

# COACH HUMOUR STYLES AND ATHLETE COMMITMENT: A RELATIONAL MEDIATION MODEL IN TEAM SPORT CONTEXTS

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## Abstract:

Humour, often viewed as a light-hearted communicative tool, carries important relational significance in elite sport. Affiliative humour has the potential to build trust and cohesion, whereas aggressive humour may threaten relational safety and undermine athlete engagement. While humour has been widely studied in organizational psychology, its implications in sport coaching remain underexplored. This study examined how athletes' perceptions of coaches' humour styles influence motivational commitment through the mediating mechanisms of relationship quality—closeness, commitment, and complementarity—guided by Humour Styles Theory, the 3+1 Cs Model, and the Sport Commitment Model. Participants were 341 athletes (aged 18-35) from five team sports in Türkiye. Measures assessed perceptions of coaches' affiliative and aggressive humour, coach-athlete relationship quality, and two forms of sport commitment: enthusiastic and constraint commitment. Regression-based mediation analyses tested indirect effects of humour styles on commitment through relational dimensions. Results indicated that affiliative humour was positively associated with enthusiastic commitment, fully mediated by athletes' perceptions of commitment and complementarity, but not by closeness. In contrast, aggressive humour predicted lower levels of enthusiastic commitment, both directly and indirectly through weakened perceptions of commitment and complementarity. Neither humour style showed significant associations with constraint commitment. These findings suggest that affiliative humour strengthens athletes' motivation by reinforcing task-relevant relational dynamics, whereas aggressive humour undermines them. In performance-driven contexts, functional alignment may be more influential than emotional closeness. Coach education programmes should therefore encourage the intentional use of affiliative humour as a relational strategy to sustain athlete engagement and long-term commitment.

**Keywords:** *coach-athlete relationship, humour styles, sport commitment, constraint commitment, enthusiastic commitment*

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## Introduction

In recent decades, humour has garnered increasing scholarly attention as a communicative device within interpersonal and organizational settings. Rather than serving solely as a source of entertainment, humour has come to be understood as a relational mechanism that shapes social dynamics, emotional climates, and interactional outcomes (Dwyer, 1991; Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003). Within the domain of organizational psychology, affiliative or constructive humour—particularly when employed by those in leadership roles—has been consistently linked to enhanced team cohesion, greater employee engagement, and more effective leadership outcomes (Kong, Cooper, & Sosik, 2019; Mesmer-Magnus, Glew, & Viswesvaran, 2012; Romero & Pescosolido, 2008). Leaders

who use affiliative humour tend to be perceived as more approachable, trustworthy, and motivational (Decker & Rotondo, 2001; Pundt & Herrmann, 2015). In contrast, the use of aggressive humour, often characterized by sarcasm or ridicule, has been associated with reduced communication quality, increased interpersonal discomfort, and erosion of trust (Cann, Cann, & Jordan, 2016; Kuiper, Grimshaw, Leite, & Kirsh, 2004).

Martin's Humour Styles Theory offers a foundational framework for understanding these divergent functions of humour (Martin et al., 2003). According to this model, affiliative humour facilitates social bonding and helps to alleviate tension, while aggressive humour may foster relational strain and psychological distance. These dynamics become especially salient in hierarchical relation-

ships, such as those between coaches and athletes, where communication is laden with both emotional and motivational significance (Cooper, Kong, & Crossley, 2018; Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Within the athletic domain, where relational trust, group cohesion, and effective communication are prerequisites for performance and well-being, the strategic use of humour can be especially consequential. Pack, Hemmings, Winter, and Arvinen-Barrow (2019) describe how sport psychology consultants conceptualize humour as a vital interpersonal tool—“another skill in your arsenal”—with the capacity to reduce stress and strengthen rapport. Building upon this understanding, Høigaard, Haugen, Johansen, and Giske (2017) reported that youth soccer players’ sense of team identity was positively shaped by coaches who incorporated humour into their interactions—particularly when combined with constructive and supportive feedback. These findings underscore the relational function of humour in sport settings, suggesting that, beyond its expressive qualities, humour may serve as a nuanced communicative tool that reinforces social bonds and strengthens athlete integration within the team environment. Collectively, such findings suggest that humour, when used appropriately and intentionally, can function not only as an expressive behaviour but also as a subtle yet powerful relational signal within coach-athlete dynamics.

