

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in female football: educational and psychological perspectives on performance development

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ABSTRACT

Purpose. The study aimed to assess the motivational level of female football players participating in the National Championship by determining the Global Motivational Force (GMF) based on intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Motivation, understood as the internal drive that provokes, supports, and directs human activity, represents a key determinant of sports performance and a significant performance generator.

Methods. This study followed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design. A questionnaire containing 14 items related to intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors, validated by previous studies, was administered to 152 female athletes competing in the 2024 Women's National Championship. The data were analysed to quantify the overall motivational level and identify dominant motivational sources.

Results. Findings revealed that 73% of the participants rated intrinsic motivational factors as “very important,” emphasising passion for the sport, athletic aspirations, and self-sufficiency. Extrinsic factors, including material benefits and the coach's leadership style, were considered highly important by 70% of the athletes. The Global Motivational Force (GMF) was calculated as 5.61, and the Global Motivational Instrumentality (GMI) as 5.32, indicating a high level of intrinsic motivation complemented by valuable external incentives.

Conclusions. Intrinsic motivation plays a decisive role in female football players' engagement and performance, while extrinsic motivators also significantly contribute to maintaining their commitment and success in competitive sports.

Key words: female football, intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, sports psychology, athletic performance

Introduction

In recent years, women's football has assumed an increasingly important role in the sports landscape both in Romania and internationally in recent years. This growth reflects a broader European trend, in which women's football has gained greater visibility in the media and in international competitions. Despite this progress, parental prejudices regarding girls' participation in football persist, and promoting the sport remains a challenge, particularly in more traditional environments [1]. More broadly, football has become a subject of interest within the social sciences and psy-

chosociology given its significant impact on modern society [2].

Recent studies have shown that girls who participate in football demonstrate higher levels of self-confidence than those not involved in any sport – an essential aspect during their developmental years [3]. These findings align with earlier observations emphasising the role of sports in shaping adolescent girls' personalities [4, 5]. Within this context, women's football emerges not only as a form of physical activity but also as a means of personal development, as highlighted in studies integrating women's football into physical education curricula [1]. Participation in extracurricular

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sports activities is positively correlated with the development of general physical competence, including motivation, confidence, motor skills, and understanding the value of physical activity [6].

Motivation is a fundamental factor in athletic performance, profoundly influencing both immediate outcomes and long-term athletic careers in competitive context. Both intrinsic motivation (driven by the desire for personal growth and self-fulfilment) and extrinsic motivation (associated with external rewards) are critical to athletic success [7, 8]. As an extrinsic factor, verbal encouragement has demonstrated strong motivational potential, positively affecting both confidence and performance, including among athletes with disabilities [9]. Additionally, obstacle courses and other diverse motor activities stimulate intrinsic motivation for sustained effort, contributing to the development of essential qualities in sports such as football [10–13].

From a theoretical perspective, the present study is primarily grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which conceptualises motivation along a continuum ranging from intrinsic motivation driven by interest, enjoyment, and personal satisfaction to various forms of extrinsic motivation regulated by external rewards, social recognition, or organisational demands [9, 11]. Within sport contexts, SDT has been extensively applied to explain athletes' engagement, persistence, and psychological well-being, particularly highlighting the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness as basic psychological needs.

In addition to this theoretical foundation, the study draws on concepts derived from expectancy-value traditions, specifically the dimensions of valence, expectancy, and instrumentality, as an operational framework for quantifying motivational intensity. In this sense, expectancy-based components are not treated as an alternative motivational theory but as a complementary analytical model used to calculate composite motivational indices (Global Motivational Force and Global Motivational Instrumentality). This integrative approach enables a structured assessment of how athletes value motivational factors, perceive the likelihood of achieving desired outcomes, and evaluate their degree of personal control over performance-related results.

Motivation in women's football is also deeply embedded in the social and relational climate of the team. Recent research emphasises that healthy interpersonal relationships, team cohesion, and supportive coach-athlete interactions are essential contextual factors that shape both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, particularly in female athletes [14]. A positive team climate characterised by trust, communication, and emotional

support not only facilitates motivational regulation but also buffers stress, enhances commitment, and contributes to athletes' long-term engagement in competitive football. Consequently, motivation should be understood not as an isolated individual attribute, but as a dynamic construct influenced by interpersonal, organisational, and cultural contexts.

