

Emotional Intelligence and Preferred Coaching Leadership Styles among Young Athletes

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Abstract

Background: It is beneficial to have a comfortable coach-athlete connection if the coach is able to embrace the leadership style that is preferred by athletes. **Aims:** Developing the ideal coach-athlete relationship requires incorporating emotional intelligence (EQ), individual focus, and coach dedication in order to improve interpersonal connections, the functioning of the team, and performance outcomes. **Methods:** The study sought 144 young student-athletes' preferred leadership style by multifactor Leadership Questionnaire Form 6s (MLQ-F6) and used a 41-item of modified Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence test (SSEIT) to examine the individual Emotional Intelligence. **Results:** A result showed the overall mean for the level of EQ among young student-athletes is only 3.27, which can be interpreted as an average state. The findings also indicated a positive association was found that the participants with moderate EI tended to prefer transformational leadership styles. **Conclusion:** This research has influenced the direction of leadership in sports and revealed a realistic recommendation for the ideal transformational leadership style for coaching behavior and suggestions of optimal coaching behaviors for sports leadership, especially for young athletes.

Keywords: Emotional Intelligence, Leadership Style, Coaching Leadership, Young Athletes

Introduction

Leadership and emotional intelligence (EI) have become critical determinants of success in modern sports environments where psychological resilience, motivation, and effective communication drive athletic excellence. The ability of coaches to understand and manage both their own emotions and those of their athletes plays a decisive role in maintaining motivation, cohesion, and mental stability during training and competition. As coaching extends beyond technical instruction, emotional intelligence has been recognized as a key soft skill that influences athletes' satisfaction, confidence, and performance outcomes (Chan & Mallett, 2011; Lee, 2019).

In the context of youth sports development programs, especially within competitive environments such as the Sarawak Sports Development initiative, the emotional intelligence of young athletes can directly affect how they respond to coaching leadership. Early exposure to emotionally intelligent leadership helps athletes develop self-regulation, empathy, and intrinsic motivation — qualities that underpin long-term sports engagement and performance (Laborde et al., 2016; Rubio et al., 2022). Therefore, identifying the preferred coaching leadership style and understanding how emotional intelligence interacts with it are crucial for building supportive, high-performing sports systems.

This study is particularly significant because it addresses a current gap in Malaysian youth sports leadership research, notably in East Malaysia where athlete development is a strategic focus under the Sports Powerhouse 2030 vision. Understanding how emotional intelligence relates to athletes' preferred leadership styles offers practical insights for coaches, sports administrators, and policymakers. It can inform the design of leadership training modules that are adaptive, emotionally aware, and culturally responsive. Moreover, this knowledge benefits both coaches and athletes, as emotionally congruent leadership fosters trust, team cohesion, and consistent performance improvement (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016).

Emotional intelligence (EI), sometimes referred to as emotional quotient (EQ), is the ability to recognize, comprehend, manage, and utilize one's own emotions as well as the emotions of others (Goleman, 2001). EI and EQ are sometimes used interchangeably. It requires a set of abilities and competencies essential to one's personal and professional success, as well as maintaining healthy relationships with others. Moreover, emotional intelligence is a soft personal skill that integrates emotion and cognition. It includes a variety of psychological competencies, including the capacity to observe, recognize, comprehend, and regulate an individual's feelings and those of others. Bar-On (1997) defined emotional intelligence as a range of noncognitive abilities such as emotional and social capabilities, competencies, and skills influencing one's ability to cope with environmental demands and pressure. The five domains in Bar-On's emotional intelligence model — intrapersonal skills, interpersonal skills, adaptability, stress management, and general mood — collectively predict psychological growth. Developing emotional intelligence can substantially enhance communication effectiveness, leadership quality, interpersonal relationships, and overall well-being.

In addition to being essential to leadership, negotiation, and conflict-resolution abilities, EI competency has been widely used to assess performance in management, psychology, and sports (Gardner et al., 2020; Schneider, 2013). Research has shown that intellectual stimulation can predict leaders' behaviours that result in higher transformation levels (Barling et al., 2000). Building strong coach–athlete relationships and fostering a positive sports environment depends heavily on mutual understanding of nonverbal cues, such as emotions and moods. Traditional sports leadership has long emphasized leader-centered approaches, but integrating EI allows for a more athlete-centered, emotionally attuned framework (Doherty & Danylchuk, 1996; Emmerling & Boyatzis, 2011).