Although humour has been widely studied within broader leadership literature, its empirical examination in sport coaching contexts remains notably underdeveloped. Coaching, much like leadership, is inherently relational and emotionally nuanced—it requires the ability to motivate, regulate emotions, and sustain long-term athlete engagement. Humour, depending on its style, intent, and interpretation, can either facilitate or disrupt these relational processes. While some sport psychology research has explored the effects of coach humour on athletes’ satisfaction, emotional regulation, or burnout (Gustafsson, 2017; Jowett, 2017; Vendl, Alvarado-Alvarez, & Euwema, 2024) studies investigating its role in shaping athlete commitment or the quality of the coach-athlete relationship remain scarce. This gap persists despite compelling theoretical grounds suggesting that humour may serve as a relational mechanism within coaching interactions.

Jowett’s 3+1 Cs Model provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the coach-athlete relationship, delineating three core dimensions: closeness, referring to mutual trust, emotional intimacy, and respect; commitment, reflecting a shared intention to sustain the relationship over time; and complementarity, denoting the degree of cooperative interactions and reciprocal role behaviours (Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004). These relational components collectively shape athletes’

perceptions of their coaches and influence how they engage during both training and competition. Recent empirical findings further underscore the predictive value of these dimensions—not only for athletic performance but also for athletes’ psychological well-being, resilience against burnout, and overall team functioning (Alexander-Urquhart, Bentzen, Kenttä, & Bloomet, 2024; Davis, Jowett, & Tafvelin, 2019; Philippe & Seiler, 2006).

High-quality coach-athlete relationships, marked by high levels of closeness, commitment, and complementarity, have consistently been associated with increased athletes’ motivation, improved psychological well-being, and sustained long-term engagement in sport contexts (Gu, Peng, Du, Fang, Guan, He, & Jiang, 2023; Scanlan, Russell, Wilson, & Scanlan, 2003). Given that motivation in sport is significantly shaped by relational dynamics (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003), it is critical to examine how specific communicative behaviours—such as coach humour—interact with relationship quality to influence motivational outcomes. In this context, the Sport Commitment Model provides a valuable theoretical framework by distinguishing between two distinct forms of commitment: enthusiastic commitment, rooted in intrinsic enjoyment and personal satisfaction, and constraint commitment, arising from perceived obligations, external pressures, or limited alternatives (Scanlan, Chow, Sousa, Scanlan, & Knifsend, 2016). Recent evidence further indicates that these two commitment forms differ in sensitivity to coaching climates and relational cues (O’Neil & Hodge, 2020), emphasizing the importance of integrating interpersonal factors into contemporary sport motivation models.

Affiliative humour inherently fosters interpersonal warmth, mutual respect, and psychological safety—core conditions essential for establishing high-quality coach-athlete relationships (Pundt & Herrmann, 2015). When athletes perceive their coach’s humour as inclusive and supportive rather than evaluative or controlling, they are likely to interpret it as indicative of relational investment, potentially increasing their sense of trust and enhancing role clarity (Alexander-Urquhart, et al., 2024). Within this relational framework, two specific dimensions—commitment and complementarity—are particularly salient. Commitment reflects athletes’ belief in the enduring value of the coach-athlete partnership, whereas complementarity refers to mutual responsiveness and effective collaboration in pursuing shared goals (Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004). These relational dimensions may act as key mediators, facilitating the positive impact of affiliative humour on enthusiastic commitment, which represents a deeper form of sport engagement driven primarily by intrinsic motivation and emotional connection (Davis, et al., 2019).

Conversely, aggressive humour often conveys controlling, dismissive, or ridiculing messages, which can undermine athletes' trust and disrupt the cooperative dynamics of the relationship (Kuiper, et al., 2004). In such cases, athletes are likely to feel diminished respect and reduced support from their coaches, negatively affecting their perceptions of relational commitment and complementarity. Consequently, aggressive humour may hinder enthusiastic commitment due to its detrimental influence on relational quality. While emotional closeness has often been highlighted in coach-athlete interactions, its mediating role in this context may be more limited, particularly in performance-driven environments where task-alignment tends to outweigh affective bonding (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003).

Within this framework, examining how humour styles influence relational processes in sport becomes essential for both advancing theoretical understanding and informing applied coaching strategies.

