

Coach-Athlete Emotional Abuse: Relationships with Perceived Coaching Efficacy and Coach-Athlete Relationship Quality

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ABSTRACT

Emotional abuse by coaches is increasingly recognized as a threat to athlete well-being, yet its associations with core sport-psychology constructs remain understudied. This study examined how coach-perpetrated psychological violence/neglect, physical violence, and sexual violence relate to athletes' perceptions of coaching efficacy and coach-athlete relationship quality. Retired elite athletes (N = 128; 113 provided data on at least one primary measure) completed measures of coach-perpetrated violence, coaching efficacy, and coach-athlete relationship quality while thinking about their most influential coach. Available-case correlations showed that higher psychological violence/neglect, physical violence, and sexual violence were significantly associated with lower perceived coaching efficacy and poorer relationship quality. The three forms of violence were positively intercorrelated, and coaching efficacy and relationship quality were strongly associated. Given the retrospective, cross-sectional design, findings do not establish causality. For clinical and applied sport psychologists, assessing coach-athlete dynamics may enhance case formulation, treatment planning, and consultation related to athlete welfare.

Keywords: coach-athlete emotional abuse; emotional abuse by coaches; psychological violence; coaching efficacy; coach-athlete relationship quality

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Emotional abuse, often discussed within sport research as psychological violence, remains one of the most pervasive yet underrecognized forms of maltreatment in sport. Elite child athletes may spend more time with coaches than with caregivers (Smits et al., 2017). The hierarchical nature of the coach-athlete relationship can amplify power imbalances and dependency as coaches hold significant authority over athletes' development, opportunities, and sense of self (Stirling & Kerr, 2008, 2010; Crooks & Wolfe, 2007).

Interpersonal violence in sport includes physical, sexual, and psychological forms of harm (Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2024; Khomutova et al., 2025). Psychological violence includes repeated non-physical behaviors such as belittling, intimidation, and humiliation that undermine athletes' psychological well-being. Although the terms *emotional abuse* and *psychological violence* overlap substantially in the literature, they are not treated as identical in the present study. Emotional abuse provides the broader conceptual focus of the article, whereas psychological violence/neglect refers specifically to the dimension measured by the Violence Toward Athletes Questionnaire–Coach Version (VTAQ-C). The VTAQ-C psychological violence/neglect subscale therefore served as the study's measure most directly related to coach-athlete emotional abuse.

Although emotional abuse in sport has been documented in qualitative studies, fewer quantitative studies have examined how these experiences relate to core sport psychology constructs that shape an athlete's perspectives and well-being. Examining psychological violence/neglect in relation to perceived coaching efficacy and coach-athlete relationship quality may contribute to understanding how athletes evaluate both the coach and the relational context in which emotionally abusive behaviors occur.

Physical and sexual violence were also examined to provide a more complete representation of participants' experiences of interpersonal violence and to remain consistent with established applications of the VTAQ-C. Reporting all three dimensions also allows emotional abuse to be considered within the broader context of coach-perpetrated interpersonal violence.

The present study therefore examined associations among coach-perpetrated psychological violence/neglect, physical violence, sexual violence, perceived coaching efficacy, and coach–athlete relationship quality in retired elite athletes. Understanding these relationships has direct relevance for clinical sport psychology, including case formulation, treatment planning, and consultation focused on athlete welfare.

Relevance to Clinical Sport Psychology

From a clinical sport psychology perspective, emotionally abusive coaching has implications for both mental health and performance. Athletes exposed to such environments may present with anxiety, perfectionism, identity disturbance, trauma symptoms, and difficulties trusting authority figures. Many athletes seek services for “confidence,” “motivation,” burnout, or performance concerns without recognizing how abusive relational dynamics may contribute to symptoms. Quantifying links between abuse exposure and perceptions of coaching competence and relationship quality may help clinicians assess relational sport histories more systematically and differentiate performance anxiety from trauma-related responses to maltreatment.

