

Interpersonal Communication and the Perceived Performance of Adolescent Athletes: Does Peer Relationship Matter?

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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of this study was to examine the impact of interpersonal communication on the perceived performance of adolescent athletes.

Method: The present research employed a descriptive-correlational design, both in terms of its applied objective and data collection method, which was field-based. The study population consisted of 300 adolescent athletes. The sampling method was purposive and accessible. Four interpersonal relationship questionnaires and one perceived sports performance questionnaire were utilized in this study. For the analysis of the research hypotheses, the structural equation modeling approach using Smart PLS was employed.

Results: The findings of the research indicated that coach-athlete, parent-athlete, and teammate-athlete (peer) relationships significantly influence sports performance. However, the impact of the coach-parent relationship on sports performance was not significant.

Conclusion: In general, creating a friendly and close atmosphere between coach and athlete, as well as establishing respect, trust, and support between coach and parents, active parental involvement and support in athletes' sports affairs, and receiving support and enhancing self-esteem from teammates can contribute to the improvement of athletes' performance and success.

Keywords: Interpersonal communication, coach, parent, athlete, performance.

Introduction

Humans, as social beings, always strive to be in communication with each other. If someone never establishes connections with others, they will become isolated from their own community. The dynamics of human life are shaped by the vitality of communication. The success of communication depends on the extent to which it achieves its intended meaning, which refers to the level of communication that a sender intends for meaningful communication. When both parties, the sender and the receiver, possess good skills in sending and receiving messages, effective communication can be established (Subarkah, 2018). In fact, communication is a process through which the sender prepares messages in verbal, non-verbal, and para-verbal forms and sends them to the receiver for their perception and understanding (Shajie et al., 2014).

Communication comes in various forms, including intrapersonal, interpersonal, small groups, organizational, collective, and multidimensional communication. In sports communication, all these forms of communication are important. The most important type of communication in the field of sports is interpersonal communication (Onwumechili, 2017). McCornack (2013) defines interpersonal communication as a dynamic form of establishing communication between two individuals, in which messages are exchanged and significantly influence their thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and relationships. Interpersonal relationships between coaches and athletes, coaches and parents, and parents and athletes are among the most important and fundamental topics in the realm of sports communication. The triadic relationship of coach/parent/athlete is likened to a pyramid, which McPherson (1978) named the urgent need for better understanding of interpersonal dynamics in the 'Little League Triangle' (quoted in Hellstedt, 1987), where each vertex of the triangle, through establishing proper

relationships, can contribute to the success of the athlete.

One key relationship and two essential elements in the realm of sports are the relationship between coaches and athletes. This relationship is important because the interpersonal relationship between a coach and an athlete is a significant factor in the success of an athlete. This relationship plays a crucial role in the social and athletic development of young athletes (Philippe et al., 2011). Jowett (2005) introduced the coach-athlete relationship as the foundation and cornerstone of the coaching process. According to him, the nature of this relationship determines the motivation, satisfaction, self-confidence, and performance of the athlete. Jowett and Ntoumanis (2004), in an attempt to systematically examine the nature of the coach-athlete relationship, used the interpersonal components of closeness, commitment, and complementarity to reflect the emotions, perceptions, and behaviors of coaches and athletes. In fact, the coach-athlete relationship is composed of three factors: closeness, commitment, and complementarity.

Many research studies have been conducted in the field of interpersonal communication between coaches and athletes. Studies such as Spink (1991), Bloom (1996), Nakamura (1996) (quoted in Onwumechili, 2018) and Olympiou et al (2008). (2009) confirm the relationship between such communication and athletic success. Jowett and Cockerill (2002) admitted the nature of this relationship determines the motivation, satisfaction, self-confidence, and performance of the athlete. Philippe et al. (2011) found that the coach-athlete relationship is beneficial for the athlete's personal growth, improved motivation, mental strength, and sports progress. Shajie et al. (2014) concluded that the quality of friendship can play a significant role in solving communication-related issues between coaches and players. Mansouri and Zartoshtian (2016) found that the presence of appropriate relationships between

coaches and athletes increases the motivation for athletic success and provides a foundation for improving athletes' performance and success.