Although existing organizational research extensively documents the effects of humour, the coach-athlete relationship offers a distinct interpersonal context characterized by emotional intensity, performance pressures, and sustained relational interactions. Investigating how humour functions specifically within this sport-related setting may yield critical insights that can inform athlete-centred coaching practices. Therefore, the current study seeks to advance this emerging line of inquiry by proposing a relational mediation model. In this model, perceived coach humour style is conceptualized as an important communicative antecedent of sport commitment, with the quality of the coach-athlete relationship serving as a potential mediating mechanism.

Drawing on data collected from team sport athletes aged 18 to 35 in Türkiye, the present study integrates three theoretically robust frameworks: Martin's Humour Styles Theory (Martin,

et al., 2003), Jowett's 3+1 Cs Model of the coach-athlete relationship (Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004), and Scanlan's Sport Commitment Model (Scanlan, et al., 2016). Employing a mediation-based analytical approach, this research conceptualizes humour not as a marginal or incidental behaviour, but rather as a meaningful relational signal with the potential to shape athletes' motivational states. The findings aim to underscore affiliative humour as an under-recognized yet promising interpersonal strategy for fostering athlete engagement and promoting sustained commitment to sport participation.

## Hypotheses

- H1. Coaches' affiliative humour will be positively associated with athletes' perceived coach-athlete relationship quality.
- H2. Coaches' aggressive humour will be negatively associated with athletes' perceived coach-athlete relationship quality.
- H3. Coach-athlete relationship quality will be positively associated with athletes' sport commitment.
- H4. The relationship between coaches' affiliative humour and athletes' sport commitment will be mediated by the perceived quality of the coach-athlete relationship.
- H5. The relationship between coaches' aggressive humour and athletes' sport commitment will be mediated by the perceived quality of the coach-athlete relationship.

## Materials and methods

### Participants

The study included 341 licensed athletes (191 male [56.0%], 150 female [44.0%]) who were actively competing in Türkiye's first- and second-division leagues of football, basketball, volleyball, handball, and water polo during the 2024–2025 competitive season. All participants were officially registered with their respective national sport feder-

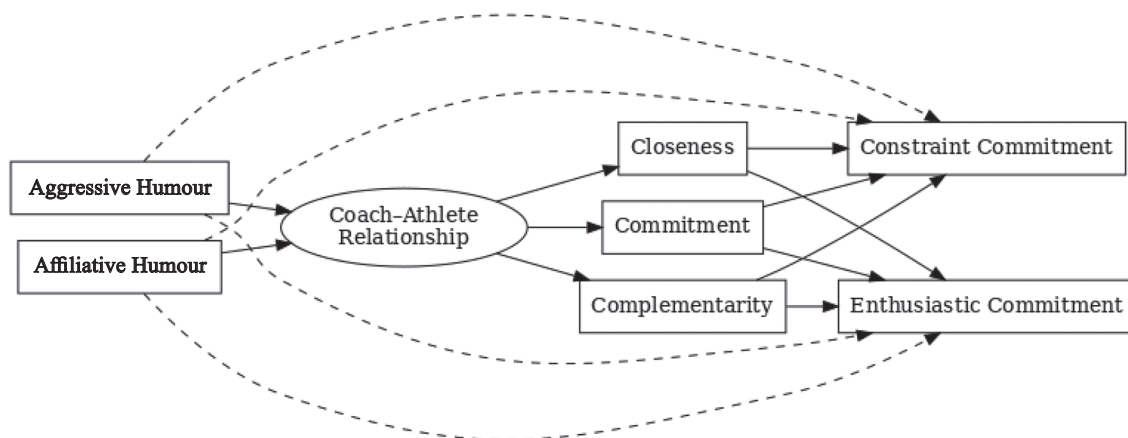


Figure 1. Conceptual mediation model of coach humour styles, relational quality, and athlete commitment.

ations and trained regularly within organized club structures.

*A priori* power analysis conducted using G\*Power version 3.1.9.4 (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009) determined that a minimum of 312 participants would be needed to detect a small effect size ( $f^2 = 0.05$ ) at 95% statistical power and a significance level of  $\alpha = .05$ . To mitigate potential loss due to missing or invalid responses, the target sample size was set at 350, resulting in 341 complete and analysable data sets.

