



Athlete-coach relationships: impact on motivation, cohesion, and satisfaction in Injibara Ketema Football Club

Relaciones entre deportista y entrenador: impacto en la motivación, cohesión y satisfacción en el Injibara Ketema Football Club

Authors

Alemayehu Ayalew Wubale ¹
Minale Kassahun Lake ²
Abebaw Wubet Tiruneh ³

^{1,3} Injibara University (Ethiopia)
² Bahir Dar University (Ethiopia)

Corresponding author:
Alemayehu Ayalew Wubale
adiale2008@gmail.com

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Abstract

Introduction: The athlete-coach relationship acted as a critical determinant of psychological dynamics in sports, yet mixed-methods research integrating motivation and cohesion within non-Western environments remained scarce.

Objective: This study assessed how the quality of the athlete-coach relationship influenced player motivation, team cohesion, and athletic satisfaction within the Injibara Ketema Football Club.

Methodology: A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was employed where a complete census provided quantitative data via standardized relationship, motivation, and cohesion scales, while semi-structured interviews with coaching staff explained the quantitative trends.

Results: Quantitative findings revealed significant positive correlations between the athlete-coach bond and player satisfaction, team cohesion, and autonomous motivation. Descriptive analyses indicated high behavioral complementarity but moderate emotional closeness, showing that players maintained high intrinsic motivation despite lower competitive satisfaction scores.

Discussion: These findings contrasted with Western literature that often prioritizes emotional closeness, as this context demonstrated that functional complementarity, structured roles, and the pursuit of collective goals acted as the primary drivers of team stability and resilience, while role clarity served as a critical structural buffer.

Conclusions: Interventions aimed at optimizing team dynamics and athlete performance should prioritize the structured cultivation of functional role clarity and shared goals rather than the forced development of emotional proximity between coaches and players.

Keywords

Coach-athlete relationship; football; satisfaction; sports motivation; team cohesion.

Resumen

Introducción: la relación entre entrenador y deportista actuó como un determinante crítico de la dinámica psicológica en el deporte, aunque la investigación con métodos mixtos que integrara la motivación y la cohesión en entornos no occidentales resultó escasa.

Objetivo: este estudio evaluó cómo la calidad de la relación entre el entrenador y el deportista influyó en la motivación del jugador, la cohesión del equipo y la satisfacción deportiva dentro del club de fútbol Injibara Ketema.

Metodología: se empleó un diseño de métodos mixtos explicativo secuencial, donde un censo completo proporcionó datos cuantitativos mediante escalas estandarizadas de relación, motivación y cohesión, mientras que entrevistas semiestructuradas con el cuerpo técnico explicaron las tendencias cuantitativas.

Resultados: los resultados cuantitativos revelaron correlaciones positivas significativas entre el vínculo entrenador-deportista y la satisfacción del jugador, la cohesión del equipo y la motivación autónoma. los análisis descriptivos indicaron una alta complementariedad conductual pero una cercanía emocional moderada, mostrando que los jugadores mantuvieron una alta motivación intrínseca a pesar de puntuaciones más bajas en satisfacción competitiva.

Discusión: estos hallazgos contrastaron con la literatura occidental que a menudo prioriza la cercanía emocional, ya que este contexto demostró que la complementariedad funcional, los roles estructurados y la búsqueda de objetivos colectivos actuaron como los principales impulsores de la estabilidad y la resiliencia del equipo, mientras que la claridad de roles sirvió como un amortiguador estructural crítico.

Conclusiones: las intervenciones destinadas a optimizar la dinámica del equipo y el rendimiento de los deportistas deben priorizar el cultivo estructurado de la claridad de roles funcionales y los objetivos compartidos en lugar del desarrollo forzado de la proximidad emocional entre entrenadores y jugadores.

Palabras clave

Cohesión de equipo; fútbol; motivación deportiva; relación entrenador-deportista; satisfacción.



