

Enhancing Leadership Development Through Serious Leisure: Insights from Pickleball

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between participation in pickleball and leadership capabilities using a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data from a leadership behavior survey involving 133 individuals who played pickleball at varying frequencies and qualitative insights from open-ended responses were analyzed. Although the quantitative results did not show a statistically significant trend, frequent pickleball players generally achieved slightly higher leadership scores than their less active or non-playing counterparts. Qualitative findings revealed three predominant themes: enhanced team dynamics, decision-making under pressure, and personal growth and confidence. These themes underscore the perceived positive impact of pickleball on leadership abilities, suggesting the potential of recreational activities to enrich leadership development programs.

Keywords: serious leisure theory, leadership enhancement, pickleball, pickleball leadership, leadership development, recreational sports, team dynamics, decision-making, personal growth, physical activity and leadership, mixed-methods research, leadership behaviors

Introduction

Recent studies have highlighted the significant role of sports in nurturing leadership skills, noting the diverse contributions of athletic engagement to leadership development (Tapşın & Karagün, 2021). Focusing on pickleball, a sport that combines elements from tennis, badminton, and table tennis, this study investigates the sport's effectiveness in enhancing leadership capabilities. The combined strategic play, team interaction, and physical discipline in pickleball offers a unique lens through which one can explore the consistency with which participation may elevate leadership skills. At the core of this investigation is the following question: Is pickleball participation correlated with superior leadership abilities?

Leadership is considered a multifaceted construct that entails both innate and acquired competencies. Contemporary discourse underscores the importance of sports and other diverse experiences in honing key leadership traits such as strategic insight, adaptability, effective communication, and collaborative prowess (Stone & Patterson, 2023; Olivola, Eubanks, & Lovelace, 2014). This study melds theoretical insights from the domain of serious leisure with practical leadership development frameworks to determine how pickleball engagement influences leadership skill enhancement.

Stebbins (1992) introduced the concept of serious leisure, which provides a theoretical framework to examine individuals' deep, enriching engagement with activities such as pickleball. These pursuits foster personal development, skill advancement, and a stronger sense of community—qualities that are in harmony with effective leadership. This study proposes that pickleball, as a model of serious leisure, serves as a conducive setting for cultivating leadership attributes.

As pickleball surges in popularity, its potential as a catalyst for both social and personal growth becomes more evident. This investigation into the link between pickleball participation and leadership competency is both timely and pertinent as it aims to enrich our understanding of how leisure activities, especially those under serious leisure, shape leadership qualities. Through mixed methods, this paper empirically proves that pickleball engagement can significantly enhance leadership skills and offer valuable insights for the fields of leisure studies and leadership development.

Key Concepts in Leadership Theories and Models

Leadership development, which seeks to determine the mechanisms underlying effective leadership, continues to be a central theme in scholarly research. Avolio and Gardner (2005) described leadership development as a spectrum of activities geared toward improving an individual's influence and guidance capabilities. At its core, leadership is about mobilizing others to achieve shared objectives through personal traits, behaviors, and contextual factors (Scott, 2021; Kjellström, Stålné, & Törnblom, 2020). The field has generated a rich tapestry of theories and models aiming to capture the essence, effectiveness, and evolution of leadership (Oc, Bashshur, & Day, 2023; Siangchokyoo, Klinger & Campion, 2020).

Recent theories have also highlighted the critical role played by varied experiences, particularly in sports, in the enhancement of leadership skills. Such perspectives highlight the value of experiential learning in sports for fostering essential leadership qualities such as teamwork, resilience, strategic thinking, and emotional intelligence (EI) (Dinibutun, 2020). This section explores how key leadership theories and models contributed to the understanding and development of leadership.

Transformational Leadership Theory

According to Bass (1999), transformational leadership theory highlights leaders' transformative role in elevating their followers' performance and encouraging their personal and professional development beyond initial expectations. This theory is structured around four key components:

1. Idealized influence - As role models, leaders demonstrate commitment and ethical standards.
2. Inspirational motivation - Leaders inspire and motivate their followers, fostering a shared vision.
3. Intellectual stimulation - Leaders encourage innovative and critical thinking.
4. Individualized consideration - Leaders address each follower's unique needs and aspirations. (Deng, et al., 2023; Siangchokyoo, Klinger, R & Campion, 2020).

Sports serve as fertile ground for practicing transformational leadership, which naturally cultivates these four components. Sports leaders, whether coaches, captains, or veteran players, often personify idealized influence by displaying unwavering commitment and ethical conduct. Moreover, they not only inspire and rally their teams with compelling visions of success but also challenge them to adopt strategic thinking in the heat of competition. Furthermore, by recognizing and nurturing each athlete's distinct talents and developmental requirements, sports leaders embody the essence of individualized consideration (Mach, Ferreira, & Abrantes, 2022).

This consistency between sports leadership and the transformational leadership model underscores the latter's relevance and applicability across various contexts, illustrating how sports participation can serve as a practical platform for developing and exhibiting transformational leadership skills (Kwan, 2020).

Emotional Intelligence: A Keystone in Leadership Development

Goleman (2021) highlighted the pivotal role EI plays in leadership development, particularly in sports. EI consists of four critical dimensions:

1. Self-awareness - Recognizing one's emotions and their impact on performance and relationships.
2. Self-regulation - Managing emotions effectively, even in challenging situations.
3. Social awareness - Understanding teammates' and opponents' emotions, fostering empathy.
4. Relationship management - Nurturing positive interactions and resolving conflicts skillfully.

Sports participation is an excellent catalyst for enhancing these EI dimensions. Athletes often experience high-pressure situations where emotional control is crucial not only for personal performance but also for team dynamics. They learn to interpret their teams' and opponents' emotional undercurrents, which in turn develops their empathy and social awareness. Moreover, sports necessitate ongoing interactions with widely diverse personalities, offering many opportunities to refine one's relationship management skills.

For instance, a basketball player must have enough self-awareness to recognize when frustration is affecting their shot, self-regulate to calm down, understand the stress being experienced by their teammates, and communicate effectively to maintain morale and focus. These skills are directly transferable to leadership roles, where understanding and guiding emotions within groups can spell the difference between success and failure.

Through sports participation, individuals can significantly improve their EI and thus build a strong foundation for effective leadership, which is crucial because EI not only refers to managing one's emotions but also harnessing and directing other people's emotional energy toward shared goals—a core aspect of leadership excellence.

Servant Leadership in Sports

Coined by Greenleaf (2002), servant leadership prioritizes team members' well-being and development above all else, naturally aligning with the sports ethos, which often values collective success over individual glory. In sports, servant leadership manifests through athletes and coaches who prioritize team needs, fostering a culture of mutual support, respect, and unity and building a strong sense of community and shared purpose, which is essential for achieving team objectives. Examples include coaches who focus on their players' personal and athletic growth, ensuring that everyone feels valued and integral to the team's success.

Applying the Team Leadership Model in Sports

The team leadership model provides insights into leaders' nuanced role in enhancing team functionality and performance, emphasizing the importance of identifying and addressing team challenges to maintain effectiveness. In sports contexts, this model highlights that coaches and team captains must be vigilant observers of team dynamics who are prepared to resolve coordination and cohesion issues. Practical applications of this model include regular team meetings to address concerns, personalized coaching sessions to improve dynamics, and strategies to boost collective performance (Abdolmaleki & Ghanbari, 2021). Landis, Hill, and Harvey (2014) discussed the critical role of effectively adaptive leaders in sports, who continuously evaluate and adjust their strategies to meet team needs.

Authentic Leadership Through Sports

According to Avolio and Gardner (2005), authentic leadership is rooted in self-awareness, ethical decision-making, transparency, and genuineness, which leaders develop and demonstrate through unique opportunities provided by sports environments. In sports, authentic leaders lead by example, showing integrity in victory and defeat, making fair decisions, and being transparent about their thought processes. Such transparency and ethical stance not only inspire team members' trust and respect but also cultivate a culture where authenticity is valued and replicated. Examples include coaches who openly communicate their decision-making processes and athletes who remain true to their values even under pressure.

The Pivotal Role of Leadership Behaviors

Potosky and Azan (2023) asserted that beyond theoretical models, tangible leadership behaviors fundamentally determine a leader's effectiveness and capacity to drive success. Such behaviors not only influence the way leaders engage with their team members but also profoundly affect organizational achievements, team cohesion, and team members' individual performance. Leaders who deeply understand these critical behaviors can be guided toward creating environments that are conducive to growth, innovation, and resilience, fostering a culture where challenges are addressed by creative solutions and teams display resilience in the face of adversity (Behrendt, Matz, & Göritz, 2017).