The majority of participants ( $n = 242$ ; 71.0%) fell within the 18-23 age range, while 80 participants (23.5%) were aged 24-29 and 19 participants (5.6%) were aged 30-35. For analytical purposes, age was coded into three categories: 1 = 18-23, 2 = 24-29, and 3 = 30-35 ( $M = 1.35$ ,  $SD = 0.58$ ).

In terms of sport representation, basketball ( $n = 111$ ; 32.6%) and football ( $n = 104$ ; 30.5%) constituted the largest groups, followed by volleyball ( $n = 63$ ; 18.5%), handball ( $n = 35$ ; 10.3%), and water polo ( $n = 28$ ; 8.2%). Weekly training frequency ranged between 2-8 sessions ( $M = 4.15$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ), with most athletes training 3-5 times per week. Eligibility criteria for inclusion were as follows: (1) being aged between 18 and 35 years, (2) possessing at least two years of competitive athletic experience, (3) not undergoing psychological treatment, and (4) not currently using psychiatric medication. All participants were screened using a standardized sociodemographic questionnaire, and those not meeting the inclusion criteria were excluded from the study. Informed consent was obtained from all eligible participants in accordance with ethical research guidelines.

## Instruments

### Sociodemographic form

Participants completed a sociodemographic form including items on age, gender, sport type, years of athletic experience, level of competition, and eligibility status based on the study's inclusion and exclusion criteria.

### Perceived coach humour styles

Athletes' perceptions of their coach's humour were assessed using a modified version of the Humour Styles Questionnaire (HSQ) originally developed by Martin et al. (2003). While the original HSQ includes 32 items across four dimensions—affiliative, aggressive, self-enhancing, and self-defeating—this study focused exclusively on the affiliative and aggressive subscales, each comprising eight items. These dimensions were selected based on their relevance to interpersonal communication and their direct observability by athletes. This decision was supported by both theoretical and methodological considerations. Specif-

ically, self-enhancing and self-defeating humour styles are regarded as internal personality traits that may be less reliably interpreted by external observers, such as athletes. Focusing solely on the interpersonal components of humour allowed for a more targeted relational mediation model (Yerlikaya, 2009).

The Turkish version of the HSQ, adapted and validated by Yerlikaya (Yerlikaya, 2003), was used in this study. Minor adjustments were made to item wording to reflect athletes' perceptions of their coach's behaviour (e.g., "My coach enjoys making athletes laugh"). Studies using the Turkish version have reported acceptable reliability, with internal consistency coefficients (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) above .80 in sport samples.

### Coach-athlete relationship

The quality of the relational bond between athletes and their coaches was measured using the Coach-Athlete Relationship Questionnaire (CART-Q) developed by Jowett and Ntoumanis (2004). The instrument consists of 11 items distributed across three subscales:

- Closeness (e.g., "I feel close to my coach"),
- Commitment (e.g., "I am committed to my coach"), and
- Complementarity (e.g., "When I am coached by my coach, we work together as a team").

Each item is rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

The Turkish adaptation of the CART-Q was conducted by Altıntaş, Çetinkalp, and Aşçı (2012). This version demonstrated strong psychometric properties in competitive athlete samples in Türkiye, with Cronbach's alpha values for all subscales exceeding .80.

### Sport commitment

Sport commitment was assessed using the Sport Commitment Questionnaire-2 (SCQ-2) developed by Scanlan et al. (2016). For this study, only the enthusiastic commitment and constraint commitment subscales were employed, each consisting of five items. These subscales reflect two distinct motivational orientations: voluntary, enjoyment-based engagement versus obligation-driven continuation. Responses were provided on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

Sample items include:

Enthusiastic commitment: "I am dedicated to continuing in this sport."

Constraint commitment: "I feel I have to keep playing this sport, even if I don't want to."

The Turkish version of the SCQ-2, validated by Can (2022), has shown high internal reliability, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients above .80 for both subscales in samples of competitive athletes.

