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Soccer Players' Attitudes toward and Preferences for Male and Female Coaches

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to determine soccer players' attitudes toward and preferences for male and female coaches. One hundred and forty-five professional soccer players (male: 103, female: 42, age range 18–35 years) participating in Division 1 in the Eastern Mediterranean completed a modified Attitudes Toward Male and Female Coaches Questionnaire (AAMFC-Q) in addition to their demographic characteristics, and general information. A 2 (athletes' gender) x 2 (hypothetical coach's gender) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) indicated a significant two-way multivariate interaction [$F(3, 141) = 22.79, p < 0.001$] with significant main effects [$F(3, 141) = 12.16, p < 0.001$] for the gender of the athlete or gender of the hypothetical coach. Our results demonstrated that male soccer players have a preference for male coaches, as indicated by item 12 (“I would prefer it if my new football (soccer) coach were a man”), while female soccer players demonstrated a preference for female coaches. Additionally, male soccer players had significantly ($p < 0.01$) less favorable attitudes toward female coaches on all items except for question 8 (“I could discuss things with her easily”). In contrast, female soccer players did not exhibit as many negative attitudes toward male soccer coaches. Based on the results of our study, it is evident that male players in sports such as soccer remain resistant to accepting female soccer coaches. This may be a result of greater exposure to male coaches, as none of the male players in our study had previously had a female coach.

Keywords: Coaching, coach preference, football players, gender inequality.


1. INTRODUCTION

Gender inequality in sports has persisted over the years, especially in the field of sports coaching. Women coaches have difficulty establishing a foothold in the coaching scene despite attempts to address the problem. One such effort was the enactment of Title IX in 1972, which prohibited gender discrimination in educational programs and increased the number of women participants in sports across academic institutions in the United States (Francis, 2016). Before this action, only 32,000 women participated in intercollegiate athletics; however, by 2004, that number had risen to 202,540 women participants (Paule-Koba *et al.*, 2013). However, the same thing could not be said for coaching. In 1997–98, the percentage of college teams trained by female coaches was 48% for women's teams and only 2% for men's teams, highlighting the ongoing inequality in coaching roles (Habif *et al.*, 2001). This inequality could be attributed to the general perception of females in sports and positions of power. Furthermore, male leaders who exhibit masculine traits, such as aggressiveness, strength, and confidence, are often perceived as more competent than women who do not display these traits (Siegele *et al.*, 2019).

Additionally, societal and cultural views and perceptions are seen as barriers for female coaches. For example, some believe that female coaches should not be responsible for training male athletes since females are not always seen as authority figures and are, therefore, perceived as incapable of enforcing discipline (LaFontaine & Kamphoff, 2016). Therefore, women often struggle to attain and maintain

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positions of power in sports, particularly as head coaches, as they are perceived to lack the necessary qualifications for the role. On the other hand, numerous factors can influence athletes' preference for the gender of their coach. One such factor is the type of sport in which the athlete is training. For instance, in strength and conditioning, male athletes tend to favor male coaches, while female strength athletes generally do not have a gender preference (Magnusen & Rhea, 2009). However, female personal trainers are often preferred due to their kinder, calmer nature and their overall higher social skills in contrast to the more aggressive male personal trainers (Fisher et al., 2013). Concurrently, in some cases, the competence and previous accomplishments of the coach also impact the athlete's preference regardless of their gender. A study conducted on athletes in New Zealand revealed that the athletes measured the coach's competence by their coaching style rather than determining whether the coach was male or female (Kuntz & Moorfield, 2024).

Regarding female athletes' preference for male or female coaches, the majority of female athletes tend not to have a gender preference for their coaches (Waddington & Gibson, 2016). Instead, they base their preferences according to their previous experiences. In other words, female athletes who primarily had a male head coach tend to prefer male trainers, while those who primarily trained under a female coach have a greater desire to be tutored by female coaches and trainers (Kalin & Waldron, 2015). Therefore, an athlete's past exposure and experiences are essential for understanding their choices and preferences regarding the gender of their coaches.

This study aims to examine soccer players' attitudes toward and preferences for male and female coaches. We hypothesize that male soccer players will have a greater preference for male coaches, while female soccer players will demonstrate a greater preference for female coaches.