Table 1.1 lists the fundamental behaviors that help cultivate effective leadership, each serving as a cornerstone in steering both teams and organizations toward their strategic objectives and vision:

- **Leadership:** Inspiring, motivating, and guiding individuals or teams.
- **Communication skills:** Conveying information clearly and persuasively and ensuring mutual understanding.
- **Decision-making:** Making informed, timely, and judicious choices.
- **Emotional intelligence:** Recognizing and managing one's emotions and those of others, facilitating empathetic interactions and decision-making.
- **Adaptability:** Adjusting strategies and approaches in response to changing environments or unforeseen challenges.

Each behavior plays an integral role in the multifaceted leadership landscape, uniquely contributing to the achievement of organizational success and sustainability. Leaders who excel in these areas are better equipped to foster a supportive and dynamic environment and empower their teams to thrive and adapt in an ever-evolving global landscape.

Table 1.1: Essential Leadership Behaviors for Effectiveness

Leadership behavior	Description
Visionary leadership	The ability to articulate a clear and compelling vision for the future is a key leadership behavior. Leaders must inspire and motivate followers toward a common goal. This is often associated with transformational leadership theory, which emphasizes leaders' role in inspiring and transforming their followers to achieve extraordinary outcomes.
Communication skills	Effective leaders are skilled communicators. They must convey ideas clearly, listen actively, and engage in meaningful conversations with stakeholders. Communication is crucial for building trust, resolving conflicts, and ensuring that team members are aligned with the organization's goals.
Emotional intelligence	Leaders must understand and manage their own emotions and those of others. Emotional intelligence is critical for developing strong relationships, managing stress, and making informed decisions. It also encompasses self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills.
Decision-making ability	Leaders must often make difficult decisions under uncertainty. Effective leaders use analytical skills, intuition, and ethical considerations to make decisions that are in the best interest of their organization and stakeholders.
Adaptability/flexibility	Leaders must adapt to change and remain flexible in the face of uncertainty. They must be able to pivot strategies, embrace new ideas, and lead their teams through transitions.
Empowerment/delegation	Leaders must empower team members and delegate tasks effectively to build capable teams and foster innovation. This involves trusting others, providing autonomy, and supporting team members' growth and development.
Integrity/ethical behavior	Leaders must act with integrity and uphold ethical standards, which include honesty, transparency, and accountability. Ethical leaders foster a culture of trust and respect and ensure that the organization's practices align with its values.
Team building/collaboration	Effective leaders are adept at building cohesive teams and fostering a collaborative environment. They recognize the importance of diversity, encourage cooperation, and use team members' strengths to achieve collective goals.

Integrating Leadership Behaviors with Theoretical Foundations

The abovementioned leadership behaviors are strongly supported by a spectrum of leadership models and theories. Transformational leadership, servant leadership, situational leadership, and frameworks centering on EI, among others, provide theoretical underpinnings that validate the importance of these behaviors (Abdolmaleki & Ghanbari, 2021). Studies published in esteemed journals, including *Leadership Quarterly*, *Academy of Management Review*, and *Harvard Business Review*, present compelling evidence of the effectiveness of these behaviors across different organizational settings. These studies highlight the critical role of leadership behaviors in enhancing team dynamics, driving organizational outcomes, and elevating individual performance.

Recent advancements in leadership theory have increasingly recognized the value of experiential learning, particularly through sports, in cultivating leadership qualities. Indeed, the dynamic and interactive nature of sports participation is consistent with the principles of several leadership theories, allowing for the practical development of essential leadership skills, behaviors, and mindsets. Sims and Fletcher-Wood (2021) argued that sports engagement offers a unique opportunity to embody and refine attributes central to transformational, servant, situational, team, and authentic leadership models.

This interaction between sports and leadership development is not coincidental; rather, it is rooted in the shared emphasis on teamwork, strategic thinking, adaptability, EI, and a service-oriented mindset. Individuals who participate in sports not only hone their physical capabilities but also experience transformative personal growth, enhancing their capacity for effective leadership. Thus, sports function not only as a metaphor for leadership but also as a practical, experiential pathway toward the acquisition and refinement of leadership behaviors critical for success in any organizational context.

Serious Leisure: A Pathway Toward Leadership Development

The concept of serious leisure offers insightful perspectives on how individuals' dedication to their hobbies can help build a foundation for leadership growth. Distinguished by one's commitment to the systematic pursuit of an activity, serious leisure not only pertains to leisurely pastimes but also concerns a deep engagement in pursuits that demand the acquisition and application of specialized skills, knowledge, and experiences. Such engagement provides a distinctive lens through which one can understand the cultivation of leadership qualities in nontraditional settings—that is, beyond the confines of professional work environments or academic learning.

Highlighting the significance of serious leisure activities, Heo et al. (2013) noted their contributions to one's life satisfaction and well-being, suggesting that these pursuits not only enrich one's personal life but also bolster their personal attributes essential for effective leadership. Indeed, individuals who engage in serious leisure activities—be it in sports, arts, or community service—are challenged to set goals, solve problems, collaborate with others, and navigate complex projects, which are all integral to leadership competency.

This section investigates the catalyst role of serious leisure in leadership skill development. People who participate in passionately and purposefully pursued activities can naturally foster and refine their leadership abilities. From enhancing one's decision-making skills and EI to promoting their resilience and strategic thinking, serious leisure activities are a practical, enjoyable, and impactful means to expand one's leadership repertoire. Through this exploration, we identify the multifaceted contributions of serious leisure to the formation and enhancement of key leadership skills and abilities, presenting it as a valuable complement to traditional leadership development programs.

Cultivating Leadership Through Serious Leisure

Serious leisure is characterized by an individual's intense engagement, personal effort in skill enhancement, development of a leisure career, and participation within a specialized community. These aspects effectively nurture leadership qualities for several compelling reasons.

Perseverance and Commitment

The profound dedication demanded by serious leisure reflects the same degree of perseverance in and commitment to impactful leadership. For instance, marathon runners or classical musicians who spend countless hours in practice build not only technical expertise but also resilience and a robust work ethic, which are hallmarks of great leaders who demonstrate unwavering commitment to their goals (Bunea, Kark, & Hammond, 2023).

Skill Acquisition and Mastery

Engaging in serious leisure activities facilitates one's acquisition of specialized skills and deep understanding of a specific domain. This continuous learning and self-improvement journey runs parallel to the development of a growth mindset, critical thinking, and innovation—which are core qualities of effective leadership (Bunea, Kark, & Hammond, 2023).

Community Engagement and Social Networks

Those who participate in a community of practice, inherent to serious leisure, experience rich opportunities for mentorship, collaboration, and leadership. Within these communities (e.g., photography club, chess federation, or volunteer group), teaching, guidance, and mentorship roles naturally emerge. These interactions are vital for honing EI, communication prowess, and the ability to positively motivate and influence others (Bunea, Kark, & Hammond, 2023).

Ethical Practice and Responsibility

Adherence to a community's norms and ethical standards while engaged in serious leisure activities instills a strong sense of responsibility and ethical leadership. Leaders in these settings uphold high standards, promote best practices, and serve as role models for newcomers, thus reinforcing the importance of integrity and ethical conduct in any leadership role.

By deeply participating in serious leisure activities, individuals not only enrich their lives with passion and purpose but also cultivate essential leadership competencies. This section illustrates how one's deliberate pursuit of serious leisure can be a transformative journey that fosters authentic and enduring leadership qualities.

Evolving Dimensions of Serious Leisure Theory

Since Stebbins's introduction of the serious leisure concept in 1982, the theory has significantly broadened in scope through empirical studies in diverse fields such as the arts, sports, hobbyist activities, and volunteer work. These scholarly works have not only validated the theory's applicability across a wide range of pursuits but have also helped refine and expand it.

To complement serious leisure and cover the full spectrum of leisure activities, Stebbins coined the term "casual leisure," which is characterized by immediate, intrinsic rewards and offers enjoyment and relaxation without the need for prolonged commitment or specialized skills. Examples include watching a movie, enjoying a picnic, and engaging in impromptu play.

Stebbins further enriched the leisure typology by identifying "project-based leisure" as a distinct category within serious leisure. This leisure type involves activities not regularly pursued but nevertheless require considerable planning and personal effort. These include organizing a community fundraiser, planning an extensive travel adventure, or undertaking a significant home improvement project. Such activities are characterized by a goal-oriented approach that blends the intrinsic reward of casual leisure with the commitment and skill development inherent in serious leisure (Stebbins, 2020).

