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## Transformational Leadership Behavior and Turnover Intention in China Physical Education

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### ABSTRACT

High-level sports teams in universities are crucial for cultivating high-level athletes in China. Currently, coaches are the most direct managers of university (including colleges) sports teams in China, with their management styles and approaches having a direct impact on athletes' psychology. This study focused on high-level university football teams and explored the impact of transformational leadership on athlete turnover intention. The mediating effect of the "coach-athlete relationship," which helps establish and develop high-level university sports teams in China, was also examined. Overall, coaches with a transformational leadership style were found to have a significant effect on reducing athlete turnover intention and enhancing the coach-athlete relationship. In fact, the effect of coaches' transformational leadership behavior on athlete turnover intention is mediated through the coach-athlete relationship.

**Keywords:** high-level university sports teams, transformational leadership behavior, turnover intention, coach-athlete relationship

### INTRODUCTION

Integrating sports and education, using the science and technological advantages of universities (including colleges) to develop competitive sports, and including competitive sports in universities to cultivate high-level athletes, are key strategies that have been used to develop the competitive sports industry in China (Hu & Yao, 2015). These strategies are also indicative of the main direction in which competitive sports in China will continue to develop: namely, with universities undertaking more tasks in athletic talent cultivation. Against the backdrop of a recent vigorous growth in interest in football in China, high-level football teams at Chinese universities have begun to receive widespread attention and have achieved rapid development. At the end of 2015, the Ministry of Education explicitly encouraged and pledged support for qualified universities to establish high-level football teams in its "Notification on Accomplishing the Task of Unique Student Recruitment for Universities in 2016." During the 2017 plenary sessions of the National People's Congress and the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, the Ministry of Education also predicted that the number of universities recruiting high-level football players in the future will increase to 200. The Ministry added that these universities' future high-level football teams will usher in "the golden period" for athletic talent development.

However, the rapid development of high-level football and sports teams in Chinese universities has also yielded numerous problems that urgently require solutions. Chief among them is the unenthusiastic high-level training and competition, which can trigger high turnover intention among athletes. Other complications, such as

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#### State of the literature

- Integrating sports and education, using the science and technological advantages of universities (including colleges) to develop competitive sports, and including competitive sports in universities to cultivate high-level athletes, are key strategies that have been used to develop the competitive sports industry in China
- It is a crucial mechanism by which transformational leadership is able to affect employees' psychological variables; namely, managers' behaviors can engender admiration and spiritual, conceptual, and moral recognition in employees when the managers are able to establish rapport with their employees.
- Focus was directed on college high-level football team coaches in China to elucidate the relationship between coaches' transformational leadership behavior and athletes' turnover intention, and explore the mediating effect of the "coach-athlete relationship." By uncovering the management practices of high-level university sports teams.

#### Contribution of this paper to the literature

- The research results indicated that the transformational leadership behaviors of high-level university football team coaches have a negative effect on athlete turnover intention; in other words, coaches' transformational leadership behaviors reduce the development of athletes' desires and intent to leave a team.
- In the present study, it was discovered that transformational leadership behavior was significantly related to the Chinese-contextualized SSG theory, with the results indicating that the transformational leadership behaviors of high-level university football team coaches had a significant positive impact on the coach-athlete relationship.
- The coach-athlete relationship had a mediating effect between transformational leadership and turnover intention because the "charisma" dimension in the transformational leadership theory refers to a coach's personal characteristics, which always exist without the need to develop a connection with athletes.

inadequate funding, the lack of an incentive mechanism, an incomplete management mechanism, and inconsistent levels of sports team members, have also been prevalent. Coupled with the lack of high-level competition opportunities for some college sports teams, many outstanding high-level college athletes (in particular those who play highly popular sports such as football) have opted to join club teams to compete out of economic and other interests. Over the long term, this result may drive other athletes to leave, and thereby avoid the tedious trainings and stiff competition of, high-level sports teams. Improving high-level university athletes' enthusiasm for participating in training and competition, while simultaneously reducing their desire to leave sports teams due to the existing conditions, are core challenges that must be addressed as more high-level university sports teams are established and developed.

