



Sivas Cumhuriyet University Journal of Sport Sciences

| cuspor.cumhuriyet.edu.tr |

Founded: 2020

Available online, ISSN: 2717-8919

Publisher: Sivas Cumhuriyet Üniversitesi

THE MEDIATING ROLE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LEADER-MEMBER EXCHANGE AND JOB PERFORMANCE: AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION FROM SPORTS ORGANIZATIONS

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Research Article

Acknowledgment

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History

Received: 13/10/2025

Accepted: 10/12/2025

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to examine the mediating role of Psychological Safety (PS) in the relationship between Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) and Job Performance (JP) in public sports organizations in Türkiye. The study was designed using a relational survey model from quantitative research methods, and data were collected from 319 sports employees working in the provinces of Antalya, İzmir, Mersin, and Muğla. LMX, JP, and PS scales were used in the research, and the data were tested using correlation analysis and SPSS PROCESS Macro. The analysis results showed that LMX has a weak effect on psychological safety ($\beta = .132$), and psychological safety significantly predicts JP ($\beta = .592$). Even when the mediating variable was controlled, the effect of psychological safety remained significant ($\beta = .209$), and the increase in the direct effect of LMX on performance from $\beta = .209$ total effect $\beta = .287$ supported a partial mediating role. In conclusion, high-quality LMX significantly increase JP when supported by PS. Employees experiencing strong LMX feel more secure, which increases their commitment and effort levels. The findings indicate the necessity of creating trust-based organizational climates to maximize performance in sports organizations.

Keywords: : Sports Organizations, Sport Employees, Provincial Directorate of Youth and Sports

LİDER-ÜYE DEĞİŞİMİ İLE İŞ PERFORMANSI ARASINDAKİ İLİŞKİDE PSİKOLOJİK GÜVENLİĞİN ARACILIK ROLÜ: SPOR ORGANİZASYONLARINDA AMPİRİK BİR ARAŞTIRMA

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Süreç

Geliş: 13/10/2025

Kabul: 10/12/2025

Öz

Bu çalışma, Türkiye'deki kamu spor organizasyonlarında Lider-Üye Etkileşimi (LÜE) ile İş Performansı (İŞ) arasındaki ilişkide Psikolojik Güvenliğin (PS) aracılık rolünü incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma, nicel araştırma yöntemlerinden ilişkisel tarama modeli kullanılarak tasarlanmış olup, Antalya, İzmir, Mersin ve Muğla illerinde çalışan 319 spor çalışanından veri toplanmıştır. Araştırmada Lider Üye Etkileşimi, İş Performansı ve Psikolojik Güvenlik ölçekleri kullanılmış olup, veriler korelasyon analizi ve SPSS PROCESS Makro kullanılarak test edilmiştir. Analiz sonuçları, LÜE'nin psikolojik güvenlik üzerinde zayıf bir etkiye sahip olduğunu ($\beta = .132$) ve psikolojik güvenliğin İş Performansı'nı anlamlı şekilde yordadığını ($\beta = .592$) göstermiştir. Aracılık değişkeni modele dahil edilmediğinde psikolojik güvenliğin etkisi anlamlı kalmış ($\beta = .209$) ve LÜE'nin iş performansı üzerindeki doğrudan etkisinin $\beta = .209$ 'dan toplam etki olan $\beta = .287$ 'ye yükselmesi kısmi aracılık rolünü desteklemektedir. Sonuç olarak, yüksek kaliteli LÜE, İŞ ile desteklendiğinde İŞ'i anlamlı şekilde artırmaktadır. Güçlü LMX deneyimine sahip çalışanlar kendilerini daha güvende hissederek, bu da bağlılık ve çaba düzeylerini artırır. Bulgular, spor organizasyonlarında performansı en üst düzeye çıkarmak için güvene dayalı organizasyonel iklimler yaratmanın gerekliliğini göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Spor örgütleri, Spor Çalışanları, Gençlik ve Spor İl Müdürlüğü

