

Evaluating the Behavior of Football Coaches in the U15 Category Through the Eyes of Players – An Intercultural Approach

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ABSTRACT. Leadership in sport, especially at the children's and junior levels, involves a complex process of influencing attitudes, emotions, and relationships within a team. This study aims to investigate differences in perception between coaches and players from different countries to determine the extent to which cultural and national environments influence perceptions of coaches' leadership behavior. We used the Multidimensional Scale of Leadership in Sport (MSLS) to compare players' perceptions of their coach's behavior before and after competition, to find differences determined by competitive experience and cultural context. 82 players and 4 head coaches participated. The data were analyzed using the Kruskal-Wallis test, followed by Dunn-Bonferroni post-hoc tests. The results highlighted significant intercultural differences across nine dimensions of leadership: vision, inspiration, instruction, individualization, support, positive and negative feedback, active management, and passive management. Coaches in Romania and Ireland were evaluated more positively regarding supportive and transformational behaviors, while the Montenegro coach exhibited a more authoritarian style. The conclusions suggest that cultural values influence how young athletes perceive their coaches' leadership behaviors, highlighting the importance of critical reflection and cultural adaptability in football.

Keywords: *coach-athlete relationship, behavior, leadership, intercultural comparison, youth football*

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INTRODUCTION

Coaches' behavior has a big impact on athletes' psychological, motivational, and social development, significantly influencing the individual and collective performance of the team (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003; Laborde et al., 2016). Leadership in sport, especially at the children's and junior levels, involves a complex process of influencing attitudes, emotions, and relationships within a team. At the youth level, the coach's job is not limited to making tactical decisions but involves a great deal of pedagogical knowledge that contributes to the development of players who are confident in their own abilities, resilient, and competitive.

The leadership styles adopted by coaches—whether transactional, authoritarian, or transformational—can shape group dynamics, athlete motivation, and the psychosocial climate of training (Chelladurai & Saleh, 1980; Charbonneau et al., 2001).

Numerous studies have shown that transformational leadership, characterised by intellectual stimulation and consideration of the individual, is associated with greater team cohesion, satisfaction, and collective efficacy (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Gomes et al., 2019). In contrast, while transactional or authoritarian leadership styles can be effective in the short term, they can lead to controlled motivation and less empathetic relationships between coaches and athletes (Horn, 1985; Mallet, 2010). In this context, understanding the relationship between coach and athlete is important for interpreting the coach's behaviour and how it is perceived by the players (Jowett, 2024; Zhao & Jowett, 2023).

Recent literature highlights the importance of a dual perspective on coach behavior, both from the coach's and the athletes' point of view, to highlight possible discrepancies between coaches' intentions and the perceptions of those being coached (McGuckin et al., 2022). For example, athletes' evaluations of coaches' behavior differ depending on their perception of their performance and the degree to which they achieve their goals (Gomes et al., 2019) Football players who perceived better athletic performance and the achievement of team goals evaluated coaches' behavior more positively at the end of the season compared to the beginning. This change in perception suggests that athletes' perceptions may evolve throughout their relationship with the coach, being influenced by context and accumulated experiences.

This study aims to investigate differences in perception between coaches and players from different countries in order to determine the extent to which cultural and national environments influence perceptions of coaches' leadership behavior. The study used the Multidimensional Scale of Leadership in Sport, which was completed by both players and coaches from four Under-15 national teams: Romania, Greece, Montenegro, and Ireland.

Through this approach, the present study aims to make an original contribution to understanding the mechanisms by which coaches' behavior is perceived and interpreted differently by athletes and coaches, with the aim of discovering new practical directions for optimizing the coach-athlete relationship and the motivational climate in youth sports.

The first objective of this study was to compare players' perceptions of coaches' leadership behavior before and after competition, while the second was to explore possible variations in the perception of leadership behavior depending on the country of origin of the coaches and players who participated in this study.

Hypotheses

We believe that the scores obtained by players on the questionnaire regarding coaches' leadership behavior will show statistically significant differences between the two assessment moments: before and after the match.

It is also assumed that there are differences between the perceptions of players from different countries regarding the leadership behavior of coaches, which could highlight certain particularities of the social, educational, and sporting context in each country.

Transformational leadership has been associated with stronger team resilience and positive relationships, whereas controlling behaviours may increase psychological fatigue (Karayel, 2024; Liu et al., 2025).

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Participants

This study analyzed the perceptions of soccer players regarding the behavior of head coaches of U15 national soccer teams in Romania, Montenegro, Greece, and Ireland, aged between 36 and 58.