Normalization and Sport Culture

In high-performance sport, demanding coaching behaviors are frequently normalized as “tough love,” creating ambiguity between discipline and abuse (Kerr & Stirling, 2012; McMahon et al., 2012). This normalization is reinforced by a win-at-all-costs mentality embedded within sport culture (Donnelly, 1993; Stirling, 2011). Athletes are encouraged to interpret harmful practices as necessary for success (Stirling & Kerr, 2013, 2014). Perceptions of emotionally abusive coaching may also vary according to competitive level and performance outcome, suggesting that successful outcomes can influence how harmful coaching behaviors are evaluated (Gervis et al., 2016). As a result, recognition of emotional abuse may occur only later, when athletes have greater distance from performance pressures and can reappraise coaching relationships with fewer constraints.

Prevalence and Safeguarding Context

Recent large-scale investigations continue to demonstrate the scope of non-physical violence in sport. In a sample of more than 600 former U.S. elite athletes, Dallam et al. (2024) found that over half reported at least one instance of psychological violence perpetrated by a coach or authority figure. These findings align with international safeguarding frameworks identifying psychological violence as the most frequently reported form of interpersonal harm in sport systems (Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2024; Khomutova et al., 2025). Despite this, empirical work has less often examined how violence exposure relates to athletes' perceptions of coaching effectiveness and relationship quality—two constructs central to sport performance, engagement, and well-being.

Theoretical Framework

Ecological and relational frameworks conceptualize athlete maltreatment as emerging from interactions across multiple levels of the sport environment (Parent & Fortier, 2018). At the microsystem level, the coach–athlete dyad is shaped by dependency, limited athlete autonomy, and power asymmetry. At broader levels, organizational norms, talent pathways, funding structures, and cultural discourses of sacrifice and toughness may reinforce compliance and silence. Within this context, emotionally abusive coaching may function as both interpersonal harm and institutionalized practice. Examining perceived coaching efficacy and relationship quality alongside violence exposure provides a relationally grounded way to understand how maltreatment may erode both technical and interpersonal evaluations of the coach.

Key Constructs and Study Rationale

Coaching efficacy reflects an athlete's perception of their coach's competence in areas such as motivation, strategy, technique, and character-building (Feltz et al., 1999). Coach-athlete relationship quality reflects perceived closeness, mutual commitment, and cooperative functioning within the relationship (Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004). Both constructs have implications for athlete well-being, help-seeking, and the broader relational climate of sport. Although related, they capture different parts of the coaching experience: perceived coaching efficacy concerns what athletes believe a coach can do, whereas relationship quality concerns how the athlete experiences the relational bond. A coach may be perceived as technically knowledgeable while also creating an unsafe or harmful relationship. Examining both constructs therefore helps clarify whether violence is associated primarily with athletes' relational evaluations, their broader evaluations of coaching competence, or both. Existing VTAQ research has examined correlates of violence including conformity to sport-ethic norms (Fournier et al., 2022) but has less often examined coaching efficacy and relationship quality together.

Retired athletes may be particularly well positioned to evaluate past coaching dynamics because recognition of maltreatment can emerge retrospectively. At the height of active careers, athletes may rationalize harmful practices as performance necessities or interpret abuse through a lens of personal responsibility (Stirling, 2011). Research with former elite child athletes has demonstrated that emotionally abusive coaching experiences can be identified and described retrospectively (Gervis & Dunn, 2004). Although retrospective designs introduce potential concerns regarding recall bias, memories associated with extreme emotion may be less likely to fade over time (Yonelinas & Ritchey, 2015).

Research Questions

The present study addressed three research questions. First, were higher levels of coach-perpetrated psychological violence/neglect, physical violence, or sexual violence associated with lower perceived coaching efficacy? Second, were higher levels of coach-perpetrated violence associated with lower perceived coach-athlete relationship quality? Third, was perceived coaching efficacy positively associated with perceived relationship quality among retired elite athletes?