Coaches often face challenges when working with the parents of athletes. Communication problems, conflicts, and sometimes power struggles over who controls the child's training are common issues (Hellstedt, 1987). Interpersonal communication between coaches and parents may be uncommon in some countries, but it is an important topic in interpersonal relationships in sports in several Western countries. In the West, parents have significant involvement in selecting their children's sports and continue to be involved until the child reaches adolescence. In Western cultures where parental involvement is highly valued, interpersonal communication with coaches also plays a role in the success of athletes (quoted in Onwumechili, 2018). McLean (2007) reported that most studies related to coach-parent interpersonal relationships have focused on disruptive aspects of such relationships, including negative behaviors and parental abuse. Hellstedt (1987) divided parental involvement in sports activities into three categories: no involvement, supportive and balanced involvement, and excessive involvement, in which cases the coach should strive to establish effective communication with the parents. Overall, Hellstedt recommends creating an open communication space while setting boundaries that parents should not cross and sharing information on how parents can support their child's growth in sports. Smoll et al. (2011) who focused on strengthening relationships between coaches and parents in their study, stated that coaches and parents play a significant role in determining participation outcomes in youth sports, which can enhance physical skills, character development, and social competence, and bring families closer together. Horn et al. (2020) reported that there are weak relationships, distrust, and a lack of

shared goals between parents and coaches, which can jeopardize child development. O'Donnell et al. (2022) has highlighted parent and coach relationships are developed and shaped by broader aspects of society and culture, and beyond social exchanges with one another. This type of relationship is developed and maintained by broader discourses, historical and cultural features, and linguistic forms that reinforce the meaning and significance of parent-coach interactions.

Since the 1990s, researches indicate that parental involvement is crucial for a child's performance. Studies on favorable parental behaviors, such as support, encouragement, financial and performance investment, and controlling sports behaviors, have been conducted (Onwumechili, 2018). The parent-athlete relationship is one of the most challenging relationships in sports. Successful relationships between parents and athletes have led to athlete success, but many athletes have suffered setbacks due to poor relationships with their parents. Delforge and Scanff (2006) refers to various factors as the player's age and personality, family type, and parents' social background. They mentioned these factors as "desirable behaviors," including support and encouragement, motivation enhancement, downplaying the importance of competition and failure, attending to the child's needs, allowing the child to participate in decision-making, and maintaining a positive relationship. Sport psychology research by Fredricks and Eccles (2004) has highlighted the significant role of prominent adults such as parents and coaches in the social and motivational development of young participants. Strand et al. (2021) demonstrated in their study that parents of these participants always attend their sports events, encourage and support their athletes, but do not exert pressure on them regarding how they perform.

Affirmation or support from a broader peer group (such as classmates, teammates)

influences positive and negative emotions and motivational processes (Harter, 1999). Peers play a significant role in the lives of adolescents, and their influence and opinions have a noticeable impact on adolescent development (Hartup, 1999; Smith, 1999). Sports provide an important context for interaction with peers, assuming it as a means to learn cooperation with teammates, negotiate, and provide solutions to ethical dilemmas, develop self-discipline, demonstrate courage, and learn virtues such as fairness, team loyalty, perseverance, and teamwork (Shields & Bredemeier, 1995). Although parents have a significant influence on interpersonal experiences and psychological development during childhood, peers hold special importance for youth development during childhood and beyond. Sullivan asserts that friendship and peer acceptance are prominent structures in peer relationships (Sullivan, 1993). Ullrich-French and Smith (2006) in their study on young football players, used the qualitative understanding of child relationships, the quality of friendships and peer acceptance related to the football context, as well as motivational outcomes related to football (such as enjoyment, stress, perceived competence). Butler and Strand (2021) found that peer relationships have an influence on the motivation of young athletes, the level of burnout, and athletes' behavior.

Based on the mentioned researches findings, it could be acknowledged that factors such as coach-athlete relationship, coach-parent relationship, parent-athlete relationship, and teammate-athlete relationship are among the most vital factors for success in the field of sports. The failure to utilize appropriate interpersonal behaviors in sports relationships can lead to team inefficiency, despite significant costs and resource allocation. A review of the background reveals that, considering the highly significant importance of interpersonal communication in sports and its role in the success and improvement of athletes'

performance, extensive studies have been conducted in recent years in both domestic and international research to better understand the nature of interpersonal relationships in sports. However, so far, no research has examined all four types of relationships (coach-athlete, coach-parent, parent-athlete, and peer-athlete) in a single study. Therefore, in this study, the interpersonal communication between coach, parent, teammate, and athlete will be investigated. In addition, the impact of these relationships on athletes' performance has received less attention in previous studies; thus, in this research, the effect of interpersonal communication on athletes' performance would be examined.