The coaches from Romania, Montenegro, and Greece hold UEFA A licenses, while the coach from Ireland holds a UEFA PRO license.

The study also included 82 players aged between 14 and 15 who are members of their country's U15 national team. No distinction was made between starters and substitutes; all players who participated in at least two U15 national team matches were included in the study, a criterion chosen to ensure a minimum level of interaction with the coach and, implicitly, a sufficiently clear perception of his behavior. Before data collection commenced, participants received information regarding the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the confidentiality of their responses. Verbal informed

consent was obtained from all adult participants. For minors, verbal informed consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians, and verbal assent was obtained from the minors themselves. Verbal informed consent was chosen due to the organizational context of international tournaments and the minimal-risk nature of the study, which involved the completion of anonymized questionnaires without any intervention. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the West University of Timișoara, Faculty of Physical Education and Sport (Approval No. 66512/01.10.2025). All procedures were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the Declaration of Helsinki.

The measurement tool used in this study was the Multidimensional Scale of Leadership (MSLS).

The Multidimensional Scale of Leadership was used for the first time in sports contexts (Gomes, 2008; Gomes & Resende, 2014; Gomes et al., 2021), assessing athletes' perceptions of coaches' leadership behaviors.

The MSLS includes nine subscales and 36 items grouped into nine subscales (Vision, Inspiration, Instruction, Individualization, Support, Positive Feedback, Negative Feedback, Active Management, Passive Management), each consisting of four items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Data analysis

The statistical analysis was performed using DataTab software. Descriptive statistics were calculated for all variables.

To compare players' perceptions across the four national teams, the non-parametric Kruskal–Wallis test was applied, as the data were ordinal and did not meet the assumptions of normal distribution. When statistically significant differences were identified, Dunn–Bonferroni post-hoc tests were conducted to determine pairwise differences between groups.

The level of statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

RESULTS

We assessed the internal consistency of the MSLS using Cronbach's alpha for pre- and post-match data (Table 1). Coefficients ranged from .42 to .94, reflecting varying levels of reliability across subscales.

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Table 1. Internal Consistency of the Multidimensional Scale of Leadership in Sport (MSLS)

Subscale	Cronbach's α (Pre)	Cronbach's α (Post)	Interpretation
Vision	0.83	0.71	Good-Acceptable
Inspiration	0.87	0.60	Excellent – Marginal
Instruction	0.81	0.42	Good-Poor
Individualization	0.91	0.80	Excellent – Good
Support	0.87	0.80	Excellent – Good
Positive Feedback	0.87	0.78	Excellent – Acceptable
Negative Feedback	0.91	0.94	Excellent(both)
Active Management	0.83	0.80	Good(both)
Passive Management	0.63	0.73	Marginal – Acceptable
Total Scale (36 items)	0.90	0.78	Excellent – Acceptable

Note. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated separately for pre-match and post-match responses ($n = 82$ players). Reliability values ranged from .42 (Instruction – post) to .94 (Negative Feedback – post), indicating acceptable to excellent internal consistency across the nine leadership dimensions. The total MSLS scale showed excellent reliability before the match ($\alpha = .90$) and acceptable reliability after the match ($\alpha = .78$). Lower reliability coefficients for some subscales, such as Instruction and Inspiration, may be explained by the young age of participants and differences between pre- and post-match assessments. These factors can influence how players interpret and respond to certain items.

Results showed statistically significant differences between players' perceptions in different countries on the following subscales:

- Vision: Players from Romania rated coaches' behavior significantly more positively than those from Montenegro, Greece, and Ireland, both before and after the competition.
- Inspiration: The highest scores were reported by Romanian and Irish players, while Montenegro recorded the lowest scores.
- Instruction: Romania scored significantly higher than the other countries.
- Individualization: Irish players reported the highest scores, while Montenegro players reported the lowest.
- Support: Romania achieved the highest scores, with significant differences compared to Montenegro and Greece.
- Positive feedback: The highest scores were recorded in Romania, followed by Ireland, while Montenegro had the lowest scores.
- Negative feedback: Montenegro recorded the highest scores, suggesting a more authoritarian leadership style. Romania and Ireland had lower scores.
- Active management: Differences were moderate, but Ireland had relatively higher scores.
- Passive management: Montenegro had the highest scores, indicating a more negative perception of coach involvement.

Overall, Romania and Ireland were rated positively on most leadership dimensions, while Montenegro was consistently associated with lower scores on constructive dimensions and higher scores on negative ones.