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How to Cite: Duyan, M., Gunel, İ. & Reyhan, S. (2025). The Mediating Role of Psychological Safety in The Relationship Between Leader-Member Exchange and Job Performance: An Empirical Investigation From Sports Organizations. *Sivas Cumhuriyet University Journal of Sport Sciences*, 6(3):285-291

Giriş

The concept of trust is considered in a wide range within the organizational context, including individuals, groups, and leader relationships. Trust is an element that cannot be created instantly and develops over a process. Leader behavior can be effective in the development of this element (Aslan & Özata, 2009). According to a 2022 survey by Apollo Technical, approximately 79% of employees have considered leaving their jobs, primarily due to not receiving sufficient appreciation from their leaders and being unable to establish positive work relationships (Yang et al., 2023). In today's competitive and rapidly changing work environment, employees face increasing levels of stress and burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Schaufeli et al., 2009). These psychological burdens weaken employees' perceptions of psychological safety, limiting their willingness to express ideas freely, seek help, or act without fear of making mistakes (Edmondson, 1999; Frazier et al., 2017). Additionally, age-related physical health issues that emerge as employees age can further complicate the development and maintenance of PS (Ilmarinen, 2005; Meng et al., 2025). Depending on all these factors, organizational outcomes, especially job performance, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment, can be negatively affected (Erkuş & Fındıklı, 2013). Employee job performance in competitive environments is an important issue, and improving performance is one of the most fundamental problems of human resource management (Doğan, 2020). Especially, behaviors of the leader that will improve employees' job performance, satisfy their personal development, and support their career steps play a significant role in building trust between the leader and the employee (Sue-Chan et al., 2012). Furthermore, LMX has become an important concept regarding employees' trust in their manager, satisfaction in the work environment, and performance. LMX theory is one of the theories examining the interaction between employee and leader (Liden & Maslyn, 1998). LMX theory argues that leaders do not establish relationships of the same quality with all employees; they develop high-quality relationships based on trust, respect, and support with some employees, while maintaining more formal and task-oriented relationships with others (Diebig et al., 2024; Cui et al., 2025). This diversity determines the employee's motivation, organizational commitment, and psychological perceptions. Especially high-quality LMX relationships support performance by increasing the individual's sense of trust and belonging (Santalla-Banderali et al., 2022). According to LMX theory, high-quality LMX developed between the leader (manager) and the member (employee) indirectly positively effects job performance. While sports organizations in Türkiye previously operated under the Prime Ministry, a significant change occurred in the structure of public sports organizations with the establishment of the Ministry of Youth and Sports in 2011. Especially after the establishment of the Ministry, the organization of the Higher Education Credit and Hostels Institution under the

"Provincial Directorates of Youth Services and Sports" via Decree Law No. 703 caused employees and managers of two different institutions to work in the same environment. As a result of this situation, it is thought that positive or negative behaviors may develop between the leader and the member (Duyan, 2021). In Türkiye's public sports sector, structural dynamics such as frequent staff rotation, ambiguous job descriptions, weak perceptions of meritocracy, and the coexistence of permanent and contracted staff create a unique context affecting leader-member interaction and psychological safety. These factors make it difficult for leaders to treat employees equally and can weaken PS and trust perceptions (Rafferty & Restubog, 2011). In such a case, to increase employee productivity, performance, and organizational belonging, organizations must meet their employees' psychological needs and safety by providing a suitable work environment. Accordingly, many organizations or public institutions fail to understand the importance of the work environment for increasing employee JP and therefore encounter many obstacles or difficulties during their work (Bhavya Sree & Satyavathi, 2017). This situation can lead to attitudes such as transferring to another public institution, intention to quit, or preferring a different sector, as it causes a decrease on the JP of public employees and a weakening of organizational commitment (Çekmecelioglu & Ülker, 2014). Therefore, the concept of LMX is seen as an important factor for employees to improve their JP (Dilig-Ruiz et al., 2018) and to provide an environment that will increase their PS (Hafner & Miller, 2011; Oktavio, 2020; Sundu et al., 2022). Based on this concept, we think that LMX is an important factor on the JP and PS of sports employees. When the studies conducted are examined, findings are showing that LMX has a positive effect on JP (Dirlik et al., 2023; Duyan, 2022; Duyan & Yıldız, 2018; Özbezek & Ege, 2022) and PS (Naiwen Li et al., 2021). Yıldız (2011), in his research on the public sports sector in Türkiye, stated that sports organization managers, wanting to gain a competitive advantage due to the rapid development of the sports sector, want to reduce job burnout, absenteeism, intention to quit, and other negative factors, as high organizational commitment of sports employees would provide higher JP and satisfaction. Determining the quality of LMX of personnel working in sports organizations, increasing their JP, and ensuring their psychological safety are considered important for improving their organizational behaviors. When studies outside the sports sector are examined, while there is research on the relationship between LMX and JP, studies including all three variables are quite limited. In parallel, no study including all three variables specifically for the sports sector has been encountered. It is thought that increasing the quality of LMX in sports organizations will also increase JP accordingly. Ensuring the psychological safety of sports employees in the work environment is important for transforming their organizational behaviors into a healthier structure. Although there are studies in