These developments capture the dynamism of the serious leisure perspective and illustrate how leisure activities can range from spontaneous and effortless to deliberate and challenging. By delineating these categories, Stebbins provides a more nuanced framework for understanding how individuals participate in leisure activities, offering insights into leisure's diverse contributions to their personal growth, community engagement, and enrichment of life.

Elements of Serious Leisure

Stebbins's (1992) comprehensive analysis of serious leisure reveals six defining characteristics.

Perseverance

In serious leisure activities, one's path toward mastery often begins with challenges. To overcome these initial obstacles, individuals must be persistent, which then leads to deeper enjoyment and fulfillment. For example, someone who intends to master a musical instrument or excel in a sport must prevail over early frustrations through continuous effort.

Leisure Career

Participants of serious leisure usually experience a progression, or “leisure career,” marked by advanced skills, deepened knowledge, and increased engagement. This concept reflects their journey from novice to expert in their chosen activity, highlighting the transformative potential of serious leisure pursuits.

Personal Effort

Another hallmark of serious leisure is an individual’s commitment to developing specialized skills and knowledge. This may extend to physical exertion, as seen in activities such as marathon running or mountain climbing, emphasizing one’s investment of energy and time in their pursuit of leisure excellence (Sachsman, 2017).

Personal Benefits

Serious leisure engagement can yield substantial personal rewards such as self-enrichment, self-expression, and self-actualization. Participants may also experience recreational enjoyment and, in some instances, financial gain, illustrating the different benefits of deep leisure involvement.

Social World

Serious leisure provides individuals with a unique social environment characterized by shared norms, values, and networks surrounding an activity, creating a sense of belonging and community among participants, who engage not only in the activity itself but also in the proximate culture.

Identity Formation

Serious leisure strengthens an individual’s personal and social identity linked to the activity. Participants often view their chosen pursuit as a key part of who they are, reinforcing their dedication and sense of connection to the activity. This identification process emphasizes the role of serious leisure in shaping individual identity and community cohesion (Kelly, Strauss, Arnold, & Stride, 2020).

Table 1.2 summarizes these characteristics, illustrating how serious leisure transcends mere hobbyism and becomes a central, enriching part of one’s life. This framework explains the different effects of serious leisure, highlighting its significance as a conduit for personal growth, social integration, and the enhancement of community life.

Table 1.2: Characteristics of Serious Leisure Activities

Characteristic	Description
The need to persevere	Participants are often required to overcome early challenges to find enjoyment and fulfillment.
The availability of a leisure career	Individuals can progress in skill, knowledge, and engagement.
The need for significant personal effort	This includes the development of one’s skills, knowledge, and sometimes personal effort.
The realization of various personal benefits	Benefits include self-enrichment, self-expression, self-actualization, recreation, or financial return.
The unique ethos and social world	Serious leisure activities are often accompanied by a unique set of norms, values, and social networks.
A strong personal and social identity	Participants often identify strongly with their chosen leisure activity.

Using Serious Leisure to Excel in Leadership

While the nexus between serious leisure and leadership development is an emerging field, such an interplay holds promising insights for enhancing one's capacity for leadership. The foundational work of Bunea and Kark (2019) established how serious leisure activities can serve as a crucible for developing vital leadership skills, including perseverance, strategic insight, and emotional acumen. This premise is supported by leadership theories advocating for the enrichment of leadership competencies through diverse life experiences.

Serious leisure provides a new perspective on the enhancement of individual well-being, social integration, and community empowerment. It can be practiced in a multitude of fields from education and health to urban development, highlighting its profound impact on one's personal fulfillment and societal well-being. The principles of serious leisure have also informed policy and program initiatives aiming to foster community participation and enhance the quality of life through leisure engagement (Bunea, Kark, & Hammond, 2023).

The potential of serious leisure to develop leadership qualities lies in its ability to diversify and deepen a leader's identity. By engaging in activities that demand commitment, creativity, and collaboration, leaders can construct a more nuanced self-concept, engage in meaningful self-reflection, and acquire a richer set of interpersonal and strategic skills. According to Bunea and Kark (2019), this blend of personal identity and leisure-driven pursuits can strengthen a leader's sense of self, fostering a robust leader identity enriched by varied experiences and perspectives.

Furthermore, the correlation between serious leisure pursuits and key leadership competencies (e.g., resilience, strategic thinking, effective collaboration, adherence to ethical norms, and improved EI) underscores the significance of these activities in developing well-rounded leaders. For instance, someone who organizes a community sports league can hone their strategic planning and team management skills, while an individual who participates in a musical ensemble may enhance their EI and collaborative abilities (Stebbins, 2020).

The following discussion draws on theoretical frameworks and real-world applications to examine the practical implications of serious leisure for leadership development and illustrate how it can be a transformative tool for cultivating leadership excellence.

Broadening the Scope of Leadership Training

The incorporation of serious leisure activities into leadership development programs constitutes a novel approach to simulating real-world leadership challenges. For example, team sports such as pickleball can mimic organizational dynamics and offer a hands-on opportunity to practice leadership through goal setting, strategic planning, and team motivation. By embedding activities that reflect leadership complexities into training frameworks, organizations can foster a more engaging and effective learning environment, allowing participants to directly apply and evaluate leadership theories in action (Kelley et al., 2020).

Developing Emotional Intelligence and Resilience

Serious leisure activities require a high degree of emotional regulation, empathy, and stress management, which are indispensable EI aspects for leadership. Confronting and overcoming challenges and setbacks within these pursuits naturally cultivates one's resilience, preparing them to manage adversity and uncertainty in the professional realm with grace and determination (Liu et al., 2024; Kelley et al., 2020).

Cultivating Ethical Leadership

Individuals engaged in serious leisure activities within communities governed by shared norms and ethics are provided with a practical setting for honing their ethical decision-making and integrity. Such experiential learning underscores the significance of upholding values and ethical standards in leadership, reinforcing the role of ethical leadership in building organizational trust and enhancing performance (Liu et al., 2024; Kelley et al., 2020).

Enhancing Interpersonal Skills

The social interactions in many serious leisure activities allow for the development of essential interpersonal skills. Participants in community-based hobbies or team sports can enhance their communication, conflict resolution, and collaboration skills, which are crucial for effective leadership in professional environments where fostering positive relationships and team unity is key to success (Stebbins, 2020).

Strengthening Self-Identity and Confidence

The achievement of mastery and personal growth within serious leisure activities strengthens one's self-identity and self-confidence. This improved self-perception is crucial for leaders because it supports the confidence that they require to inspire others, make decisive actions, and project a strong leadership presence. One's sense of accomplishment and self-assurance from engaging in serious leisure pursuits translates into a more assertive and capable leadership style (Bunea, Kark, & Hammond, 2023).

Strategies for Integrating Serious Leisure into Leadership Development

Leadership development programs can maximize the potential of serious leisure as a tool for nurturing leadership qualities by strategically incorporating activities that not only challenge participants but also align with specific leadership competencies. For instance, someone who organizes a team to participate in a community service project can enhance their project management, teamwork, and ethical decision-making skills. The following are tailored recommendations for including serious leisure in leadership growth initiatives.

Curating Targeted Activities

Serious leisure activities must mirror leadership complexities. For example, pickleball and other team sports can simulate organizational leadership aspects such as strategic planning and team dynamics. Meanwhile, adventure sports such as rock climbing or trekking can foster one's resilience and risk management skills.

Incorporating Reflection Sessions

Structured reflection sessions must be conducted after leisure activities to facilitate deeper learning. These discussions should help participants reflect on their experiences, identify parallels to leadership scenarios, and clarify how these insights can help facilitate their professional development.

Promoting Ongoing Engagement

Participants must be encouraged to continue their engagement with serious leisure activities beyond formal training sessions, which may involve setting personal goals within their chosen activity, joining community clubs or groups, or even leading a leisure project. Continuous involvement ensures the sustained development of leadership skills and fosters a lifelong learning mindset.

Using Community Resources

Participants must use local community resources and networks to support and expand their opportunities for serious leisure engagement. For instance, partnerships with local sports clubs, arts organizations, and volunteer groups provide participants with an array of options to explore and engage with.

Monitoring Progress and Impact

Participants must be encouraged to document their serious leisure activities and the leadership competencies they believe are being developed through journals and other tools. This practice not only strengthens the link between leisure and leadership but also provides program facilitators with valuable feedback to tailor future activities.