METHOD

Participants

This study was approved by the authors' university institutional review board and was conducted in accordance with Standard 8 of the APA Ethics Code (APA, 2010). Based on a two-tailed correlation with $\alpha = .05$, power of .80, and an anticipated correlation of $r = .30$, the minimum required sample size was 84. Available sample sizes for the primary correlations ranged from 102 to 109 and exceeded this threshold. The final sample comprised 128 retired elite athletes who reported competing at the national or international level. Eligibility criteria required participants to be at least 18 years old, retired from their sport, trained in the United States, able to understand written English at or above an eighth-grade level, and willing to provide informed consent. Fifteen participants did not provide CART-Q, CES, or VTAQ-C data; 113 contributed data to at least one primary measure. Descriptive characteristics of the enrolled sample are presented in Table 1. Valid sample sizes are reported for each analysis.

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of Sample

		<i>n</i>	Valid %
Age (years; valid <i>n</i> = 127; missing = 1)			
	27-30	58	45.7%
	23-26	31	24.4%

	31-35	11	8.7%
	55+ ^a	9	7.1%
	41-45	5	3.9%
	36-40	4	3.1%
	18-22	4	3.1%
	51-55	3	2.4%
	46-50	2	1.6%
	Prefer not to say	0	0.0%
Sex (valid $n = 127$; missing = 1)			
	Female	64	50.4%
	Male	63	49.6%
	Prefer not to say	0	0.0%
	Other	0	0.0%
	Intersex	0	0.0%
Gender (valid $n = 127$; missing = 1)			
	Woman	64	50.4%
	Man	63	49.6%
	Prefer not to say	0	0.0%
	Other	0	0.0%
	Transgender	0	0.0%
	Gender expansive	0	0.0%
	Non-binary	0	0.0%
Race (valid $n = 128$; missing = 0)			
	White	106	82.8%
	Other	15	11.7%
	Black	5	3.9%
	Asian	2	1.6%
	Hawaiian	0	0.0%

	Native	0	0.0%
Ethnicity (valid $n = 122$; missing = 6)			
	Not Hispanic	96	78.7%
	Other	16	13.1%
	Hispanic	10	8.2%
	Prefer not to say	0	0.0%
	Latinx	0	0.0%
Sport (valid $n = 116$; missing = 12)			
	Ball/puck sports (e.g., baseball, hockey, football, rugby, volleyball, basketball)	71	61.2%
	Performance competition (e.g., dance, gymnastics, ice skating, competitive cheer)	23	19.8%
	Endurance (e.g., track, cycling, swimming)	17	14.7%
	Other	4	3.4%
	Extreme sports (e.g., skiing, snowboarding)	1	0.9%
	Combat (e.g., boxing, martial arts)	0	0.0%
	Prefer not to say	0	0.0%
Age at start of athletic career (years; valid $n = 125$; missing = 3)			
	5-10	68	54.4%
	11-15	26	20.8%
	4 or under	26	20.8%
	18+	3	2.4%
	16-18	2	1.6%
	Prefer not to say	0	0.0%
Career Length (years; valid $n = 125$; missing = 3)			
	11-15	40	32.0%
	16-20	34	27.2%
	5-10	30	24.0%
	20+	16	12.8%
	0-4	5	4.0%

	Prefer not to say	0	0.0%
Years Since Retirement (years; valid $n = 125$; missing = 3)			
	4-6	47	37.6%
	7-10	33	26.4%
	1-3	19	15.2%
	20+	12	9.6%
	15-20	6	4.8%
	11-14	5	4.0%
	Less than 1	3	2.4%
	Prefer not to say	0	0.0%
Highest Level of Competition (valid $n = 114$; missing = 14)			
	NCAA I	54	47.4%
	Professional League	15	13.2%
	Club	14	12.3%
	NCAA III	11	9.6%
	Other	7	6.1%
	NCAA II	7	6.1%
	NAIA	4	3.5%
	NJCAA III	1	0.9%
	NJCAA I	1	0.9%
	Prefer not to say	0	0.0%
	NJCAA II	0	0.0%

Note. Percentages reflect valid responses for each item; missing responses were excluded from percentage calculations. ^aBecause of a survey-programming error, the oldest age category was displayed as 55+ rather than the intended 56+. Consequently, age 55 appeared in two response categories. Responses are reported according to the categories selected by participants.