the literature on the effect of LMX on JP, research including the PS variable is quite limited. In this respect, the absence of studies involving all three variables examined in the current study, especially aimed at the sports sector, is important for the originality of the research and filling the gap in the literature. Furthermore, the lack of studies on sports employees addressing all three variables is considered a gap. Therefore, the aim of this study designed to fill this gap is to examine whether PS has a mediating role in the relationship between LMX and JP among sports managers and employees working in sports organizations. Accordingly, it was aimed to examine the hypotheses formed in line with the research purpose.

H1: Leader–Member Exchange has a positive effect on employees' job performance.

Leader–Member Exchange theory posits that the quality of the relationship established between leaders and their subordinates significantly shapes employees' attitudes, motivation, and performance outcomes (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). High-quality LMX relationships strengthen employees' perceptions of organizational support, reinforce their commitment to role responsibilities, and positively influence their performance-related behaviors (Dansereau et al., 1975). Within sports organizations—where team coordination, rapid decision-making, and task distribution are essential—the trust-based interaction between leader and member becomes even more crucial for enhancing performance. Consistent with this view, previous empirical studies have demonstrated that higher levels of LMX contribute to increased job performance among employees (Ilies et al., 2007).

H2: Leader–Member Exchange positively influences employees' psychological safety levels.

Psychological safety refers to employees' perception that they can express their ideas without fear of punishment or exclusion in the workplace (Edmondson, 1999). High-quality LMX relationships facilitate open communication with leaders, foster a sense of support, and enable employees to voice their opinions without concern for negative consequences or mistakes (Kahn, 1990). Accordingly, prior research provides strong evidence that LMX enhances employees' perceptions of psychological safety (Carmeli et al., 2010). In sports organizations—where work processes are fast-paced and performance pressure is typically high—psychological safety becomes a crucial element for encouraging innovative behaviors and ensuring the fulfillment of role expectations. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that high-quality LMX will contribute positively to employees' psychological safety.

H3: Psychological safety has a positive effect on employees' job performance.

Empirical studies have shown that employees with higher levels of psychological safety tend to take more active roles within their teams, engage more readily in innovative behaviors, and communicate more openly—factors that collectively enhance performance outcomes

(Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Individuals working in psychologically safe environments are better able to focus on their tasks, remain open to learning from mistakes, and adapt more effectively to the high coordination demands characteristic of sports organizations. Consequently, psychological safety is widely recognized as a strong predictor of job performance (Frazier et al., 2017).

H4: Psychological safety mediates the relationship between Leader–Member Exchange and job performance.

The literature indicates that psychological mechanisms play a mediating role in explaining how high-quality LMX leads to favorable organizational outcomes (Liao et al., 2010). The climate of trust established through LMX enhances employees' confidence in expressing themselves, which in turn contributes to improved performance levels. Accordingly, it is expected that the effect of LMX on job performance becomes stronger when psychological safety is taken into account. In sports organizations—where team cohesion, perceived leader support, and trust-based interactions are especially critical for performance outcomes—this mediating influence may be even more pronounced.