2. METHOD

2.1. Participants

The sample comprised 145 professional soccer players (male: 103, female: 42, age range 18–35 years) participating in Division 1 in the Eastern Mediterranean. The participants had an average of 10.69 (SD = 4.41) years of experience in soccer, with years of experience ranging from 4 to 18. Soccer players who reported less than 4 years of professional experience were excluded from the analysis. Seventy-eight of the male players were Caucasian, and 25 were non-Caucasian (African American and Hispanic/Latino), while 36 of the female players were Caucasian and 6 non-Caucasian (African American and Hispanic). At the time of the study, none of the male participants were coached by a female, while 26.2% (n = 11) of the female players were coached by a female. At the same time, none of the male participants had ever been coached by a female, while 38% (n = 16) of the female participants had been coached by a female in previous years.

2.2. Instruments

Male and female soccer players completed a modified Attitudes Toward Male and Female Coaches Questionnaire (AAMFC-Q) (Weinberg et al., 1984) in addition to their demographic characteristics, general information, and informed consent form. The demographic characteristics and general questions included information regarding age, gender, height, weight, years of professional experience in soccer, gender of current coach, and whether they had a coach of the opposite gender before.

The instrument is appropriate to assess athletes' attitudes and preferences toward a male or female coach. The test-retest reliability coefficients (0.8 and 0.77 for male and female versions, respectively) of the questionnaire were described by previous investigators (Weinberg et al., 1984). The original version included 11 items and required the participants to respond to a Likert-type scale from 1 (not at all) to 11 (very much) (Weinberg et al., 1984). For this study, an additional item that was presented by Habif et al. (2001) was included in the questionnaire. The additional item (item 12) was scored on the same Likert scale, and the athletes' preferences for a coach of a particular gender were examined. Also, for this study, further modifications to the questionnaires of Habif et al. (2001) and Weinberg et al. (1984) were made in the introductory paragraph. The revised version presented David (or Linda) as an expert in soccer rather than in volleyball, which was irrelevant to the purpose of this study. The modified version that was used in this study is presented in Table I. The test-retest reliability of the modified version that was used in our study was assessed utilizing 42 semi-professional players (26 male and 16 female players) and was indicated to be 0.78. For test-retest reliability, the semi-professional players were tested twice, two weeks apart.

2.3. Procedure

The questionnaire, relevant questions and procedures were approved by the technical director and the coach of the teams. Furthermore, the study was conducted in accordance with the declaration of

TABLE I: MODIFIED ATTITUDES TOWARD MALE AND FEMALE COACHES QUESTIONNAIRE

Instructions: Please read the following scenario. Once you are done reading it, let the independent researcher/investigator know if you have any questions or concerns. If everything is clear respond to the 12 items.											
SCENARIO: David (Linda) has completed his (her) undergraduate bachelor's degree, getting a diploma in the field of Exercise and Sport Science with a coaching certificate in football (soccer). David (Linda) made good grades in college and went on to receive a Master's degree in the field of Kinesiology. David (Linda) is a UEFA Pro Licenced coach and has several other certifications from respectable football (soccer) organizations. David (Linda) played football (soccer) at a college level as well as a competitive level upon graduation. David (Linda) also served as an assistant football (soccer) coach. David (Linda) just got a job as a football (soccer) coach at your team. Please answer the questions below concerning your feelings about David (Linda) being your team's new football (soccer) coach. Please circle the number (1–11) that corresponds to your feelings for each question.											
1. I would like him (her) as a football (soccer) coach											
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	
Not at all										very much	
2. His (her) presence on the field might break my concentration											
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	
Not at all										very much	
3. He (she) could want to make me play better.											
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	
Not at all										very much	
4. He (she) might still be a head coach in 20 years.											
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	
Not at all										very much	
5. I could take it when he (she) tells me I did something wrong.											
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	
Not at all										very much	
6. I would have confidence that he (she) is a good football (soccer) coach.											
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	
Not at all										very much	
7. I could take orders and instructions from him (her) easily.											
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	
Not at all										very much	
8. I could not take punishment from him (her).											
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	
Not at all										very much	
9. I could discuss things with him (her) easily.											
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	
Not at all										very much	
10. I might expect him (her) to give praise and say nice things easily.											
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	
Not at all										very much	
11. I might feel angry (mad) if he (she) yelled at me.											
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	
Not at all										very much	
12. I would prefer it if my new football (soccer) coach were a woman (man):											
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	
Not at all										very much	

Helsinki and received approval from the National Committee of Bioethics (CNBC). Participation was voluntary, and players were assured that no one would be identified by name. Players were randomly assigned to one of the two hypothetical scenarios and the questionnaire was completed in person during the scheduled pre-season testing. Half of the male and female soccer players were required to respond to the scenario of having a hypothetical female coach, while the other half were required to respond to the scenario involving a male coach. The two scenarios (male coach or female coach) included hypothetical information about the soccer coaches. In both scenarios, the coaches were described as having the same education, skills and experiences, with gender being the only differentiating factor.