Introduction

The intricate athlete-coach relationship serves as a fundamental dynamic in competitive sport, establishing the coach as a primary social actor capable of shaping athletes' motivation and subsequent performance (Sulistiyo et al., 2024). Zhang and Rhim (2024) emphasize that interpersonal dynamics are essential to a team's psychological and social environment, significantly influencing member wellness, self-efficacy, and stress regulation. Furthermore, the perceived quality of these interactions serves as a consistent indicator of strong team cohesion and favorable developmental outcomes (McShan & Moore, 2023).

The 3+1Cs paradigm, which emphasizes the interdependence of emotions, cognitions, and behaviors, serves as a core framework in contemporary conceptualizations of the coach-athlete interaction (Mohd Kassim et al., 2024). These interpersonal dynamics are intrinsically linked to the fulfillment of essential psychological needs, as established by Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Sağ & Polat, 2026). Within this framework, coaches who provide a supportive environment nurture intrinsic motivation, the highest level of self-determined drive, thereby enhancing athletes' sense of self-endorsement while simultaneously reducing the risk of burnout (Cahyono et al., 2023). Furthermore, recent scholarship emphasizes that athlete satisfaction and coaching leadership behaviors are deeply modulated by the quality of this dyad (Jin et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2025).

Beyond individual motivation, the coach acts as the architect of team cohesion, often described as the invisible strength of unity (Karayel et al., 2024). This cohesion is profoundly influenced by the coach's ability to cultivate a positive team identity where members feel a sense of shared value (Maurice, 2025). Recent evidence concerning professional football environments suggests that social and task-related unities are critical precursors to both athletic performance and subjective player satisfaction (Liu et al., 2025). Despite the global consensus on these variables, a significant limitation remains: a lack of holistic studies exists assessing the nexus of motivation, cohesion, and satisfaction within a single competitive context, specifically within the unique cultural and socioeconomic landscape of Ethiopian football (Lachore et al., 2023; Bora et al., 2025). Historically, research often examines the athlete-coach relationship in isolation from team cohesion (Kim & Choi, 2024), leaving a critical gap in understanding their combined effect within non-Western professional clubs. The specific dynamics at the club level warrant a localized examination to move beyond generalizations rooted in Western sports models and to address regional organizational challenges (Sene et al., 2024).

Therefore, the objective of this study is to assess the influence of athlete-coach relationships on player motivation, team cohesion, and overall satisfaction within the Injibara Ketema Football Club. This study bridges the gap in Ethiopian football by using current psychological methods to generate data-driven insights. In doing so, it demonstrates the necessity of implementing specialized frameworks to guide targeted, evidence-based interventions within the Ethiopian sports sector.

Method

This research utilized an explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach to examine the topic (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023). This approach was selected to move beyond mere nominal description; the quantitative phase provided statistical trends regarding the athlete-coach bond and player outcomes, while the qualitative phase functioned as a structural lens to interpret the "why" and "how" behind these figures, ultimately providing a functional analysis of the Injibara Ketema Football Club's psychological architecture.

Research design

The research was characterized as quantitative and correlational in its primary phase, aimed at identifying the strength and direction of relationships between variables, followed by an explanatory qualitative phase. This design allowed for the triangulation of data, ensuring that the results were not only statistically significant but also contextually grounded in the professional realities of the club.

Participants and sampling

The study was conducted at the Injibara Ketema Football Club. A comprehensive census sampling technique was employed ($N=30$), comprising the entire active population of the organization: 25 players, 4 coaches (head and assistants), and 1 team leader. The justification for this census approach was rooted in the club's nature as a closed social system. In such environments, a census eliminated sampling error and provided the highest possible internal validity, as it captured the total social reality of the ecosystem rather than a subset.

