



Advancing Women in Leadership

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Full Length Research Paper

Exploring the Source of Leadership Self-Efficacy among Japanese Female High School Student-Athletes through Sport Experiences

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Purpose: To apply self-efficacy theory to identify the sport-related themes and the processes through which they influence leadership self-efficacy (LSE) among Japanese female high school student-athletes. **Method:** Focus group and one-on-one interviews were conducted with 30 female high school student-athletes aged 16-17. A grounded theory approach (GTA), which allows the generation of theory from participants' narratives, was employed to extend self-efficacy theory within the sport context. **Result:** We identified four categories that impact LSE: (a) leadership experience, (b) feedback on leadership behavior, (c) observation of leaders, and (d) sport performance level. **Implication:** These findings of this study contribute to the development of leadership education programs for girls through sport, helping to address the underrepresentation of female leaders in Japan.

Keywords: leadership development; female student-athletes; leadership self-efficacy; sport leadership

In recent years, the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions has emerged as a significant global challenge, prompting efforts toward resolution. Japan, in particular, consistently ranks low in gender equality, as indicated by the World Economic Forum's annual Gender Gap Index (GGI), where it was ranked 118th out of 146 countries in the 2024 report (WEF, 2024). Japan's gender gap is especially pronounced in politics and economics. The gender ratio of parliamentary representatives stands at 0.115, while that of managerial positions is 0.171, significantly contributing to Japan's lower ranking.

One key reason for this substantial gender gap in political and economic domains is Japan's historical adherence to a patriarchal system, in which women were historically denied the right to make key life decisions—such as education and marriage—on their own. Instead, women were confined to domestic roles such as childcare and housework, reinforcing a rigid gender-based division of labor: women belong at home, men belong in the workforce. As a result, women's entry into the workforce has been a relatively recent phenomenon, and structural barriers remain, such as systems that reward long working hours and continuous employment—practices that continue to hinder women's access to leadership positions (Villa, 2019). However, in recent years, global movements toward gender equality, alongside domestic challenges such as a declining birthrate and economic stagnation, have spurred

various gender equality initiatives within Japan. Notable examples include the implementation of the Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society in 1999 and the 2015 enactment of the Act on the Promotion of Women's Active Engagement in Professional Life. Despite these efforts, progress remains slow compared to other nations, and Japan's GGI ranking has continued to decline. Therefore, alongside establishing environments where women can actively participate, it is essential to prioritize the development of women capable of demonstrating leadership across various fields, particularly in politics and economics. Expanding leadership education targeted at girls and women has become an urgent priority.

As previously noted, the shortage of female leaders is deeply rooted in historical, societal, and organizational factors (Nakamura & Horimoto, 2017; Villa, 2019). Therefore, updating societal values and eliminating structural discrimination against women in political and organizational settings is essential. While only one of many possible approaches, efforts have been made to shift societal perceptions by providing leadership training opportunities for prospective female leaders and by promoting their visibility across various sectors. Among these initiatives, the use of sport as a medium for leadership development has gained attention. Sport is widely utilized in youth development initiatives due to its capacity to contribute to physical, psychological, and social growth, which, in turn, benefits community development (McGarry et al., 2020). This

connection is grounded in the broader recognition that sport not only fosters personal growth but also serves as a platform to address wider societal challenges. In particular, in the context of "Sport for Development," which refers to the idea of using sport as a means to achieve positive outcomes in areas such as public health, peace, youth development, and the economy (Schulenkorf, et al., 2016), sport has been recognized as a tool for addressing various social issues, including promoting peace and gender equality, leading to the establishment of numerous sport-based programs targeting girls (UNESCO, 2024).

In Japan, the significance of sport for leadership development is particularly evident in the school sport club system, which serves as a primary setting where adolescent girls engage in sport and encounter opportunities to assume leadership roles. Approximately 64.5% of Japanese high school girls (ages 15–18) participate in exercise or sport at least once a week (Sasakawa Sports Foundation, 2023). School-based sport clubs serve as one setting where students can engage in physical activities, with 34.4% of female high school students participating in these extracurricular sport clubs (Sasakawa Sports Foundation, 2023). In these school-based sport clubs, it is customary for senior students to hold leadership roles, such as team captain or game captain. This structure naturally creates a dynamic where underclassmen take on follower roles while upperclassmen assume leadership positions, allowing the functions of leadership and followership to develop within this environment (Ono & Shoji, 2015). Consequently, participating in school-based sport clubs provides students with opportunities to experience leadership firsthand. In fact, a survey of junior and senior high school girls examining their perceptions of leaders and their leadership experiences revealed that 36.8% of the respondents reported learning about leadership through school clubs including sport clubs or committees. This was the highest proportion compared to other contexts such as classroom activities, extracurricular lessons, or out-of-school activities. At the same time, the proportion of such responses was lower among girls attending coeducational schools compared to those in girls' schools, indicating that girls may have fewer opportunities to take on leadership roles in environments where boys are present (Plan International Japan, 2022).

