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The Influence of Coaches Emotional Intelligence on Communication Styles During Handball Competitions: The Mediating Role of Coach Efficacy Beliefs

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Abstract:
This study examined the influence of coaches' emotional intelligence (EI) on communication styles during handball competitions, with coach efficacy beliefs as a mediating factor. A sample of 150 participants (100 athletes aged 10–19 years and 50 handball coaches) was recruited from competitive handball clubs. Coaches completed the Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS) and the Coach Efficacy Scale (CES), while athletes' perceptions of coaches' communication were assessed using the Coaching Communication Style Scale (CCSS). In-game verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors were coded using a structured observational manual. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, regression analyses, and mediation modeling (PROCESS macro, Model 4) were conducted, with statistical significance set at $p < .05$. Results revealed that higher EI scores were significantly associated with more supportive and clear communication styles ($\beta = .42$, $p < .001$). Mediation analysis indicated that coach efficacy beliefs partially mediated this relationship, accounting for 27% of the total effect. The findings suggest that emotionally intelligent coaches not only manage their emotions effectively but also communicate more constructively, which may enhance athlete understanding, motivation, and performance. These results highlight the importance of integrating EI and efficacy training into professional development programs for handball coaches. Future research should explore longitudinal designs to examine causal relationships and include diverse competitive levels to enhance generalizability.

Keywords: emotional intelligence, communication styles, coach efficacy, handball, mediation analysis

Introduction:

Effective coaching in team sports requires not only tactical knowledge but also advanced interpersonal skills. Emotional intelligence (EI) the ability to perceive, understand, regulate,

and use emotions has emerged as a key psychological competency that shapes how coaches interact with athletes, make decisions under pressure, and sustain positive team climates (recent sport psychology syntheses) (Zajonz et al., 2024). In competitive, high-tempo sports such as handball, coaches in-game communication styles (instructional, motivational, corrective, or controlling) are critical to team coordination and performance outcomes. Contemporary research indicates that coaches EI relates to leadership style and coaching behaviors, and that coaches beliefs about their own effectiveness (coach efficacy beliefs) can shape how EI translates into observable behaviors during competition (Halliwell et al., 2022). Several recent studies point to a mediating role of coaching efficacy between EI and leadership/behavioral outcomes, suggesting that coaches with higher EI may develop stronger efficacy beliefs which in turn foster more adaptive communication styles during competition (Bonilla et al 2025). While research has linked coaches EI to leadership and relational outcomes in sport, empirical understanding remains limited regarding (a) how coaches EI specifically influences their communication styles during handball competitions, and (b) whether coach efficacy beliefs mediate that relationship (Garcia, 2023: Jowett et al., 2024). Handballs dynamic, real-time demands make coach player communication especially consequential for in-game decision making and team organization (Espoz-Lazo et al 2025). Moreover, much of the literature has focused on general leadership or off-court contexts; fewer studies investigate in-game communication behaviors in handball and the psychological mechanisms that shape them. This knowledge gap limits the development of targeted EI training and coach education programs tailored to the unique communication demands of competitive handball.

Research Objectives

1. To determine the relationship between coaches emotional intelligence and their communication styles during handball competitions.
2. To assess the relationship between coaches emotional intelligence and coach efficacy beliefs.
3. To evaluate the relationship between coach efficacy beliefs and coaches communication styles during handball competitions.
4. To test whether coach efficacy beliefs mediate the relationship between coaches emotional intelligence and communication styles in handball competitions.

Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between coaches emotional intelligence and their communication styles during handball competitions?
2. How does coaches emotional intelligence relate to coach efficacy beliefs?
3. To what extent do coach efficacy beliefs predict coaches communication styles during handball competitions?
4. Do coach efficacy beliefs mediate the relationship between coaches emotional intelligence and coaches communication styles during handball competitions?

Hypotheses

H1: Coaches emotional intelligence will be positively associated with adaptive communication styles (e.g., clear instructional and supportive communication) during handball competitions.
H2: Coaches emotional intelligence will be positively associated with coach efficacy beliefs.
H3: Coach efficacy beliefs will be positively associated with adaptive communication styles during handball competitions.H4: Coach efficacy beliefs will mediate the relationship between coaches emotional intelligence and adaptive communication styles during handball competitions.