Procedure and instrumentation

Data collection proceeded in two distinct phases following institutional approval. In the quantitative phase, players ($n=25$) completed a structured questionnaire adapting the Athlete-Coach Relationship Scale (ACRS) and the Sport Motivation Scale (SMS-6). To ensure linguistic and conceptual equivalence, the instruments were translated into Amharic and back-translated by independent language experts. All items utilized a five-point Likert scale to measure player perceptions. In the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the 4 coaches and the 1 team leader. These interviews were designed to uncover leadership philosophies and communication barriers that explained the levels of cohesion and satisfaction identified in the preceding quantitative phase.

Data analysis

The data analysis followed a dual-track process. Quantitatively, the reliability of the research instruments was rigorously confirmed via Cronbach's alpha, which yielded coefficients greater than 0.83, indicating high internal consistency. Statistical processing was performed using SPSS (Version 27), where descriptive statistics, including the mean and standard deviation (SD), were calculated. Pearson correlation coefficients (r) were employed to determine the strength and direction of the linear relationships, with the threshold for statistical significance set at $p \leq 0.05$. Parallel to this, the qualitative analysis involved subjecting interview data to a systematic thematic analysis to identify critical themes such as Role Clarity that provided a deeper causal explanation for the quantitative trends.

Ethical considerations

The tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki were strictly followed. The University Research Ethics Committee granted institutional ethical approval. All participants were provided with a detailed information sheet in Amharic and signed written informed consent forms before data collection. To ensure a blind review process and protect the professional standing of participants within the competitive club environment, alphanumeric coding was used for all data processing, and all electronic files were stored in password-protected environments accessible only to the primary research team.

Results

Demographic profile of participants

The study utilized a comprehensive census sampling technique to capture the entire social ecosystem of the Injibara Ketema Football Club ($N=30$). As detailed in Table 1, the participant pool was primarily composed of players (83.33%), aligning with the study's focus on athlete-centered outcomes. The inclusion of the coaching staff (13.33%) and management (3.33%) provided the necessary multi-perspective data to achieve the explanatory scope required for a mixed-methods analysis.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the respondents

Membership Role	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Players	25	83.33%
Coaches (Head Coach and Assistants)	4	13.33%
Team Leader	1	3.33%
Total Sample Size (N)	30	100.00%

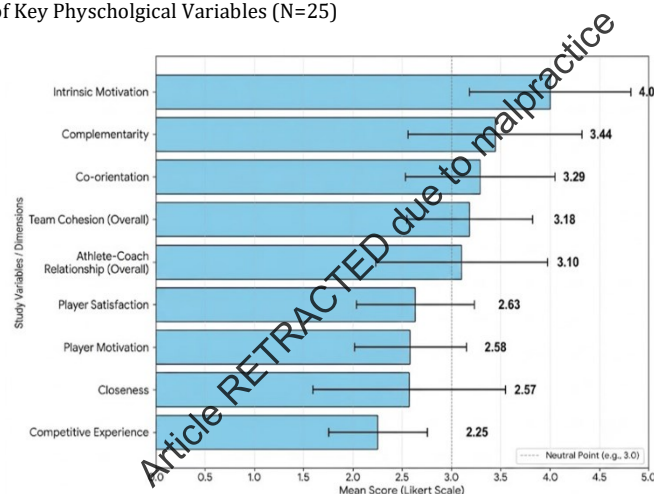
Descriptive analysis

The descriptive statistics displayed in Table 2 revealed a generally positive psychological climate. A significant analytical insight emerged from the sub-scale comparison: Complementarity (Role Acceptance) recorded the highest mean value ($M=3.44$), in contrast to Closeness, which showed a substantially lower mean ($M=2.57$). The high drive observed in Intrinsic Motivation ($M=4.00$, $SD=0.817$) paired with lower Competitive Experience satisfaction ($M=2.25$, $SD=0.500$) suggested a psychological resilience gap within the squad. Qualitative interviews with the coaching staff explained this divergence; coaches emphasized using Role Clarity as a structural buffer. By ensuring that every player accepted their specific tactical role (Complementarity), the staff maintained functional team unity even when competitive match outcomes were unfavorable.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for key study variables