Athletes' desire to leave a sports team to the extent that it affects their regular training and competitiveness is known as turnover intention. March and Simon (1958) introduced the idea of turnover intention, arguing that an employee's decision to leave mainly depends on the comfort brought by their current job compared with the results of their subjective willingness to change (Bowen & Siehl, 1997; Wu & Tai, 2016). Because employee resignation causes numerous adverse effects to organizations, excessive voluntary resignation from employees is not an event with which organizations are content (Wu, Tsai & Yeh, 2014); thus, this topic has received widespread attention from management researchers. In the field of sports research, the turnover intention of student athletes has been studied by several foreign scholars (Turner & Pack, 2013); however, this problem has not been studied by Chinese scholars, with the few sports-related turnover intention studies focusing on physical education teachers and sports industry employees (Zhang, Gang & Zhang, 2010).

Research has verified that managers' transformational leadership behaviors have a substantial impact on employees' turnover intention (Geyer, 1998). Similarly, the leadership behaviors of direct managers for university football teams in China (mostly coaches) affect athletes with regards to training motivation, self-efficacy, team performance, team cohesion, and role involvement (Wu et al., 2014; Wu & Tai, 2016; Yan, Zhu & Li, 2017). However, no studies have yet explored the relationship between coaches' transformational leadership behaviors and athletes' turnover intentions, or determined the mechanism between the two actions. In related research on transformational

leadership and employee's psychological variables, the superior-subordinate relationship is often viewed as an essential mediator. It is a crucial mechanism by which transformational leadership is able to affect employees' psychological variables; namely, managers' behaviors can engender admiration and spiritual, conceptual, and moral recognition in employees when the managers are able to establish rapport with their employees. This connection facilitates the common pursuit of personality goals and the effective achievement of organizational tasks.

In the present study, it is similarly argued that superior-subordinate relationships play a crucial role in the relationship between transformational leadership and psychological variables (including turnover intention). Focus was directed on college high-level football team coaches in China to elucidate the relationship between coaches' transformational leadership behavior and athletes' turnover intention, and explore the mediating effect of the "coach-athlete relationship." By uncovering the management practices of high-level university sports teams, the results of this study can be used to develop more appropriate management strategies for high-level university sports teams in China.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Transformational Leadership and Turnover Intention**

Organizational managers' leadership approaches, styles, and behaviors all affect subordinate employees' psychology, thereby directly impacting the performance of employees and organizations. The same phenomenon occurs in sports teams, wherein coaches' leadership behaviors directly influence team results. In 1978, Burn proposed two major leadership types: transactional leadership and transformational leadership (Bass, 1978). Transactional leadership is primarily based on exchange and a series of implicit contracts, with leaders meeting subordinates' immediate interests mainly to facilitate subordinate management (Bass, 1999). By contrast, transformational leadership cultivates and enhances subordinates' awareness through the pursuit of higher ideals and moral values (e.g., freedom, democracy, fairness, peace, and humanity). Studies have confirmed that compared with transactional leadership, transformational leadership can lead to higher employee satisfaction and better organizational performance.

Bass (1995) further expanded the concept of transformational leadership, asserting that transformational leadership triggers subordinates' high-level needs (here, transformational leadership is presented based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs) by making employees aware of the significance of undertaking organizational tasks (Bass, 1999). An atmosphere of mutual trust is thus established, prompting subordinates to sacrifice their own interests for the benefit of organizations and enabling those organizations to achieve results that surpass expectations. Because the theory of transformational leadership is highly inclusive, it provides a broad basis for the mechanism of leadership; it also includes multiple levels and angles of leadership, concepts that already have broad fundamental perspectives. Thus, transformational leadership remains one of the focal topics in leadership research today.

