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Original article

COACHING STYLE AND GENDER AS PREDICTORS OF ATHLETE–COACH COMMUNICATION IN SPORT

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Abstract

Aim. This study investigates how coaching style and coach gender influence athletes' perceptions of communication quality. It addresses a gap in the literature by examining these variables jointly, considering their combined and individual impact on the athlete–coach relationship.

Methods. A quantitative, cross-sectional, and correlational design was employed. A total of 164 athletes completed a questionnaire measuring perceived communication quality using six subscales adapted from the Coaching Behavior Scale for Sport (CBS-S). The questionnaire also included demographic information and coach classification based on perceived coaching style (autocratic, democratic, holistic, or laissez-faire). Linear regression and Pearson correlation analyses were used to examine the predictive value of coaching style and coach gender.

Results. Regression models showed that holistic ($R^2 = 0.156$, $p < 0.001$) and democratic ($R^2 = 0.050$, $p = 0.017$) styles were significantly associated with higher communication scores. The laissez-faire style had a strong negative effect ($R^2 = 0.405$, $p < 0.001$), while the autocratic style showed no significant predictive power. Coach gender alone was not a consistent predictor; however, in the laissez-faire model, female coaches were rated more favorably ($p = 0.006$).

Conclusions. Coaching style emerged as the primary factor influencing athletes' perceptions of communication, with gender playing a secondary, context-dependent role. These findings have practical implications for coach training programs, emphasizing the importance of relational and communication skills, particularly within athlete-centered coaching approaches.

Keywords: Coaching style, athlete-coach communication, coach gender.

Introduction

In high-performance sport, the communication between athletes and coaches plays a critical role not only in shaping athletic outcomes but also in influencing broader aspects of personal development. Given the rigorous demands of training and competition, athletes frequently spend more time with their coaches than with family members, which amplifies the coach's impact on their cognitive, emotional, and social development (Jin et al., 2022). Within this context, the coaching style adopted by the coach becomes a central factor in determining how effectively this relationship functions.

Coaching style refers to the characteristic manner in which a coach interacts with, guides, and supports athletes during instruction and performance. It encompasses communication patterns, decision-making approaches, and leadership strategies employed by the coach. Numerous coaching styles have been identified, each associated with distinct behavioral tendencies and psychological effects on athletes. Four styles frequently discussed in coaching research are autocratic, democratic, holistic, and laissez-faire (Maryville University, 2021; Su et al., 2024). These styles vary in the degree of control, autonomy, and emotional support provided to athletes, and consequently, in how they affect the athletes' perceptions of coach communication.

The autocratic style is characterized by centralized authority and directive behavior, where decision-making remains entirely under the coach's control, and strict compliance is expected. This approach may enhance discipline and structure but has been associated with limited opportunities for athlete input and potentially weaker interpersonal rapport. By contrast, the democratic style promotes shared decision-making and active collaboration, enabling athletes to participate in shaping their goals and strategies, which can strengthen communication and mutual respect.

The holistic coaching style shifts the focus from performance alone to the development of the whole person. Coaches using this approach prioritize personal growth and well-being alongside competitive success. They foster trust-based, empathetic relationships that enhance communication, self-confidence, and long-term development. On the opposite end of the spectrum, the laissez-faire style is marked by disengagement, minimal guidance, and a passive stance in decision-making. This style relies heavily on athletes' self-direction and, in the absence of sufficient intrinsic motivation, may contribute to disorganization, lack of discipline, and poor communication.

In addition to coaching style, coach gender may influence the quality of athlete–coach communication. Different communication styles between men and women can affect communication effectiveness.

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Despite the acknowledged importance of communication in sports performance and athlete development, there is a noticeable gap in the existing literature regarding the combined influence of coaching style and coach gender on athletes' perception of communication quality. While some studies have addressed coaching behaviors or leadership styles independently, few have systematically examined how these variables interact to shape the athlete-coach communicative dynamic. This lack of empirical focus represents a significant limitation, particularly given the increasing emphasis on psychological and relational factors in athlete support systems.

Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by exploring how different coaching styles and the gender of the coach influence athletes' perceptions of communication quality. The investigation is guided by the following hypothesis:

H₁: There is a significant difference in the quality of communication perceived by athletes depending on the coaching style and the coach's gender.