Among female football players, motivation is often shaped by internal factors such as the desire to improve and achieve personal goals and external influences, including team support and financial incentives. The psychological impact of competition also affects both motivation and performance [3]. Motivation in women's sports is particularly important given the additional challenges related to social stereotypes and cultural expectations [1]. Furthermore, the motivation of female athletes is closely linked to the quality of organisational management, which must provide an effective framework tailored to athletes' human and material needs to support optimal preparation and performance [15, 16].

The professionalisation of sports structures, including youth and junior football clubs, is essential for the long-term success of sports organisations, especially amid economic and social instability. Well-structured sports management grounded in multidisciplinary knowledge, scientific methodology, and systemic diagnosis significantly influences both athletic performance and motivation [17–21]. Effective management of sports activities and the active engagement of athletes are critical to enhancing organisational performance in the sports sector [22, 23].

This study investigates the motivational dynamics of professional female football players in Romania. It distinguishes itself from previous research by focusing exclusively on professional women's football, a field often underrepresented in existing literature. The study proposes an integrated approach examining the interaction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, a topic insufficiently explored in women's sports. The research also incorporates psychological and emotional dimensions of motivation, which are essential for enhancing both performance and athlete well-being. Early development of basic motor skills during physical education classes represents a critical component in forming sport-related motivation among girls [24], while systematic motor activities foster a healthy lifestyle and encourage intrinsic motivation for movement and participation [25, 26].

Previous studies on motivation in sports have largely centred on male athletes or individual sports disciplines, while research on women's football remains limited [8]. Literature addressing the motivation of professional

athletes, particularly within national women's football contexts, remains scarce. Therefore, this study analyses the overall motivational drive of professional female football players in Romania, focusing on identifying and understanding key motivational factors that influence athletes' behaviours and attitudes. It adopts an integrated methodology aimed at a comprehensive assessment of motivation as a critical psychological component in the athletic careers of female football players. Given the rapid evolution of modern football, the physical, technical-tactical, and psychological demands placed on athletes are continuously increasing [27]. This necessitates coherent organisational strategies supported by well-coordinated and motivated human resources [23]. Additionally, leisure sports games such as football contribute to personal development and promote essential educational values, including perseverance, self-discipline, motivation, and social support among participants [1, 28, 29].

Hypotheses

Based on Self-Determination Theory and expectancy-based approaches to motivation in sport [9, 11], the present study proposes the following testable hypotheses:

H1: Intrinsic motivational dimensions (valence, expectancy, and instrumentality) will display higher mean scores than extrinsic motivational dimensions among female football players competing in the Women's National Championship.

H2: Intrinsic and extrinsic motivational indices (Global Motivational Force and Global Motivational Instrumentality) will be significantly associated, reflecting the interaction between internal drives and external motivational conditions in women's football.

Material and methods

This was quantitative cross-sectional study that aimed to quantify the motivational level of women's football players through different scientific research techniques. The sample comprised 152 players from the 2024 Romanian Women's National Championship.

Participants were recruited from multiple clubs registered in the national competition system. Inclusion criteria were: (i) active participation in the national championship during the 2024 season, (ii) a minimum one year of competitive experience, and (iii) voluntary consent to participate. Athletes who were injured at the time of data collection or who did not complete the questionnaire in full were excluded.

Data collection was conducted during the competi-

tive season, ensuring ecological validity of motivational perceptions. The questionnaire was administered in a paper-and-pencil format, prior to regular training sessions, under standardized conditions. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and all athletes provided informed consent in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

Basic demographic information (age and competitive experience) was collected to characterise the sample; however, no subgroup analyses were conducted, as the primary aim of the study was to provide an overall assessment of motivational patterns at the championship level.

Motivation was assessed using a 14-item questionnaire designed to capture intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors in sport, previously applied in football and sport organization research [14, 15]. The instrument was administered in Romanian, the native language of the participants, and no translation or back-translation procedures were required.

The questionnaire comprised seven intrinsic and seven extrinsic motivational items. Intrinsic factors referred to the content of the sports activity, passion for football, athletic aspirations, personal affirmation, and perceived need for performance, whereas extrinsic factors included material benefits, social climate, leadership style, and organisational conditions. The full list of items is presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Responses were recorded using a 3-point Likert-type scale, reflecting the dimensions of valence, expectancy, and instrumentality. This 3-point scale was selected to ensure clarity and ease of response for athletes in an applied sport context, and to reduce response ambiguity during in-season data collection. Similar reduced-point scales have been used in applied sport motivation research where rapid and intuitive assessment is required [11].

Internal consistency of the questionnaire was assessed in the current sample. The intrinsic motivation subscale demonstrated acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.78$), while the extrinsic motivation subscale showed adequate reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.74$), supporting the use of composite indices for descriptive and correlational analyses.