Literature Review

In the literature review, we first examined studies that have explored the current status of women in leadership in Japan and the underlying factors contributing to their underrepresentation. We then reviewed research that highlights the potential of sport to contribute to leadership development.

Current Status of Women in Leadership in Japan

Japan continues to face significant gender inequality, with women remaining underrepresented in leadership positions across sectors. For example, women held only 20.5% of board positions in publicly listed companies compared to the OECD average of 32.5%, and they accounted for just 10.0% of members of the National Diet versus the OECD average of

33.8% (OECD, n.d.). Women make up only 8.3% of cabinet members, further underscoring Japan's lag in gender parity. Unlike many OECD countries that have shown steady increases in women's representation since 2012, Japan's figures have remained largely stagnant.

Scholars have identified multiple factors underlying this persistent underrepresentation. Nakamura and Horimoto (2017) highlighted three key factors that hinder women's leadership development in Japan: government policy, organizational factors, and women's own motivation. The first factor, government policy, includes initiatives promoting gender equality in employment and efforts to shift away from work-centered lifestyles. However, despite these policies, the unequal division of household and childcare responsibilities persists, and systemic policy changes that could significantly transform traditional gender roles remain underdeveloped. The second factor, organizational, concerns structural employment practices in Japan. Women are often hired into positions with limited opportunities for promotion, and traditional seniority-based systems favor men, who tend to accumulate longer continuous service, making it easier for them to obtain leadership positions. The third factor, women's motivation, is shaped by socially prescribed gender roles, limited professional networks, and a lack of female role models in leadership positions. These conditions make it difficult for women to develop aspirations toward leadership roles.

Nakamura and Horimoto also emphasized the importance of educational and training opportunities in leadership development, noting that various organizations have begun offering programs to enhance women's leadership capacity. However, previous studies have indicated that women generally have fewer opportunities for skill development compared to men (Betz, 2007; van Vianen & Keizer, 1996), and this tendency may be particularly pronounced in Japan, given the structural and cultural barriers discussed above. Therefore, it is essential to intentionally provide leadership training opportunities in order to promote the development of women leaders.

Leader Development and Sport

Adolescence, particularly the ages of 12 to 18, is considered a period of "experiential exploration" in leader development, where individuals develop a range of leadership skills through various extracurricular activities (Liu et al., 2021). Participation in sport has been shown to enhance individuals' self-perception of their leadership skills. In fact, individuals with regular sport experience have been shown to possess significantly higher leadership abilities compared to those without such experience (Mareque et al., 2022). Sport also provides opportunities to acquire broader life skills, such as communication and teamwork, which are foundational to leadership (Gould & Carson, 2008; Holt et al., 2017; Opstoel et al., 2020). While these benefits apply across gender, evidence suggests that sport may be particularly beneficial for adolescent girls. Hancock et al. (2012) found that the positive relationship between sport

participation and leadership self-perception was especially pronounced among girls.

At the same time, as previously noted, sport is male-dominated culture, so girls participate at lower rates than boys (Mareque, et al., 2022), and women in sport-related fields face numerous challenges and conflicts (e.g., Brawner, 2023; Dixon & Bruening, 2005; Itoh et al., 2017). In particular, women are underrepresented in leadership positions (Burton, 2015), with lower proportions of female coaches (Acosta & Carpenter, 2012; Goorevich et al., 2024) and sport administrators (Acosta & Carpenter, 2012; Brawner, 2023) compared to men. Burton et al. (2020) pointed out that leadership stereotypes are often associated with more masculine traits, and this tendency is particularly pronounced in the context of sport, where masculinity is heavily emphasized. Therefore, when considering leader development for adolescent girls through sport, it is essential to create environments that provide girls with equitable opportunities to experience leadership. Leberman (2017) also highlighted the value of offering leadership development in settings tailored specifically to young women, suggesting that programs separated from those designed for boys can be more effective. In line with this, Chelladurai (2011) specifically highlighted self-efficacy as a critical skill developed through sport and emphasized its significance in the cultivation of effective leadership—a key concept that will be discussed in the following section.