Objectives

This study aims to explore how communication between athletes and coaches is influenced by different coaching styles and by the coach's gender. The specific objectives are:

- To examine how athletes perceive communication quality across four coaching styles: autocratic, democratic, holistic, and laissez-faire.
- To determine whether coach gender has an impact on how communication is experienced by athletes.
- To analyze if gender effects vary depending on the coaching style applied.
- To assess which coaching styles are most strongly associated with positive or negative communication outcomes.
- To contribute empirical data to a field where combined analyses of gender and coaching style remain limited.
- To provide practical insight for coach development programs, with a focus on relational and communication skills.

Methods

The present study employs a quantitative, cross-sectional, and correlational design, aiming to analyze the relationships between coaching style, coach's gender, and the quality of communication as perceived by athletes. By applying linear regression models, the research also gains an explanatory dimension, assessing the extent to which the independent variables can predict communication scores.

The study used questionnaire for data collecting. The questionnaires were supplemented with an informed consent process, developed in accordance with the ethical standards and principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki for research involving human participants.

The questionnaire included sociodemographic data and items to explore the quality of communication between athlete-coach taken from the standardized questionnaires CBS-S. The Coaching Behavior Scale for Sport (CBS-S) developed by Koh, Kawabata and Mallett (2014) is a 47-item questionnaire which measures athletes' perceptions of seven dimensions of coaching behavior: physical training and planning (7 items), technical skills (8 items), goal setting (6 items), mental preparation (5 items), competition strategies (7 items), personal rapport (6 items), and negative personal rapport (8 items).

From CBS-S 6 sub-scales were used: technical skills (6 items), goal setting (4 items), mental preparation (4 items), competition strategies (4 items), personal rapport (3 items) and negative personal rapport (10 items). Negative personal rapport was completed with 3 items from personal experience as an athlete.

The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient obtained for the set of 31 items was $\alpha = 0.953$, indicating an excellent level of internal consistency. This value suggests that the items included in the scale are highly homogeneous and consistently measure the perception of communication in the athlete-coach relationship. The high reliability supports the use of the scale in subsequent statistical analyses.

Results

The sample comprised a total of 164 participants 64.6% male athletes and 35.4% female athletes. These reported that their coaches are 24.39% females and 75.61% males (Figure 1). Regarding the coaching style, they perceived their coaches as being autocratic 21.95%, holistic 33.54%, democratic 31.10% and laissez-faire 13.14% (Figure 2).