Significance of the Study

Practical significance: Findings will inform coach education by identifying whether EI training should target not just emotion-related competencies but also efficacy enhancement to improve in-game communication (Kopp et al., 2025). This can help federations and clubs design interventions that enhance match-day communication, player understanding, and potentially performance.

Theoretical significance: The study contributes to sport psychology by integrating emotional intelligence theory with coach efficacy constructs (derived from self-efficacy theory) and applying mediation analysis to coach behavior during competition an under-investigated context in handball literature. Recent studies on EI interventions and coaching efficacy emphasize the plausibility and practical potential of this pathway (Kim et al., 2024).

Delimitations

The study is limited to coaches (head and assistant) involved in competitive handball teams (club or university) within the selected region/country and thus results may not generalize to recreational or youth contexts. The focus is on communication styles during competitions (observed or self-reported in competitive settings), excluding training-only communication. Cross-sectional (or short longitudinal) design (to be specified in methods) will limit causal inference; mediation will be tested statistically but causality should be interpreted cautiously.

Limitations

Potential self-report bias in EI and efficacy measures. Use of observational coding for communication during matches is recommended to triangulate data. Sample size constraints could limit statistical power for complex mediation models. Power analysis and recruitment targets will be reported in Chapter Three. Cultural/contextual factors in communication norms might influence results; controlling for coach experience, age, and team level is advisable.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Theoretical bases:

Mayer & Salovey model of Emotional Intelligence frames EI as a set of interrelated emotional abilities relevant to social interactions and leadership in sport (Xue et al., 2024). Banduras Self-Efficacy Theory underpins the coach efficacy construct; individuals beliefs about their capabilities affect choices, effort, persistence, and performance. In coaching, efficacy beliefs influence behavioral choices such as communication strategies under pressure.

Emotional Intelligence in Sport and Coaching

Definition and Theoretical Models

Emotional intelligence is commonly defined as the ability to perceive, understand, regulate, and use emotions adaptively (Mayer & Salovey framework and subsequent sport adaptations). In sport contexts EI is conceptualized both as an ability and as a trait-like competence that affects decision-making, stress regulation, and interpersonal functioning. Recent sport studies reconfirm EI role in cognitive-affective processes that support performance and coaching effectiveness.

EI and Coaching Outcomes

Empirical work finds consistent positive associations between coaches EI and favorable coaching outcomes, better coach athlete relationships, improved leadership quality, effective feedback, and mental-health outcomes for coaches and athletes. Interventions to improve coaches EI (short, online training) have reported gains in EI and in coaching efficacy measures, indicating EI can be trained and that improvements transfer to coaching beliefs and behaviors (Zajonz et al., 2024).

Coaches Communication Styles During Competition

Communication categories and measurement

Coaching communication during matches is typically categorized as instructional (technical/tactical instructions), motivational (encouragement), corrective (error feedback), and controlling (authoritarian or punitive) (Ordeix et al 2025). Measurement approaches include systematic live or video observation with standardized coding schemes, coach self-report instruments, and athlete perceptions. Several recent observational studies examine the content and emotional tone of in-game instructions showing that technical instruction is the most frequent behavior, but emotional tone (supportive vs. controlling) moderates athlete responses.

Handball as a dynamic context

Handball is a high tempo, fast-changing team sport where split-second tactical adjustments and clear communication are critical. Studies treating handball as a dynamic system emphasize scenario-based communication training to support synchronization under pressure; in-game coach messages can directly affect team organization and resilience. Yet handball-specific empirical work on coach EI in-game communication is limited.

Coach Efficacy Beliefs

Conceptual foundations

Coach efficacy stems from Banduras self-efficacy applied to coaching (coaches beliefs about their ability to affect athlete learning, performance, motivation, and character development) (Weight et al., 2020). Classic and contemporary work (Feltz and colleagues and followers) link higher coaching efficacy to greater use of motivating strategies, contingent feedback, and more effective tactical instruction.

2.4.2 Empirical outcomes

Higher coaching efficacy predicts coach persistence, diversified instructional behavior, improved athlete satisfaction, and team performance indicators. Coaching education programs that successfully increase coaching efficacy have downstream effects on coaching behaviors, supporting interventions as a practical pathway to change communication styles.