Embracing Diverse Pathways toward Leadership Excellence

The serious leisure perspective describes the rich and diverse experiences that facilitate leadership excellence. Pickleball and other activities demonstrate how structured, engaging, and purposeful leisure pursuits can become powerful platforms for developing leadership skills. Such an approach highlights the need to adopt different and innovative methodologies in the quest for leadership growth, broadening the scope beyond traditional educational or corporate training programs to include the enriching potential of serious leisure.

Pickleball

Pickleball is a racquet sport involving two or four players who use paddles to hit a perforated, hollow plastic ball over a 36-inch-high net until one side fails to return the ball or commits an infraction. The game was invented in 1965 in Washington, United States, as a children's backyard game and combines elements of tennis, badminton, and table tennis (Chen et al., 2021; Larson, 2022).

USA Pickleball categorizes players based on their participation level, which helps in understanding the sport's varying impacts on players' leadership skills. Casual players, who engage in the sport 1–7 times a year, may experience different skill development levels compared with core players, who play more than eight times a year. This distinction is crucial in examining how varying degrees of pickleball engagement can facilitate leadership development (USA Pickleball Association, 2020). Sports are recognized for cultivating various leadership skills such as teamwork, strategic planning, and effective decision-making (Chelladurai, 1990), and the relevance of pickleball in leadership is rooted in the sport's nature and structure.

Pickleball offers a distinctive setting in which one can develop and apply these skills. It requires players to make quick decisions, strategize against opponents, and often work with a partner during doubles play (Littlewood & USA Pickleball Association, 2015). It has also transcended the boundaries of a mere sports activity by serving as a community engagement tool that promotes physical well-being and mental health through social interaction and the joy of play. Moreover, pickleball's integration into community centers, educational institutions, and recreational programs demonstrates its role in encouraging a healthy lifestyle and fostering communal ties. Nevertheless, the field with the most compelling link with pickleball is leadership; the requirements of the sport—quick decision-making, adaptability, and strategic thinking—mirror essential qualities in effective leadership (Kim et al., 2021). The team dynamics in pickleball doubles play require communication, collaboration, and mutual support—all critical components of leadership (Chelladurai, 1990).

Anecdotal evidence and qualitative research suggest that individuals who play pickleball develop enhanced leadership skills, such as team building, conflict resolution, and strategic planning. From its inception in 1965 to its inclusion in international tournaments, pickleball has evolved as a serious leisure activity, with some studies describing such growth as staggering (Vitale & Liu, 2020; Casper & Jeon, 2018; Ryu et al., 2018).

USA Pickleball (2023) reports that in 2022, there were more than 4.8 million pickleball players in the United States—a significant increase from previous years. Pickleball's appeal lies in its accessibility and inclusivity as it attracts both former tennis players and those new to racquet sports. In response to this surge in interest, communities have converted tennis courts to pickleball courts, built dedicated pickleball facilities, and offered clinics and leagues to accommodate the growing demand.

Pickleball is also gaining momentum worldwide, with countries in Europe, Asia, and North America seeing an increase in participation rates and the establishment of national governing bodies to promote the sport. Because of such participation growth, pickleball was named the fastest-growing sport in the United States from 2021 to 2023 (Beaver, 2023; Follett, 2022). The Sports and Fitness Industry Association reports that at least 8.9 Americans played pickleball at least once—an increase of 86% from 2021 and 264% over the decade (Ryan, 2023).

Pickleball has also gained a geographic and demographic reach that transcends borders and cultures. While popular among older adults for its low physical impact, it has also increasingly attracted a younger, more dynamic cohort. Studies highlight the sport's inclusivity through a balanced representation across genders and a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds. This demographic diversity is pivotal in understanding how pickleball fosters community and social bonds among players of varying ages and backgrounds (Reynolds et al., 2016).

Cultivating Leadership Through Pickleball

The strategy and collaboration in pickleball serve as an effective platform for developing key leadership skills. The sport demands quick decision-making, strategic planning against opponents, and, notably in doubles play, teamwork and communication, which correspond to vital leadership qualities such as adaptability, problem-solving, and effective collaboration (Littlewood & USA Pickleball Association, 2015).

Beyond the court, pickleball promotes community engagement and well-being, highlighting broader implications for leadership. Its integration into community centers and recreational programs demonstrates its ability to build social connections and promote a culture of health and wellness. This communal engagement is consistent with the leadership qualities of inclusivity and community building (Kim et al., 2021).

From Casual Play to International Recognition

The remarkable growth of pickleball reflects its burgeoning role in the sports landscape and its potential as a leadership development tool. The sport's accessibility, appealing to both seasoned athletes and newcomers, has led to increased investment in facilities and programs to accommodate its expanding player base (USA Pickleball, 2023).

Leadership Implications

Pickleball's continued growth has led to an increased recognition of its implications for leadership development, particularly in terms of fostering diverse leadership skills and promoting community engagement. The sport's ability to bridge demographic gaps and emphasis on strategic teamwork position it at the forefront of innovative approaches to leadership training.

The Nexus Between Serious Leisure and Leadership Development

The intersection between serious leisure characteristics and effective leadership attributes presents a compelling avenue for understanding how leadership capabilities can be enriched by pursuits outside the professional sphere. The dedication to mastery, cultivation of specialized skills, and fostering of meaningful social connections within serious leisure activities epitomize the core competencies required of transformative leaders. This section examines the dynamics of this relation, highlighting serious leisure as fertile ground for leadership growth.

Serious Leisure Theory: A Foundation for Leadership Enhancement

Serious leisure theory offers a nuanced perspective on individuals' deep, enriching engagement in leisure pursuits. This framework is especially helpful when examining activities such as pickleball, a sport that exemplifies the serious leisure paradigm through its blend of strategic play, community formation, and personal skill development. Individuals who engage in pickleball navigate challenges, collaborate with peers, and strategize for success, honing leadership skills that can be applied even outside the game.

Serious leisure theory posits that serious leisure activities facilitate the development of

- perseverance and commitment, which reflect the resilience and dedication essential for leadership.
- skill acquisition, which corresponds to leaders' vital traits of continuous learning and adaptability.
- community engagement, which pertains to building networks and fostering collaboration, highlighting leaders' ability to facilitate team dynamics and influence people.

Through the lens of serious leisure, pickleball transcends sports and emerges as a microcosm for leadership development, offering participants opportunities to exercise and enhance qualities directly transferable to leadership roles. Whether through leading a team in a competitive match, strategizing for victory, or navigating the dynamics of partnership play, individuals apply and refine leadership principles in real time.

Implications for Leadership Development

This theoretical exploration emphasizes how serious leisure, exemplified by pickleball, functions as a mechanism for cultivating a broad spectrum of leadership qualities. Participating in activities that demand engagement, skill, and social interaction can help individuals develop a well-rounded leadership profile. The current framework suggests that leadership can develop beyond traditional training programs and workshops and involve the rich experiences offered by serious leisure pursuits.

Serious leisure theory not only enriches our understanding of leisure's value but also elevates it as a critical component in the comprehensive development of leadership skills. Organizations and individuals who create environments that encourage and recognize serious leisure activities for their developmental potential can unlock new pathways toward leadership excellence.

Integrating Serious Leisure Attributes with Pickleball Dynamics

The application of serious leisure's defining characteristics to pickleball sheds light on the sport's complexity and its players' deep commitment. This analysis reveals not only the personal fulfillment that players derive from engaging in pickleball but also the sport's significant contributions to community cohesion and social networking.

Adopting the serious leisure perspective, this study investigates pickleball not only as a recreational activity but also as a conduit for meaningful personal and communal transformation. Table 1.3 presents the defining characteristics of serious leisure, their application in pickleball, and the corresponding outcome.

Perseverance and Skill Development

Pickleball demands and nurtures perseverance among its players, who devote time and effort to improving their skills because of its learning curve and competitive nature. Their continuous commitment corresponds to the serious leisure characteristic of the progressive development of expertise, which in turn fosters a sense of achievement and personal growth.

Community and Social Bonds

The communal aspect of pickleball, evident in doubles play, tournament participation, and local clubs, creates a vibrant social environment that is consistent with the serious leisure principle of being part of a community of practice. Here, players not only share strategies and experiences but also form lasting friendships, enhancing their social connectivity and strengthening their community network.

Identity and Personal Fulfillment

Pickleball players’ regular participation in the sport often allows them to develop a leisure identity that becomes an integral part of their self-concept. Rooted in the accomplishments, social interactions, and joy derived from the sport, this identity contributes to players’ profound sense of personal fulfillment as they view themselves as part of a larger community, reinforcing their commitment to pickleball and its values.