Theoretical Framework

Self-Efficacy Theory

Self-efficacy is defined as the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce predicted outcomes (Bandura, 1997). In other words, it refers to the capacity to direct one's efforts toward desired goals and to sustain the motivation necessary to achieve those goals within a given context. Based on this definition, self-efficacy functions as a central cognitive mechanism that mediates between self-evaluative information and individuals' subsequent thought patterns, emotional responses, motivation, and behavior (Feltz et al., 2008). When self-efficacy is high, individuals are more likely to persist in their efforts, overcome obstacles, and effectively manage stress and anxiety (Bandura, 1997). Taken together, these findings highlight why, in today's unpredictable and high-stress society, self-efficacy is regarded as an essential competency, prompting numerous studies to identify the factors that contribute to its enhancement.

Furthermore, the low representation of women in specific academic fields, such as mathematics and physics, and related career paths has been linked to lower self-efficacy among girls and women, reducing their likelihood of pursuing these disciplines and careers (e.g., Betz & Hackett, 1986; Hackett & Betz, 1981). As noted earlier, sport is likewise a field in which girls and women are underrepresented. In particular, women are especially scarce in leadership positions (e.g., coach, athletic administrator), and numerous studies have identified low

self-efficacy as one of the contributing factors (e.g., Machida-Kosuga et al., 2016; Swim et al., 2021). Therefore, in order to increase the number of women who aspire to and remain in leadership roles over time, applying self-efficacy theory to identify the key aspects that enhance self-efficacy is considered useful.

Sources of Efficacy Information

Efficacy beliefs are shaped through a complex process that integrates diverse sources of information. Bandura (1997) identified four primary sources of self-efficacy: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and physiological and emotional states.

The first source, mastery experiences, refers to individuals' experiences of success or failure and is considered the most influential source of efficacy information. Mastery experiences affect self-efficacy beliefs through self-evaluation of one's performance. When an experience is perceived as successful, self-efficacy increases; conversely, when perceived as a failure, self-efficacy beliefs decrease. Monitoring successful experiences reinforces the evaluation of mastery experiences and can enhance self-efficacy more effectively than monitoring failures (Feltz et al., 2008).

The second source, vicarious experiences, involves obtaining efficacy information by observing others. Repeated observation of others' actions and outcomes provides information on how to perform tasks correctly and reassures individuals that the task is learnable. When others succeed, individuals' self-efficacy in similar tasks tends to increase, while observing others' failures can diminish self-efficacy (Feltz et al., 2008). Observing others with similar abilities and personal characteristics has been shown to be especially effective in bolstering self-efficacy, suggesting that the most beneficial comparisons come from individuals who are either similar in ability or slightly more skilled (Bandura, 1997).

The third source, social persuasion, has a limited impact on its own but can motivate individuals to persist in their efforts when assessments are within a realistic range (Bandura, 1997). The strength of its influence also depends on the persuader's prestige, credibility, expertise, and trustworthiness (Feltz et al., 2008). Additionally, people can self-persuade by affirming their ability to accomplish or cope with specific tasks through positive self-talk or affirmations, while negative self-talk or irrational beliefs can lower self-efficacy and affect subsequent activities.

The fourth source, physiological and emotional states, refers to individuals' cognitive assessment of their physiological condition when evaluating their capacity to meet the demands of specific tasks (Feltz et al., 2008). Factors like physical strength, fitness, fatigue, and pain play a role; favorable conditions enhance efficacy, while unfavorable ones reduce it. For example, positive emotions such as happiness, excitement, and calmness can elevate efficacy judgments (Maddux & Meier, 1995; Treasure, et al., 1996), whereas negative emotions like anxiety, fear, and worry tend to decrease self-efficacy (Feltz, 1982).

Interventions based on these sources of efficacy information can modify self-efficacy beliefs. However, how efficacy information is weighted, processed, and integrated to form judgments across different tasks, situations, and personal skill levels remains unclear (Feltz et al., 2008).

Leadership Self-Efficacy

Leadership self-efficacy (LSE) refers to an individual's confidence in their ability to lead others (Dwyer, 2019). LSE is a critical factor contributing to effective leadership, making the enhancement of LSE essential for improving leadership quality within organizations (Chemers et al., 2000; McCormick et al., 2002).

However, previous study has indicated that women tend to have lower LSE compared to men of similar age and educational background (McCormick et al., 2002). The gender difference in LSE is not attributed to the number of leadership experiences but rather to differing interpretations of work outcomes. Specifically, men are more likely to interpret their performance in ways that boost efficacy, while women are more likely to interpret their successful performance in ways that constrain their efficacy, thus leading to gender differences in LSE (McCormick et al., 2002). Consequently, women who lack confidence in their leadership abilities are less likely to pursue leadership positions and may display a lack of confidence regardless of their actual capabilities. Furthermore, research has demonstrated a positive correlation between LSE and career advancement (Machida-Kosuga et al., 2016), suggesting that enhancing LSE could encourage individuals to aspire to higher levels of leadership.