Variables / Dimensions	Mean	Std. Deviation (SD)	Interpretation
Athlete-Coach Relationship (Overall)	3.10	0.871	Generally Positive
○ Closeness	2.57	0.976	Moderate
○ Co-orientation (Shared Goals)	3.29	0.756	High
○ Complementarity (Role Acceptance)	3.44	0.882	Strong
Player Motivation (Overall)	2.58	0.566	Moderate
○ Intrinsic Motivation	4.00	0.817	High Drive
Team Cohesion (Overall)	3.18	0.636	Generally Positive
Player Satisfaction (Overall)	2.63	0.599	Moderate
○ - Competitive Experience	2.25	0.500	Lower Satisfaction

Figure 1. Descriptive Statistics of Key Psychological Variables (N=25)



Correlational analysis

The Pearson correlation analysis (Table 3) highlighted the athlete-coach bond as the central anchor of the team's social architecture. The very strong correlation between the Athlete-Coach Relationship and Player Satisfaction ($r=0.671$, $p<0.001$) provided the most substantial evidence for the primary objective of this study. While player motivation did not correlate significantly with team cohesion ($p=0.067$), the qualitative data revealed that the athlete-coach bond acted as the primary mechanism through which social unity was transformed into subjective well-being. Specifically, the qualitative synthesis explained that because Closeness was only moderate, player satisfaction was not derived from personal friendship, but rather from the professional reliability and shared goals (Co-orientation) established by the coaching staff.

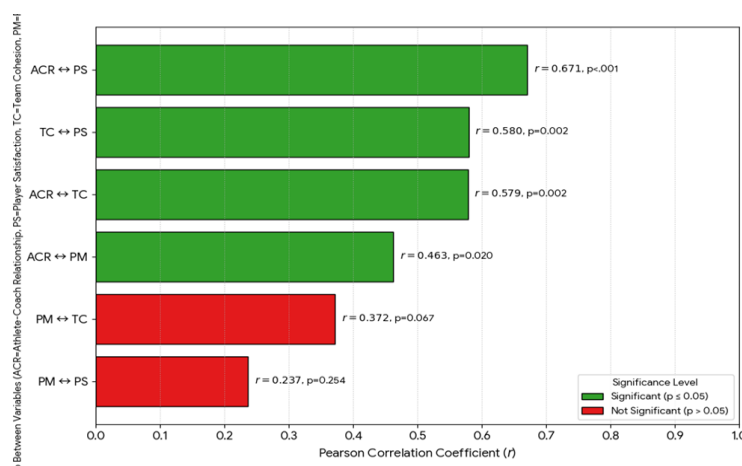
Table 3. Pearson correlation coefficients (r) between the athlete-coach relationship and player outcomes

Relationship	Pearson (r)	Sig. (2-tailed)	Significance Level
ACR with Player satisfaction	0.671	0.000	Very strong positive
ACR with Team cohesion	0.579	0.002	Strong positive
ACR with Player motivation	0.463	0.020	Significant positive
Team cohesion with Player satisfaction	0.580	0.002	Strong positive

Player motivation with Team Cohesion	0.372	0.067	Not significant
Player motivation with satisfaction	0.237	0.254	Not significant

Note: Significant differences, $p \leq 0.05$. Abbreviations: ACR = Athlete-Coach Relationship.

Figure 2. Pearson Correlation Coefficients (r) Between Study Variables ($N=25$)



Discussion

This study provides empirical evidence highlighting the extent to which the athlete-coach relationship influences the social and psychological environment of the Injibara Ketema Football Club. The analysis reveals a statistically significant positive correlation between the coach-athlete bond and all three measured variables: player motivation, team cohesion, and overall satisfaction (Davis, 2024). These findings are in line with broader international research in sports psychology, reinforcing the vital role that interpersonal dynamics play in supporting an athlete's general well-being (Gajardo et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2023; López-Gajardo & Díaz-García, 2023).