METHOD

This study adopted a causal research model aiming to examine the mediating role of PS in the relationship between LMX and JP. LMX was determined as the independent variable (X), JP as the dependent variable (Y), and PS as the mediating variable (M) (Figure 1). The population of the research consists of sports personnel working in the Provincial Directorates of Youth and Sports serving in the provinces of Antalya, Mersin, Mugla, and İzmir. G*Power (3.1.9.7) software was used to determine the sample size, and reaching 319 participants was targeted with a 95% confidence level, 5% margin of error, and 0.80 test power. Data were collected through convenience sampling, one of the non-probability sampling methods.

Data Collection Tools

Leader–Member Exchange Scale (LMX): The scale developed by Liden and Maslyn (1998) and adapted into Turkish by Bas, Keskin, and Mert (2010) was used. The scale consists of four dimensions—*affect, loyalty, contribution, and professional respect*—and includes a total of 12 items. Scoring is based on the overall total. Participants rated each item on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree). For each dimension, item scores are summed and averaged. Higher scores indicate a higher-quality leader–member relationship. The reliability coefficient of the 12-item, five-point Likert-type scale in this study was found to be $\alpha = .89$.

Job Performance Scale (JP): The four-item scale developed by Kirkman and Rosen (1999) and Sigler and Pearson (2000) and adapted into Turkish by Cöl (2008) was used. The Job Performance Scale consists of three core dimensions: *task performance, contextual performance, and counterproductive work behavior*. The scale contains a total of 8 items, depending on the version used in the study. Participants rate each statement using a 5-point Likert scale

(1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree). Item scores for each dimension are summed and averaged. Higher scores indicate better overall job performance. The scale's reliability was calculated as $\alpha = .83$ in this study.

- **Psychological Safety Scale (PS):** The Psychological Safety Scale, developed by Edmondson (1999) and adapted into Turkish by Bülül, İsiacık, and Aytaç (2022), consists of four items that measure the extent to which individuals feel safe expressing themselves within a team, taking interpersonal risks, and expressing themselves. The scale is unidimensional and assesses the shared belief that the work environment is supportive and non-threatening. Participants rate each item on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree). Scale scores are calculated by summing item responses and calculating the

mean score. Higher scores indicate higher levels of perceived psychological safety within the team or organization. The scale's reliability coefficient in this study is $\alpha = .81$.

Personel Information form.

A personal information form was used to collect data on participants' gender, marital status, educational level, and city of residence. Descriptive statistics were conducted based on the collected data.

FINDINGS

The findings obtained from the data collected in the study examining the mediating role of psychological safety in the effect of leader-member exchange on job performance are presented in the tables below.