In line with this, Leberman (2017) emphasized the importance of implementing leader development programs specifically for young women as a way to address the unique challenges faced by female leaders. Therefore, to increase the number of women proactively pursuing leadership positions, it is essential to focus on girls' self-efficacy and examine how sport experiences impact their leadership self-efficacy. Such an investigation may contribute to the development of effective leadership education programs for girls.

Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this study was to explore how aspects of sport activities influence leadership self-efficacy among Japanese female high school student-athletes.

The research question for this study is: What sport-related experiences contribute to the development of leadership self-efficacy among Japanese female high school student-athletes?

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design informed by the Grounded Theory Approach (GTA; Charmaz, 2014), which was chosen to allow participants' voices and perspectives

to emerge in a naturalistic manner, enabling the identification of patterns grounded in their experiences. GTA was particularly appropriate for this study, as the aim was to generate conceptual insights into the processes by which sport-related experience—such as participation in school-based or community sport clubs, the leadership roles they assumed, and the interactions encountered—shape leadership self-efficacy among Japanese female high school student-athletes. In doing so, the study also sought to extend the application of self-efficacy theory to the context of sport and adolescent leadership development.

Participants

To recruit participants, purposeful sampling was first employed for the initial group interview to ensure that participants met the study criteria: high school girls currently participating in sport, either through school-based clubs or local community sport clubs. Consent was sought through their school teachers, and students who provided consent (and obtained parental consent) were randomly assigned to groups according to their availability, after which group interviews were conducted. As the study progressed, theoretical sampling, a method specific to GTA (Charmaz, 2014) was then applied. Theoretical sampling does not involve predefining participants; instead, subsequent participants are selected based on emerging analytical results. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was achieved—when no new themes arose—through repeated interviewing and analysis.

To collect rich and diverse qualitative data, both focus group and individual interviews were employed in a complementary manner. Focus groups (2–5 participants) facilitated dynamic discussions and allowed observation of group interactions, while individual one-on-one interviews were primarily conducted to elicit deeper personal experiences and to clarify in greater detail how these experiences influenced leadership self-efficacy. Although the same semi-structured interview guide was used across both formats, the combination of group and individual settings enriched the data and contributed effectively to the theoretical sampling process.

All participants were high school female student-athletes aged 16 to 17 from Tokyo, Japan, an urban metropolitan area, who were involved in either school-based sport clubs or community sport clubs. Eligibility criteria required that participants were currently enrolled in high school and actively engaged in organized sport. The sports they were currently engaged in included soccer, rhythmic gymnastics, basketball, and badminton. According to self-efficacy theory, the presence of males in traditionally male-dominated fields can impact females' self-efficacy (Hackett, 1995). As sport is a male-dominated field, it has been suggested that women, as a minority, may face challenges in accessing leadership experiences due to various factors (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007). Additionally, it has been argued that leadership programs should consider gender and provide learning environments tailored to girls (Hoyt & Johnson, 2011). Therefore, we focused on female high school students

attending an all-girls school, where they could engage in sport activities without the influence of male counterparts.

Data collection proceeded in three rounds. In Round 1, focus groups were conducted to capture initial perspectives, and participants were grouped with familiar peers, such as classmates or teammates from the same sport club, in order to facilitate more active and open discussions. In Round 2, one focus group was conducted to further examine the shared themes identified in the first round. In addition, individual interviews were primarily used to clarify in greater detail how specific experiences influenced leadership self-efficacy. Round 3 then combined additional focus groups with one individual interview to refine the emerging categories and approach theoretical saturation. In Round 2 and 3, focus groups were organized based on participants' pre-survey responses, grouping together those who shared similar experiences. This arrangement was intended to facilitate in-depth discussions and allow common themes to emerge more clearly. An overview of the rounds, including methods, number of participants, and purposes, is summarized in Table 1. It should be noted that different participants were involved across the three rounds of data collection. This was consistent with the principles of theoretical sampling in which new participants are deliberately recruited in later stages to refine emerging categories and ensure the comprehensiveness of the analysis. Rather than weakening the analysis, the inclusion of different groups strengthened the findings by allowing for the comparison of perspectives across participants and contributing to theoretical saturation.

Table 1

Overview of data collection rounds: Methods, participants, and purposes.