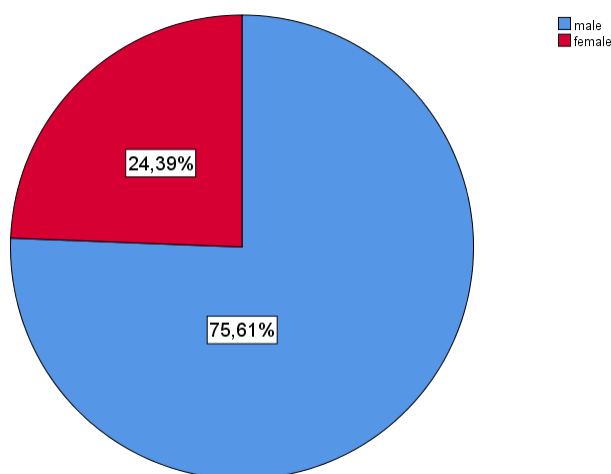


Figure 1. Coach's gender

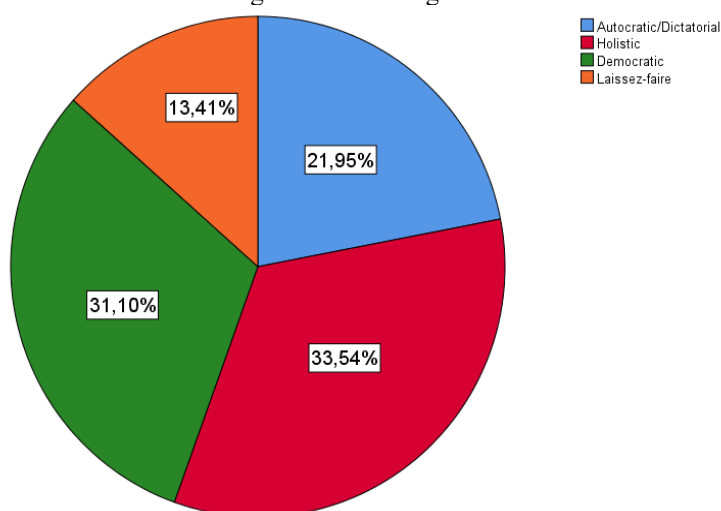


Figure 2. Coaching style

Table 1. Linear Regression Results

Coaching style	The direction of the effect on communication	Person correlation	% variance explained (R^2)	Sig.
Autocratic	Negative	$r = -0,138$	3 %	n.s. ($p > 0,05$)
Holistic	Positive	$r = 0,382$	15,6 %	$p < 0,001$
Democratic	Positive	$r = 0,185$	5 %	$p = 0,018$
Laissez-faire	Moderate negative	$r = -0,614$	40,5 %	$p < 0,001$
Coach's gender	female > male	$r \approx 0,13$	—	Significant only in the model including the laissez-faire style

The Pearson correlation analysis revealed weak but significant relationships between the communication score and the autocratic coaching style. Specifically, the communication score was positively correlated with the coach's gender ($r = 0.126$, $p = 0.05$). Additionally, a weak negative correlation was found between the communication score and the autocratic coaching style ($r = -0.138$, $p = 0.039$), indicating that authoritarian coaches are perceived as having lower communication competence. A significant relationship was also observed between coach gender and coaching style ($r = -0.164$, $p = 0.018$), suggesting an uneven distribution of coaching styles across genders. Although the identified effects are modest, they may hold practical relevance for the selection and training of coaches, given their potential impact on communication quality with athletes.

The linear regression model constructed to assess the influence of coach gender and coaching style on communication scores was not statistically significant overall ($F(2,161) = 2.504$, $p = 0.085$). None of the individual predictors showed a

statistically significant effect ($p > 0.05$). These results suggest that other variables, beyond the coach's gender and coaching style, may play a more substantial role in shaping athletes' perceptions of communication quality.

Pearson correlations revealed a significant relationship between the overall communication score and the holistic coaching style ($r = 0.382$, $p < 0.001$). Although the strength of the correlation is low, it suggests that athletes perceive more effective communication from coaches identified as holistic. Additionally, the relationship between communication score and coach gender was weak but significant ($r = 0.126$, $p = 0.05$). No significant correlation was found between coach gender and the holistic coaching style ($r = 0.078$, $p = 0.161$), indicating independence between these variables.

The linear regression model including coach gender and the holistic coaching style as predictors of communication scores was statistically significant ($F(2,161) = 14.824$, $p < 0.001$), accounting for 15.6% of the total variance ($R^2 = 0.156$). The holistic coaching style had a moderate and statistically significant positive impact on communication ($B = 28.685$, $\beta = 0.375$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that coaches identified as holistic are perceived as having significantly stronger communication skills. In contrast, coach gender did not significantly influence communication in this model ($p = 0.182$). These findings emphasize the importance of professional or structural characteristics of holistic coaches in athletes' perceptions of communication effectiveness.

Pearson correlations also identified a significant relationship between communication scores and the democratic coaching style ($r = 0.185$, $p = 0.009$). Although the correlation is weak, it indicates that athletes perceive more effective communication from coaches with a democratic style. The relationship between communication and coach gender remained weak but significant ($r = 0.126$, $p = 0.05$), while no significant correlation was observed between coach gender and the democratic style ($r = 0.017$, $p = 0.413$).

The linear regression model including coach gender and democratic coaching style as predictors of communication scores was statistically significant ($F(2,161) = 4.199$, $p = 0.017$), explaining approximately 5% of the total variance ($R^2 = 0.050$). The democratic coaching style had a significant positive effect on communication ($B = 14.312$, $\beta = 0.183$, $p = 0.018$), indicating that coaches with this style tend to be perceived as more effective communicators. However, coach gender was not a significant predictor in this model ($p = 0.110$).

A moderate and statistically significant negative correlation was observed between communication scores and the laissez-faire coaching style ($r = -0.614$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that athletes perceive lower communication quality from coaches with a disengaged approach. Meanwhile, the correlation between coach gender and communication score remained weak but significant ($r = 0.126$, $p = 0.05$), and no significant relationship was found between coach gender and the laissez-faire style ($r = 0.068$, $p = 0.193$), confirming their independence.