Materials and Methods

The statistical population of the study consists of adolescent athletes in Kashan city, selected from participants in both team and individual sports. The age range of the participants is between 13 and 17 years old. The sample size for this research is 300 adolescent athletes who have achieved first to third place in provincial, national, or international competitions. To collecting data, Coach-Athlete Relationship Questionnaire by Jowett and Ntoumanis (2004) (13 questions in 3 dimensions: closeness and intimacy, commitment, complementarity), Coach-Parent Questionnaire (developed by researchers) (30 questions in 8 dimensions: Trust, Communication, Support, Teamwork, Respect, Motivation, Demotivation, and Excessive involvement), Parent-Athlete Questionnaire by Lee and MacLean (1997) (18 questions in 3 dimensions: Directive behavior, Definition and praise, and Active participation), Peer-Athlete Questionnaire by Weiss and Smith (1999) (22 questions in 6 dimensions: Support and enhancement of self-esteem, Loyalty and intimacy, Commonalities, Pleasant companionship and play, Conflict resolution, and Conflict), and Perceived Sports Performance Questionnaire (developed by researchers) (10 questions) were used. The

Likert five-point scale was used to respond to the questionnaires, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). 10 experts in the physical management field and 3 adolescent athletes judged the face and content validity of the scale. Descriptive statistics were used to evaluate the demographic characteristics and

data distribution using the Smirnov-Kolmogorov test. The data analysis was performed using the SmartPLS version 3 and SPSS version 25 software. The status of convergent reliability and validity coefficients are depicted in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Convergent Reliability and Validity Coefficients of Research Variables

AVE		Cronbach's Alpha		Composite Reliability		Dimensions	Factors
0.706		0.859		0.905		Closeness	Coach athlete relationship
0.625	0.53	0.799	0.89	0.869	0.91	Co-orientation	
1.000		1.000		1.000		Complementary	
0.588		0.936		0.95		Support	Parent coach relationship
1.000	0.54	1.000	0.94	1.000	0.945	Respect	
0.733		0.878		0.916		trust	
0.736		0.916		0.932			
0.757	0.56	0.893	0.94	0.926	0.95	Guided behavior compliment Active participation	Athlete parents relationship
0.736		0.821		0.893			
0.830		0.796		0.907		Conflict Resolution	
0.666		0.832		0.888		Companionship	Athlete's teammate relationship
1.000	0.50	1.000	0.91	1.000	0.92	Things in Common and Loyalty	
0.738		0.822		0.894		Intimacy	
0.815		0.774		0.898		Self-Esteem	
						Enhancement and Supportiveness	
	0.55		0.89		0.91		Performance

Table 2. Comparison Matrix of Extracted Mean Variance of Correlation Coefficients of Structures (Divergent Validity)

Fornell & Larcker	A.P	A-P.R	A-T.R	C-A.R	Com	Comp	C.R	Perf	G.B	L & I	P-C.R	Sup,n	Supp	T.C	Clos	Co-O	Comp	Resp	Trust
A.P	.85																		
A-P.R	.83	.75																	
A-T.R	.35	.42	.71																
C-A.R	.31	.39	.50	.73															
Com	.31	.42	.90	.44	.82														