Round	Participant number	Selection criteria & purpose
Round 1 4 focus groups	Total 15 15	Purposeful sampling to capture initial perspectives from girls active in school/community sport.
Round 2 1 focus group 4 individual interviews	Total 6 2 4	Theoretical sampling, with individual interviews as the primary method to elicit more personal experiences and clarify in detail how specific experiences influenced leadership self-efficacy; one additional focus group was conducted to further examine shared themes emerging from Round 1.
Round 3 3 focus groups 1 individual interview	Total 9 8 1	Theoretical sampling to refine categories, deepen understanding of the processes underlying self-efficacy development, and move toward theoretical saturation.

Semi-structured Interview Protocol

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This method was chosen to balance the flow and adaptability of questions during the interviews, ensuring harmony between participants' spontaneity and questions aligned with the study framework (Bloomberg, 2022). The interview guide was developed based on the four sources of efficacy information that influence self-efficacy—mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and physiological and emotional states (Bandura, 1997). While questions were structured around this guide, flexibility was maintained to adjust questions based on participants' responses.

The interviews were conducted by two researchers, either as focus groups (2–5 participants) or in-depth, one-on-one interviews, each lasting approximately 30 minutes to an hour. This data collection was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Informed consent, participant protection, confidentiality, and anonymity were explained to participants, who then provided consent. Additionally, since participants were high school students under the age of 18, written explanations of the study's purpose were provided to parents or guardians, and parental consent was obtained.

We developed a self-designed, semi-structured interview guide grounded in Bandura's self-efficacy theory (1997) and informed by prior qualitative studies on leader development in sport (Damon et al., 2024; Machida-Kosuga & Kohno, 2023). The guide comprised four core questions, each mapped to one of the four sources of efficacy (mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and physiological/emotional states).

Given the semi-structured format, the interviewer used tailored probes following participants' initial response to elicit richer detail (e.g., specific episodes and contexts, actors involved, frequency and valence of feedback, and perceived impact on leadership self-efficacy).

To ensure alignment with the study's research question—What sport-related experiences contribute to the development of leadership self-efficacy among Japanese female high school student-athletes?—the interview guide was organized around the four sources of efficacy so that each item elicited concrete sport experiences relevant to leadership self-efficacy.

Data Analysis

As previously mentioned in the Participants section, this study employed Charmaz's (2014) GTA for analysis. This method involves three stages of analysis: (a) initial coding, (b) focused coding, and (c) theoretical coding.

In the initial coding phase, a process called line-by-line coding was conducted, in which each line of the transcribed data was assigned a label (code). This step allowed for the identification and extraction of significant actions or behaviors from participants' statements. By comparing assigned codes, specific terms used by participants, known as *in vivo* codes, were

identified. These *in vivo* codes are essential as they capture key concepts that symbolize participants' statements and actions. In the subsequent focused coding stage, codes relevant to the research question were extracted from the initial codes, and similar codes were grouped together to form provisional categories. Finally, in the theoretical coding stage, relationships between the selected codes from the focused coding were conceptualized to develop a theory. Specifically, this stage illustrated the processes through which participants' LSE was enhanced or diminished through sport activities, as well as the factors influencing these processes, which were represented in a conceptual diagram.

Throughout each phase, constant comparison—one of GTA's core features (Glaser & Strauss, 1967)—was utilized. During analysis, if necessary, previous stages were revisited, and comparisons were made between statements and assigned codes, as well as between different codes. This approach helped clarify similarities and differences, uncover hidden meanings, and identify underlying actions.

To ensure the quality and rigor of this qualitative research, the analysis was conducted by two researchers, who collaboratively assessed the emergent categories, themes, and findings. Throughout the process, memos—an essential component of GTA—were used to explicitly document the analytic development. The analysis and writing were guided by Charmaz's (2014) four criteria for evaluating grounded theory studies: originality, credibility, resonance, and usefulness.

Trustworthiness and Rigor of This Study

Various approaches have been utilized to ensure the quality of qualitative research. One of these is the criteriological approach, which assesses research quality by determining whether the methodology meets predefined external criteria. Among the widely used criteria are the four standards proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1986)—credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. It is suggested that meeting these four criteria enhances the "trustworthiness" of the research.

Credibility was supported through constant comparison throughout the analytic process, including data collection, and the use of rich, illustrative quotations. Dependability was enhanced via the development of an iterative codebook and the maintenance of an audit trail. Initial coding was conducted independently by two researchers (the first and second authors), and the level of agreement in their results was examined. Subsequent coding was primarily carried out by the first author; however, analytic findings were regularly reported and discussed with the co-researchers, which helped resolve ambiguities and strengthen the stability of the categories. Transferability was addressed by providing thick descriptions of the research context (Tokyo—a metropolitan setting—female high school student-athletes aged 16-17 and their sport context), enabling readers to judge applicability to other settings. Finally, confirmability was fostered through the use of memos, which are emphasized as a central component of the grounded theory

process. Throughout the study, memos were written to document analytic decisions, reflections, and emerging theoretical insights, creating an audit trail that linked interpretive claims explicitly to the data.