Table 1.3: Serious Leisure Characteristics in Pickleball

Characteristic	Application in pickleball	Outcome
Perseverance and skill development	Continuous practice and improvement	Personal growth
Community and social bonds	Clubs, tournaments, social play	Enhanced social connectivity
Identity and personal fulfillment	Identifying as a pickleball player	Sense of community and self

This structured approach to analyzing pickleball through a serious leisure perspective not only highlights the sport’s role in advancing personal development and fostering community ties but also emphasizes its transformative potential for players. As they navigate the challenges and joys of the sport, pickleball players embody the essence of serious leisure, achieving a unique blend of personal satisfaction, social engagement, and identity formation.

The Gap in Literature: Pickleball and Leadership

Empirical studies and theoretical perspectives from psychology, sociology, sports management, and other disciplines provide insights into how pickleball and other serious leisure activities facilitate personal growth and leadership development (Jungsu Ryu et al., 2018). However, the long-term impact of these activities on leadership skills constitutes a gap in this body of knowledge. Anecdotal evidence and case studies further illustrate how individuals transfer the skills and experiences they gained from pickleball into effective leadership in professional, community, or educational settings (Van Doorn, Heyden & Reimer, 2023). This real-world application highlights the sport’s practical implications beyond the court. Hence, this research gap presents an opportunity to investigate how specific dynamics of pickleball participation may help cultivate leadership qualities and expand one’s understanding of serious leisure activities as a context for personal and professional growth.

Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach through a meticulously designed self-assessment questionnaire to evaluate the influence of pickleball on essential leadership competencies. It sought to isolate and identify the sport’s distinct contributions to leadership skills to set it apart from a general examination of serious leisure activities.

Survey Components and Leadership Behaviors

The survey was developed to measure the foundational behaviors of effective leadership as identified by Potosky and Azan (2023) and Behrendt, Matz, and Göritz (2017). These included

- visionary leadership
- communication skills
- emotional intelligence
- decision-making ability
- adaptability
- empowerment
- integrity
- team building

These are considered critical behaviors for steering teams and organizations toward their objectives, providing a structured framework for assessing leadership within the pickleball participation context.

Demographic Insights and Player Categorization

The incorporation of demographic questions facilitated a nuanced analysis of leadership behaviors across diverse participant groups. To delineate the correlation between varying degrees of engagement in pickleball and the development of leadership qualities, the survey classified respondents into core players (regular participants), casual players (infrequent participants), or nonplayers.

Survey Structure for Depth and Breadth

The survey also followed a dual-structured design by combining Likert-scale items for quantifiable self-assessments of leadership behaviors with open-ended questions to gather contextual and experiential insights. This mixed-methods approach ensured that the evaluation comprehensively captured not only the participants' perceptions of their leadership capabilities but also the specific ways pickleball participation might influence these skills. The qualitative data were crucial for identifying the experiential dimensions of leadership growth through pickleball, reflecting modern leadership theories that emphasize the value of experiential learning in enhancing leadership abilities (Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021).

Overall, this instrument offered a holistic assessment of leadership behaviors by aligning its design with the study's focus, that is, how pickleball uniquely facilitates leadership development. It also allowed for an in-depth exploration of how pickleball participation can help cultivate leadership skills. This approach highlighted the ways specific leisure activities may enrich leadership competencies, contributing valuable insights to sports psychology, leadership development, organizational behavior, and other fields.

Strategic Sample Selection for Comparative Analysis

This study recruited a diverse sample of individuals actively involved in pickleball, from beginners to advanced players, to comprehensively examine how the sport affects leadership development. To robustly assess pickleball's unique impact, this study also recruited a control group composed of individuals not engaged in pickleball or any structured leisure activities. This comparative approach isolated and identified the specific effects of pickleball participation on leadership qualities.

In this investigation, ensuring a broad representation across various demographics was crucial. Hence, the sample included a balance of ages, genders, and professional backgrounds, allowing for a nuanced exploration of the possible influence of pickleball on leadership skills across different segments of the population.

Recruitment Strategy

Participants

Recruitment was conducted at pickleball clubs and sports organizations using their networks to reach a broad spectrum of players. Other valuable channels for engaging potential study participants were social media platforms and online forums dedicated to pickleball enthusiasts. Outreach emphasized the study's aim to understand how pickleball affects leadership development, appealing to the participants' interest in contributing to the sport's body of knowledge.

Control Group

Meanwhile, the control group was curated from the general population, with recruitment efforts ensuring consistency with the pickleball participant group in terms of demographic characteristics excluding their involvement in structured leisure. To accomplish this goal, strategies may include leveraging community centers, professional networks, and social media advertising. This group provided essential baseline data against which pickleball players' leadership qualities can be compared.

Ensuring Rigorous Methodology

By implementing strategic sample selection, this study can offer insightful comparisons between pickleball participants and the control group and clarify the sport's potential to improve leadership competencies. The emphasis on diversity and comprehensive recruitment aims to ensure that the findings reflect broad population segments, thus enhancing the study's relevance and applicability.

Survey Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods design. The participants answered a total of 24 questions: 6 on demographic information, 16 on leadership qualities, and 2 open-ended questions on specific leadership scenarios.

The participants provided demographic data regarding age, gender, highest education level, employment status, organizational level of job position, and current job title. A total of 14 questions were extracted using the Delphi technique to assess leadership characteristics, which include behaviors, communication skills, EI, decision-making ability, adaptability and flexibility, empowerment and delegation, integrity and ethical behavior, and team building and collaboration. The scale's ratings ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A Likert scale was necessary because it uses a bipolar rating system to establish either a strong positive or strong negative in terms of the leadership items.

Meanwhile, the study's qualitative component was represented by two open-ended questions focusing on how playing pickleball has influenced the participants' leadership abilities and asking them to provide examples of how they demonstrated leadership during a challenging time.

Data Collection

Data were systematically gathered using an online self-assessment questionnaire via SurveyMonkey and SurveyPlanet, which were chosen for their broad accessibility and efficiency. Before survey dissemination, the participants were briefed on the study's goals, the confidentiality measures in place to protect their responses, and their rights as voluntary participants. The participants provided consent online before obtaining access to the survey, ensuring their full awareness of and agreeability to the participation terms.

Analytical Approach

This study used advanced statistical software to examine the data as it allows for accurate processing and analysis of survey responses. Initial steps involved generating descriptive statistics to illustrate the study cohort's demographic makeup and aggregate their self-assessments of leadership abilities. The subsequent comparative analysis focused on identifying differences in leadership competencies between active pickleball players and the nonparticipant control group. Additionally, correlation analysis focused on the nuances of how varying degrees of involvement in pickleball (frequency and intensity of play) are linked to self-perceived leadership skills to reveal meaningful patterns or trends.

Upholding Ethical Integrity

This study adhered to the highest ethical standards by safeguarding participant privacy and ensuring anonymity in all responses. All participants were provided detailed information about the study's purpose, their rights, and the intended academic use of their data. They were also informed of the voluntary nature of participation and the paramount importance of confidentiality in handling survey data.

Significance of Focused Examination on Pickleball

This investigation attempted to identify and explain pickleball's specific contributions to the enhancement of leadership qualities. By providing a unique opportunity to explore how participation in pickleball, distinguished from other types of serious leisure, directly influences the development of essential leadership competencies, this study offers insightful perspectives on the broader implications of recreational sports on professional and personal growth.