Recent studies have demonstrated growing interest in emotional intelligence (EI) and its relationship with sports (Laborde et al., 2016; Ubago-Jimenez et al., 2019). Emotions are integral to competitive performance, influencing how athletes cope with success, failure, and injury (Magrum et al., 2019; Rodriguez-Romo et al., 2021). Given its ability to predict athletic

outcomes (Kopp & Jekauc, 2018), EI has become a key element in shaping coaching effectiveness and athlete development. This study provides valuable insight into how EI relates to leadership preferences among Sarawak's development athletes — a population crucial to Malaysia's next generation of elite performers — aligning with national aspirations for sustainable sports excellence. Accordingly, the Sarawak Sports Development program represents an ideal context to explore how emotionally intelligent leadership can enhance athlete engagement and coach–athlete synergy in achieving the nation's Sports Powerhouse 2030 vision. Thus, the present study is significant in identifying emotional intelligence attributes that strengthen leadership effectiveness, foster positive coach–athlete relationships, and guide future leadership training within Malaysia's youth sports framework.

Methodology

Participants

The participants in the Sports Sarawak Development Program represent the population for the aim of this study. According to the Sports Development Division, the state of Sarawak is separated into three different zones: the Southern Zone, which includes the cities of Kuching, Kota Samarahan, Serian, and Sri Aman; the Central Zone, which provides for Betong, Sarikei, Sibu, and Kapit; and the Northern Zone, which includes Bintulu, Miri, and Limbang. Individual, Targeted, Wall and Net, Invasion, and Combat Sports are the five (5) sports categories that Sarawak has established for the various sports. To meet the inclusion criteria, each athlete needs to be at least 12 years old and should have prior experience working with at least one head coach. The researcher recruited only current Sarawak athletes, whereas athletes in club sports were excluded from the study.

Instrumentation and Measurement

The self-administered questionnaire for this study is available as an online Google Form, where the data gathered will be recorded and protected. Three elements comprised the online survey: background information about the participants, a Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire for 6S, and a modified version of the Schutte Self-reported Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT). The purpose of these questionnaires was to evaluate Sarawakian players' emotional intelligence abilities and preferred coaching and leadership styles. The district, zone, sport, age, and gender were the independent factors. The individuals' preferred leadership styles and self-reported EI scores were the dependent variables. In this study, emotional intelligence in the general population has been measured using the modified Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT) (Austein et al., 2014; Schutte et al., 1998).

The modified SSEIT employs a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 and describing "strongly disagree," "disagree," "neutral," "agree," and "strongly agree." In the present study, the 41-item modified version of Austrin's (2004) SSEIT was used, which corresponds to the three categories of Solovey and Mayer's (1990) emotional intelligence model: (a) optimism/mood regulation, (b) utilization of emotions, and (c) appraisal of emotions (Bester et al., 2013). In addition, the 41-item SSEIT contains a greater proportion of 21 items with reversed values than the previous 33-item version, which contained only three questions with reversed values. It is possible that the original text does not accurately reflect the opinions of individuals in the real world. The modified version is regarded as a balanced scale for objective assessment of emotional intelligence components (Saklofske et al., 2007). The internal

consistency of the 41-item SSEIT was likewise determined to be comparable to the original version. Ng et al. (2010) recommended the use of the 41-item SSEIT for international students in the United States due to its greater concurrent validity and reliability.

The Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire Form 6s (MLQ-6S) assesses the preferences of student-athletes for transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles. The MLQ-6S consists of 21 items that indicate four forms of transformational leadership, two styles of transactional leadership, and one style of laissez-faire leadership (3 items per factor). Transformational leadership, according to Bass Avolio (1990), entails idealizing influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration. Transactional leadership is associated with contingent reward and management by exception. A passive leadership style is classified with laissez-faire administration. This survey provides descriptions of seven leadership styles. Each question is measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from not at all (0 points), once in while (1 point), sometimes (2 points), fairly often (3 points), to frequently/ always (4 points). The total score on the MLQ-6S is subdivided into three ranges: high (9-12), moderate (5-8), and low (0-4). These instruments can be used to compare the evolution of the ideal leadership style in Sarawak with the results of emotional intelligence in terms of the preferred leadership style in various regions of Sarawak.

Procedure

The formal approval from the participants was obtained prior to data collection. A formal request letter and consent form were delivered. Following this, the researcher disperses the self-administration questionnaire (via Google form) to respondents for each Sports Development Division.

Ethical Considerations

The questionnaire was filled in by the respondents emphasizing their voluntary participation and ensuring the confidentiality of their responses. This also ensures the study compliance with ethical standards and guidelines.