Results

The data analysis revealed four categories: (a) leadership experience, (b) feedback on leadership behavior, (c) observation of leaders, and (d) sport performance level.

Leadership Experience

Leadership experience emerged as a form of mastery experience. In Japan's school-based sport clubs, it is customary for senior students to take on leadership roles, meaning that many participants had previously experienced being leaders in sport. Leaders were selected either through direct appointment by a coach or through discussions among teammates. Even those who had not held official leadership positions had opportunities to demonstrate leadership in various capacities, such as guiding younger team members during meetings or taking the lead during games.

When expected to fulfill a leadership role, participants engaged in trial and error, adjusting their communication styles with team members. For some, these experiences became successful mastery experiences, such as effectively facilitating discussions, achieving team goals, or gaining followers among teammates. However, some participants experienced these moments as failures. Specific instances included communication conflicts with team members or feelings of pressure from leadership responsibilities, which led to behaviors that deviated from their ideal image of a leader. Those who experienced such failures sometimes developed an aversion to leadership roles.

For example, one participant noted, "When I was on the club team, I tried to express my opinions, but felt they were rejected, which made me afraid to speak up. From then on, I just let others take the lead." Another reflected, "I was in a position where I had to lead the team, but I became overwhelmed... I ended up exposing all my weaknesses to the team, which made me feel like I had become a leader far removed from the one I envisioned."

Feedback for Leadership Behavior

Feedback from others, such as coaches and teammates, was identified as a factor that reinforces mastery experiences. This corresponds to social persuasion, one of the four sources of efficacy information.

Participants shared experiences in which constructive feedback helped them reflect on their actions and improve their leadership skills. For example, one participant described a conflict with a teammate:

"My teammates didn't express their opinions much, so I spoke strongly. As a result, one of them cried, saying later that she thought I was scary. I didn't understand why at the time—I thought I was just speaking normally. About a week later, the

teacher pointed it out to me, and I talked with the girl who had cried and apologized. After that, we were able to share opinions again and work together.”

Others shared how positive recognition from a trusted coach encouraged further leadership behavior. One participant recalled:

“During a practice match, some of my teammates were feeling down after being scolded by the coach or frustrated by losses. Since we were third-year students, we encouraged them, saying things like ‘It’s okay,’ and ‘Let’s try again next time.’ Our female coach saw that and told us, ‘It’s great how you support one another—your team is the best at doing that.’ Hearing that made me really happy and gave me the motivation to keep trying.”

Observation of Leaders

Vicarious experience, the second most influential source of self-efficacy, significantly impacted the leadership self-efficacy of participants in this study through observing various leaders encountered in sport. Participants met and observed diverse role models, including older leaders within their teams, leaders from other teams, and prominent figures in the sport world through the media, which helped them form an ideal image of a leader. Examples of participant statements include, “My ideal leader was a captain who would guide us well and wasn’t afraid to say what needed to be said. Everyone respected them, and I don’t think anyone disliked that senior member,” and “During games, when I felt anxious, [my role model] would offer words of encouragement. Conversely, if I made a mistake out of nervousness, there was a senior who would carefully remind me what needed to be done, and I admired that.”

However, not all leaders encountered served as positive role models. Some participants noted negative examples, such as, “Watching the current leader, I find myself thinking, ‘I don’t want to become like that.’” Negative role model attributes included dissatisfaction with communication skills, such as “tone and choice of words,” and frustrations with certain behaviors, like, “There’s a leader who acts like ‘I’m the absolute authority’... as if they are always right and can do whatever they want.” However, observing such unfavorable examples of leadership did not necessarily diminish self-efficacy. Rather, witnessing poor role models led some participants to clarify their own ideal image of a leader and strengthen their motivation to become a better one. For example, one participant stated, “When I look at the current leader, I just think, ‘I don’t want to become like that.’ There’s a lot going on, and I just know I don’t want to be like that.” Another said, “I don’t like people like that, and it helped me form a clear idea of the kind of leader I don’t want to be. I don’t want to become someone who thinks it’s okay to look down on others just because they have less ability or hold a lower position. I want to be a leader who treats everyone equally.”