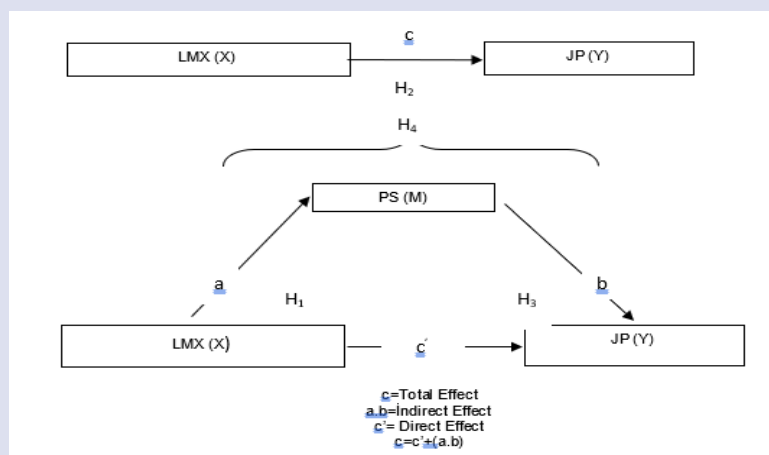


Figure 1. Research model

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Participants

| Variable | Group | f | % | Age | Work Experience |
|----------------|---------------|-----|------|--------------|-----------------|
| Gender | Male | 173 | 54.2 | 36.91± 10.41 | 12.65±9.70 |
| | Female | 146 | 45.8 | | |
| Marital Status | Married | 221 | 69.3 | | |
| | Single | 98 | 30.7 | | |
| Education | Undergraduate | 229 | 71.8 | | |
| | Postgraduate | 90 | 28.2 | | |
| City | Antalya | 83 | 26.0 | | |
| | İzmir | 98 | 30.7 | | |
| | Mersin | 59 | 18.5 | | |
| | Mugla | 79 | 24.8 | | |

When Table 1 is examined, it is seen that 54.2% (n=173) of the participants are male and 45.8% (n=146) are female employees. It was determined that the vast majority of participants (69.3%, n=221) are married, and in terms of education level, the majority (71.8%, n=229) are undergraduate graduates. When the distribution of participants by the cities they work in is examined, a ranking is seen as İzmir (30.7%), Antalya (26.0%), Mugla (24.8%), and Mersin (18.5%). The average age of sports employees was determined as $X = 36.91$ (SD=10.41), and their average work experience was $X = 12.65$ years (SD=9.70).

Table 2. Normality Analysis Results for the Scales

| Scales | \bar{x} | SD | Median | Variance | Skewness | Kurtosis |
|--------|-----------|------|--------|----------|----------|----------|
| LMX | 53.85 | 5.62 | 55.00 | 31.62 | -0.611 | -0.543 |
| JP | 34.04 | 4.49 | 35.00 | 20.16 | -0.456 | -0.535 |
| PS | 12.31 | 1.95 | 12.00 | Mar.81 | -0.166 | -1.045 |

The findings in Table 2 show that the mean and median values obtained from the scales are close to each other. Furthermore, the skewness and kurtosis coefficients being within the ± 1.96 range (George & Mallery, 2010) and the data clustering around the linearity line in the Q-Q plot indicate that the data distribution meets the normal assumption. Therefore, the use of parametric tests in the study was deemed appropriate. Multivariate normality was evaluated using Mahalanobis distances based on the composite scores of LU, IP, and PG. None of the cases exceeded the χ^2 critical

value with three degrees of freedom at $p < .001$ ($\chi^2_3 = 16.27$), indicating that the assumption of multivariate normality was not seriously violated. Açıklama

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

As a result of the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), the goodness-of-fit values of the measurement model were found to be at an acceptable level: $\chi^2/df=3.7$, RMSEA=.08, SRMR=.053, NFI=.94, NNFI=.93, CFI=.92, GFI=.90, AGFI=.87, IFI=.91, RFI=.92. These values indicate that the scales provide sufficient fit for construct validity. It was determined that the factor loadings of the Leader–Member Exchange scale ranged from .52 to .74, those of the Job Performance scale ranged from .54 to .77, and those of the Psychological Safety scale ranged from .74 to .82.

Mediation Analysis Results

Table 3. Results of Regression Analysis Regarding Mediation Test

| Path Analysis | | β | SH | p |
|---|----------------|--------------------------------|-------|------|
| Total Effect (X----Y) | | .2879*** | .0418 | .000 |
| Path a (X----M) | | .1327*** | .0180 | .000 |
| Direct Effect (X----Y) | | .2093*** | .0438 | .000 |
| Path b (M----Y) | | .5928*** | .1263 | .000 |
| Model Fit Statistics | | | | |
| Total Effect Model | R ² | .130; F (1-317) =47.378*** | | .000 |
| Path a Model | R ² | .146; F (1-317) =54.227*** | | .000 |
| Full Mediation Model | R ² | .186; F (1-317) =36.285*** | | .000 |
| Bootsrapt Result (5.000 Samples) | | | | |
| Indirect Bootstrap Effect (a.b) | | .0787***; 95%CI [.0425, .1175] | | |
| The Fully Standardized Effect Size of Mediation (K ²) | | .0985***95%CI [.0523, .1495] | | |