## Procedure

Prior to data collection, athletes from football, basketball, volleyball, handball, and water polo clubs across Türkiye were contacted to obtain permission and to inform them about the purpose, scope, and voluntary nature of the study. After institutional consent was granted, the athletes were invited to participate and complete the questionnaires individually in group settings before or after their regular training session. Athletes were assured that their participation was confidential and anonymous, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. The assessment package included a demographic form and three standardized self-report instruments: the Coach–Athlete Relationship Questionnaire (CART-Q), the Sport Commitment Questionnaire (SCQ), and an adapted version of the Humour Styles Questionnaire (HSQ). All instruments were completed individually, in paper-based format, under the supervision of the research team or team staff. Completion time averaged between 15 and 20 minutes. Upon collection, responses were screened and coded for subsequent statistical analyses.

## Ethical considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of an institution affiliated with one of the authors and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments. Participants were informed about their rights, including voluntary participation and the ability to withdraw at any point without penalty. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to data collection.

## Data screening

Prior to conducting the main analyses, the dataset was examined for completeness, accuracy, and adherence to statistical assumptions. Missing data were addressed using listwise deletion, which yielded a final analytic sample ranging between 339 and 341 cases across variables. The proportion of missing data was minimal (less than 1%) and was limited to isolated item non-responses rather than full-scale omissions. Given the low frequency and random distribution of missing responses, listwise deletion was deemed a suitable and unbiased strategy for handling missing data in the present study. Multivariate outliers were assessed using Mahalanobis distance, with a significance threshold set at  $p < .001$ . No cases exceeded this criterion. Univariate normality was evaluated through skewness and kurtosis metrics, using  $\pm 2$  as the acceptable range (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). All variables demonstrated acceptable skewness. Although the complementarity subscale showed a kurtosis

value slightly above 3, this deviation was not considered problematic, as it reflected the positively valenced nature of the construct and the clustering of high scores among athletes. All other variables—including affiliative and aggressive humour, as well as enthusiastic and constraint commitment—fell within acceptable distributional parameters. Thus, all variables were retained in their original form for parametric testing.

## Statistical analysis

Mediation analyses were conducted using the MedMod module (General Linear Model–Mediation) in Jamovi version 2.2.5. The analyses followed Hayes' guidelines (Hayes, 2018), employing bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals to assess the significance of indirect effects. Specifically, 5,000 bootstrap resamples were generated to compute 95% confidence intervals. An indirect effect was interpreted as statistically significant if the corresponding confidence interval did not include zero. A total of four mediation models were tested. Statistical significance was set at  $p < .05$  for all analyses. This approach aligns with contemporary best practices in mediation analysis, which prioritize the estimation and interpretation of indirect effects over the significance of individual path coefficients (Hayes, 2018). Prior to testing the mediation models, independent samples *t*-tests were conducted to explore whether the dependent variables—enthusiastic commitment and constraint commitment—varied significantly across demographic factors such as gender, age group, and sport discipline. As no significant group differences were found for either outcome variable, these demographic factors were excluded as covariates in the final models.

## Results

Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations among study variables are presented in Table 1. Athletes reported relatively high levels of closeness, commitment, and complementarity, while affiliative humour was moderately endorsed and aggressive humour was rated lower. Enthusiastic commitment was generally high, whereas constraint commitment was lower in comparison. As expected, affiliative humour was positively correlated with the relational dimensions and enthusiastic commitment, while aggressive humour showed negative associations with these constructs. Constraint commitment was largely unrelated to affiliative humour and the relational dimensions but demonstrated a small positive association with aggressive humour.

This section presents the findings of four distinct mediation analyses conducted to investigate the associations between athletes' perceptions of their coach's humour style and two forms of sport commitment: enthusiastic commitment

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among Study Variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Closeness	6.01	0.96	—						
2. Commitment	5.44	1.12	.68**	—					
3. Complementarity	5.81	0.87	.69**	.58**	—				
4. Affiliative humour	4.75	0.75	.22**	.25**	.24**	—			
5. Aggressive humour	3.06	1.02	-.44**	-.39**	-.36**	-.28**	—		
6. Enthusiastic commitment	4.13	0.78	.33**	.37**	.39**	.14**	-.29**	—	
7. Constraint commitment	2.70	0.76	-.04	-.03	-.04	-.05	.23**	.09	—

N = 341, p < .01.