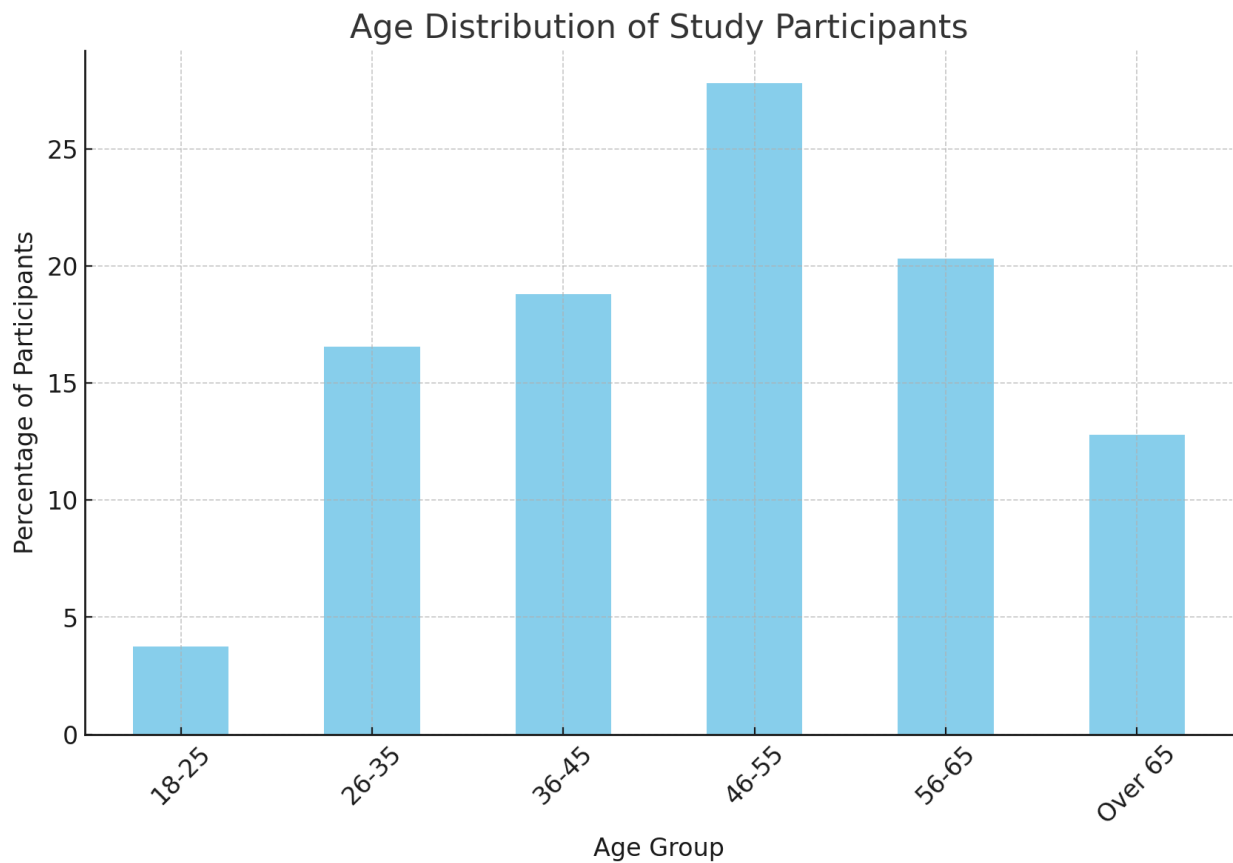
Findings

The analysis explored the relation between pickleball participation and leadership development among a diverse group of individuals. Through descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, analysis of variance, and visual representations, this study revealed insights into the respondents’ demographics and pickleball’s impact on perceived leadership skills.

Demographic Overview

The diverse participant group was composed of 133 individuals, providing a rich dataset for examining how pickleball participation interplays with leadership capabilities. Figure 1 provides a more detailed demographic overview.

Participants’ Age Distribution



The participants’ broad range of age groups ensured comprehensive representation: 18–25 (3.76%), 26–35 (16.54%), 36–45 (18.80%), 46–55 (27.82%), 56–65 (20.30%), and above 65 (12.78%). This distribution suggests that a significant portion of participants were in the middle to late adulthood stages, with the highest number of participants in the 46–55 group.

Participants’ Gender Distribution

Distribution of Subjects According to Gender

Gender	N	%
Male	69	51.9
Female	64	48.1
Total	133	100

The participants were nearly evenly split between males (51.9%) and females (48.1%), suggesting a balanced gender perspective on the relation between pickleball play and leadership.

Participants' Education Levels

Distribution of Subjects According to Highest Educational Level

Education Level	<i>N</i>	%
High School Diploma	6	4.52
Associates of Arts	4	3.01
Bachelor's Degree	61	45.86
Master's Degree	44	33.08
Doctoral Degree	18	13.53

Among them, 45.86% held bachelor's degrees, followed by 33.08% with master's degrees. Doctoral degree holders accounted for 13.53%, while holders of high school diplomas (4.51%) and associates of arts (3.01%) were less represented. The high education level among participants highlights the potential for nuanced insights into leadership behaviors.

Participants' Employment Status

Distribution of Subjects According to Employment Status

Employment Status	<i>N</i>	%
Employed (Full Time)	89	66.92
Retired	15	11.28
Employed	15	10.53
Employed (Part Time)	5	3.76
Other	9	7.51

Majority of the participants were employed full-time (66.92%), followed by retirees (11.28%) and those simply employed (10.53%). In addition, 3.76% reported being engaged in part-time work, with smaller proportions consisting of students, small business owners, independent consultants, and other statuses. Such diversity in employment situations enriches one's understanding of leadership across different professional circumstances.

Participants' Organization Level

Distribution of Subjects According to Organizational Level

Organizational Level	<i>N</i>	%
Other	11	8.4
Entry Level	4	3.05
Individual Contributor	19	14.5
Upper Management	24	17.56
Middle Management	32	24.43
Executive	43	32.06

Participants’ organizational levels varied widely, with those in executive (32.06%), middle management (24.43%), and upper management (17.56%) positions forming the largest groups. Individual contributors accounted for 14.50%, while entry-level roles were less common at 3.05%. Additional unique positions included business owners and professors, indicating a range of leadership experiences within the cohort.

Frequency of Pickleball Play

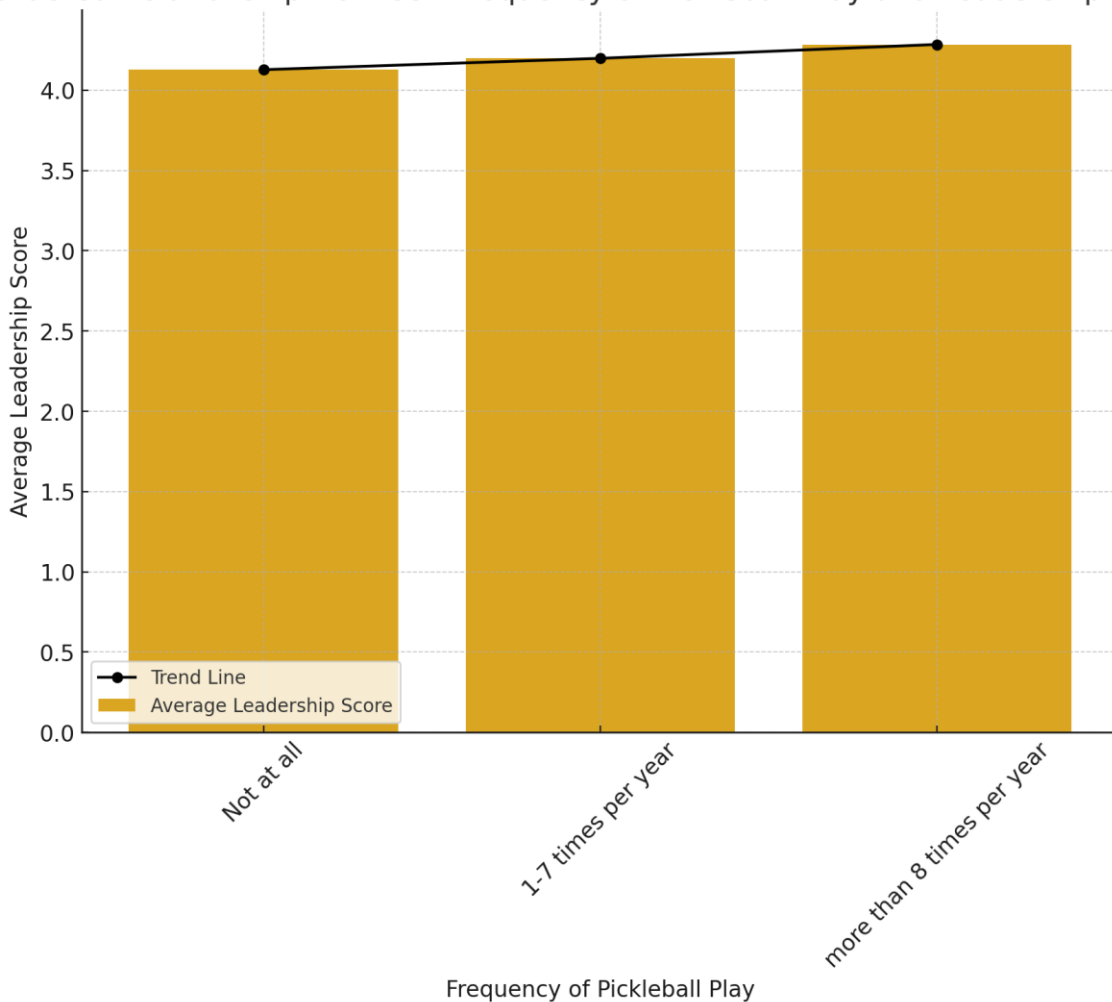
Distribution of Subjects According to Pickleball Play

Frequency of Pickleball Play	N	%
Not At All (Non Pickleball Players)	75	55.64
More than 8 Times Per Year	37	27.82
1-7 Times Per Year	21	16.54

The pickleball engagement distribution for this study, based on USA Pickleball Association standards, showed that 55.64% of the participants did not play the sport at all, 27.82% played the sport more than 8 times per year, and 16.54% played 1–7 times per year.