Results

Socio-Demographic of Respondents

The demographic profile of the Sarawak development athlete was analysed to visualize the composition of the respondents (Table 1). One hundred and forty-four (N=144) respondents completed the survey with an 56.9% (n=82) response rate from Southern Zone, 23.6% (n=34) from Northern Zone and 19.4% (n=28) participants from Central Zone.

Table 1

Demographic of Respondent

Demographic background	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	85	59
Female	59	41
Age		
13 – 16-year-old	89	61.8
17 – 20-year-old	55	38.2
Type Of Sports		
Individual	40	27.8

Invasion	6	4.2
Wall & Net	18	12.5
Combat	51	35.4
Target	29	20.1
District Zone		
Southern Zone	82	56.9
Northern Zone	34	23.6
Central Zone	28	19.4

The Level of Emotional Intelligence

The level of emotional intelligence of Sarawak Sports Development Athletes (N=144) responses of Modified Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligences Test (MSSEIT) shown in Table 2. Four factors represented the EI level with optimism/ mood regulation has the highest mean score (mean = 3.69, SD= ± 0.47), and appraisal of emotions scored the lowest with mean of 2.96, SD= ± 0.47 . The study reveals an average Emotional Intelligence Score (M = 3.27, SD = ± 0.37), meaning that Sarawak development athlete emotional intelligence is in moderate state, probably due to the emotional understanding have not fully develop. This is based on the mean values as references (Landell, 1997), which was classified into three (3) levels namely low (mean score 1.00 – 2.99), moderate (mean score 3.00 – 3.99), and high (mean score 4.00 – 5.00).

Table 2

Emotional Intelligence Factor

Factor	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Optimism/ Mood Regulation	144	3.69	0.47
Utilization of Emotions	144	3.16	0.49
Appraisal of Emotion	144	2.96	0.46
Emotional Intelligence Score	144	3.27	0.37

Emotional Intelligence based on gender

As a comparison by gender, the EI level differences among males and females of Sarawak Sports Development Athletes are shown in Table 3. Based on the findings, there is no significant difference between genders established for each factor and overall, of EI as $p>.05$.

Table 3

Emotional Intelligences T-test for Equality of Means by Gender

Factor	Significant (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Std. Difference	Error
Optimism/ mood regulation	0.489	-0.05	0.79	
Utilization of emotions	0.957	-0.01	0.84	
Appraisal of emotion	0.120	0.12	0.78	
Total Score EI	0.739	0.02	0.06	

Emotional Intelligence based on type of sports.

There are four different types of sports in the program of Sarawak Sports Development Athletes, which are categorized as Individual, Invasion, Wall & Net and Combat. According to Table 4, the results show that the overall score of EI indicated a significant difference based on the types of sports. Only one factor, utilization of emotions, showed significant differences

between the types of sports, with a mean score of 0.71, $p=0.02$. This may be because Sarawak development athletes still need to develop their emotional understanding, and according to Austin et al. (2022), individuals who score high on utilization of emotions reported having difficulty in controlling the emotions.

Table 4

Emotional Intelligence ANOVA Test by Type of Sports

Factor	Sum of Square	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Optimism/ mood regulation	1.12	4	0.28	1.28	0.28
Utilization of emotions	2.84	4	0.71	3.00	0.02*
Appraisal of emotion	0.90	4	0.22	1.05	0.38
Total Score EI	1.47	4	0.36	2.83	0.02*

* $p<.05$

The Leadership Style

The leadership style preferred by Sarawak Sports Development Athletes is represented by responses to Multiple Leadership Questionnaire Form 6s (MLQ-F6) shown in Figure 1. The highest percentage (24%) appeared to be an idealized influence among overall participants. Seven factors represent the types of leadership. Transformational leadership entails idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration. Transactional leadership is associated with contingent reward and management by exception. A passive leadership style is classified as laissez-faire administration. The results showed that the leadership style preferred by Sarawak Sports Development Athletes is transformational leadership. On the other hand, the least preferred leadership style is laissez-faire.