TABLE II: DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS (MEAN \pm SD) AND GENERAL INFORMATION OF SOCCER PLAYERS

	Male (n = 103)	Female (n = 42)	Total (n = 145)
Descriptive			
Age (yrs)	23.43 \pm 3.44	22.69 \pm 4.52	23.21 \pm 3.78
Height (cm)	179.33 \pm 5.85	166.70 \pm 5.53	175.67 \pm 8.12
Weight (kg)	72.95 \pm 5.49	57.62 \pm 5.02	68.51 \pm 8.79
Experience in soccer (yrs)	11.04 \pm 4.37	9.83 \pm 4.42	10.69 \pm 4.41
Current coach female	0% (n = 0)	26.2% (n = 11)	
Current coach male	100% (n = 103)	73.8% (n = 31)	
Had a female coach before	0% (n = 0)	38% (n = 16)	
Had a male coach before	100% (n = 103)	100% (n = 42)	

TABLE III: RESPONSES OF THE SOCCER PLAYERS ON THE AAMFC-Q QUESTIONS

Questions	Males (n = 103)		Females (n = 42)	
	Male hypothetical scenario (n = 51)	Female hypothetical scenario (n = 52)	Male hypothetical scenario (n = 21)	Female hypothetical scenario (n = 21)
Q1	10.29 \pm 0.78	4.27 \pm 2.13 ^{† #}	8.29 \pm 1.27	10.19 \pm 0.81
Q2	1.55 \pm 1.29	2.90 \pm 2.15 [†]	1.76 \pm 0.94	1.10 \pm 0.30*
Q3	9.00 \pm 1.56	4.62 \pm 2.64 ^{† #}	8.86 \pm 1.53	8.52 \pm 2.64*
Q4	9.90 \pm 0.83	4.02 \pm 2.28 ^{† #}	9.67 \pm 1.71	6.19 \pm 2.52*
Q5	9.65 \pm 0.93	7.17 \pm 2.47 ^{† #}	9.86 \pm 0.91	9.90 \pm 1.30
Q6	9.78 \pm 0.83	6.21 \pm 2.62 ^{† #}	10.00 \pm 0.71	9.81 \pm 1.03
Q7	9.59 \pm 0.83	7.48 \pm 2.28 ^{† #}	10.10 \pm 0.94	9.90 \pm 1.48
Q8	2.49 \pm 1.65	2.94 \pm 1.66	1.19 \pm 0.40	1.76 \pm 1.34*
Q9	9.69 \pm 1.16	6.71 \pm 2.99 ^{† #}	5.90 \pm 3.46	9.95 \pm 1.77*
Q10	8.92 \pm 1.67	6.31 \pm 2.10 ^{† #}	8.00 \pm 1.84	8.95 \pm 1.99
Q11	2.43 \pm 1.63	3.48 \pm 2.09 [†]	2.71 \pm 1.85	3.52 \pm 2.46
Q12	10.22 \pm 0.90	3.75 \pm 1.76 ^{† #}	6.48 \pm 2.36	9.90 \pm 1.38*

Note. * $p < 0.05$ denotes significant differences in female responses based on the coach's scenario; [†] $p < 0.05$ denotes significant differences in male responses based on the coach's scenario; # $p < 0.05$ denotes significant differences between male and female responses based on the coach's scenario.

The questionnaires were filled out in a separate room, with an independent researcher collecting the anonymous responses.

2.4. Statistical Analysis

All statistical analyses were performed in IBM[®] SPSS[®] Statistics, version 28.0, for Windows (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA), and significance was set at a level of 0.05. The homogeneity of variance assumption was examined utilizing the Brown–Forsythe test, while the normality assumption was verified using the Shapiro–Wilk test. A 2 (athletes' gender) \times 2 (hypothetical coach's gender) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was utilized to compare the independent variables (athletes' gender and hypothetical coach's gender) with the 12 items on the AAMFC-Q. If a significant interaction existed, Univariate tests were followed to examine which items contributed to that interaction.