Table 2. Mediation models testing indirect effects of coach humour styles on athletes' sport commitment through relational dimension

Model	Path	$\beta$	SE	95% CI	p
Model 1 (Affiliative humour → Enthusiastic commitment)	Total effect	0.1472	0.0561	[0.0289, 0.2700]	<.01
	Direct effect	0.0265	0.0532	[-0.0652, 0.1179]	>.05
	Indirect via commitment	0.0543	0.0209	[0.0194, 0.1007]	<.01
	Indirect via complementarity	0.0617	0.0242	[0.0217, 0.1159]	<.01
Model 2 (Affiliative humour → Constraint commitment)	Indirect via closeness	0.0035	0.0193	[-0.0369, 0.0397]	>.05
	Total effect	-0.0472	0.0552	[-0.1691, 0.0686]	>.05
	Direct effect	-0.0485	0.0547	[-0.1572, 0.0613]	>.05
	Indirect via commitment	0.0055	0.0209	[-0.0313, 0.0505]	>.05
Model 3 (Aggressive humour → Enthusiastic commitment)	Indirect via complementarity	-0.0037	0.0187	[-0.0394, 0.0312]	>.05
	Indirect via closeness	-0.0089	0.0215	[-0.0465, 0.0275]	>.05
	Total effect	-0.2190	0.0397	[-0.3016, -0.1346]	<.001
	Direct effect	-0.1355	0.0419	[-0.2167, -0.0501]	<.01
Model 4 (Aggressive humour → Constraint commitment)	Indirect via commitment	-0.0571	0.0215	[-0.1013, -0.0176]	<.01
	Indirect via complementarity	-0.0664	0.0201	[-0.0861, -0.0275]	<.01
	Indirect via closeness	-0.0918	0.0349	[-0.1111, -0.0275]	>.05
	Total effect	0.1664	0.0392	[0.0842, 0.2486]	>.05
Model 4 (Aggressive humour → Constraint commitment)	Direct effect	0.1707	0.0374	[0.0981, 0.2432]	<.001
	Indirect via commitment	-0.0161	0.0216	[-0.0607, 0.0277]	>.05
	Indirect via complementarity	0.0012	0.0182	[-0.0358, 0.0371]	>.05
	Indirect via closeness	-0.0116	0.0265	[-0.0630, 0.0411]	>.05

Note.  $\beta$  = standardized regression coefficient; SE = standard error; CI = confidence interval. p < .05; p < .01; p < .001.

and constraint commitment. The analyses further assessed whether these relationships were mediated by the perceived quality of the coach-athlete relationship, operationalized through the dimensions of commitment, complementarity, and closeness. Mediation effects were tested using bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals derived from 5,000 resamples, in accordance with contemporary mediation analysis standards (Hayes, 2018).

Table 2 provides a summary of the statistical estimates, including indirect effect coefficients, 95% confidence intervals, and p-values, for each of the four hypothesized models. These models examined the mediating roles of the coach-athlete relationship dimensions in the pathways from affiliative and aggressive humour to both forms of sport commitment.

In the first model, affiliative humour was found to be a positive predictor of enthusiastic commitment. While the total effect was statistically significant ( $\beta = 0.1472$ , SE = 0.0561, 95% CI [0.0289, 0.2700]), the direct effect of affiliative humour on enthusiastic commitment was not significant ( $\beta = 0.0265$ , SE = 0.0532, p > .05), suggesting that the effect operates indirectly through relational pathways. The mediation analysis confirmed this pattern, with significant indirect effects observed through both the perceived commitment ( $\beta = 0.0543$ , 95% CI [0.0194, 0.1007]) and complementarity ( $\beta = 0.0617$ , 95% CI [0.0217, 0.1159]) dimensions of the coach-athlete relationship. The indirect path through closeness, however, did not reach significance ( $\beta = 0.0035$ , 95% CI [-0.0369, 0.0397]).

The second model tested whether affiliative humour influenced constraint commitment, which reflects a more externally driven and obligation-based form of motivation. In contrast to the first model, neither the total effect ( $\beta = -0.0472$ ,  $SE = 0.0552$ , 95% CI [-0.1691, 0.0686]) nor any of the indirect effects through relational dimensions were statistically significant. Specifically, commitment ( $\beta = 0.0055$ , 95% CI [-0.0313, 0.0505]), complementarity ( $\beta = -0.0037$ , 95% CI [-0.0394, 0.0312]), and closeness ( $\beta = -0.0089$ , 95% CI [-0.0465, 0.0275]) failed to mediate any relationship between affiliative humour and constraint commitment. These results indicate that affiliative humour does not play a significant role in shaping athletes' sense of obligation to continue participation.