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; SH: Standard Error. Unstandardized beta coefficients are reported; K2: Cohen's d için 0.2 = Weak / 0.5 = Medium / 0.8 = Strong

According to the regression analysis findings in Table 5; the effect of LMX (X) on the mediating variable (M) PS (Path a) was determined to be significant and positive ($\beta = .1327$, 95% CI [.0972, .1681], $t = 7.3639$, $p < .001$). According to this result, LMX explains 14.6% ($R^2 = .146$) of the variance in the mediating variable PS. The combined effects of the mediating variable PS (Path b) and LMX (Path c') on the outcome variable JP (Y) were analyzed. The findings obtained show that PS has a significant and positive effect on JP ($\beta = .5928$, 95% CI [.3444, .8413], $t = 4.6955$, $p < .001$). LMX was also found to have a significant and positive effect on JP ($\beta = .2093$, 95% CI [.1230, .2955], $t = 4.7738$, $p < .001$). According to this model, LMX and PS together explain 18.6% ($R^2 = .186$) of the variance in JP. In the model established without the mediating variable (M), the total effect of LMX (X) on JP (Y) (Path c) was examined, and it was found that even without PS, LMX has a significant and positive effect on JP ($\beta = .2879$, 95% CI [.2056, .3702], $t = 6.8832$, $p < .001$). The analysis conducted using the bootstrap method showed that the indirect effect was significant and confirmed the partial mediating role of PS. The results of the mediation analysis are presented graphically in Figure 3.

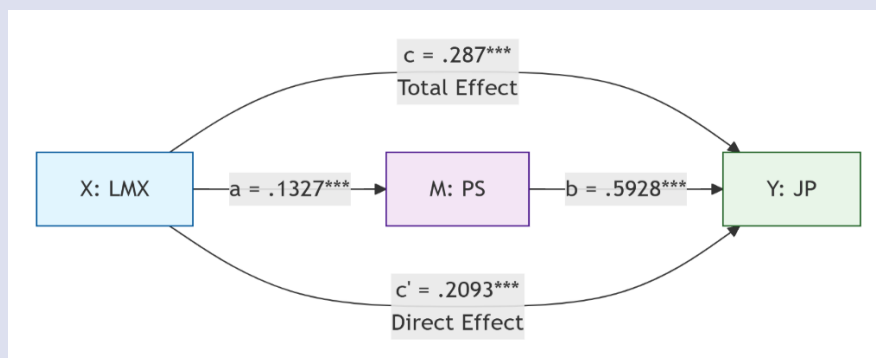


Figure 3. Display of analysis results on model.

Discussion, conclusion and recommendations

The main purpose of this research was to examine the mediating role of PS in the relationship between LMX and JP in sports organizations. The analyses revealed that PS undertakes a statistically significant partial mediating function in this relationship. This finding shows that a high-quality LMX is more effective in increasing JP when it creates an environment where employees feel PS. The research findings showed that LMX has a positive but small to moderate of effect ($\beta = .28$) on JP. This result supports that a healthy and mutual trust-based interaction between leader and member provides a positive contribution to increasing the performance of employees in sports organizations. In the literature, there are many studies emphasizing the positive effect of

increased quality in the interaction between leader and member on employee performance (Fikario et al., 2019; Janssen & Van Yperen, 2004; Latifoglu et al., 2023). However, the weak effect size in the current study suggests that performance increase is not solely dependent on a positive LMX relationship and that other factors come into play. Indeed, in the literature, this effect is reported at lower levels in some studies (Biao & Cheng, 2014; Breevaart et al., 2015). This difference is considered to possibly stem from the different characteristics of sample groups or the sectoral context. One of the most important findings of the research is the mediating role of PS in the LMX-JP relationship. This relationship can be explained within the framework of Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964). According to this theory, high-quality,