Comp	.2	.3	.3	.6	.3	.9													
	7	0	5	6	1	8													
C.R	.2	.3	.7	.4	.7	.3	.9												
	9	4	9	4	0	4	1												
Perf	.3	.3	.4	.2	.3	.1	.2	.7											
	2	4	1	8	7	5	2	4											
G.B	.6	.9	.3	.3	.3	.2	.3	.2	.7										
	9	5	9	7	9	8	1	9	9										
L&I	.3	.3	.8	.3	.5	.2	.4	.3	.3	.8									
	4	3	1	8	9	9	7	6	1	6									
P-C.R	.5	.5	.5	.6	.5	.4	.4	.2	.5	.4	.7								
	3	8	4	4	1	6	7	9	1	1	4								
Sup.n	.2	.2	.8	.4	.6	.2	.5	.3	.2	.6	.4	.9							
	1	8	1	3	3	9	4	3	7	4	3	0							
Supp	.5	.6	.5	.6	.5	.4	.4	.3	.5	.4	.9	.4	.7						
	5	1	3	1	0	5	6	1	4	1	8	2	7						
T.C	.2	.2	.6	.2	.5	.1	.4	.3	.2	.4	.2	.3	.2	.9					
	2	6	2	8	1	7	4	5	2	7	8	6	8	8					
Clos	.2	.3	.4	.9	.3	.4	.3	.2	.3	.3	.5	.3	.5	.2	.8				
	9	5	4	1	8	8	7	2	3	6	4	7	1	6	4				
Co-O	.2	.3	.4	.9	.4	.5	.4	.3	.3	.3	.6	.4	.6	.2	.6	.7			
	8	5	6	1	2	4	2	2	3	2	2	1	0	4	9	9			
Comp	.6	.8	.3	.3	.4	.2	.3	.3	.7	.2	.5	.2	.5	.2	.3	.3	.8		
	9	9	9	6	1	6	3	2	5	5	4	5	7	6	1	4	7		
Resp	.2	.2	.4	.4	.4	.3	.4	.1	.3	.3	.6	.3	.5	.1	.3	.3	.2	.9	
	0	8	5	0	4	2	0	4	0	0	3	9	8	9	2	9	2	8	
Trust	.4	.4	.4	.5	.3	.3	.3	.1	.3	.3	.8	.3	.7	.2	.5	.5	.3	.4	.8
	0	1	2	9	9	8	6	8	4	4	6	2	5	2	2	6	9	7	6

After ensuring the face and content validity of the items by experts, an Exploratory and Confirmatory Factor Analysis was run to investigate the construct validity for the coach-parent questionnaire KMO=0.90, Bartlett's $\chi^2=5919.43$ and perceived sports performance questionnaire KMO=0.90, Bartlett's $\chi^2=1362.84$ were statistically significant at $p < 0.001$ which indicates model fit indices of the data. Using the Varimax method in the factor analysis set, they explained 67.42% of the total variance for the coach-parent questionnaire and 51.34% of the total variance for the perceived sports performance questionnaire.

Results

After analyzing the data, it was initially determined that 133 participants (44.3%) were female, and 167 (55.7%) were male. 131 individuals (43.7%) participated in individual sports, while 169 individuals (56.3%) were involved in team sports. The average sports experience was 7.2 ± 0.91 years. Out of the athletes, 241 individuals (80.3%) had achieved championship titles, with an average championship experience of 20.1 ± 39.8 years.

Table 3, presents the R-squared values for the latent variables within the model. Other criterion for model fit is the overall model fit, which is indicated by the Goodness of Fit.

Table 3. Values of the Goodness of Fit (GOF) Criterion for the Overall Model Fit

Structures	Coach athlete	Parent coach	Athlete parents	Teammate	Performance
Communality values	0.53	0.62	0.56	0.47	0.55
R Squares	0.22				
GOF	0.34				

Based on the R-squared values presented in Table 3, the variable "performance" falls within the range of moderate determination coefficient and the calculated value for the goodness of fit in the research, it shows that the overall model

fit is "strongly" confirmed. The final criterion that needs to be examined is the measure of the model's predictive power or the Stoner-Geisser or Q2 index.

Table 4. Values of the Q2 for endogenous variables of the research model

Factors	1-SSE/SSO
Coach athlete relationship	0.40
Parent coach relationship	0.46
Athlete parents relationship	0.48
Athlete's teammate relationship	0.40
Performance	0.42

According to the obtained results, values higher than 0.15 for Q2 indicate that the model has

relatively good predictive power.