DISCUSSION

The results obtained in this study highlight significant differences between the perceptions of players from four U15 national teams (Romania, Montenegro, Greece, and Ireland) regarding the leadership behavior of their coaches. Data collection was conducted between February and April 2025, during two international tournaments involving the Romanian U15 national team, a context that should be considered when interpreting the findings. The analysis performed with the Kruskal-Wallis test, followed by Dunn-Bonferroni post-hoc tests, showed that these differences are present in most of the MSLS questionnaire subscales. Our findings are consistent with previous results showing that supportive coach behaviours enhance motivation, while controlling behaviours undermine it (Şenel et al., 2025).

Vision subscale

Players' perceptions of their coach's ability to provide clear direction and a shared vision for the team varied significantly between countries, both before and after the competition. For example, at both time points, players from Montenegro rated this dimension significantly lower than the other participants.

This result may suggest a difference in how the common goal is communicated and internalized within national teams, but caution is needed in drawing causal interpretations. Previous studies support the importance of this dimension in strengthening collective cohesion and effectiveness (Fransen et al., 2018).

Similarly, perceptions of the coach's leadership behavior can change over the course of the season depending on perceptions of team performance and goal achievement (Gomes et al., 2019).

Inspiration subscale

This dimension, associated with the coach's ability to motivate and enthuse the team, also showed significant variations between groups. Montenegro and Greece had lower scores compared to Ireland and Romania, before and after the competition. The differences may reflect both cultural leadership styles and different levels of inspirational communication practiced in the national context.

The literature shows that inspirational style is a central component of transformational leadership, with positive effects on athletes' engagement and satisfaction (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Mallett, 2010).

Instruction subscale

Perceptions of the clarity and effectiveness of the technical and tactical instructions provided by the coach varied between countries, especially before matches. In this case, the higher scores obtained by Ireland and Montenegro may suggest a more directive coaching style focused on task clarity.

Well-structured coaching styles correlate positively with collective effectiveness, especially in a competitive context (Høigaard et al., 2015).

Individualization subscale

This dimension proved to be one of the most differentiated between groups. The higher scores recorded by Montenegro and Ireland may reflect a greater concern for the individual needs of athletes. The perception of individualized support contributes to intrinsic motivation and long-term commitment (Horn, 1985).

Support subscale

Perceived support from the coach was higher in Ireland and Romania. These data can be related to the literature that emphasizes the role of social support in building coach-athlete relationships (Jowett, 2017; Erickson & Côté, 2016).

Subscales related to feedback and management

Positive feedback – High scores in Ireland and Romania suggest a leadership style more oriented towards positive reinforcement, which is supported by literature highlighting the beneficial effects of this style on performance (Chen & Rikli, 2003).

Negative feedback – Montenegro scored highest on this subscale, which could signal a more critical or directive communication style. Studies show that frequent negative feedback can affect intrinsic motivation (Horn, 1985).

Active Management – Ireland and Romania also report the best scores on this subscale, while Greece and Montenegro have lower scores.

Passive Management – Montenegro had the highest scores, which may suggest a lack of involvement on the part of coaches in preventing problems or correcting errors.

The results of our study highlighted significant differences between the perceptions of players from the four national teams (Romania, Montenegro, Greece, and Ireland), suggesting a possible influence of cultural and educational context on how coaches' leadership behavior is perceived. These differences

should not be interpreted as being exclusively determined by the environment of origin, but reflect, to a certain extent, the impact of social norms, collective values, and communication styles specific to each country.

In this regard, the literature provides a solid theoretical basis. For example, sport leadership is deeply shaped by the cultural context, as athletes' values and expectations can vary significantly from one culture to another (Liu et al, 2025). Similarly, two studies show that players' preferences for certain leadership styles are influenced not only by personal traits, but also by the educational and organizational environments in which they were formed (Horn, 1985; Fransen et al., 2018)

Coaches' personal values are not separate from their daily behaviors, but rather "manifest themselves through concrete actions in their relationship with athletes." This link between values and behavior is important in an educational environment geared toward the holistic development of young athletes (Høigaard et al., 2008).

In addition, the literature on coach development argues that reflective practice plays a central role in shaping an effective and adaptable leadership style (Bell, 2022; Nelson et al., 2006; Knowles et al., 2001). This approach requires coaches to critically evaluate their own actions, adapt to the needs of athletes, and align their behavior with personal and group values.

Therefore, we can assume that the cultural and educational environment influences both the behavior of coaches and how it is perceived by players. However, it should be noted that our study cannot demonstrate a direct causal relationship between these variables. Rather, the results provide a valuable exploratory basis for future cross-cultural research in the field of youth sports leadership.