Sport Performance Level

Self-perceived sport performance level emerged as a factor affecting emotional status. Previous studies have shown that, for female athletes, higher competitive skills promote coaching self-efficacy in the context of second careers as coaches (Mikura & Ogasawara, 2021). Similarly, in the context of leadership, lower self-perceived competitive ability was associated with a sense of being unsuited for leadership and a decline in LSE. In Japan, it is customary for athletes with high skill levels to assume leadership roles in sport teams, and many consider highly competitive ability a key leadership quality.

Supporting this notion, one participant shared, “When it comes to sport, I feel like I’m in complete darkness... I’m currently the one in the club who’s growing the least, not changing at all. I don’t know how to improve. Even when I ask others, they say it’s something I have to work out myself, but I can’t figure it out. I’m fed up with myself, and I’ve started to hate badminton itself... If I’m not going to grow, maybe I should quit? My confidence really seems to be influenced by my perceived performance and improvement in the sport.”

In Japanese sport teams, where seniority is deeply embedded, senior members are often expected to take on leadership roles. This can lead to inner conflict for senior members who feel responsible for leading younger teammates yet perceive their own abilities as inferior.

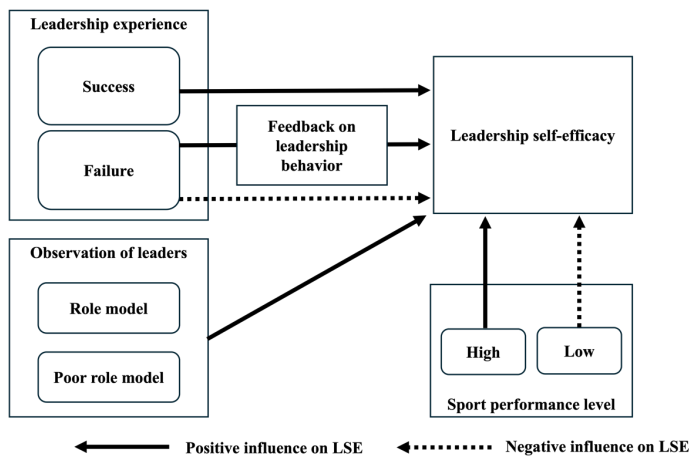
For example, one participant said, “As a second year, I feel I have to lead the first years, including through my play. But since I’m less skilled than they are, I worry that if I try to give advice, it might affect their play style, so I end up not saying anything.”

Influence of Four Categories on Leadership Self-Efficacy

Figure 1 illustrates the influence of these four categories on LSE. Solid lines indicate positive influences, while dotted lines indicate negative influences. As indicated in the results, successful leadership experiences enhance LSE, whereas unsuccessful experiences diminish it. However, receiving constructive feedback on leadership behavior from others can transform such experiences into positive ones. Moreover, observing role models—even poor role models—can lead to a positive recognition that one can become a better leader. Finally, while higher perceived sport performance levels were associated with increased LSE, lower perceived performance or struggles in sport was found to decrease LSE.

Figure 1

Four sources of leadership self-efficacy gained through sport experiences



Discussion

To further interpret the findings, we discuss how each of the four identified categories—leadership experience, feedback on leadership behavior, observation of leaders, and sport performance level—contributed to participants’ leadership self-efficacy. These factors are examined in light of self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997) and relevant empirical research.

Leadership Experience

The findings suggest that leadership experience functions as a form of mastery experience, a key source of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Consistent with McCormick et al. (2002), participants who experienced success in leadership roles demonstrated stronger leadership self-efficacy. However, the present study also highlights that not all leadership experiences were interpreted as successful. When participants faced interpersonal difficulties or role strain, some internalized these moments as failures, leading to diminished confidence in their leadership abilities.

Bandura (1997) emphasizes that unsuccessful experiences prior to the development of efficacy can negatively impact self-efficacy beliefs. The current findings extend this idea by illustrating how adolescent girls may disengage from leadership opportunities following perceived failures. These insights underscore the importance of supportive environments and mechanism—such as feedback and encouragement—to mitigate the negative impact of early leadership struggles. This will be further explored in the next section on feedback on leadership behavior.

Feedback on Leadership Behavior

As illustrated in the Result section under ‘Feedback on Leadership Behavior’, feedback from others, particularly when it comes from respected figures such as teachers or coaches,

played an important role in transforming participants’ perceptions of their own leadership. Participants who had initially viewed their experiences as failures reported that such support helped them reframe those experiences as learning opportunities, allowing them to improve their communication and leadership behaviors.

This finding aligns with Bandura’s (1997) view that social persuasion can contribute to a stronger sense of self-efficacy, especially when the communicator is a knowledgeable and trusted individual (Won et al., 2017). Although verbal persuasion alone is unlikely to dramatically alter self-efficacy beliefs, targeted and credible evaluations can strengthen capabilities. McCauley et al. (2013) similarly noted in studies on women’s LSE that feedback can highlight areas of strength and needed growth, facilitating further development as a leader.