Recruitment and Procedure

Participants were recruited through professional mailing lists, alumni networks, athlete organizations, and social media outreach. Interested individuals accessed a Qualtrics survey after reading an informed consent document emphasizing voluntary participation and confidentiality. The survey required approximately 30 minutes to complete and included demographic questions and three measures. Participants were instructed to think about the most influential coach they had throughout their athletic career and to use that same coach when answering

the CART-Q, modified CES, and VTAQ-C. Participants were offered the option to enter a \$50 Visa gift-card raffle. Mental health resources were provided following survey completion.

Measures

Violence Toward Athletes Questionnaire – Coach Version (VTAQ-C)

The VTAQ-C (Parent et al., 2019) comprises 36 items assessing psychological violence/neglect (16 items), physical violence (9 items), and sexual violence (11 items) perpetrated by coaches. Items are rated on a 4-point scale from 0 (never) to 3 (often, more than 10 times). Stored response codes were converted to the stated 0–3 scale before analysis. Mean subscale scores were computed when all items in the relevant subscale were completed; higher scores indicate more frequent violence. Internal consistency in this sample was good for psychological violence/neglect ($\alpha = .90$), acceptable for physical violence ($\alpha = .77$), and low for sexual violence ($\alpha = .38$). The low sexual-violence coefficient should be considered in light of the low prevalence and restricted item variance.

Coach–Athlete Relationship Questionnaire (CART-Q)

The CART-Q (Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004) consists of 11 items measuring closeness, commitment, and complementarity within the coach–athlete relationship. Items are rated on a 7-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). A global mean score was computed when all items were completed; higher scores reflect better perceived relationship quality. Internal consistency of the global score was excellent in this sample ($\alpha = .96$).

Coaching Efficacy Scale – Modified (CES)

The CES (Feltz et al., 1999) was adapted to assess athletes' perceptions by modifying the wording to reflect evaluation of the coach (e.g., "My coach is confident in..."). Participants were asked to rate how confident they were in their most influential coach's capabilities. The 24 items assess motivation, game strategy, technique, and character-building efficacy, rated from 0 (not confident at all) to 9 (very confident). Stored response codes were converted to the stated 0–9 scale before analysis. An overall perceived coaching efficacy score was computed when all items were completed. Internal consistency was excellent in this sample ($\alpha = .98$). Because the respondent perspective was changed, scores are interpreted as athlete-perceived coaching efficacy rather than coach self-efficacy.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics for Macintosh, Version 27.0.1.0. Of the 128 participants retained in the sample, 113 provided data on at least one primary measure. No missing values were imputed. Mean scale and subscale scores were computed when all items required for the relevant score were completed. Available-case analysis was used so that participants with valid scores for both variables contributed to each correlation; therefore, sample size varied by variable pair.

Analyses were aligned with the study's correlational research questions and were intended to characterize the magnitude and direction of associations rather than estimate unique predictive effects among variables measured concurrently. The VTAQ-C subscales were retained on their frequency-based metric because dichotomizing participants into no-exposure and any-exposure groups would discard information about the frequency of reported experiences. Pearson product-moment correlations (two-tailed) were conducted to examine associations among coach-perpetrated psychological violence/neglect, physical violence, sexual violence, athletes' perceived coaching efficacy, and coach–athlete relationship quality. Ninety-five percent confidence intervals for correlations were computed using Fisher's *r*-to-*z* transformation (Schober et al., 2018). Because the violence variables were positively skewed and contained many zero values, Spearman correlations were also examined as sensitivity analyses. Statistical significance was set at $\alpha = .05$.

