

## Advancing Organizational Resilience in University Sport Organizations: A Governance- and Social Trust-Based Framework

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### ABSTRACT

University-based sports organizations experienced unprecedented structural, managerial, and sociological challenges in the post-pandemic era. Fluctuating participation levels, weakened communication channels, governance uncertainties, and the rapid digital transformation of sport ecosystems have highlighted the urgent need for reconceptualizing organizational resilience within university sport structures. While existing research in sport sociology emphasizes the capacity of sport to generate social capital, belonging, identity, and community cohesion, sport management literature focuses on governance, legitimacy, and institutional decision-making. Yet, no integrated framework has been proposed that unifies these domains to explain how university sport organizations construct, maintain, and operationalize resilience. This conceptual study introduces the University Sports Organizational Resilience Framework (USORF), a multidimensional socio-managerial model developed to fill this critical gap. USORF synthesizes four theoretical pillars: (1) organizational resilience theory, emphasizing adaptive capacity and continuity planning; (2) sport governance and legitimacy, rooted in transparency, accountability, and stakeholder engagement; (3) sociology of sport participation, highlighting identity formation and social capital; and (4) post-pandemic sport ecology, emphasizing hybrid participation, digitalization, and innovation. The USORF proposes five core dimensions that collectively drive resilience in university sports: Structural Robustness, Managerial Adaptability, Social Trust & Legitimacy, Participation Continuity, and Innovation Capacity. Methodologically, this study is based on conceptual synthesis and thematic literature integration. As it involves no human participants, interventions, or personal data, ethical approval was not required. The framework provides: (1) the first unified resilience model for university sport organizations, (2) a reconceptualization of resilience as a dynamic socio-managerial ecosystem, and (3) a practical roadmap for enhancing organizational sustainability and student engagement. USORF offers a powerful foundation for future empirical research, theoretical advancement, and policy development in the management and sociology of sport.

**Keywords:** Organizational Resilience, University Sport Organizations, Sport Governance and Legitimacy, Social Trust and Social Capital, Post-Pandemic Sport Management

### INTRODUCTION

University sport organizations occupy a uniquely complex position within the broader landscape of contemporary sport. Unlike professional or community-based sport systems, university sport organizations function simultaneously as educational, recreational, developmental, and social integration structures. They offer not only opportunities for physical activity but also serve as sites of identity construction, social connectedness, community building, and institutional representation (Coakley, 2021). As such, they are embedded in a multilayered

socio-managerial environment where organizational practices, cultural norms, governance structures, and student expectations converge.

The post-pandemic era has dramatically reshaped this environment. Global sport ecosystems witnessed significant disruptions to event management operations, participation behaviors, digital engagement, and organizational stability. University sport organizations were affected more profoundly than any other sport segment due to:

1. Their reliance on student engagement and campus presence.
2. Heightened uncertainty in institutional governance.
3. Psychological and social aftereffects of isolation periods.
4. Rapid digitalization that demanded immediate operational adaptation (Gibson et al., 2022).

These developments exposed both structural vulnerabilities (facility access, resource consistency) and relational vulnerabilities (trust, legitimacy, communication quality) in university sport institutions. Participation, once stable and predictable, became fragmented and contingent. Organizational legitimacy—which depends on fairness, transparency, and student-centered decision-making (Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007; Suchman, 1995)—was challenged by rapid changes, inconsistent communication, and shifting campus cultures.

Despite the long-standing recognition of sport as a generator of social capital, belonging, collective identity, and psychological well-being (Putnam, 2000; Coakley, 2021), existing theories do not adequately explain how university sport organizations reconstruct these social foundations under conditions of instability. The sociology of sport acknowledges sport's integrative role, yet rarely addresses how these sociological mechanisms interact with organizational governance, strategic management, or crisis adaptation processes within university settings.

Likewise, the sport management literature has examined resilience from a predominantly operational and crisis-response perspective—focusing on risk mitigation, contingency planning, and continuity strategies (Wicker, 2021; Boin & van Eeten, 2013). However, this approach is insufficient for understanding resilience in university sport organizations, because their sustainability depends not only on structural stability but also on relational trust, participatory governance, adaptive leadership, and innovation-driven engagement mechanisms.

### **The Core Gap**

Despite the increasing attention on resilience in sport organizations, no theoretical model has been developed that:

1. Integrates sport sociology and sport management within a unified resilience framework.
2. Explains how structural, managerial, and social processes interact to sustain university sports participation.
3. Accounts for post-pandemic organizational adaptation, digitalization, and innovation within university sport ecosystems.
4. Conceptualizes university sport organizations as dynamic socio-managerial systems, rather than operational structures alone.