Frequency of Play and Overall Leadership Scores

Ordered Relationship Between Frequency of Pickleball Play and Leadership Scores



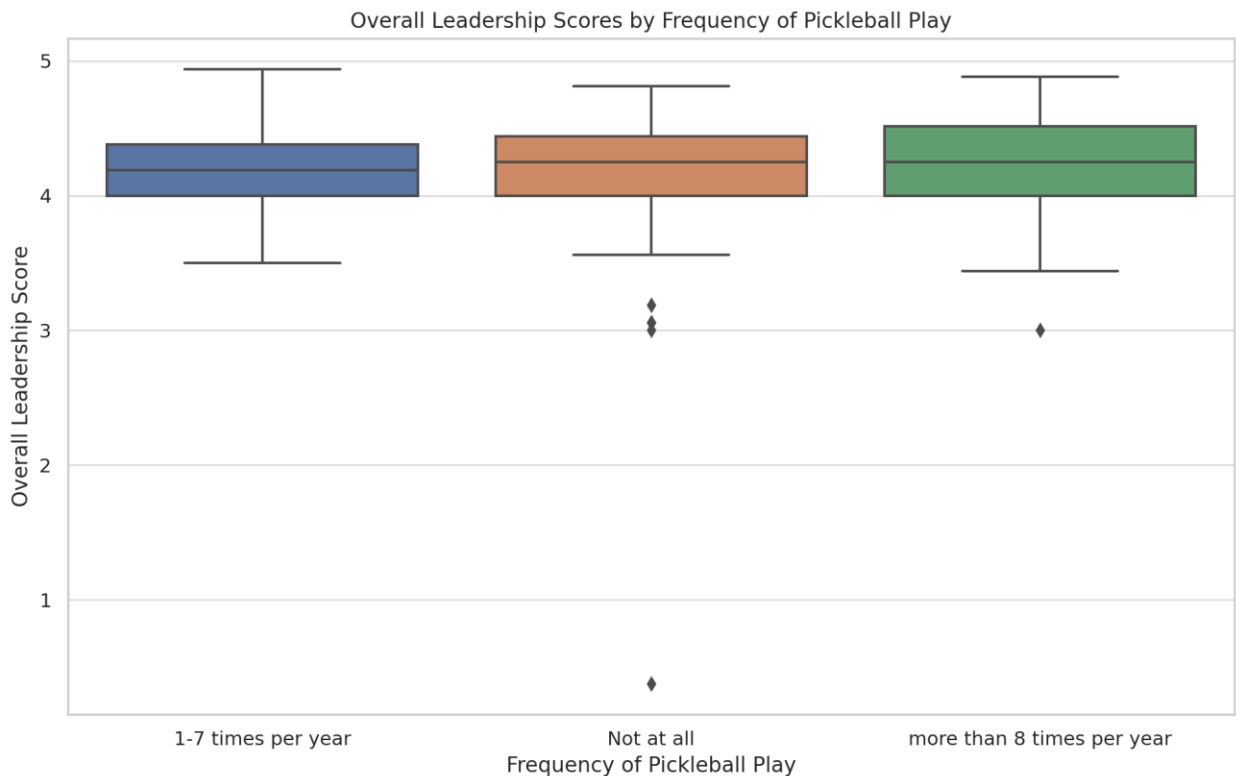
The examination of average overall leadership scores across different frequencies of pickleball play revealed a slightly increasing trend. The observed variety in pickleball engagement allows for a broad perspective on how the sport might influence leadership capabilities, from those with no experience to those who are active.

The average leadership scores by frequency of play indicate a potential trend where increased pickleball participation is linked to higher leadership capabilities.

The findings are interpreted in more depth as follows. Nonplayers obtained an average leadership score of around 4.13, and this baseline suggests that even without engaging in pickleball, the participants tend to exhibit solid leadership behaviors because of other factors such as professional experience, education, and personal development activities. Meanwhile, casual players, who play pickleball 1–7 times a year, showed a slight improvement in leadership scores with an average of approximately 4.20. Although modest, such an increase may imply that even limited participation in pickleball could positively contribute to one’s leadership skills. The social interaction, strategic thinking, and physical activity involved in pickleball might help enhance valuable leadership qualities such as teamwork, decision-making, and resilience. Finally, core players, who play pickleball more than eight times a year, achieved the highest average leadership score of about 4.29, further supporting the idea that more frequent engagement in activities such as pickleball, which require communication, strategy, and adaptability, could facilitate one’s leadership development. This increase in average leadership scores among this group also suggests that the benefits to leadership capabilities may be dose-responsive to the frequency of pickleball play.

Although the observed relation highlights a potential positive impact of pickleball participation on leadership capabilities, the correlation between pickleball play frequency and leadership scores was extremely weak and not statistically significant. This visualization supports the earlier analysis suggesting that despite the minor increase in leadership scores with more frequent participation in pickleball, such a relation does not strongly indicate that pickleball participation leads to superior leadership abilities.

Overall Leadership Scores by Frequency of Play



Overall, a positive correlation is observed between pickleball play frequency and leadership capabilities, indicating the potential role of regular, engaging physical and social activities such as pickleball in enhancing leadership skills. Future studies could explore this relation more comprehensively by incorporating control groups and longitudinal designs for a more accurate assessment of causality and the underlying mechanisms.

Frequency of Play and Self-Reported Leadership Behavior Scores

The analysis of individual quantitative questions revealed a nuanced perspective of how frequency of play affects various leadership behaviors.

Inspiration and Vision

Participants who played 1–7 times a year generally rated themselves higher in inspiring staff to commit to their vision, with average ratings of 4.33–4.42. Those who played more than 8 times a year achieved slightly lower averages at 4.17–4.24, while nonplayers rated themselves at 4.00.

Explaining Major Decisions

Participants who engaged in play regardless of frequency tended to rate themselves higher in explaining the reasons behind major decisions compared with those who did not play at all, with ratings ranging from 4.19 to 4.67.

Use of Appropriate Vocabulary

Players, particularly those who engaged in the sport more frequently (more than eight times a year), rated themselves highly in using the appropriate vocabulary to simplify complex issues, with scores of 4.48–4.67. Nonplayers had slightly lower self-assessments in this area.

Seeking Others' Views

Respondents who played more frequently rated themselves higher in actively seeking the opinions of others, with averages ranging from 3.91 to 4.33, suggesting that play might influence collaborative leadership styles.

Controlling Impulses and Reflective Decision-Making

Ratings in these areas were slightly higher among those who played, indicating that engagement in the sport might correlate with better impulse control and a more reflective decision-making process.

Delegation and Empowerment

Those who participated in play, especially more than eight times a year, tended to assign higher self-ratings in delegating responsibilities and empowering staff, ranging from 3.83 to 4.67.

Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives

Interestingly, the ratings were somewhat consistent, with slight variations, across different frequencies of play, indicating that the participants' perceived ability to implement diversity and inclusion initiatives may not be as strongly influenced by play frequency as other leadership behaviors.

The results of the Pearson correlation analysis, which sought to clarify the association between frequency of play and each of the quantitative leadership questions, indicated generally weak but mostly positive correlations.

Positive Relation

Most leadership qualities were slightly positively associated with frequency of play, suggesting that individuals who play more often might somewhat exhibit these qualities more than those who play less often. Specifically, the items "I have a positive, optimistic and upbeat nature" and "The primary consideration for any decision is whether it meets company values" showed the strongest positive correlations (0.194 and 0.192, respectively), indicating a slightly stronger relation with frequency of play and implying that more active players tend to be more optimistic and align their decisions closely with company values.

The item "I encourage my team to be flexible when achieving a goal" (0.188) also showed a notable positive correlation, indicating that individuals who play more actively might be more inclined to encourage flexibility in their teams. Other qualities such as "I actively seek the views of others when formulating a strategy" (0.181) and "I empower others to take responsibility for making an impact in their work environment" (0.128) exhibited slight positive relations, suggesting a possible association between frequent play and more inclusivity and empowerment in leadership.