Since the mid-1990s, sports research has incorporated the concept of transformational leadership, with scholars discovering that managers' transformational leadership behaviors in sports organizations are closely related to athlete satisfaction, organizational commitment, and performance (Pruijn, 1995; Wallace & Weese, 1995; Doherty & Danylchuk, 1996). Early research subjects in such studies were not coaches, but rather were sports organization managers (e.g., campus recreation directors and athletic directors); however, by the early 2000s, researchers began to focus on coaches' leadership behaviors. These studies have revealed that athletes perform passively when their coaches display similar behaviors (and vice versa), and have concluded that a successful coach demonstrates transformational leadership and possesses characteristics such as a passion for work (Donohue et al., 2007), humility, professional ethics, enthusiasm, a positive work attitude, ability to delegate tasks, the capacity to work with others, and the ability to build up others into unique individuals (Wu et al., 2014; Wu, Tsai & Tai, 2016). These coaches establish unique and positive relationships with numerous stakeholders (including athletes) in the course of their coaching, which helps promote others' success (Pharion, 2014). Prior studies also noted that coaches

who engage in transformational leadership establish a clear vision and development strategy for their team, and appropriately lead their subordinates (athletes) so that the vision become a reality (Hampson & Jowett, 2014).

Other studies have explored coaches' relationships with their athletes, and the effect that that relationship has on athlete psychology, athlete behaviors, and team performance. For example, Yan et al. (2017) examined the relationship between short-track speed skating coaches' transformational leadership behaviors and their skaters' role involvement. Elsewhere, Jung and Sosik (2002) have analyzed the relationship between coaches' transformational leadership behaviors and team collective efficacy. A study by Cronin et al. (2015) investigated the relationship between coaches' transformational leadership behaviors and athletes' work cohesiveness, whereas a study by Price and Weiss (2013) highlighted the relationship between coaches' leadership behaviors and juvenile athletes' psychology and team performance based on transformational leadership theory.

Turnover intention refers to the intent of employees to voluntarily leave an organization or profession (Mobley, Griffeth, Hand & Meglino, 1979). Because employees generally choose to leave voluntarily after careful consideration, turnover intention tends to be revealed before formal turnover (Bluedom, 1982), and is thus the most effective predictor of employee turnover behavior (Hom, Mitchell, Lee & Griffeth, 2012). As noted earlier, employee turnover intention has a substantial impact on organizations; thus, reducing turnover intention is a key concern for organizations, from both a theoretical and practical perspective. According to prior research, transformational leadership behaviors have a negative impact on turnover intention; that is, transformational leadership behaviors can reduce employee turnover intention. In the present study, it is argued that the impact of transformational leadership primarily manifests in three ways: (a) it prompts employees to maintain a positive mood and produces in the employees a psychological dependence on their superiors, thus strengthening the association between organization and employee; (b) it enables employees to internalize organization values and an organization identity, again strengthening the association between organization and employee; and (c) it triggers high expectations in employees and induces feelings of being essential to the organization.

To date, few studies have explored the relationship between coaches' transformational leadership behaviors and athletes' turnover intentions, possibly because actual turnovers rarely occur in university sports teams. However, despite this rarity, training and competition are still greatly affected when athletes display turnover intention; in team-based sports such as football, team performance is also highly affected by turnover intention. Therefore, the following hypothesis was proposed:

- H1:** The transformational leadership behaviors of coaches of high-level university football teams have a significant negative impact on athlete turnover intention.

### **Transformational Leadership and the Coach-Athlete Relationship**

A favorable superior-subordinate relationship, mutual trust, and sincere collaboration between leaders and employees form the foundation of effective organizational operations, with modern leadership research encouraging leaders to avoid overt or aggressive displays of power and follow "human-oriented" principles instead (Ma & Qu, 2007). Similarly, although coaches of high-level university sports teams in China retain the official right to manage (i.e., control) their team, the mentoring relationship that has long been established in this industry downplays the concepts of supervision and control, and instead encourages caring instruction.

Bass et al. (1999) determined that transformational leadership consists of four dimensional structures: charisma, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Of these four dimensional structures, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration all require a connection with subordinate employees to be realized (Avolio, Bass & Jung, 1999). Similarly, among high-level university football teams in China, coaches' inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration must be embodied in their general interactions related to training and life. Therefore, the following hypothesis was proposed:

**H2:** The transformational leadership behaviors of coaches of high-level university football teams have a positive impact on the coach-athlete relationship.