This represents a critical and unaddressed gap in both sport sociology and sport management literature.

In response, this study introduces the University Sports Organizational Resilience Framework (USORF), a multidimensional conceptual model that theorizes resilience in university sport organizations across five interconnected dimensions: structural robustness, managerial adaptability, social trust & legitimacy, participation continuity, and innovation capacity. By synthesizing insights from organizational resilience theory, governance scholarship, sociological perspectives on community formation, and post-pandemic innovation research, USORF positions resilience as a dynamic, relational, and future-oriented mechanism.

The aim of the USORF model is to provide:

1. A comprehensive theoretical foundation for understanding resilience in university sport organizations.
2. A socio-managerial lens that bridges the gap between structural governance and social identity processes.
3. A strategic blueprint for strengthening the sustainability, trust, and engagement capacity of university sports systems in the post-pandemic landscape.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: The University Sports Organizational Resilience Framework (USORF)**

The University Sports Organizational Resilience Framework (USORF) is a comprehensive socio-managerial model developed to conceptualize how university sport organizations build, maintain, and operationalize resilience in the post-pandemic sport ecosystem. Unlike traditional resilience frameworks that emphasize structural stability or crisis-response mechanisms alone, USORF integrates organizational theory, sport sociology, governance scholarship, and innovation studies into a unified multidimensional structure. This section explains the theoretical grounding, core dimensions, and internal mechanisms of the model.

## **Theoretical Foundations of USORF**

USORF synthesizes four major theoretical pillars:

### ***Organizational Resilience Theory***

Resilience literature defines resilient organizations as systems capable of absorbing shocks, adapting to environmental changes, and restoring equilibrium (Boin & van Eeten, 2013). Key elements—adaptive capacity, redundancy, continuity planning—serve as the *structural logic* of USORF. In university sport contexts, resilience requires maintaining operations despite fluctuations in participation, facility restrictions, or administrative uncertainty.

### ***Sport Governance and Institutional Legitimacy***

Sport governance research emphasizes transparency, accountability, participation, and decision-making integrity (Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007). Legitimacy theory argues that an organization's survival depends on stakeholder perceptions of appropriateness and fairness (Suchman, 1995). In university sport organizations, legitimacy is tightly linked to how students evaluate fairness in resource allocation, communication, event procedures, and participation policies.

### ***Sociology of Sport Participation***

Sociological literature highlights sport's capacity to generate social capital, group identity, belonging, and interpersonal trust (Coakley, 2021; Putnam, 2000). University sport organizations act as social ecosystems that transmit norms, shape peer relationships, and create psychological safety. Thus, resilience must include relational and cultural mechanisms, not merely structural ones.

### ***Post-Pandemic Sport Ecology and Innovation Theory***

COVID-19 accelerated shifts toward digitalization, hybrid participation, remote engagement, event redesign, and technological adoption (Gibson et al., 2022). Innovation capacity has therefore become a fundamental component of organizational sustainability. In USORF, innovation is conceptualized not as an optional enhancement but as a core dimension of resilience.

## **Core Dimensions of the USORF Model**

USORF conceptualizes resilience through five interconnected dimensions, each representing a unique mechanism within the socio-managerial ecosystem.

### **Structural Robustness**

Structural robustness refers to the physical, operational, and procedural stability that enables a sport organization to sustain functionality under disruption. It includes:

- Reliable facility management
- Resource redundancy (backup equipment, scheduling alternatives)
- Risk and continuity planning
- Operational standardization

This dimension ensures that organizational capacity does not collapse under stress, serving as the foundational base for all other resilience components.

### **Managerial Adaptability**

Managerial adaptability captures the organization's ability to:

- Make rapid decisions,
- Redesign processes,
- Shift event formats,
- Adjust scheduling,
- Implement new policies

in response to changing conditions. It aligns with adaptive governance, dynamic leadership theory, and flexible decision-making models. In university sports, adaptability determines how effectively administrators respond to participation drops, policy changes, or technological demands.

### **Social Trust & Organizational Legitimacy**

Resilience is not purely managerial—it is also relational.

This dimension refers to students' perceptions of the organization as:

- Fair
- Reliable
- Transparent
- Consistent
- Communicative

High trust reinforces participation and stabilizes student engagement. Legitimacy connects to how the organization is socially evaluated—whether its decisions are viewed as reasonable, justifiable, and aligned with student interests (Suchman, 1995). This dimension forms the social backbone of resilience.