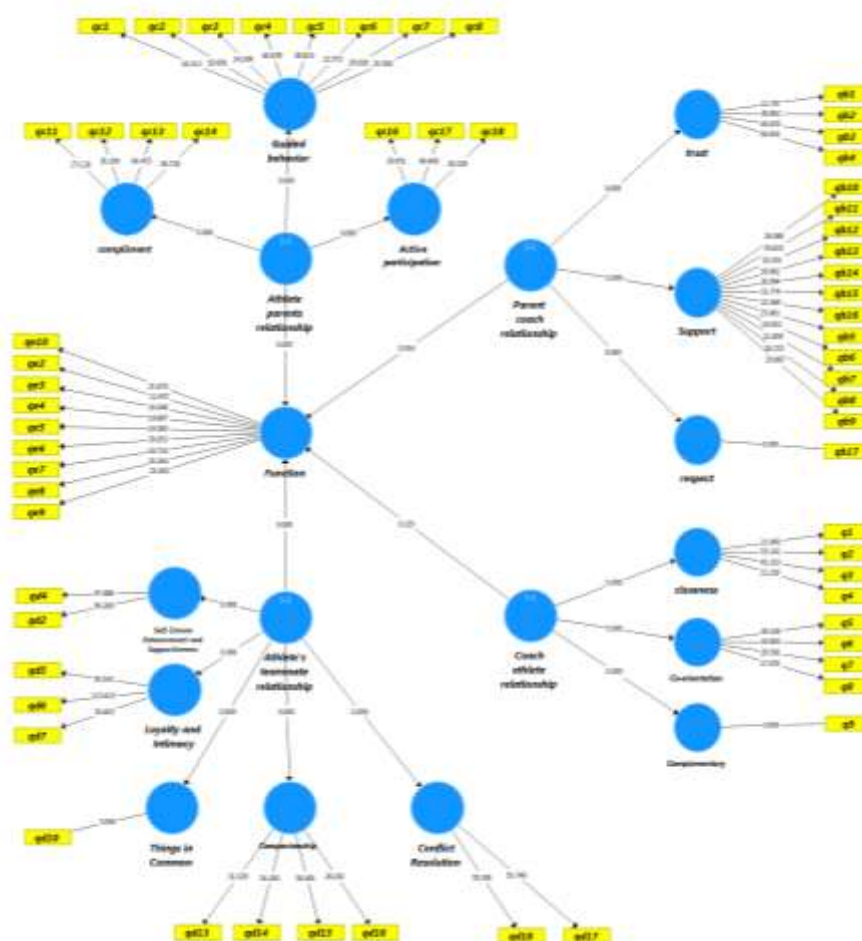


Figure 1. Significant Coefficients of the Main Research Hypotheses

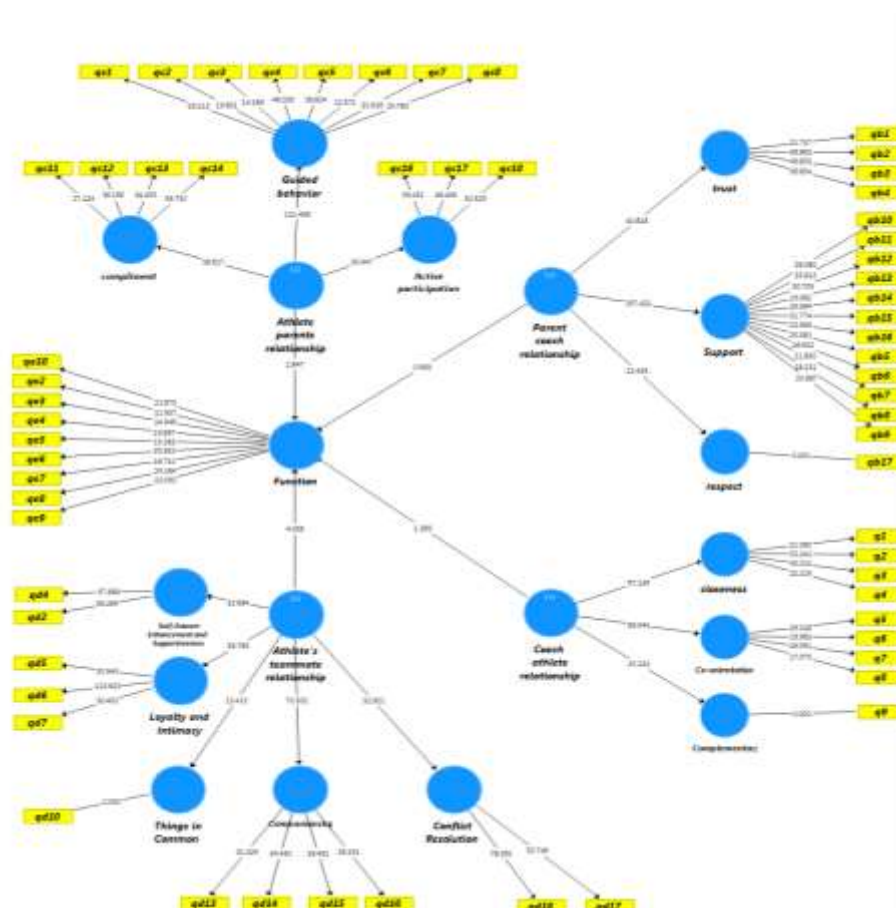


Figure 2. Standard Coefficients of the Research Mode

The evaluation of research hypotheses is conducted by examining the paths of the structural model, where each path represents

one hypothesis. The evaluation of research hypotheses is presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Evaluation of Research Hypotheses and Results