In order to analyze the intercultural differences between the countries participating in this study, it is important to mention the works of Daniel David (2015) and Geert Hofstede (2010).

Daniel David (2015) describes Romanian culture as characterized by distrust of authority, avoidance of uncertainty, strong relational orientation, and family-based rather than institutional collectivism.

These characteristics can directly influence how Romanian players perceive the behavior of soccer coaches.

Therefore, leadership behaviors perceived as empathetic, supportive, and focused on interpersonal relationships are evaluated positively, while more authoritarian styles are viewed with restraint. In this sense, the results of this study suggest that Romanian players respond favorably to transformational behaviors, especially those related to individual support and positive feedback.

Furthermore, cultural differences between groups in other countries can be analyzed through the cultural model developed by Geert Hofstede.

According to Hofstede et al. (2010), Romania is characterized by uncertainty avoidance and a moderate distance from power, which may indicate a preference for leaders who provide clarity, structure, and support.

Ireland, in comparison with Romania, is defined by a high level of individualism and a low distance from power, which encourages a participatory leadership style characterized by constructive feedback and open communication. This is also reflected in the results of our study. The high scores obtained by the Irish coach in the subscales relating to support for players and the use of positive feedback highlight the cultural model preferred by the Irish people.

According to Hofstede et al. (2010), Greece, like Romania, has a high level of uncertainty avoidance, which can translate into a preference for clear rules and stability. For this reason, players may perceive transactional behaviors more favorably. Montenegro is not directly included in Hofstede's cultural analysis. Still, his theory mentions the people of the Western Balkans, who are characterized by rigid collectivism, a great distance from power, and low tolerance for ambiguity. These characteristics may explain the more authoritarian style perceived by the Montenegro coach and the lower level of appreciation in the dimensions of vision, inspiration, or support.

CONCLUSIONS

This study highlighted significant differences in the perceptions of U15 players from four European countries (Romania, Greece, Montenegro, and Ireland) regarding the leadership behavior of their coaches. The use of the MSLS questionnaire and the Kruskal-Wallis test allowed these differences to be identified within nine relevant subscales: vision, inspiration, instruction, individualization, support, positive feedback, negative feedback, and active management and passive management.

The results showed that, in most of the dimensions analyzed, players' perceptions varied significantly according to their nationality, suggesting a possible influence of cultural and educational context on how athletes perceive and interpret coaches' behaviors.

Another important conclusion is that players' perceptions are not static but can change depending on their experiences in competition. This was observed by comparing pre- and post-competition responses, which revealed some significant changes in the evaluation of the coach's behavior, especially in dimensions such as inspiration or positive feedback. Thus, the coach-player relationship should be

understood as dynamic, influenced by context and results, but also by how the coach communicates, supports, and manages the team.

Although the study did not directly assess the influence of the cultural environment through in-depth qualitative or transnational comparative methods, the differences observed between countries indicate that cultural variables and educational styles may contribute to how leadership behaviors are perceived and appreciated. This highlights the need for coach training programs that integrate components of cultural adaptability and critical reflection on one's own behaviors and values.

The results of this study, which was based on analyzing players' perceptions of the leadership behavior of coaches of U15 national teams in Ireland, Montenegro, Greece, and Romania, highlight significant differences that can be correlated with cultural, educational, and structural characteristics of each football context.

The Romanian coach stands out for his balanced and active leadership style, which is perceived positively by the players. The Montenegrin coach is in stark contrast, with a more rigid and authoritarian style, while Ireland and Greece are positioned between these extremes, with rather positive tendencies in the case of Ireland and neutral tendencies in the case of Greece.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the literature by providing a comparative perspective on how young football players perceive coaching leadership in different cultural contexts. The results may be useful for national federations, coach educators, and practitioners in high-performance sport who wish to improve the coach-player relationship and promote an effective leadership style tailored to the real needs of young athletes.

Limitations of the study

Subjective assessment of coaches' behavior

The data were based solely on the players' perceptions, without any external or observational assessment of the coaches' behaviors. Future studies may benefit from using observational tools to complement self-report measures, as suggested by comparative analyses of coach behaviour observation instruments (Ordeix et al., 2023).

Influence of the competitive context

The questionnaires were completed close to the time of the competition, which may have influenced the participants' perceptions, especially depending on the results or the atmosphere created during the tournament.

Sample size

Although acceptable for exploratory research, the number of participants is relatively limited to generalize conclusions to the entire population of U15 players or to each country involved.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed to the design, data collection, statistical analysis, and writing of the manuscript. All authors approved the final version of the paper.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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