Observation of Leaders

Based on the findings presented the Result section, this study discusses how observing leaders influenced participants’ leadership self-efficacy. Sport is known to offer opportunities to observe various leaders and provide everyone, regardless of position, the chance to step into leadership roles (Burton, 2015). Furthermore, research indicates that the more similar the observer is to the model, the greater impact it has on the observer’s self-efficacy (Bandura, 1995). Observing the success of similar others can strengthen self-efficacy by reinforcing a sense of “I can succeed too,” whereas observing their failures can lower self-efficacy. In school sport clubs, the increased opportunity to observe leaders of similar age and gender offered rich vicarious learning experiences.

For girls and women, the presence of same-gender role models is particularly impactful in fields or careers where they are underrepresented, as shown in various studies (e.g., Gray & Weese, 2023; Moran-Miller & Flores, 2011). Sport activities can thus provide valuable opportunities to observe same-gender leaders in action. Lirgg (1992) also noted that confidence tends to be lower for girls and women in “masculine” domains such as sport, and that positive portrayals of women in sport through the media can promote effective modeling.

In mixed-gender sport environments, however, there is a risk that leadership positions may be dominated by boys. This suggests a need for strategies, such as quota systems, to intentionally place girls in leadership roles. Additionally, offering leadership training that includes effective communication methods can help cultivate positive role models among these leaders.

Sport Performance Level

As noted in the Result section, the notion that “those with higher competitive skills should assume leadership” and “older members should be leaders”—cultural stereotypes specific to Japan—were found to reduce LSE among those who did not meet these expectations. Additionally, a lack of confidence in their sport abilities contributed to negative emotional states, such as anxiety and discouragement, which in turn led to decreased

self-efficacy. As previously mentioned, negative emotional states are known to lower self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997).

Furthermore, sport carry various stereotypes and gender biases, with leadership qualities often associated with traditionally masculine characteristics, leading to the perception that “girls and women are not suited for leadership in sport” (Grappendorf & Burton, 2017; Schull, 2017). While traditional trait-based leadership theories have been increasingly replaced by behavior-based approaches in leadership research (Chelladurai, 2014), society still holds onto trait-based ideas. These stereotypes can have harmful effects, such as diminishing leadership self-efficacy among girls. Therefore, eliminating rigid stereotypes and gender biases related to leadership in both sport and society, and promoting practices informed by contemporary leadership theories, are also essential steps forward.

Implication

The findings of this study revealed the key aspects of sport environments that either enhance or diminish LSE among female high school student-athletes, offering valuable insights for both practitioners and researchers.

For practitioners, this study confirmed the potential usefulness of incorporating sport into leadership education and highlighted considerations for developing leadership programs that utilize sport. In the context of sport for development, sport has already been employed in programs aimed at empowering girls and women (e.g., Sport for Tomorrow, n.d.; Women Win, n.d.). However, in Japan, sport has not yet fully realized its potential as a tool for achieving gender equality, and further efforts to leverage this potential are warranted.

For researchers, we provide insights into previously unexplored factors that influence LSE among girls in sport, offering implications for future research. Unlike prior studies on sport and leadership, which have largely focused on Western contexts, this study revealed phenomena unique to the Japanese context. In Japan, there remains a tendency to emphasize leaders' traits rather than behaviors, which may be one reason for the scarcity of female leaders in fields beyond sport. It is essential to further investigate the effects of gender bias and leadership stereotypes—potentially through comparisons with male counterparts—to understand these influences more comprehensively.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to apply self-efficacy theory to explore the key aspects within sport activities that influence leadership self-efficacy (LSE) among Japanese female high school student-athletes. The interview analysis identified four key aspects that contributed to the development of LSE: leadership experience, observation of leaders, feedback on leadership behavior, and sport performance level. These findings suggest that participation in sport can serve as an effective form of early leadership education by offering opportunities to gain leadership experience and observe diverse role models.

At the same time, the male-dominated nature of sport presents structural challenges. Therefore, it is essential to create sport environments that actively support girls in taking on leadership roles and that offer encouragement and guidance, especially when they face difficulties. These findings underscore the importance of developing sport settings that are intentionally designed to foster girls' leadership development.

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Appendix

Interview Question Guide:

1. In your sport experience, have you ever achieved or failed to achieve something as a leader?
2. What kinds of leaders have you encountered through your sport activities, and how did their presence influence you?
3. Through your sport activities, what kind of feedback have you received regarding your leadership actions?
4. How did you feel during your leadership experiences in sport activities?