RESULTS

Preliminary analyses. Data were screened for univariate outliers and distributional shape. The violence variables, particularly sexual violence, were positively skewed and contained many zero values. One extreme sexual-violence score was identified ($z = 5.18$). Pearson correlations were examined with and without this case, and the results were substantively unchanged; therefore, all cases were retained. Spearman correlations were also examined as sensitivity analyses and were similar in direction and statistical significance to the Pearson correlations. Accordingly, Pearson correlations are reported as the primary analyses.

Descriptive Statistics

Psychological violence/neglect demonstrated the highest mean subscale score ($M = 0.47$, $SD = 0.50$), followed by physical violence ($M = 0.24$, $SD = 0.33$) and sexual violence ($M = 0.05$, $SD = 0.11$). Mean perceived coaching efficacy was 7.26 ($SD = 1.66$), and mean coach–athlete relationship quality was 5.61 ($SD = 1.34$).

Correlational Analyses

All three forms of coach-perpetrated violence were significantly and negatively associated with perceived coaching efficacy and coach–athlete relationship quality. Psychological violence/neglect was negatively associated with perceived coaching efficacy, $r(102) = -.57$, 95% CI $[-.69, -.42]$, $p < .001$, $r^2 = .32$ ($n = 104$), and relationship quality, $r(105) = -.46$, 95% CI $[-.60, -.29]$, $p < .001$, $r^2 = .21$ ($n = 107$). Physical violence was negatively associated with perceived coaching efficacy, $r(104) = -.31$, 95% CI $[-.47, -.12]$, $p = .001$, $r^2 = .09$ ($n = 106$), and relationship quality, $r(107) = -.23$, 95% CI $[-.40, -.05]$, $p = .015$, $r^2 = .05$ ($n = 109$). Sexual violence was negatively associated with perceived coaching efficacy, $r(100) = -.56$, 95% CI $[-.68, -.41]$, $p < .001$, $r^2 = .31$ ($n = 102$), and relationship quality, $r(103) = -.45$, 95% CI $[-.59, -.28]$, $p < .001$, $r^2 = .20$ ($n = 105$). The three violence subscales were positively intercorrelated ($rs = .46-.71$). Perceived coaching efficacy and coach–athlete relationship quality were positively associated, $r(104) = .73$, 95% CI $[.62, .81]$, $p < .001$, $r^2 = .53$ ($n = 106$) (see Table 2).

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlations Among Study Variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1. Psychological violence/neglect	0.47	0.50	—				
2. Physical violence	0.24	0.33	.71*** [.60, .79]	—			
3. Sexual violence	0.05	0.11	.59*** [.45, .70]	.46*** [.30, .60]	—		
4. Perceived coaching efficacy	7.26	1.66	-.57*** [-.69, -.42]	-.31** [-.47, -.12]	-.56*** [-.68, -.41]	—	
5. Relationship quality	5.61	1.34	-.46*** [-.60, -.29]	-.23* [-.40, -.05]	-.45*** [-.59, -.28]	.73*** [.62, .81]	—

Note. Values are Pearson correlations with 95% confidence intervals in brackets. Available-case analysis was used; pairwise sample sizes ranged from 102 to 109. Confidence intervals for r were computed using Fisher's r -to- z transformation. Scale means are reported on their stated metrics: VTAQ-C = 0–3, perceived coaching efficacy = 0–9, and relationship quality = 1–7. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Findings

This study provides quantitative evidence linking coach-perpetrated psychological violence/neglect, physical violence, and sexual violence with lower perceptions of coaching efficacy and lower-quality coach–athlete relationships among retired elite athletes. The strong positive correlation between perceived coaching efficacy and relationship quality indicates that athletes’ evaluations of coaching competence and relational quality were closely related. The three forms of violence were also positively intercorrelated, indicating that their separate bivariate associations should not be interpreted as independent effects. These findings extend qualitative research describing the emotional, relational, and performance-related consequences of emotionally abusive coaching (Stirling, 2011; Kerr & Stirling, 2012).