### Mediating Effect of the Coach-Athlete Relationship

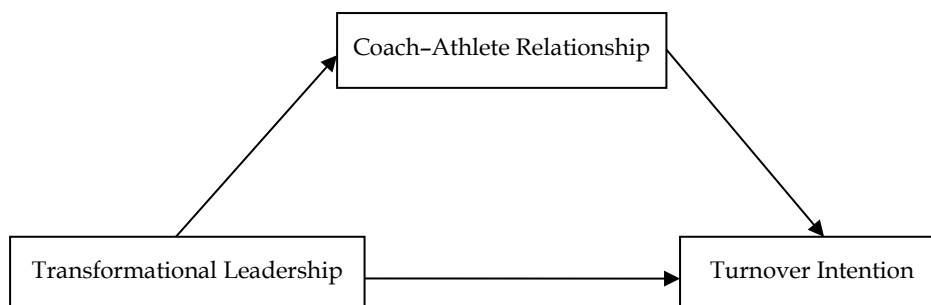
In general, a more favorable superior-subordinate relationship (i.e., a more satisfactory relationship based on the revelation of true feelings) is associated with employees being more likely to display consistency and tacit understanding with their managers in work and life (Wu et al., 2016), and being more appreciative of managers' leadership styles; it is also associated with managers being more likely to provide employees with guidance and assistance. A similar association can be found in university sports teams. Specifically, athletes who maintain a more favorable relationship with their coaches tend to receive more guidance and care from those coaches related to training and life, and tend to show more support and appreciation for the coaches' work and coaching style. Such a caring coach-athlete relationship also means that athletes receive more support from and feel more valued by their sports team, which typically makes them more willing to stay on the team (Ma & Qu, 2007; Wu et al., 2014). Thus, the following hypothesis was proposed:

**H3:** The coach-athlete relationship is negatively associated with athlete turnover intention.

In short, a favorable coach-athlete relationship can prevent the development of athlete turnover intention. Additionally, transformational leadership can establish a high-quality superior-subordinate relationship through managers' common pursuit (with employees) of self-value and growth, which positively influences employee work results. A high-quality superior-subordinate relationship is indicated by trust, admiration, and respect from leaders (who also deliver the results expected of their subordinates) and trust, loyalty, hard work, and high performance from subordinates (Jiang & Yang, 2014). Therefore, the superior-subordinate relationship plays a critical role in reducing employee turnover intention via transformational leadership. Similarly for sports teams, coaches' transformational leadership behaviors can effectively promote the relationship between them and their athletes, and a favorable coach-athlete relationship can encourage athletes to train hard and compete, thereby reducing turnover intention. Therefore, the following hypothesis was proposed:

**H4:** Transformational leadership significantly reduces athlete turnover intention through the mediating effects of the coach-athlete relationship.

The following theoretical model in **Figure 1** was proposed based on the aforementioned theoretical analyses and hypotheses:



**Figure 1.** Research Model

## RESEARCH METHOD

### Sampling and Participants

The main research respondents for this study were high-level university football teams in China. Cluster sampling was conducted during the national university football league 2016 season using "team" as the sampling unit; specifically, 225 high-level football athletes from nine universities that recruit high-level athletes (Sichuan University, Southwestern University of Finance and Economics, Nanchang University, Central South University, Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics, Chongqing University, Tongji University, South China University of Technology, and City University of Hong Kong) were selected as respondents. All of the respondents were male, and the group comprised 62 freshmen, 49 sophomores, 41 juniors, 27 seniors, and 3 postgraduates. A total of 64 of the respondents were first-level athletes who passed the independent entrance examination for their university, 50 were second-level athletes who passed the National Higher Education Entrance Examination with a score of 65% (as required by local second tier universities), 47 were second-level athletes who passed the National Higher Education Entrance Examination with a score as required by local second tier universities, and 21 were ordinary students who directly enrolled in their universities through the National Higher Education Entrance Examination.