The regression model including coach gender and the laissez-faire style as predictors of communication was highly significant ($F(2,161) = 54.757$, $p < 0.001$), explaining 40.5% of the total variance ($R^2 = 0.405$). The laissez-faire coaching style had a strong and statistically significant negative effect on communication scores ($B = -66.290$, $\beta = -0.625$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that coaches of this type are perceived as having substantially lower communication effectiveness. Furthermore, coach gender significantly influenced communication ($B = 14.229$, $p = 0.006$). To determine which gender was the positive predictor of communication, regression analyses were conducted separately for male and female coaches. The results indicated that athletes perceive female coaches as having superior communication abilities. This model demonstrated the highest explanatory power among all those tested and highlights the importance of both structural-professional factors (coaching style) and personal characteristics (coach gender) in shaping perceived communication quality in the athlete-coach relationship.

Discussions

The results partially support the hypothesis:

- The "coaching style" factor can be considered a significant predictor of athlete-coach communication: communication scores vary notably across the four styles, ranging from positive effects (holistic, democratic) to strongly negative effects (laissez-faire).
- The "gender" factor becomes relevant only in interaction with specific styles. Therefore, its role is context-dependent rather than primary.

Coaching style:

- The holistic and democratic coaching styles—closely aligned with autonomy-supportive behavior and transformational leadership as described in motivational literature—are positively correlated with communication scores. These styles are characterized by more empathetic and athlete-centered communication, which enhances openness, constructive feedback, and the overall quality of the athlete-coach relationship (Jin et al., 2022; D'Aquino & Jolo, 2024). These findings underscore the importance of adapting coaching approaches to suit the individual characteristics of each athlete, with a particular focus on strategies that prioritize outcomes, set clear objectives, promote effective communication, and support informed decision-making.
- The authoritarian coaching style reflects a controlling, authority-centered approach. The negative correlation observed supports previous findings showing that rigid directives tend to reduce athletes' perception of communicative competence (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003; Hassan & Nazarudin, 2023). Moreover, the lack of

statistical significance in the linear regression model aligns with other studies (Jin et al., 2022) that have examined the athlete–coach relationship, suggesting that while perceived negatively, authoritarian traits may not independently predict communication quality when other variables are considered.

The laissez-faire coaching style emerges as the strongest negative predictor of communication quality. This aligns with the results of meta-analytic study by Judge and Piccolo (2004). The lack of involvement and absence of feedback underscore the critical role of the coach's active presence in maintaining a healthy communicative climate. The high β value (0.625) indicates a substantial effect, consistent with the laissez-faire model described by Su et al. (2022).

Coach's gender:

The effects of coach gender are consistent but modest: female coaches are rated slightly more favorably overall. The difference becomes statistically significant only in the context of the laissez-faire style. This suggests that in low-involvement or deficient coaching environments, athletes may respond more positively to personal traits—such as empathy—commonly associated with women (Christov-Moore et al., 2014).

These findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations:

- Sample size and composition: The sample was relatively small ($N = 164$) and may not fully represent athletes across different sports, competitive levels, or geographic regions.
- Self-reported data: Communication scores were based on athletes' subjective perceptions, which may be influenced by personal bias or recent experiences.
- Cross-sectional design: The study captures data at a single point in time, such a design restricts the potential to determine causality or to monitor how variables evolve over time.
- Unequal gender distribution: There was an imbalance between male and female coaches reported by participants, which may affect the generalizability of gender-related findings.

Conclusions

This study highlights the importance of coaching style in shaping how athletes perceive communication with their coaches. Holistic and democratic styles were associated with higher communication quality, likely due to their emphasis on empathy, collaboration, and athlete-centered values. In contrast, the laissez-faire style showed the strongest negative impact, underscoring the risks of disengagement and lack of structure. The autocratic style was negatively perceived, but its effect was not statistically significant in the regression model. Gender alone was not a consistent predictor, but it became relevant when combined with a laissez-faire approach—female coaches were perceived more favorably in this context.

These findings suggest that communication is shaped primarily by coaching behavior, with gender acting as a secondary, context-dependent factor. The study provides useful insights for coach development programs focused on enhancing relational and communication skills.

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