3. RESULTS

Table II demonstrates the demographic characteristics and general information that was obtained which included: age, gender, height, weight, years of professional experience in soccer, gender of current coach and whether they had a coach of the opposite gender before.

Results indicated a significant two-way multivariate interaction (Wilks Lambda = 0.34, $F(3, 141) = 22.79$, $p < 0.001$) with significant main effects (Wilks Lambda = 0.50, $F(3, 141) = 12.16$, $p < 0.001$) for the gender of the athlete or gender of the hypothetical coach. The responses of the soccer players on the AAMFC-Q questions are presented in Table III.

4. DISCUSSION

Based on our results, male soccer players demonstrated a preference for male coaches, as indicated by item 12 (“I would prefer it if my new football (soccer) coach were a man”), while female soccer players demonstrated a preference for female coaches. Additionally, male soccer players had significantly (p

<0.01) less favourable attitudes toward female coaches on all items except for question 8 (“I could discuss things with her easily”). In contrast, female soccer players did not exhibit as many negative attitudes toward male soccer coaches, as their responses did not significantly favour the female coaches on items 1, 5, 6, 7, 10 and 11. Therefore, despite their preference for a female coach, female players were also likely to accept a male coach easily. Concurrently, both male and female soccer players agreed that a male coach was more likely to be a head coach in 20 years compared to a female coach (item 4).

Our findings are in agreement with those of Weinberg et al. (1984) who investigated the responses of college basketball players in 1981–1982. The investigators found that male athletes exhibited more negative attitudes toward female coaches compared to female athletes. Similarly, female players did not perceive male coaches as negatively, which also aligns with our findings. What is surprising is that male attitudes toward female coaches remain unchanged even 40+ years following that study. Despite several attempts to promote gender equality, the persistence of these attitudes suggests that male athletes, particularly in sports such as soccer, may be more reluctant to accept female coaches. Concurrently, considering that women have been traditionally coached by male coaches it seems as though female soccer players do not have a negative attitude toward male coaches. Having said that, with the addition of item 12 to this study, it appears that female soccer players tend to prefer female coaches. Consequently, more women will likely be coaching female soccer teams now than in the past. On a negative note, the fact that both male and female soccer players did not respond positively to item 4 (“She might still be a head coach in 20 years”) is not encouraging.

Similar negative attitudes toward female strength and conditioning coaches were also demonstrated in a study by Magnusen and Rhea (2009). The authors evaluated the responses of male football players and female soccer and volleyball players. They have also demonstrated that male and female athletes had different attitudes toward male and female strength and conditioning coaches. Male athletes not only indicated more negative attitudes toward female strength and conditioning coaches but also suggested that female coaches could be a distraction during workouts and have little impact on their training. On the contrary, the aforementioned study demonstrated that female athletes did not report a preference for a female strength and conditioning coach and reported positive attitudes toward male and female coaches. Furthermore, the female athletes stated that they could listen to and have confidence in either a male or a female strength coach and that neither gender would make it difficult for them to concentrate.

In contrast to the previously mentioned studies, the work by Habif et al. (2001) suggested that negative attitudes toward female coaches may be changing. The authors demonstrated no significantly different attitudes toward male or female coaches in their study of basketball players. Furthermore, when item 12 (“I would prefer it if my new football (soccer) coach were a woman (man)”) was examined, they indicated that male basketball players preferred a male coach while female players did not demonstrate a preference based on the gender of the coach. In the same study when volleyball players were examined, they reported no significant preference for a coach of a particular gender, suggesting that the cultures associated with different sports (traditionally masculine versus gender-neutral sports) may be significant factors influencing athletes' attitudes and responses toward coaches.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the results of our study it is evident that male players in sports such as soccer remain resistant to accepting female soccer coaches. This may be a result of greater exposure to male coaches, as none of the male players in our study had previously had a female coach. If young male athletes are introduced to female coaches early in their careers, they may develop a more positive attitude toward female coaches, which may in turn increase the acceptance of female soccer coaches in the long term. Such early exposure could promote a more diverse coaching environment, ultimately benefiting both the players and the coaches.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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