A total of 225 questionnaires were distributed and 220 were returned, yielding a questionnaire return rate of 97.78%. Among those returned, 38 invalid questionnaires were excluded, leaving 182 questionnaires that could be used for data analysis. Thus, the questionnaire validity rate was 82.72%.

### Variable Measurement

The 22-item transformational leadership behavior questionnaire was originally compiled by Herold et al. (2008) according to research by Rubin et al. (2005). All items in the questionnaire began with "The head coach will....."; examples of the questions include "The head coach will outline future blueprints that are interesting for us," "The head coach will encourage us to become part of the team," and "The head coach's coaching style will consider our personal needs." All items were answered using a 5-point Likert scale.

The coach-athlete relationship scale in this study referenced the subordinate-supervisor guanxi (SSG) theory developed by Wong et al. (2010). The corresponds with most domestic and foreign studies on the superior-subordinate relationship, which have mainly adopted one of two theories: the Western leader-member exchange (LMX) theory, which is a branch of the management leadership theories that effectively explains the impacts that superiors have on subordinates; and the SSG theory in China (Wu et al., 2014; Wu et al., 2016). Notably, the coach-athlete relationship in China has begun to transform from a mentoring relationship to a contractual relationship, especially in the case of highly professional team sports such as football and basketball, wherein a coach's role regarding the entire team has been modified from a "teacher" to a "manager." However, the features of this contractual relationship between coaches and athletes remain unclear due to the overall situation in China, with no obvious indication of vertical duality or social exchange. Nevertheless, the continuing mentoring relationship that exists between coaches and athletes in team sports (sometimes beginning in athletes' youth), together with the influence of traditional Chinese culture, means that the coach-athlete relationship in China generally displays obvious characteristics of SSG. In addition, numerous studies have verified that the coach-athlete relationship in China is actually one type of Chinese-style interpersonal and communication relationships, for which the SSG theory is suitable for analyzing (Frey, Czech, Kennt & Johnson, 2006). Thus, the SSG theory was selected for this study. The scale consisted of eight items, with questions such as "After training and competitions, I interact frequently with my coach" and "After training and competitions, I share almost the same interests and hobbies with my coach."

Finally, the scale compiled by Arnold et al. (1999) was adopted to measure turnover intention. This scale consists of three items, and includes questions such as "I often think of quitting the team."

**Table 1.** Reliability Analysis and Correlation Analysis

Variable	Items	$\alpha$	Transformational Leadership	Coach–Athlete Relationship	Turnover Intention
Transformational Leadership	22	0.96	1		
Coach–Athlete Relationship	8	0.85	0.44**	1	
Turnover Intention	3	0.65	-0.40**	-0.25*	1

## RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

### Reliability, Validity, and Correlation Analyses

All of the scales utilized in this study were subjected to Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient testing using the statistical analysis software SPSS version 17.0. The results indicated that the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficients for transformational leadership, the coach–athlete relationship, and turnover intention were 0.96, 0.85, and 0.65, all of which were greater than 0.60 and thus reliable (see **Table 1**). Specifically, the correlation coefficient between transformational leadership and the coach–athlete relationship, and between transformational leadership and turnover intention, was ( $r = 0.44, p < .01$ ) and ( $r = -0.40, p < .01$ ), respectively, whereas the correlation coefficient between the coach–athlete relationship and turnover intention was ( $r = 0.25, p < .05$ ). These results indicate that the synchronous change between variables was statistically significant and should be further analyzed to verify the causal relationship between them, providing a basis on which to test the hypotheses.

Next, the validity of the scales was tested using factor analysis, which revealed that the factor loadings for transformational leadership, the coach–athlete relationship, and turnover intention were all greater than 0.50; moreover, the removal of any one question item did not cause a significant increase in the reliability of the scale. In addition, the cumulative variance explained for the three scales was 70.28%, 66.13%, and 59.46%, respectively. Therefore, all three scales were considered to possess satisfactory validity.