Negative Relation

The negative correlation observed in one leadership quality, "I have successfully implemented programs and initiatives that result in a more diverse workplace," (-0.041) was so weak that it was close to no correlation, indicating that frequency of play has virtually no linear relation with the implementation of diversity initiatives.

These results generally suggest that engaging in pickleball play correlates with higher self-assessments across different leadership behaviors. Individuals who participate in pickleball, regardless of frequency, tend to regard themselves as more effective in various leadership aspects compared with those who do not engage in play. These correlations, however, are not strong enough to suggest a direct link, which could indicate that the act of playing may have positive implications for the development and demonstration of leadership qualities although it is important to note that these are self-assessments and may not necessarily reflect objective leadership effectiveness measures.

Qualitative Insights

Several themes were observed from the qualitative analysis of responses from participants who reported a positive influence of pickleball on their leadership abilities:

1. **Enhanced team dynamics.** The participants indicated that playing pickleball improved their ability to work in teams, highlighting the value of cooperation, coordination, and mutual support—key aspects transferable to effective leadership.
2. **Strategic thinking and decision-making.** Pickleball play was also associated with refined strategic thinking skills. The participants reported that the game's fast pace and need for quick decision-making represented leadership scenarios, enhancing their strategic planning abilities.
3. **Communication skills.** Effective communication—a leadership cornerstone—was another area of improvement linked to pickleball. The sport's emphasis on clear, concise communication during play was seen as beneficial in enhancing leaders' ability to articulate vision and directives.
4. **Resilience and adaptability.** Confronting and overcoming challenges in pickleball, whether tactical in-game decisions or broader team management issues, was cited as fostering resilience and adaptability—which are essential for leadership in dynamic environments.

Meanwhile, a few responses offered a contrasting view, suggesting the lack of a perceived influence of pickleball on leadership abilities. These perspectives often highlighted the recreational nature of the respondents' participation or a lack of direct applicability to their leadership contexts.

Discussion

A positive correlation was observed between frequency of pickleball play and self-reported leadership effectiveness across various dimensions. Participants who played pickleball, whether 1–7 times or more than 8 times a year, consistently assigned higher self-ratings in leadership capabilities compared with those who did not participate in the sport at all. These dimensions included inspiring vision, explaining decisions, using appropriate vocabulary, seeking others' views, controlling impulses, maintaining a positive outlook, aligning decisions with company values, empowering others, showing courage, reflective decision-making, delegating responsibilities, and implementing diversity initiatives.

The results suggest that playing pickleball may help enhance one's self-perceived leadership qualities. They are also consistent with the findings of Bunea and Kark (2019), who observed that serious leisure activities can help develop perseverance, strategic insight, emotional acumen, and other vital leadership skills. These findings could be attributed to several factors inherent in play activities, such as social interaction, problem-solving, strategic thinking, and stress relief, which can translate into more effective leadership behaviors. For example, the act of playing may foster a positive, optimistic attitude and the ability to control impulses, which are both critical for leadership effectiveness.

Interestingly, the highest self-ratings were often found among participants who played pickleball casually (1–7 times per year), suggesting that even infrequent engagement in the sport can significantly benefit leadership development. This may also imply that the quality and nature of the play, rather than frequency, are pivotal in harnessing benefits for leadership skills. Moreover, the fact that core players (those who play more than eight times a year) also rated themselves highly across most leadership behaviors reinforces the idea that regularly engaging in playful activities contributes to perceived leadership efficacy.

In addition, the implementation of diverse workplace programs showed the least variation in self-assessment scores across different frequencies of play. This suggests that although play may enhance certain leadership qualities, the complexity of creating a diverse workplace might depend more heavily on specific professional training and experience rather than the general benefits of play.

By suggesting that play is not merely a leisure activity but also a potential developmental tool that can enhance leadership capabilities, these findings expand the literature on the role of serious leisure activities in adult development and leadership.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings contribute to the theoretical discourse on serious leisure as a venue for developing and displaying leadership skills. While this study did not find a direct, significant link between pickleball play frequency and leadership scores, it nevertheless highlighted the potential of leisure activities as a medium for nurturing leadership qualities. This corresponds with theories suggesting that the skills, attitudes, and behaviors fostered through leisure activities can parallel those valued in leadership contexts, such as teamwork, strategy, and perseverance.

In practice, this study's insights can educate organizations and individuals regarding the value of promoting and engaging in leisure activities. Corporations and educational institutions may find that encouraging participation in sports such as pickleball could be a unique setting for developing leadership, fostering environments where leadership skills can be practiced and observed in nontraditional settings. Meanwhile, individuals who understand the potential benefits of leisure activities on leadership skills may be motivated to participate and engage in such pursuits more frequently.

Future Research Directions

Although this study anecdotally and theoretically supports the association between pickleball participation and leadership skill enhancement, empirical evidence remains insufficient. Thus, future studies may employ both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to examine how pickleball and similar activities help develop leadership competency. This study could also provide valuable insights into the specific mechanisms underlying the influence of serious leisure activities on leadership skills, offering guidance for integrating sports such as pickleball into leadership training programs.

Scholars may also consider conducting grounded research. Lindqvist and Forsberg (2023) argued that the use of grounded theory could lead to crucial theoretical insights that could be used to better understand the driving factors through which play affects leadership behaviors and whether these self-assessments translate into observable leadership effectiveness in organizational settings.

Finally, researchers may also perform longitudinal studies, which could provide insights into the long-term impact of play on leadership development and effectiveness and trace the evolution of leadership qualities as individuals participate in pickleball and other leisure activities. Scholars may also expand the research scope to include diverse leisure activities to clarify whether certain types are more conducive to the development of specific leadership qualities.

Limitations and Considerations

The study's limitations include its reliance on self-reported data, which may be subject to bias, and the existence of unmeasured confounding variables that may influence both pickleball participation and leadership qualities. The categorization of pickleball play frequency and the assignment of ordinal values for correlation analysis may also oversimplify the nuanced ways in which engagement with the sport affects individuals.

Conclusion

Our study did not establish a statistically significant relation between pickleball play and leadership qualities. Nevertheless, it provided an opportunity to further explore leisure activities as a domain for leadership development. The positive self-assessment of leadership qualities across all levels of pickleball participation highlights the value of leisure activities in enhancing individuals' perceptions of their leadership capabilities. As society continues to recognize the multifaceted nature of leadership development, the role of leisure activities in this process warrants further exploration and appreciation.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this work the author(s) used Chat GPT in order to brainstorm topics, recommend an outline, summarize and paraphrase text. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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Appendix

Survey Instrument for Assessing Leadership Behaviors in Pickleball Players

Introduction to Participants:

Thank you for participating in this survey. Your responses will contribute to a study examining the relation between pickleball participation and leadership qualities. This survey is designed to assess various behaviors that research suggests are critical for effective leadership. Participation is voluntary, and all responses will be kept confidential.

Section 1: Demographic Information

1. Age:
2. Gender:
3. Highest level of education completed:
4. Current occupation:
5. Pickleball playing frequency: () core (more than 8 times per year) () casual (1–7 times per year) () non-player

Section 2: Leadership Behavior Assessment

Please rate the following statements based on your experiences and perceptions using the scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree.

Visionary Leadership

6. I can clearly articulate a vision for the future of groups or organizations I am involved with.
7. I am able to inspire and motivate others toward a common goal.

Communication Skills

8. I communicate my ideas clearly and effectively.
9. I actively listen to others and engage in meaningful conversations.

Emotional Intelligence

10. I am aware of my own emotions and can manage them effectively in various situations.
11. I can understand and respond to the emotions of others in a constructive way.

Decision-Making Ability

12. I make informed and ethical decisions even under uncertainty.
13. I use a combination of analytical skills and intuition to solve problems.

Adaptability/Flexibility

14. I adapt to changes and remain flexible in uncertain situations.
15. I am open to new ideas and can pivot strategies when necessary.

Empowerment/Delegation

16. I trust my team members and delegate tasks effectively to empower them.
17. I support the growth and development of my team members.

Integrity/Ethical Behavior

18. I act with integrity and uphold ethical standards in all situations.
19. I am transparent and accountable in my actions and decisions.

Team Building/Collaboration

20. I am adept at building cohesive teams and fostering a collaborative environment.
21. I value diversity and leverage the strengths of team members to achieve goals.

Section 3: Open-Ended Questions

22. How do you believe playing pickleball (if applicable) has influenced your leadership abilities?
23. Please describe an instance where you demonstrated leadership in a challenging situation.