Motivational indices were computed using an expectancy-based multiplicative model adapted from classical expectancy-value formulations [11]. For each motivational item, valence (V) was multiplied by expectancy (E) to obtain the Global Motivational Force (GMF) score, and valence (V) was multiplied by instrumentality (I) to compute the Global Motivational Instrumentality (GMI) score.

Table 1. Intrinsic motivational factors

No.	Motivational items
1	Content of sports activity: training, contests, cantonments, recovery
2	Chances of using and developing sports capabilities creatively
3	Passion for practiced sport
4	Athletic aspiration level: promotions in superior categories, batch selections
5	Trend of personal affirmation: integration and hierarchical promotion in the team
6	Need for performance: to be the best, to win, self-sufficiency
7	Fear of failure: misses, defeats, injuries, adversaries' security tendency

Table 2. Extrinsic motivational factors

No.	Motivational items
1	Normative acts of societies: laws, statutes, regulations
2	Material benefits and facilities: bonuses, prizes, dwellings, trips
3	Social climate: family, club, public, coaches, press, radio-TV
4	The social prestige of the athlete, the practiced sport, the club, the coach
5	Driving style applied: coach, club, administration
6	The sport-school relationship: the ability to be a performance athlete and a student
7	Material conditions: plant, equipment, material base, schedule

Item-level scores were first calculated and subsequently averaged across intrinsic and extrinsic items, resulting in separate intrinsic and extrinsic GMF and GMI indices. Given the 3-point scale, the theoretical range for both GMF and GMI scores was 1 to 9, with higher values indicating stronger motivational intensity and perceived control, respectively. This approach allows for a transparent and interpretable quantification of motivational strength in applied sport settings.

Statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 26.0. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, and percentages) were calculated for all motivational dimensions. Given the ordinal nature of the 3-point response scale, Spearman's rank correlation coefficients were used to examine associations between intrinsic and extrinsic motivational indices.

Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$. Due to the exploratory and descriptive aim of the study, effect sizes are reported where applicable, and findings are interpreted cautiously without causal inference.

Motivational factors

Intrinsic motivational factors are within factors like aspiration, passion, and personal affirmation. As shown in Table 1, such factors include the content of sports activity, possibility to develop sport capabilities, and fear of failure.

Extrinsic motivational factors are outside factors like material rewards, social standing, and style of

coaches. Table 2 shows unique elements like social climate, material conditions, and sport-school relationship.

Results

Descriptive statistics indicated higher mean values for intrinsic motivational dimensions compared to extrinsic dimensions across valence, expectancy, and instrumentality. The distribution of responses showed that 73% of the participants rated intrinsic motivational factors as "very important" while 70% assigned the highest importance level to extrinsic motivational factors.

Intrinsic motivational expectancy was reported as fully meeting expectations by 53% of the respondents, whereas 44% indicated partial fulfilment and 3% reported that expectations were not met. For extrinsic expectancy, 50% of the athletes reported full fulfilment of expectations, 44% partial fulfilment, and 6% indicated that expectations were not met.

With respect to motivational instrumentality, 51% of the participants perceived intrinsic motivational outcomes as depending entirely on their own efforts, while 47% reported shared dependence on both personal effort and external factors, and 2% indicated dependence primarily on others. In contrast, for extrinsic instrumentality, 34% of the respondents perceived full personal control, 52% reported combined dependence, and 14% perceived motivational outcomes as depending predominantly on external agents.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and associations between intrinsic and extrinsic motivational dimensions

Motivational dimension	Intrinsic (mean $\pm$ SD)	Extrinsic (mean $\pm$ SD)	Spearman's ρ (intrinsic – extrinsic)	<i>p</i> -value
Valence	2.56 $\pm$ 0.24	2.50 $\pm$ 0.14	–0.47	< 0.05
Expectancy	2.29 $\pm$ 0.16	2.23 $\pm$ 0.09	–0.09	> 0.05
Instrumentality	2.53 $\pm$ 0.28	1.94 $\pm$ 0.26	0.11	> 0.05

Spearman's rank correlation coefficients (ρ) were used due to the ordinal nature of the 3-point response scale.

A summary of descriptive statistics and correlations between intrinsic and extrinsic motivational dimensions is presented in Table 3.

Spearman's rank correlation analysis revealed a moderate negative association between intrinsic and extrinsic motivational valence ($\rho = -0.47$, $p < 0.05$), indicating that higher valuation of intrinsic motivational factors tended to co-occur with lower reliance on extrinsic valuation. Correlations between intrinsic and extrinsic expectancy and instrumentality dimensions were weak and did not reach statistical significance.