Hypothesis	The path of hypotheses	significant	Path coefficient	Result
The first hypothesis	The path of coach-athlete relationship on sports performance	1.99	0.04	null hypothesis was rejected
The second hypothesis	The path of coach-parent relationship on sports performance	0.66	0.50	null hypothesis was conformed
The third hypothesis	Path of parent-athlete relationship on sports performance	3.06	0.003	null hypothesis was rejected
The fourth hypothesis	The path of teammate-athlete relationship on sports performance	4.58	0.001	null hypothesis was rejected

Discussion

The analysis of the research findings demonstrated that the coach-athlete relationship has a significant effect on athletes' performance with a path coefficient of 0.04. Athletes and coaches develop participation or a professional relationship and spend a significant amount of time together to ultimately achieve success in performance. This relationship has a significant impact on the training process and athletes' performance results (Coakley, 1990). In conclusion, the research findings confirm that the coach-athlete relationship has a significant impact on athletes' performance. The results are consistent with previous studies, emphasizing the importance of the coach-athlete relationship in enhancing motivation, satisfaction, self-confidence, and overall sports performance. It seems that athletes require a specialized coach in their respective field to oversee their technical performance, provide proper training and movement corrections, as well as foster motivation and enthusiasm, maintaining it throughout their athletic journey. It is evident that all sports champions acknowledge one of the most critical factors in their success as their coach, and this relationship consistently leads to the improvement and enhancement of athletes' performance.

Furthermore, the analysis of the research findings showed that the Coach-parent relationship does not have a significant effect on athletes' performance with a path coefficient of 0.50. This finding contradicts the studies conducted by Smoll et al. (2011). The possible reason for this discrepancy might be the differences in the study population compared to other research, the age of the athletes, the existence of cultural and educational differences, or even the type of family. It can also be stated that Coach-parent relationships are an essential aspect of interpersonal relationships in sports in most Western countries. Parents participate in choosing their children's sports and follow up on all their

matters until adolescence. However, in this research, it appears that this interpersonal relationship has not been widely accepted in our society, unlike Western countries, and coaches and parents do not have a strong inclination towards establishing two-way communication. Therefore, the results of this section may not be meaningful in the statistical population and the mentioned samples. On the other hand, during the developmental years (8 to 16 years old), a good Coach-parent relationship enhances the success of a program, while weak relationships can undermine it (Hellstedt, 1987). According to Smoll et al. (2011) a positive relationship between the coach and parents only occurs with two-way communication. This suggests that since the family plays a supportive and nurturing role, while the coach plays an instructional and motivational role in the athlete's success, it can be inferred that parents put in their effort at home while coaches work with athletes in the sports environment, and any interference in each other's domain can have an adverse effect on the athlete's success. It seems that in this statistical population, parents establish a balanced relationship with their coaches and are less involved in coaching matters and decisions, which aligns with the optimal coach-parent relationship based on previous research.

Also, the analysis of the research findings showed that Parent-athlete relationships have a significant effect on athletes' performance with a path coefficient of 0.003. Strand et al. (2021) stated that parents have a fundamental influence on children's participation in sports. Parental involvement indicates commitment to the child, positive awareness of the child's growth, and reinforcement of self-confidence, which can impact children's motivation, enjoyment, and long-term participation in youth sports activities (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004). It appears that every athlete spends the majority of their time with their family, and it is expected that a significant portion of an individual's behavior within the family stems

from family conversations and overall family behaviors. As the results of this section demonstrate the significance of this relationship, it can be acknowledged that the family plays a crucial role in shaping a child's interest in sports and subsequently determining their specific sports discipline. In this process, creating interest, enthusiasm, and envisioning a successful future are clear responsibilities of the family, and their absence creates difficulties for the athlete. Therefore, intimate and friendly behavior or hostility within the family environment, as well as attention and importance given to the athlete's sports path, including the environment, coach, growth, and development, all play a significant role in the success and improvement of the athlete's performance. Based on the research findings, it can be acknowledged that athletes greatly appreciate their parents' encouragement, praise, and understanding of their emotions during competitions, even after performing poorly. They derive a lot of enjoyment from being recognized and praised for their efforts, and this support leads to better performance in future competitions.