### Common Method Variance Analysis

Common method variance (CMV) is a systematic error, also known as an artificial covariance between the predicted variable and criterion variable caused by the same data source or scorer, the same measurement environment, item context, or item characteristics. The partial correlation analysis developed by Podsakoff et al. (2003) was used to examine whether this study contained a significant CMV problem. The results showed that the correlation coefficients for each of transformational leadership, the coach–athlete relationship, and turnover intention were significant (i.e., -0.634, 0.44, and -0.41, respectively), indicating that CMV was an insignificant problem in this study.

### Regression Analysis

In this study, variables such as athletes' grades, field positions, and admissions were set as the control variables, and a linear regression equation was established between transformational leadership, the coach–athlete relationship, and turnover intention. The relationship between transformational leadership, the coach–athlete relationship, and turnover intention was then determined by examining the significance of  $\beta$ .

### Main Effects Analysis

**Table 2** shows that in the regression equation of the dependent variables in relation to the independent variables, university football coaches' transformational leadership had a negative effect on athletes' turnover intention ( $\beta = -0.303, p < .01$ ) and a positive effect on the coach–athlete relationship ( $\beta = 0.392, p < .01$ ). Hence, Hypotheses 1 and 2 were supported. The results suggest that coaches' transformational leadership behaviors can reduce athlete turnover intention and facilitate the relationship between athletes and coaches.

**Table 2.** Analysis of Main Effects

Dependent variable		Turnover intention		Coach-athlete relationship	
		M1	M2	M3	M4
Control Variable	Grade	-0.047	-0.052	-0.047	-0.054
	Position	0.056	0.070	0.056	0.024
	Ways of enroll	-0.072	-0.045	-0.072	-0.019
Independent Variable	Transformational leadership		-0.303**		0.392**
F		1.723	10.079**	1.723	11.402**
R <sup>2</sup>		0.028	0.186	0.028	0.205
ΔR <sup>2</sup>		0.012	0.167**	0.012	0.187**

**Table 3.** Analysis of Mediated Effects

Dependent variable		Turnover intention		
		M5	M6	M7
Control Variable	Grade	-0.047	-0.052	-0.058
	Position	0.056	0.070	0.039
	Ways of enroll	-0.072	-0.045	0.003
Independent Variable	Transformational leadership		-0.303**	-0.285**
Mediated Variable	Coach-athlete relationship			-0.370**
F		1.723	10.079**	18.358**
R <sup>2</sup>		0.028	0.186	0.343
ΔR <sup>2</sup>		0.012	0.167**	0.324**

### Mediating Effect

As revealed in **Table 3**, the regression equation for the dependent variables in relation to the independent variables indicated that the impact of grades, field positions, and admissions on athlete turnover intention were insignificant. After introducing transformational leadership, it was determined that coaches' transformational leadership behaviors had a negative effect on athletes' turnover intention ( $\beta = -0.303$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Subsequently, the coach-athlete relationship was introduced and the effects of both transformational leadership and the coach-athlete relationship were examined, with the coach-athlete relationship significantly negatively affecting athletes' turnover intention ( $\beta = -0.370$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Thus, Hypothesis 3 was supported. Further analysis indicated that transformational leadership still had a significant impact on turnover intention ( $\beta = -0.285$ ,  $p < .01$ ) after the coach-athlete relationship had been added, although the  $\beta$  coefficient was significantly reduced. Nevertheless, the condition of partial mediation was met, illustrating that the predictive effect of transformational leadership on turnover intention could be realized through the coach-athlete relationship. Hence, Hypothesis 4 was supported.

## DISCUSSION

### Effect of the Transformational Leadership Behavior of Coaches on Athlete Turnover Intention

The research results indicated that the transformational leadership behaviors of high-level university football team coaches have a negative effect on athlete turnover intention; in other words, coaches' transformational leadership behaviors reduce the development of athletes' desires and intent to leave a team. As was discussed earlier, the probability of high-level university football players actually leaving their teams is small because of their identities as high-level university athletes and students. Indeed, their main purpose for entering university is to receive a high education and obtain the corresponding degree, and their studies would be greatly affected if they left their respective sports teams. However, simply because athletes do not actually leave is not a guarantee that they will not be inclined to leave. Despite studies maintaining that the impact of turnover intention on employee