The computed Global Motivational Force (GMF) yielded a mean value of 5.61, indicating a generally elevated level of motivational intensity among the female football players included in the study.

Discussion

The present study explored intrinsic and extrinsic motivational dimensions in female football players competing in the 2024 Romanian Women's National Championship using an expectancy-based motivational framework. The results indicate that intrinsic motivational dimensions tend to be rated higher in importance and motivational intensity than extrinsic dimensions, while both forms of motivation coexist within the athletes' motivational profiles. These findings suggest that internal motivational drivers represent a salient component of engagement in women's football, particularly in competitive contexts where structural and financial incentives may be limited.

The observed moderate negative association between intrinsic and extrinsic motivational valence indicates that athletes who strongly value internal motivational factors tend to place less emphasis on external incentives. This pattern is consistent with previous research grounded in Self-Determination Theory, which emphasises the role of autonomous motivation in sustained engagement, persistence, and psychological well-being in sport contexts [9, 11]. At the same time, the weak and non-significant correlations identified for expectancy and instrumentality dimensions suggest that intrinsic and extrinsic motivational mechanisms may

operate in parallel rather than in direct opposition, reflecting the multifaceted and context-dependent nature of motivation in team sports.

Importantly, motivation in football does not develop in isolation but is embedded within the broader interpersonal and organisational environment of the team. Recent research highlights that healthy team relationships characterised by trust, communication, role clarity, and supportive leadership play a critical role in shaping athletes' motivational experiences and psychological functioning. In this regard, systemic approaches to team dynamics emphasise that interpersonal interactions and group structures influence not only collective performance but also individual motivation and well-being [19]. The relatively elevated levels of intrinsic motivation observed in the present study may therefore reflect not only individual dispositions but also the presence of functional relational climates within teams. Conversely, dysfunctional team dynamics may undermine motivation even when individual aspirations are strong.

The findings should be interpreted within the constraints of the study design. The cross-sectional nature of the research limits causal inference and precludes conclusions regarding the directionality of relationships between motivational dimensions. Furthermore, motivation was assessed through self-report measures using a 3-point response scale, which may reduce sensitivity and increase the risk of response clustering. Contextual factors at the time of data collection, such as phase of the competitive season or recent performance outcomes, may also have influenced athletes' responses.

Several limitations of the study must be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design precludes examination of motivational changes over time and limits causal interpretation. Second, although internal consistency was assessed, the psychometric evaluation of the questionnaire remains limited; and future studies should incorporate confirmatory factor analysis and broader validation procedures. Third, the use of a brief ordinal scale may restrict variability in responses. Finally, the sample was drawn from a single national competition, which limits the generalisability of the

findings to other cultural or competitive contexts.

Future research should employ longitudinal designs to investigate motivational dynamics across different phases of the competitive season and career stages. Integrating measures of team climate, coach–athlete relationships, and organisational support would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of how interpersonal and structural factors interact with individual motivational processes. Additionally, linking motivational indices to objective performance indicators, retention rates, and psychological outcomes, such as well-being or burnout, would enhance the applied relevance of future studies.

From an applied perspective, the findings underscore the importance of fostering environments that support intrinsic motivation in women's football. Coaches and sports organizations should emphasise autonomy-supportive practices, constructive feedback, and positive team relationships to sustain athletes' internal motivational resources. While extrinsic incentives remain relevant, particularly in competitive settings, they should be implemented in ways that complement rather than undermine intrinsic motivation, thereby supporting long-term engagement and psychological well-being.

Conclusions

This study provides a descriptive overview of intrinsic and extrinsic motivational dimensions among female football players competing in the Romanian Women's National Championship. The findings indicate that intrinsic motivational factors tend to be rated higher in importance than extrinsic factors, while both forms of motivation are present within the athletes' motivational profiles.

The results also highlight the relevance of expectancy- and instrumentality-related perceptions in shaping motivational experiences, as reflected by the overall motivational indices observed in the sample. However, these findings should be interpreted within the limitations of a cross-sectional, self-report design and a specific national competitive context.

Overall, the study contributes context-specific evidence to the literature on motivation in women's football and underscores the need for future research that integrates individual motivational processes with interpersonal and organisational factors.

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Ethical approval

The research related to human use complied with all the relevant national regulations and institutional policies, followed the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki, and was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities at the University Valahia of Targoviste (approval No.: 627).

Disclosure statement

No author has any financial interest or received any financial benefit from this research.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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