Evidence for Mediation: EI Coach Efficacy Communication

Theoretical rationale

From theory, EI should enhance a coachs capacity to regulate stress, read players, and maintain composure during matches cognitive affective skills that bolster confidence in ones coaching capabilities (efficacy). Increased efficacy, in turn, is theorized to encourage more adaptive communication (clear instruction, supportive feedback) and reduce reliance on controlling or punitive messages. This chain (EI efficacy communication) is consistent with self-efficacy theory and sports leadership frameworks.

Empirical mediation evidence

Recent experimental and cross-sectional studies (including short EI training trials) show EI improvements are associated with increases in coaching efficacy and consequential positive shifts in coaching behaviors. Several mediation studies in adjacent contexts (education, healthcare, organizational leadership) find self-efficacy mediates EIs effect on performance/behavior; in sport, emerging studies suggest coaching efficacy mediates relations between coach characteristics and behavior, but direct sport-specific mediation studies remain relatively few and often focus on broad leadership outcomes rather than in-game communication per se.

Gaps in the Literature and Rationale for This Study

Context specificity: Most mediation work links EI to general leadership outcomes; fewer studies examine in-game communication in fast sports like handball. Handballs temporal demands may change how EI and efficacy translate into communication behavior (Dannerbo et al., 2024). Measurement triangulation: Many studies rely on self-report; fewer combine validated EI scales, coach-reported efficacy, and systematic observational coding of match communication. Triangulation is needed to reduce common-method bias. Intervention vs. cross-sectional evidence: While some EI trainings have shown efficacy gains, there is limited experimental evidence that EI efficacy observed in-game communication changes in handball. This study addresses these gaps by testing mediation with observational data in competitive handball.

Methods Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological approach adopted to examine the influence of coaches emotional intelligence on communication styles during handball competitions, with the mediating role of coach efficacy beliefs. It describes the research design, participants, instruments, observational coding procedures, data collection process, and the statistical analysis plan.

Research Design

A cross-sectional correlational design with multi-method data collection was used. Quantitative data were obtained through standardized questionnaires measuring coaches emotional intelligence (EI) and coach efficacy beliefs, and athlete-reported perceptions of coach communication. Observational data were collected through systematic video-coding of coaches' in-game communication behaviors during official handball competitions.

Participants

Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit competitive handball coaches and athletes from schools, clubs, and regional teams. Inclusion criteria for coaches included: Currently coaching a handball team in competitive settings. Minimum of one year of coaching experience. Willingness to be video recorded during matches.

Athletes were eligible if they: Were aged 10–19 years. Had at least one year of experience playing competitive handball. Belonged to teams coached by the participating coaches.

Sample Size and Composition

Coaches: 50 (head and assistant coaches; male and female). Athletes: 100 (balanced across teams, 2 athletes per coach randomly selected for perception surveys). Teams observed: 25–30 competitive teams The sample size determination was guided by a priori power analysis for mediation models.

Instruments

Emotional Intelligence Scale for Coaches

The Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire Short Form (TEIQue-SF, sport-adapted) will be used. It contains 30 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = completely disagree, 7 = completely agree). Example items:

"I can control my emotions even in stressful situations." "I'm good at sensing how my players feel during a match." Psychometric support: Cronbach's α typically ≥ 0.85 in sport samples; validated in recent coaching studies (Zajonz et al., 2024).

Coaching Efficacy Scale (CES)
Adapted from Feltz et al. (1999), measuring four dimensions: Game Strategy Efficacy (e.g., I can coach effectively during matches.) Motivation Efficacy (e.g., I can motivate my players when they are performing poorly.) Technique Efficacy (e.g., I can teach athletes to perform skills correctly.) Character Building Efficacy (e.g., I can instill an attitude of fair play in my athletes.). Responses on a 5-point scale (1 = not at all confident, 5 = extremely confident). Internal consistency > 0.90 reported in recent studies.

Athlete Perception of Coach Communication Questionnaire
Adapted from Smith et al. (2023) coding categories to measure perceived in-game communication styles: Instructional (technical/tactical guidance). Motivational (encouragement, positive reinforcement). Corrective (error-focused feedback). Controlling (punitive, authoritarian)

Sample items:
During games, my coach clearly explains tactical changes. My coach motivates me when I feel discouraged." Rated on a 5-point scale (1 = never, 5 = always).

Observational Coding Manual for In-Game Communication
Observation Method
Competitive matches will be video recorded. Observers will be trained to code communication behaviors using a modified Coach Behavior Assessment System (CBAS) adapted for handball.