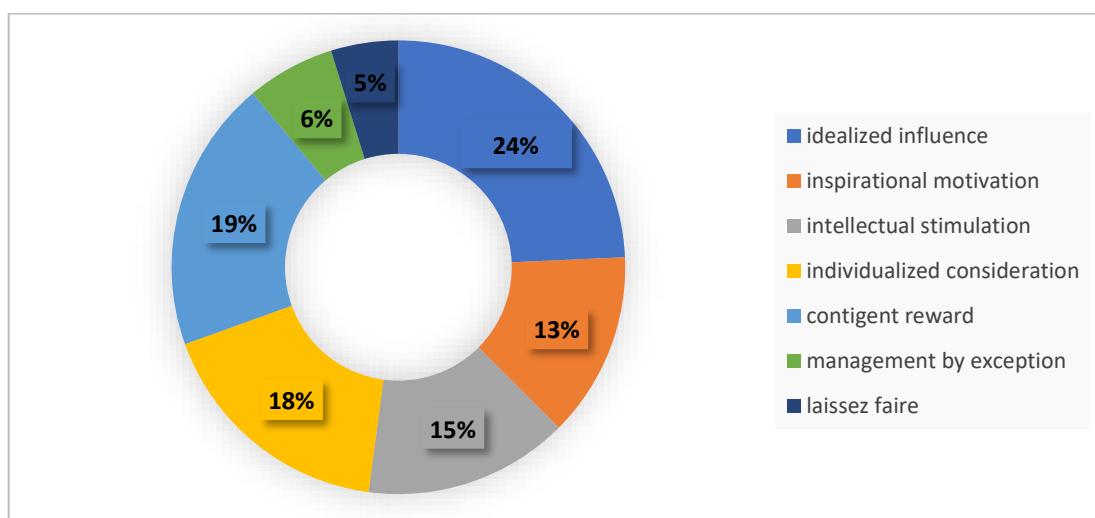


Figure 1. Participants' Preferences for Leadership Styles

Transformational Leadership by Gender and Types of Sports

The results show that there is no significant difference between males and females and also types of sports among Sarawak Sports Development Athletes on the preferred leadership style.

Emotional Intelligence Scores Influence toward Transformational Leadership Style

The findings in this study indicated only 0.18 (18%) of emotional intelligence scores influence the type of transformational leadership style preferred by Sarawak Sports Development Athletes as in Table 5. In addition, factor 1 (Optimism/ mood regulation) have a high percentage of influence toward the transformational leadership style, with value of 0.39 (39%), follow by factor 2 (Utilization of emotion), with value of 0.10 (10%) and factor 3 (Appraisal of emotion) with the value of 0.08 (8%) as shown in Table 6.

Table 5

Regression Table of EI Score influence toward Transformational Leadership Style

Model	R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change	Durbin-Watson
1	0.18	10.32	3	140	<.001	1.74

Table 6

Coefficients table of EI Score influence toward Transformational Leadership Style

Model	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
Factor 1	0.390	4.616	<0.001
Factor 2	0.106	1.074	0.285
Factor 3	-0.089	-0.977	0.330

Discussion and Conclusion

Previous study indicates that coaching based on the concept of transformational leadership may fulfil the psychological demands of the athlete and motivate the athlete's supporters to achieve outstanding performance (Jo-Hsuan Lee et al., 2022; Schneider, 2013). In addition, emotional intelligence has been used to predict the capability to lead through transformational coaching behaviour (Tabrizi et al., 2021) (Jo-Hsuan Lee et al., 2022). The purpose of this study is to investigate the growth of emotional intelligence among athletes participating in Sarawak's development programme and to compare the transformational leadership styles that these athletes prefer. On top of that, the focus of this study was on the influence that an individual's level of emotional intelligence has on their preference for a transformational leadership style. According to the findings of this study, the emotional intelligence (EI) and transformational leadership (TL) of Sarawak development athletes are at a moderate level. On the other hand, research by Gabriel Rodriguez et al. (2021) suggests a correlation between experience, measured by quantity (number of years practising sports) and quality (competition level). Based on the research of Fernandez et al. (2005) and Laborde et al. (2011), experiences and athletic skills may be associated with improved emotional adjustment. Furthermore, it is understandable that the results of the emotional intelligence and transformational leadership tests have no significance in gender and sports categories. This is because the research conducted by Gabriel Rodriguez et al., 2021 suggested that the quantity and quality of experiences should be measured, and emotional intelligence can be acquired through participation in sports. A study by Jo-Hsuan Lee et al., 2022 demonstrated a slight correlation between the two variables, with higher EI athletes indicating a stronger preference for transformational leadership. The study concerned the relationship between emotional intelligence score and preferred transformational leadership style. Despite this, Jo-Hsuan Lee and colleagues 2022 believed that the accumulation of life experiences played a role in forming transformative leadership to promote the sharing of perspectives. In the case

of Sarawak's development athletes, emotional intelligence doesn't make much of a difference in transformational leadership style.

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