The critical point of this study's explanatory scope lies in the observed tension between Professional Role Acceptance (High Complementarity, $M=3.44$) and Emotional Connection (Moderate Closeness, $M=2.57$). While Western models often emphasize personal rapport as the primary driver of the bond, these results suggest a context-specific hierarchy in the Ethiopian professional environment. The relationship functions effectively through mutual clarity regarding objectives and responsibilities rather than deep personal intimacy. This distinction is vital for practitioners. Although the current findings align with the principles of Self-Determination Theory (Sag & Polat, 2026), they indicate that, within this particular context, the fundamental need for relatedness is primarily satisfied through the alignment of shared goals, or co-orientation and mutual respect for authority, rather than through Westernized concepts of personal friendship.

A strong correlation between the identified bond and player satisfaction ($r=0.671$) suggests that role clarity and professional support serve as the central mechanisms for bridging the gap between moderate satisfaction levels and high intrinsic drive (López-García et al., 2023). The correlation with team cohesion ($r=0.579$) reinforces the concept of the coach as the social architect of the team. In this role, the coach's ability to foster complementarity directly leads to a more coherent group, a finding echoed by recent football-specific research (Liu et al., 2025). By ensuring that every member feels a sense of shared value within the collective task, the coach stabilizes the team's social fabric even during competitive losses.

Recent scholarship supports this context-sensitive approach, demonstrating that leadership behavior must be modulated to effectively influence athlete satisfaction (Karayel et al., 2024). The results indicate that in the Ethiopian context, the coach's role extends beyond tactics into a form of professional mentorship that directly fuels intrinsic motivation ($M=4.00$). Within sports motivation research, the caliber of structured social support remains the most dependable indicator of self-determined drive (Lachore et al., 2023).

In summary, prioritizing a high-quality coach-athlete bond is essential for successful team dynamics in the Ethiopian context. This study moves beyond isolated variable measurements seen in historic research, such as the trends criticized by Jiahao and Jing (2024), to provide an integrated, holistic view. The findings reinforce that mutual respect and role clarity are the fundamental levers that coaches use to optimize the social ecosystem of the club and address specific regional organizational and structural challenges effectively (Sentie et al., 2024).

Limitations and future research

While this study successfully captures the social dynamics of the club through a census approach, the sample size remains a limitation. Future research benefits from larger, multi-club samples to enhance the generalizability of these findings. Additionally, expanding the scope to include a comparative analysis based on sex provides deeper insight into whether these coach-athlete relationship dynamics vary across gender, further refining the understanding of the psychological and social architecture in professional football environments.

Conclusions

This study confirmed that the athlete-coach relationship significantly predicted player motivation, team cohesion, and satisfaction at Injibara Ketema Football Club. Complementarity and co-orientation emerged as the primary mechanisms for maintaining group unity, with role clarity and shared goals fostering intrinsic motivation despite challenging competitive outcomes. By prioritizing professional respect and clear expectations over Western-centric models of personal intimacy, this research provided a localized framework for optimizing performance in the Ethiopian sports context. Future studies should expand to multi-club samples and longitudinal designs to further validate these findings and evaluate long-term athletic development.

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Declaration of AI and AI-assisted technologies

The authors used ChatGPT, Gemini, and Grammarly solely for linguistic translation from Spanish to English and mechanical grammar polishing. The authors reviewed, edited, and verified all text. The core conceptualization, research design, data analysis, interpretations, and conclusions are original and the sole responsibility of the human authors.

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Author Affiliations

A.A.W & A.W.T: Department of Sport Science, College of Natural and Computational Science, Injibara University, Injibara, Ethiopia.

M.K.L: Department of Sport Science, Sport Academy, Bahir Dar University, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia.



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Authors and translators' details:

Alemayehu Ayalew Wubale
Minale Kassahun Lake
Abebaw Wubet Tiruneh

adiale2008@gmail.com
minalekasa@gmail.com
abebawwubet1@gmail.com

Author and Translator
Author
Author

Article RETRACTED due to malpractice