Interpretation and Theoretical Implications

Findings are consistent with ecological perspectives on athlete maltreatment, which emphasize how power asymmetries and performance-driven sport environments can sustain harmful coaching behaviors (Parent & Fortier, 2018). Notably, the strongest associations emerged for psychological violence/neglect and sexual violence, whereas physical violence showed smaller associations. Participants who reported greater exposure to coach-perpetrated violence also evaluated both the coach’s effectiveness and the relational climate of the dyad more negatively. The strong positive correlation between perceived coaching efficacy and relationship quality suggests that athletes’ evaluations of coaching competence and the relational quality of the coach–athlete relationship are closely connected. Athletes may not fully compartmentalize “competence” and “relationship” when evaluating coaches; however, the cross-sectional design cannot determine whether these domains mutually reinforce one another.

Implications for Clinical Sport Psychology

These findings support the clinical utility of assessing coaching relational history during intake and case formulation, particularly when athletes present with performance concerns (e.g., confidence, motivation, or burnout). Brief, targeted questions about coaching dynamics (e.g., responses to mistakes, use of humiliation or threats, psychological safety) may help clinicians identify whether harmful coaching experiences could be relevant to current distress. A low rating of relationship quality or coaching efficacy should not be treated as proof of maltreatment; assessment should focus on specific behaviors, context, and the athlete’s interpretation. When indicated, interventions may incorporate psychoeducation about emotional abuse and trauma-informed approaches while remaining responsive to the individual athlete’s needs.

Applied Implications for Coaches and Sport Organizations

At an applied level, results underscore the importance of safeguarding policies and coach education that explicitly address psychological violence and neglect, not only physical and sexual harm. Coach training that emphasizes relational competencies (e.g., autonomy-supportive communication, constructive feedback, emotional regulation) may be particularly relevant, given the bivariate links between violence exposure and both relational and perceived competence outcomes. However, the present study did not evaluate coach training, reporting systems, or organizational interventions; these recommendations are informed by the broader safeguarding literature rather than directly tested here.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations should be considered. Data were retrospective and self-reported, which may introduce recall, response, and common-method biases, and the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference. Although participants answered all three measures with reference to their most influential coach, the meaning of “most influential” was subjective and may not have identified their most problematic coach. Of the 128 enrolled participants, 15 did not provide primary-measure data. A survey-programming error resulted in overlapping descriptive age categories at age 55; age was not included in the primary analyses. Available-case analysis

retained all usable responses but produced varying sample sizes across correlations. The sample was predominantly White and U.S.-trained, limiting generalizability. The CES was adapted from coach self-report to athlete report, and further validation of this adaptation is needed. The sexual-violence subscale also demonstrated low internal consistency and limited variability; findings involving this score should therefore be interpreted cautiously.

Future research should use longitudinal and more diverse samples, examine potential moderators (e.g., sport type, gender, developmental stage, and organizational context), and recruit samples large enough to model less prevalent forms of violence. Future studies should also further validate athlete-rated coaching efficacy and examine whether coaching efficacy and relationship quality have distinguishable roles across different sport environments.

CONCLUSION

Coach-perpetrated psychological violence/neglect, physical violence, and sexual violence were associated with lower perceived coaching efficacy and poorer coach–athlete relationship quality among retired elite athletes. Perceived coaching efficacy and relationship quality were also strongly related, suggesting that athletes' evaluations of coaching competence and the relational quality of the coach–athlete relationship are closely connected. For clinical sport psychologists, assessing specific coaching behaviors may strengthen case formulation when coaching history is relevant. These retrospective findings do not establish causal effects and require replication in larger, more diverse samples.

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