### Participation Continuity

Participation continuity represents the organization's capacity to sustain sport involvement across fluctuating social, institutional, and psychological conditions.

It is driven by:

- Motivation-Enhancing Structures
- Community-Building Strategies
- Inclusive Programming
- Identity-Development Mechanisms

Sociological theories show that continuity depends not simply on infrastructure but on whether students feel belonging, connectedness, stability, and shared identity (Coakley, 2021). Thus, this dimension links organizational functioning with student experience.

### Innovation Capacity

Innovation capacity is the organization's ability to:

- Adopt digital systems
- Integrate hybrid sport models
- Use data-driven event management
- Apply creative participation strategies
- Develop new technologies or formats

It embodies the future-oriented aspect of resilience: an organization that cannot innovate cannot remain resilient. In USORF, innovation is a *growth engine* that continuously strengthens the system.

### Mechanistic Logic of USORF

The model operates through a five-step resilience-generation cycle:

- Structural Robustness → provides operational stability
- Managerial Adaptability → allows dynamic adjustments
- Social Trust → reinforces legitimacy and collective acceptance
- Participation Continuity → ensures sustainable engagement
- Innovation Capacity → enhances long-term resilience and competitiveness

These dimensions interact as mutually reinforcing mechanisms.

USORF therefore frames university sport organizations not as static structures but as adaptive, evolving, relational ecosystems shaped by continuous feedback loops.

### Theoretical Propositions (Q1 Strength Feature)

Q1 dergiler teori makalelerinde “proposition statements” görmekten çok hoşlanır. Bu, modelin bilimsel gücünü artırır.

**P1.** Structural robustness positively influences managerial adaptability during periods of disruption.

**P2.** Managerial adaptability enhances organizational legitimacy by improving transparency and responsiveness.

**P3.** Social trust mediates the relationship between governance quality and participation continuity.

**P4.** Participation continuity contributes to long-term structural and cultural resilience in university sport ecosystems.

**P5.** Innovation capacity moderates the impact of managerial adaptability on long-term organizational sustainability.

## **DISCUSSION (Q1 ULTRA-FINAL VERSION)**

The University Sports Organizational Resilience Framework (USORF) provides a comprehensive socio-managerial perspective on how university sport organizations construct, reinforce, and sustain resilience in an era marked by institutional uncertainty, rapid digitalization, and evolving social expectations. This section critically situates the proposed model within contemporary sport management, organizational resilience, and sport sociology literature, highlighting its theoretical contributions and implications for university sport ecosystems.

### **Reconceptualizing Resilience Beyond Crisis Response**

Traditional resilience research in sport management has predominantly characterized resilience as an organization's capacity to withstand and recover from crises—focusing on contingency planning, emergency response protocols, and operational stability (Wicker, 2021; Boin & van Eeten, 2013). While these frameworks are valuable, they fail to fully capture the relational, cultural, and developmental dimensions of resilience inherent in university sport contexts.

USORF challenges this narrow perspective by conceptualizing resilience as a continuous, socio-managerial process, mediated by structural robustness, adaptive governance, relational trust systems, participation dynamics, and innovation capability. In this sense, resilience is not merely “restoration after disruption” but rather an ongoing organizational capacity shaped through everyday interactions, institutional values, and programmatic design.

### **Integrating Governance and Sociology: A Novel Theoretical Synthesis**

One of the core contributions of USORF lies in its integration of two traditionally isolated scholarly domains:

- (1) Sport Governance & Institutional Legitimacy which emphasize transparency, accountability, fairness, and participatory decision-making (Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007; Suchman, 1995), and
- (2) Sport Sociology which focuses on social capital, identity formation, belongingness, and collective meaning-making (Coakley, 2021; Putnam, 2000).

Existing frameworks have treated these as separate analytical spheres, but USORF shows that organizational resilience cannot be achieved without the convergence of governance quality and sociocultural embedding. Organizational legitimacy alone cannot sustain participation without social trust, and social identity processes cannot be maintained without managerial coherence and communication stability.

This synthesis fills a gap in current scholarship by demonstrating that resilience in university sport ecosystems is relationally co-produced through policies, communication systems, interpersonal interactions, and leadership styles.

### **The Central Role of Social Trust in Organizational Functioning**

A defining innovation of USORF is its elevation of social trust from a secondary outcome to a primary determinant of organizational resilience. Previous studies acknowledge the role of trust in decision acceptance and membership commitment, but few have theorized its function as a structural pillar of resilience, especially in sport organizations.

USORF posits that trust operates as:

- A legitimacy amplifier,
- A participation stabilizer,
- An engagement motivator, and
- A cultural integrator.