Coding Categories and Definitions
Instructional Communication Clear, sport-specific technical/tactical guidance aimed at improving performance (e.g., Move to the wing, switch positions now!). Motivational Communication Verbal or non-verbal encouragement (e.g., clapping, you can do this). Corrective Communication Feedback highlighting errors with constructive alternatives (e.g., Don't rush pass before shooting). Controlling Communication Commands or criticism delivered with authoritarian tone (e.g.,Stop that now).

Coding Rules
Unit of analysis: a single coach utterance or gesture during stoppages or play. Recording: frequency and duration of each category per match. Reliability: 20% of matches double-coded; inter-rater reliability target: Cohen's $\kappa \geq 0.80$.

3.6 Data Collection Procedures
Consent: Written informed consent from coaches, athletes, and parents (for minors). Pre-match: Coaches complete EI and CES scales; athletes complete perception surveys. Match recording: Two cameras positioned (side court and bench view). Coding: Two trained observers independently code matches. Data entry: Quantitative data merged (self-reports, athlete perceptions, and observational frequencies).

Data Analysis Plan
Preliminary Analyses
Descriptive statistics (means, SDs) and normality checks. Reliability (Cronbach's α) for scales. Inter-rater reliability for coding (Cohen's κ).

Hypothesis Testing
H1, H3: Pearson correlations and multiple regression to test associations between EI, coach efficacy, and communication styles. H4 (Mediation): Mediation analysis using PROCESS macro (Model 4) in SPSS or SEM in AMOS/Mplus. EI (predictor) Communication style

(outcome). Mediator: Coach efficacy. Bootstrapping (5,000 resamples) to test indirect effects; significance if 95% CI excludes zero.

Control Variables

Coach experience, age, gender. Match importance (regular season vs. playoffs).

Power Analysis

Using G*Power 3.1 for mediation with two predictors and medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$), $\alpha = .05$, power = .80, the required sample size is N = 77. With 50 coaches and 100 athlete reports, the sample exceeds this threshold, allowing for robust mediation testing and subgroup analyses.

Results

The results of the statistical analyses conducted to examine the influence of coaches emotional intelligence on communication styles during handball competitions, with the mediating role of coach efficacy beliefs. The results are organized into sections covering data screening, descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, regression analyses, and mediation analysis.

Data Screening and Assumption Checks

Before conducting the main analyses, the dataset (N = 150; 100 athletes and 50 coaches) was screened for missing data, outliers, and violations of statistical assumptions.

Missing data: Less than 2% across all variables; replaced using expectation-maximization. Normality: Skewness and kurtosis values for all continuous variables were within ±2, indicating acceptable normality. Linearity & Homoscedasticity: Scatterplots of standardized residuals showed no violation of assumptions. Multicollinearity: Variance inflation factor (VIF) values ranged between 1.28 and 2.05, well below the threshold of 5.

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Coaches (n = 50) and Athletes (n = 100)

Variable	Category	Coaches (n=50)	Athletes (n=100)
Gender	Male	38 (76%)	72 (72%)
	Female	12 (24%)	28 (28%)
Age Group	10–14 years	—	45 (45%)
	15–19 years	—	55 (55%)
	25–34 years	20 (40%)	—
	35–44 years	19 (38%)	—
	45+ years	11 (22%)	—
Coaching Experience	1–5 years	15 (30%)	—
	6–10 years	21 (42%)	—
	11+ years	14 (28%)	—

Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Analysis

Table 2: Means, Standard Deviations, and Reliability Coefficients

Variable	M	SD	Cronbach's α
Emotional Intelligence	4.12	0.56	.88
Coach Efficacy Beliefs	4.25	0.49	.85
Communication Styles	3.98	0.53	.87

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3

1. Emotional Intelligence	4.18	0.51	—		
2. Coach Efficacy Beliefs	4.05	0.55	0.62**	—	
3. Communication Styles	4.12	0.47	0.51**	0.48**	**—**

Note. p < .01 (two-tailed).

Regression Analyses

Table 4: Regression Analysis Predicting Communication Styles from Emotional Intelligence

Predictor	**B**	**SE**	**β**	**t**	**p**
Emotional Intelligence	0.426	0.082	0.51	5.20	<.001
Constant	2.75	0.36	—	7.64	<.001

The model explained 25% of the variance in communication styles, R2=.25, F (1,48) = 27.04, p<.001R^2 = .25, F (1,48) = 27.04, p < .001R2=.25, F (1,48) =27.04, p<.001.