performance is influenced by various factors (Allen, Weeks & Moffitt, 2005), it is undeniable that athletes' turnover tendency reflects dissatisfaction with the status quo. Such dissatisfaction may originate from individuals, organizations, work characteristics, or environments, and may cause athletes to slack off or vent their discontent during training and competitions. In particular, in team sports such as football, personal problems may directly affect the unity and teamwork of a team. According to the four dimensions of transformational leadership proposed by Bass (1995), athletes can develop trust toward organizations through their coaches' inspirational motivation and individualized consideration. Coaches with transformational leadership are conducive to athletes' development of trust and tend to strive for fairness in the organization, which enhances athlete identification, involvement, and loyalty to the organization; reduces turnover intention; promotes teamwork among the team; and facilitates improved performance.

### **Effect of the Transformational Leadership Behavior of Coaches on the Coach–Athlete Relationship**

Gerstner and Day (1997) conducted the first theoretical study on the conceptual and empirical relationships between transformational leadership and the superior–subordinate relationship, although the superior–subordinate relationship theory used in their research was based on the Western-contextualized LMX theory. In the present study, it was discovered that transformational leadership behavior was significantly related to the Chinese-contextualized SSG theory, with the results indicating that the transformational leadership behaviors of high-level university football team coaches had a significant positive impact on the coach–athlete relationship. In other words, coaches' transformational leadership behaviors have a positive effect on the relationship between coaches and their athletes, facilitating the development of a relationship between them. Transformational leadership changes the relationship that is established by transactional leadership (wherein subordination is based on contracts and transactions), with managers offering more support, care, and affection (including that in nonworking contexts) to employees. In university sports teams in China, coaches with transformational leadership characteristics can influence athletes through personal charisma, intellectual stimulation, and some compelling behaviors; these factors prompt athletes to identify with their coaches' behaviors and develop respect and trust for their coaches, thus strengthening the coach–athlete relationship overall.

### **Impact of the Transformational Leadership Behavior of Coaches on Athlete Turnover Intention Mediated through the Coach–Athlete Relationship**

Superior–subordinate relationships are often viewed as the impact mechanism of transformational leadership on employees' psychological characteristics; that is, a superior–subordinate relationship is the mediating variable for the influence of transformational leadership on employees (Wu et al., 2014; Wu et al., 2016). The present study similarly verified this phenomenon in a sports context, revealing that coaches' transformational leadership behaviors affect athletes' turnover intention through the coach–athlete relationship. Notably, the coach–athlete relationship had a mediating effect between transformational leadership and turnover intention because the "charisma" dimension in the transformational leadership theory refers to a coach's personal characteristics, which always exist without the need to develop a connection with athletes. Therefore, unlike the other three dimensions, the impact of this particular dimension on athletes does not need to be realized through the coach–athlete relationship.

## **CONCLUSION**

China's high-level university football teams are a crucial component for the development of China's campus football industry. These teams become the top reserve talent training channels for campus football, as well as one of the crucial channels for cultivating China's high-level football players. At present, the various management and training systems utilized for high-level football teams in China are still incomplete, and their essential roles in the cultivation of China's sports talents have yet to be demonstrated. Nevertheless, it is established that coaches play a crucial multirole in high-level football teams, during which their personal capacity and leadership style significantly affect high-level football teams. Through the present study, it was discovered that the

transformational leadership behaviors of China's high-level university football team coaches have a significant impact on athlete turnover intention and the coach-athlete relationship; specifically, they reduce athlete turnover intention and enhance the relationship between coaches and athletes. Moreover, the impact of coaches' transformational leadership behaviors on athlete turnover intention is realized through the coach-athlete relationship, which exhibits a mediating effect on the process. Therefore, high-level university football team coaches should focus on athletes' personal development, encourage athletes to demonstrate their personal talents, and demonstrate humanistic care toward athletes' lives and learnings in order to continually improve their relationship with the athletes, minimize the athletes' turnover intention, and facilitate the development of united and harmonious sports teams.

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