The third model explored the effects of aggressive humour on enthusiastic commitment. As expected, aggressive humour was associated with lower levels of intrinsic commitment. The total effect was statistically significant and negative ( $\beta = -0.2190$ ,  $SE = 0.0397$ , 95% CI [-0.3016, -0.1346]), and the direct path from aggressive humour to enthusiastic commitment also reached significance ( $\beta = -0.1355$ ,  $SE = 0.0419$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Mediation analysis revealed significant indirect effects through both commitment ( $\beta = -0.0571$ , 95% CI [-0.1013, -0.0176]) and complementarity ( $\beta = -0.0664$ , 95% CI [-0.0861, -0.0275]) dimensions of the coach-athlete relationship. The indirect effect through closeness did not meet the threshold for significance ( $\beta = -0.0918$ ,  $SE = 0.0349$ , 95% CI [-0.1111, -0.0275]), although the confidence interval suggests a potential trend towards significance. Overall, these results suggest that aggressive humour undermines athletes' intrinsic motivation by eroding key dimensions of the relational dynamics with their coach.

Finally, the fourth model assessed whether aggressive humour contributed to constraint commitment. While the total effect was positive ( $\beta = 0.1664$ ,  $SE = 0.0392$ , 95% CI [0.0842, 0.2486]), it did not reach statistical significance. Furthermore, none of the indirect pathways through commitment ( $\beta = -0.0161$ , 95% CI [-0.0607, 0.0277]), complementarity ( $\beta = 0.0012$ , 95% CI [-0.0358, 0.0371]), or closeness ( $\beta = -0.0116$ , 95% CI [-0.0630, 0.0411]) were significant. This suggests that even when relational quality is compromised, it does not necessarily translate into higher levels of externally motivated participation among athletes.

## Discussion and conclusion

This study investigated how athletes' perceptions of their coach's humour style—specifically affiliative and aggressive humour—relate to two distinct forms of sport commitment: enthusiastic and constraint-based. Drawing upon Martin's Humour Styles Theory (Martin, et al., 2003), Jowett's 3+1 Cs model (Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004),

and the Sport Commitment Model (Scanlan, et al., 2016), the findings provide novel insight into the relational and motivational implications of coach humour in high-performance sport settings.

Affiliative humour was positively associated with enthusiastic commitment, and this effect was fully mediated by the relational dimensions of commitment and complementarity. Although the observed effect sizes were modest, their statistical significance and theoretical consistency suggest that even subtle expressions of affiliative humour can strengthen coach-athlete relationships and support intrinsically motivated engagement. Consistent with these findings, earlier studies have shown that affiliative humour serves as a resource that builds trust, emotional security, and cohesion in leadership (Pundt & Herrmann, 2015; Yam, Christian, Wei, Liao, & Nai, 2018) and in educational settings, where it functions as a valuable communication tool (Grace-Odeleye & Santiago, 2019; Morreall, 2008). In sport contexts, comparable relational cues—such as warmth and clarity—have likewise been shown to foster athlete autonomy, sustained engagement, and well-being (Balaguer, et al., 2012; Jowett, et al., 2017).

While emotional closeness is often viewed as the cornerstone of high-quality coach-athlete relationships, its impact may shift depending on performance demands and the outcomes under study. Recent evidence with college soccer players shows that stronger relationship quality is linked to lower levels of burnout, partly through enhanced training satisfaction (Liu & Li, 2024). In performance-driven contexts, this suggests that the task-focused aspects of the relationship—such as clear role expectations, mutual responsiveness, and smooth coordination—may be more critical for athlete well-being than affective closeness, with affiliative humour primarily reinforcing these collaborative dynamics.

Aggressive humour, on the other hand, predicted lower levels of enthusiastic commitment both directly and indirectly through decreased perceptions of commitment and complementarity within the coach-athlete relationship. These findings echo prior studies indicating that disparaging or sarcastic humour can damage leader credibility, increase emotional detachment, and undermine relational reciprocity (Cann, et al., 2015; Kuiper, et al., 2004; Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). In high-performance sport settings, where interpersonal dynamics are under constant scrutiny, aggressive humour is often perceived not as light-hearted banter but as a relational threat. Ronglan and Aggerholm (2014) have observed that when humour is used inappropriately or excessively, it may undermine trust within the coach-athlete relationship and foster detrimental social consequences—such as interpersonal detachment and breakdowns in team communication. (Ronglan & Aggerholm, 2014).