Finally, the analysis of the research findings demonstrated that Peer-athlete relationships have a significant impact on athletes' performance with a path coefficient of 0.001. Youth who report having more peer presence in their lives indicate that they engage in more physical activity (Salvy et al., 2008). The influence of peers in late childhood and adolescence has been identified as one of the most influential factors affecting motivation levels. Some studies indicate that children under the age of 13 are more influenced by their parents, while adolescents are more influenced by their peers (Van Der Horst et al., 2007). Peers play a primary role in the lives of adolescents, and the influence of peers and their opinions on adolescents' development is significant (Hartup, 1999; Smith, 1999). During this period, peers provide emotional support and friendship. Youth sports play an important

role in the growth and development of meaningful peer connections (Dworkin et al., 2003). Additionally, Sullivan's (1993) interpersonal theory can be utilized to better understand young athletes, as it suggests that parents have a significant influence on inter-individual experiences and psychological growth during childhood, while peers hold special importance for the growth of youth during childhood and beyond. Athletes in their path to success observe teammates who possess different talents, abilities, and performances, and this connection can greatly assist individuals in achieving success. Furthermore, athletes, in addition to the impactful relationships they have with their coaches and parents, receive the most influence from their teammates. Companionship, along with competition both on and off the sports field, can greatly contribute to an athlete's success. Given the high level of significance in this relationship compared to other relationships, it seems that our adolescents currently attribute higher importance and value to their relationships with peers in sports compared to relationships with adults. This may be due to the generational gap between adolescents and parents or coaches, leading adolescents to have a greater inclination to establish relationships with peers and teammates in sports. From the component of commonalities, which was the least important component of this relationship, it can be inferred that even with minimal commonalities in terms of thoughts, interests, and even the absence of shared values, athletes and peers still showed interest in supporting and guiding their teammates in order to perform their skills and techniques better.

The results of the findings and the discussion in this section indicate that each of the relationships plays an important and influential role in the growth, performance improvement, and success of athletes. However, this impact can be seen at its highest level when we observe a mutual relationship between the facets of interpersonal communication. This

means that athletes simultaneously and harmoniously require communication with their coach, parents, teammates, and appropriate interaction between the coach and parents. This coordination in relationships and its tangible manifestation for the athlete can lead to positive developments on the path to their success. Additionally, the results emphasize the influential role of each relationship, noting that some relationships have a greater impact while others have a lesser role. The athlete's relationship with their teammates can play the most significant role because, on one hand, cooperation and collaboration during training and competitions, and on the other hand, camaraderie amidst competition both on and off the sports field, can propel the athlete towards greater success. Furthermore, parents, with their valuable presence as the primary supporters and motivators, help maintain enthusiasm and drive in their children, keeping them on the path to success and contributing to their achievements. The coach-athlete relationship, despite the coach's technical and tactical abilities, is mentioned as the third influential facet in the athlete's success because the athlete's primary motivating factor in various fields is the coach and their success. The interaction and calculated relationship between the coach and parents, although having a lesser impact compared to other factors, constitutes the fourth facet of these relationships. Although communication between coaches and parents is crucial for the overall development of young athletes. Coaches need to establish clear channels of communication to keep parents informed about their child's progress, training plans, and any concerns that may arise. Open and transparent communication between coaches and parents fosters trust, understanding, and cooperation, which are essential for the holistic development of young athletes.

Conclusion

Furthermore, communication between coaches

and parents is crucial for the overall development of young athletes. Coaches need to establish clear channels of communication to keep parents informed about their child's progress, training plans, and any concerns that may arise. Open and transparent communication between coaches and parents fosters trust, understanding, and cooperation, which are essential for the holistic development of young athletes. In summary, effective communication is a cornerstone of success in sports. It facilitates teamwork, fosters positive relationships, and ensures that all team members are on the same page. Whether it's between athletes, coaches, or parents, communication plays a vital role in creating an environment that promotes growth, development, and achievement in the world of sports.

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