reciprocity-based relationships established between leader and employee foster trust, mutual respect, and a sense of obligation. This social and psychological capital forms the basis of a psychologically safe environment where employees can freely express their ideas, act without fear of making mistakes, and undertake new initiatives (Edmondson, 1999). Employees who feel safe become more cognitively and emotionally engaged in their work (Kahn, 1990). This engagement ultimately enables the transformation of trust into positive work outcomes, i.e., higher performance. This finding is also consistent with the study by Zakiy (2024), which emphasizes the role of the quality of organizational relationships on outcomes, and Rozikan et al. (2024), which shows that perceived support can increase work engagement through LMX. In the current study, it can be said that employees perceiving psychological safety in a strong LMX environment are more willing to contribute to organizational goals. The study also determined that LMX has a significant and positive, yet again weak, effect ($\beta = .13$) on the mediating variable PS. In this context, it is seen that strong and healthy communication established between leaders and members, aimed at motivating and encouraging employees, not only fosters a sense of PS but also improves their JP. It is thought that this result will have a positive effect on the general productivity of employees in organizations (Akman, 2023; Dar et al., 2024). However, it was determined that PS has a moderately medium to strong effect and positive effect ($\beta = .59$) on JP. This finding shows that individuals working in sports organizations and feeling safe will positively contribute to their productivity and performance in the work environment. The presence of PS perception in an organization creates synergy among employees, encourages them to work towards common goals, allows them to express their thoughts and ideas openly, and reduces anxieties that may arise when taking risky decisions as a team (Edmondson, 1999). In public sports institutions in Türkiye, factors such as the centralized and bureaucratic structure, rigid hierarchies, ambiguous job descriptions, and deficiencies in merit-based management understanding may weaken the relationship between LMX and PS. In environments lacking PS, even

high-quality LMX relationships may be insufficient to achieve performance increases due to employees avoiding taking initiative. In other words, when PS does not mediate the LMX-JP relationship, LMX alone may not be sufficient. In such cases, employees may avoid cognitive engagement, creativity, and open communication while performing their tasks. This suggests that for high performance, not only relationship quality LMX but also the presence of psychological resources like PS is necessary. In conclusion, the findings of this research show that the high-quality relationship between leader and member has significant and complementary effects on the JP of employees experiencing psychological safety. Creating a trust-based organizational climate in sports organizations will increase employees' trust in each other and their leaders, encourage them to take risks without fear of making mistakes, and improve their work efficiency and performance by appreciating their successes. In this context, the analyses examining the mediating role of PS in the positive effect of LMX on JP clearly revealed that PS undertakes a partial mediating function. Although there are studies in the literature examining the effect of LMX on JP, there are limited studies addressing the mediating role of PS in the relationship between these variables. Therefore, it is foreseen that the current research will make a significant contribution to the literature from this perspective. The study has some limitations. The collection of data only from sports organizations in specific regions of Türkiye limits the generalizability of the findings. It is recommended that future studies use multi-center samples covering different regions. Furthermore, the cross-sectional research design does not allow for causality inference. Adopting longitudinal designs in subsequent research will provide a clearer understanding of causal relationships between variables. Mixed-method research supported by qualitative interviews can also provide a more in-depth perspective on the subject. Finally, collecting data from a single source (self-reporting) carries the risk of common method bias; collecting data from different sources (managers, colleagues) in future studies will reduce this risk.

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Araştırmının Etik Taahhüt Metni

Yapılan bu çalışmada bilimsel, etik ve alıntı kurallarına uyulduğu; toplanan veriler üzerinde herhangi bir tahrifatın yapılmadığı, karşılaşılabilecek tüm etik ihlallerde “Sivas Cumhuriyet Üniversitesi Spor Bilimleri Dergisi ve Editörünün” hiçbir sorumluluğunun olmadığı, tüm sorumluluğun Sorumlu Yazara ait olduğu ve bu çalışmanın herhangi başka bir akademik yayın ortamına değerlendirme için gönderilmemiş olduğu sorumlu yazar tarafından taahhüt edilmiştir.