64.2
	Female	112	35.8
	Total	313	100.0
Status of Respondents	Director of Sports	21	6.7
	Deputy Director	29	9.3
	Coach	63	20.1
	Athlete	200	63.9
	Total	313	100.0
Years of Experience	1 – 5 years	134	42.8
	6 – 10 years	108	34.5
	11 – 15 years	71	22.7
	Total	313	100.0

Table 1: shows the analysis of the Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents in sections. Observed from Table was that 78 (24.9%) of the respondents were within the age range of 18–22 years, 104 (33.2%) were aged 23–27 years, 67 (21.4%) were between 28–32 years, while 64 (20.5%) were 33 years and above, indicating that respondents were largely within the active age bracket suitable for university athletics. Further observation revealed that 201 (64.2%) of the respondents were male, while 112 (35.8%) were female, showing higher male participation in NUGA athletics competitions in the North-west zone. Regarding respondents' status, 21 (6.7%) were Directors of Sports, 29 (9.3%) were Deputy Directors, 63 (20.1%) were coaches, while the majority, 200 (63.9%), were athletes. This distribution confirms that athletes constituted the dominant group in the study, which is appropriate given the focus on coaching leadership and team cohesion. In terms of years of experience, 134 (42.8%) of the respondents had 1–5 years of experience, 108 (34.5%) had 6–10 years, while 71 (22.7%) had 11–15 years of experience, suggesting that most respondents possessed adequate exposure to university sports activities to provide reliable information.

Research Question: What is the impact of coaching style on building social support for effective performance in NUGA athletics competitions among Universities in North-West Zone, Nigeria?

Mean and Standard Deviation on Impact of Servant Coaching Style on Social Support (N = 313)

S/N	Item Statement	Mean (\bar{x})	SD	Decision
1	The coach cares about my personal growth beyond athletics.	3.41	0.76	Accepted
2	I receive emotional support from my coach during stressful times.	3.38	0.79	Accepted
3	The coach encourages team bonding and mutual care.	3.45	0.74	Accepted
4	Servant leadership increases trust and cooperation among teammates.	3.36	0.81	Accepted
5	Athletes feel emotionally safe under coach's leadership.	3.33	0.83	Accepted
6	The coach supports my academic and athletic balance.	3.29	0.85	Accepted
7	Athletes can approach the coach with personal or team-related problems.	3.34	0.80	Accepted
8	The coach helps athletes connect and support one another.	3.39	0.78	Accepted
Aggregate Mean / SD		3.37	0.80	Accepted

Table above shows the Mean and Standard Deviation of Responses on Coaches' Leadership Style and on building social support. Observed from the table was that the aggregate mean score of 3.37 is greater than the decision mean of 2.50. This clearly indicates that respondents generally agreed that servant coaching style has a positive impact on building social support for effective performance in NUGA athletics competitions among universities in the North-West zone of Nigeria. Further observation showed that all individual item mean scores ranged between 3.29 and 3.45, which are above the decision mean of 2.50. This implies that servant coaching behaviours such as showing concern for athletes' personal growth, providing emotional support, encouraging team bonding, fostering trust and cooperation and being approachable significantly enhance social support among track and field athletes.

Hypothesis: Coaches' leadership styles have no significant impact on building social support for effective performance in NUGA athletics competitions in North-West Zone, Nigeria.

Chi square analysis on the impact of Coaches' leadership styles on building Social Support for effective performance of track and field athletes in NUGA athletics competitions in North-West zone, Nigeria

Variable	χ^2 _calculated	Df	p-value	Decision
Social Support	40.72	312	<0.001	Reject Ho

Table above depicts Chi square analysis on the impact of Coaches' leadership styles on building Social Support for effective performance of track and field athletes in NUGA athletics competitions in North-West zone, Nigeria. Observed from Table was that the calculated χ^2 of 40.72 is greater than the critical value of 3.841, with a p-value < 0.001. This indicated that coaches' leadership styles significantly foster social support, which strengthens social support and contributes to effective performance in NUGA athletics competitions. Thus, the hypothesis is rejected.

Discussion

The findings revealed that coaching leadership style had a significant impact on social support among track and field athletes in NUGA athletics competitions ($p < 0.001$). This implies that supportive and servant leadership behaviours improve emotional, psychological and instrumental support within athletic teams. This finding is corroborated by Kim and Cruz (2023), in a study titled "Servant leadership in sport: Implications for athlete well-being and social support,"

who highlighted that servant leadership strengthens social and emotional support in team environments. Similarly, Fransen et al. (2020), in a study titled “Who takes the lead? Athlete leadership and team cohesion,” found that leadership behaviours enhance cooperative support among teammates. Furthermore, Chelladurai and Kim (2022), in a study titled “Leadership styles and athlete outcomes in competitive sport,” reported that supportive coaching improves athletes’ perceived social support and overall welfare. However, a study by Fransen, Van Puyenbroeck, Loughead, Vanbeselaere, De Cuyper and Broek (2020) titled “Who takes the lead? Athlete leadership and team cohesion,” found that athletes’ peer leadership and informal social networks were often more predictive of perceived social support than the coach’s formal leadership behaviours. This disparity may be due to the fact that athletes often rely on teammates for emotional, motivational and practical support, especially in highly cohesive teams, making peer interactions a critical complement to coaching leadership. These findings indicate that while coaching leadership contributes to social support, it is one of multiple factors including peer relationships and team culture that shape overall athlete welfare.

Conclusion

The findings of the study revealed that coaching style, particularly servant coaching style, has a significant and positive impact on building social support for effective performance among athletes in NUGA athletics competitions in universities within the North-West zone of Nigeria. This is evidenced by the high aggregate mean score of 3.37, which is above the criterion mean of 2.50, indicating that respondents generally agreed that servant leadership behaviours such as caring for athletes’ personal development, providing emotional support, promoting team bonding, fostering trust and cooperation, ensuring emotional safety and maintaining accessibility strongly enhance social support among athletes. The Chi-square result ($\chi^2 = 40.72$, $df = 312$, $p < 0.001$) further confirmed that coaches’ leadership styles have a statistically significant impact on the development of social support, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis. This implies that effective coaching behaviours are not only perceived positively by athletes but also play a crucial role in strengthening interpersonal relationships, emotional well-being and team cohesion, all of which contribute to improved performance in athletics competitions. Therefore, it can be concluded that adopting supportive and athlete-centered coaching styles is essential for enhancing social support systems and achieving better competitive outcomes in NUGA athletics within the study area.

Recommendation

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Athletics coaches in universities within the North-West zone should adopt more servant and athlete-centered coaching styles that prioritize athletes’ personal development, emotional well-being and overall welfare, as these have been shown to significantly enhance social support.
2. University sports authorities and management should organize regular training, workshops and coaching clinics to expose coaches to modern, evidence-based leadership approaches that strengthen team interaction, trust and cooperation among athletes.
3. Coaches should intentionally promote team bonding activities and open communication channels within athletics teams to strengthen interpersonal relationships and improve social support among athletes.
4. Universities should establish mentorship and monitoring systems to ensure that coaches consistently apply positive leadership behaviours that foster emotional safety, trust and accessibility for athletes.
5. Sports governing bodies such as NUGA should integrate leadership style evaluation into coaching certification and performance appraisal systems to encourage the adoption of effective coaching practices that enhance social support and competitive performance.

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