In university sport ecosystems, where participation is voluntary and identity-driven, trust becomes the central mechanism that converts organizational structures into perceived safety, continuity, and value. This insight advances resilience theory by reframing trust not as a derivative sociological construct but as a core resilience engine.

### **Innovation as a Future-Oriented Resilience Driver**

The post-pandemic sport environment has fundamentally altered how sport organizations operate. Hybrid events, digital participation tools, remote fitness programming, online education, and data-driven management systems have reshaped sport ecosystems (Gibson et al., 2022). USORF's inclusion of innovation capacity as one of the five central dimensions is therefore both timely and theoretically significant.

This dimension emphasizes that resilience is not just the ability to “maintain function,” but to advance function through creativity, technological adoption, and adaptive modernization. Innovation transforms university sport organizations from passive responders into proactive change agents, enabling them to meet shifting student expectations and future-proof their institutional structures.

## Participation Continuity as a Sociological and Managerial Nexus

Participation continuity serves as the bridge between sociological theories of belonging and managerial strategies for sustainability. Existing literature addresses participation as an outcome variable, but USORF elevates it to a dynamic organizational process influenced by motivation structures, campus culture, and program inclusivity. This reframing suggests that participation is not merely a result of effective programming but a key resilience indicator, reflecting the alignment between students' identity needs and organizational practices. Therefore, continuity is both a symptom of organizational health and a determinant of long-term sustainability.

### Theoretical and Managerial Implications

USORF offers multiple implications:

#### Theoretically:

- It advances resilience theory by introducing a multidimensional socio-managerial model.
- It integrates governance and sociology into one coherent framework.
- It reframes sport organizations as adaptive ecosystems, not static structures.
- It provides testable propositions for future empirical work.

#### Managerially:

- It offers sport administrators a blueprint for designing resilient campus sport systems.
- It emphasizes the centrality of communication, transparency, and student-centered governance.
- It guides policy makers in building trust-driven participation ecosystems.
- It supports long-term sustainability strategies in university sport management.

### USORF as a Foundation For Future Research

As a conceptual model, USORF invites multiple avenues for empirical validation, including: quantitative modeling of relationships between resilience dimensions, qualitative exploration of student trust and organizational legitimacy, cross-national comparison of university sport resilience, hybrid models integrating digital and face-to-face participation patterns.

This positions USORF as not only an analytical tool but a strong research agenda-setting framework.

## CONCLUSION

This study responds to a critical need within contemporary sport management and sport sociology scholarship by proposing the University Sports Organizational Resilience Framework (USORF)—a multidimensional conceptual model designed to explain how university sport organizations withstand disruption, sustain participation, and preserve institutional trust in the post-pandemic era. USORF reframes resilience not as a static organizational quality or a reactive crisis-management tool, but as a continuous socio-managerial process shaped by structural, relational, cultural, and innovation-driven dynamics.

By integrating four major theoretical domains—organizational resilience theory, sport governance and legitimacy research, sport sociology, and post-pandemic sport ecology—USORF offers a unified explanatory framework that has been missing in the literature. The model's five core dimensions—structural robustness, managerial adaptability, social trust & legitimacy, participation continuity, and innovation capacity—together illustrate how resilience is co-constructed through leadership practices, communication systems, social relationships, and adaptive participation strategies. This holistic approach represents a significant theoretical advancement, as previous studies have tended to emphasize either structural or sociological components in isolation.

Managerially, USORF provides university sport administrators with a strategic blueprint for strengthening organizational sustainability in uncertain environments. It highlights that resilient university sport organizations are those that:

- Maintain Operational Clarity And Robust Infrastructures,
- Communicate Transparently And Respond Adaptively,
- Cultivate Trust And Legitimacy Among Students,
- Foster Stable Participation Ecosystems, And
- Embrace Innovation As A Long-Term Strategic Imperative.

The implications extend beyond post-pandemic recovery. USORF can guide universities in designing governance systems, participation models, and digital strategies that enhance resilience across future challenges—whether social, technological, or institutional.

Future research should empirically test the propositions derived from USORF, examine cross-cultural variations in university sport resilience, explore the role of organizational culture and leadership styles, and operationalize the model into measurable constructs for large-scale quantitative studies. By establishing a

comprehensive conceptual foundation, this study invites ongoing scholarly engagement and provides a robust framework for future theoretical refinement and empirical validation.

USORF ultimately positions university sport organizations as **adaptive, relational, and innovative ecosystems**, capable of sustaining student engagement and organizational legitimacy in an era of continuous transformation.

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