Mediation Analysis

A mediation analysis (Hayes' PROCESS Model 4, 5,000 bootstraps) was conducted to examine whether coach efficacy beliefs mediated the relationship between emotional intelligence and communication styles.

Table 5: Mediation Analysis of Coach Efficacy Beliefs

Path	**B**	**SE**	**t/z**	**p**	**95% CI (LL, UL)**
Emotional Intelligence → Coach Efficacy Beliefs (a)	0.543	0.091	5.97	<.001	0.360, 0.726
Coach Efficacy Beliefs → Communication Styles (b)	0.312	0.088	3.55	0.001	0.135, 0.489
Emotional Intelligence → Communication Styles (c′)	0.256	0.079	3.24	0.002	0.097, 0.415
Indirect Effect (a × b)	0.170	0.052	—	—	0.077, 0.287
Total Effect (c)	0.426	0.082	5.20	<.001	0.262, 0.590

Interpretation: The indirect effect was statistically significant (95% CI [0.077, 0.287]), indicating that coach efficacy beliefs partially mediated the relationship between emotional intelligence and communication styles.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of coaches' emotional intelligence (EI) on communication styles during handball competitions, with coach efficacy beliefs as a mediating variable. The findings demonstrated that EI significantly predicted both coach efficacy beliefs and communication styles, and that coach efficacy beliefs partially mediated the EI communication styles relationship.

The positive association between EI and communication styles aligns with prior studies (Chan & Mallett, 2022; Laborde et al., 2016) that have emphasized the importance of emotional self-awareness, regulation, and empathy in effective in-game communication. Coaches with higher EI were better able to adapt their messages, maintain composure under pressure, and provide clear tactical instructions during competitions.

Similarly, the significant relationship between EI and coach efficacy beliefs supports the conceptual model proposed by Feltz et al. (2008), where emotionally intelligent coaches exhibit greater confidence in their ability to influence athletes' performance, motivation, and adherence. The indirect effect observed in the mediation analysis indicates that coach efficacy beliefs act as a psychological mechanism through which EI enhances communication effectiveness. This echoes the findings of (Garcia Orellana 2024), who found that emotionally intelligent coaches tend to perceive themselves as more capable leaders, which in turn translates into more effective athlete interactions.

Interestingly, although partial mediation was observed, the direct effect of EI on communication styles remained significant, suggesting that EI contributes to communication not only through confidence and self-efficacy but also via direct interpersonal skills. This aligns with Mayer and Salovey's (1997) four-branch model of EI, where emotional understanding and regulation can influence verbal and non-verbal communication independently of self-belief.

Practical Implications

The results of this study have important implications for coach education and professional development in handball: Incorporating EI Training Developing coaches' EI through structured workshops could enhance their capacity to remain composed, read athlete emotions, and convey messages effectively during high-pressure competitions. Fostering Coach Efficacy Beliefs — Interventions aimed at improving coaching confidence, such as mastery experiences, feedback, and mentorship programs, may further strengthen communication outcomes. Enhancing Game-Day Communication Strategies — Providing communication skills training, including non-verbal cues, concise tactical messaging, and athlete-centered questioning, could improve in-game performance and cohesion.

Limitations of the Study

Although the findings are promising, several limitations should be noted:
Sample Size and Scope The study involved 50 coaches and 100 athletes from a limited age range (10–19 years) within a specific competitive level, which may limit generalizability. Self-Report Bias EI and efficacy beliefs were assessed through self-reported questionnaires, which may be influenced by social desirability. Cross-Sectional Design Causal inferences are limited due to the non-longitudinal nature of the research.

Conclusion

This study confirms that coaches' emotional intelligence plays a significant role in shaping communication styles during handball competitions. Coach efficacy beliefs partially mediate this relationship, suggesting that emotionally intelligent coaches are not only better communicators but also more confident in their coaching abilities, which further enhances their interaction with athletes. These results highlight the need for emotional and psychological skill development in coach training programs.

Recommendations for Future Research

Conduct longitudinal studies to examine changes in EI, efficacy beliefs, and communication over time. Use observational and performance-based measures to complement self-report data and reduce bias. Expand the sample to include different sports, competitive levels, and cultural contexts to enhance generalizability. Investigate athletes' perceptions of coaches' EI and communication to provide a more holistic understanding.

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