Although the dimension of emotional closeness did not emerge as a significant mediator in the model—suggesting that affective proximity may not primarily channel the influence of humour styles on commitment—it is the erosion of shared understanding and task-aligned coordination that appears more central to the motivational disruption triggered by aggressive humour. These insights align with theories emphasizing psychological safety and mutual respect as foundational elements for sustained athlete motivation. Notably, Bedar (2017) found that maladaptive humour styles could significantly undermine group psychological safety, thereby impairing team cohesion, development, and overall effectiveness.

Regarding constraint commitment, neither affiliative nor aggressive humour demonstrated significant direct or indirect effects. This reinforces the conceptual distinction between enthusiastic and constraint commitment (Scanlan, et al., 2016), suggesting that humour—especially as an externally observable relational behaviour—plays a more salient role in facilitating autonomous forms of engagement rather than compliance-based participation. Constraint commitment is often shaped by structural or external factors such as scholarship obligations, limited alternatives, or external expectations, and may thus be relatively impervious to relational cues. This interpretation aligns with findings by Berki et al. (Berki, Pikó, & Page, 2019), who observed that constraint commitment was more strongly predicted by institutional and contextual pressures than by interpersonal dynamics.

Moreover, in sport cultures where authoritarian coaching styles remain prevalent, aggressive humour may be normalized or overlooked, thus weakening its perceived relevance to obligation-driven motivation. This cultural dimension may also help explain the absence of significant effects on constraint commitment in the present study.

Collectively, these findings expand the scope of humour research within sport psychology by demonstrating that humour functions not merely as a stylistic element of coaching, but as a relational signal with tangible motivational consequences. They underscore the need to incorporate communication-based constructs—such as humour—into theoretical models of athlete engagement and retention. Specifically, while affiliative humour appears to facilitate intrinsic motivation through the enhancement of relational quality, aggressive humour may erode these dynamics and diminish athletes' desire to remain voluntarily involved in sport.

From a practical standpoint, these results suggest that coach education programmes should place greater emphasis on the role of humour in shaping relational climates. While many programmes address interpersonal communica-

tion broadly, they may benefit from incorporating modules that explore the relational and psychological implications of humour use. Coaches, particularly in high-pressure performance environments, could be trained to use affiliative humour deliberately as a means of signalling inclusion, trust, and collaborative intent—factors known to contribute to athlete well-being and sustained engagement.

The present study offers empirical evidence that coach humour styles play a meaningful role in shaping athletes' motivational orientations—primarily through their influence on the perceived quality of the coach-athlete relationship. Specifically, affiliative humour was positively associated with enthusiastic commitment, with this effect fully mediated by the relational dimensions of commitment and complementarity. In contrast, aggressive humour demonstrated a detrimental association with intrinsic motivation, operating through the same relational mechanisms. Importantly, neither humour style exerted significant influence on constraint commitment, suggesting that externally regulated motivation may be less responsive to interpersonal cues.

These findings underscore the importance of broadening traditional, trait-focused approaches to coaching behaviour by incorporating relational and communicative processes into conceptual and applied frameworks. Humour, rather than serving solely as a reflection of individual personality, appears to function as a relational signal—one that shapes the motivational climate within which athletes interpret and engage with their sport. Depending on its tone, intent, and reception, humour may either reinforce psychological safety and collaboration or foster tension and disengagement.

By integrating key insights from humour psychology, sport commitment theory, and relational models of coaching, this study highlights communication style as a modifiable and often overlooked aspect of the coach's influence. From an applied perspective, coaches and those responsible for their training are encouraged to view humour not as an incidental or spontaneous behaviour, but as a strategic interpersonal tool with the potential to shape athletes' engagement and long-term commitment. When used constructively, affiliative humour may strengthen relational bonds and promote motivation; conversely, aggressive humour may disrupt relational quality and compromise athlete well-being.

Future research could build on these findings by examining how athlete-level variables—such as personality traits, gender, or cultural norms—moderate the effects of humour in coaching. Longitudinal designs may also help clarify how humour dynamics unfold over time and contribute to athlete development, performance, and retention within competitive sport environments.

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