Soccer Coaches' Leadership Styles and Compatibility with Youth Players

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ABSTRACT:
It is important to analyze whether the way soccer players perceive the leadership of their coaches is related to the compatibility they assume about coaches. Studies on Brazilian soccer about this topic are still few. Thus, this study has three objectives: (a) analyze whether the compatibility between coaches and players differs depending on the coaches' leadership styles; (b) analyze whether the compatibility between coach and players differs depending on the closer approximation between the current and preferred behaviors of coaches perceived by players, and (c) analyze if players' perception about the leadership styles of the coaches changes according to the age of the players. The evaluation protocol included the Multidimensional Scale of Leadership in Sport and the Coach-Athlete Compatibility Measure. One hundred and eighteen young players from five elite Brazilian football clubs participated in the study. Players who evaluated more positively the leadership styles of their coaches assumed higher compatibility with the coaches, and this result did not change according to the players' age. In conclusion, the way players perceive their coaches' leadership is related to their compatibility with the coaches, being necessary to improve coaches' leadership styles.

Estilos de liderança e compatibilidade entre treinadores e jovens atletas de futebol

RESUMO:
É importante analisar se a forma como os jogadores de futebol percebem a liderança dos seus treinadores está relacionada com a compatibilidade que assumem relativamente aos treinadores. Os estudos sobre este tema no futebol brasileiro ainda são incipientes. Assim, este estudo tem três objetivos: (a) analisar se a compatibilidade entre treinador e jogadores difere em função dos estilos de liderança dos treinadores; (b) analisar se a compatibilidade entre treinador e jogadores difere em função dos atletas perceberem maior aproximação entre os comportamentos atuais e preferidos dos treinadores e (c) analisar se a perceção dos jogadores sobre os estilos de liderança dos treinadores muda de acordo com a idade dos jogadores. O protocolo de avaliação incluiu a Escala Multidimensional de Liderança no Desporto e a Medida de Compatibilidade Treinador-Atleta. Participaram no estudo jogadores de cinco clubes da elite do futebol brasileiro. Os atletas que avaliaram mais positivamente os estilos de liderança dos treinadores assumiram maior compatibilidade relativamente aos treinadores, sendo que este resultado não variou em função da idade dos atletas. Em conclusão, a forma como os jogadores percebem a liderança dos seus treinadores está relacionada com a compatibilidade com os treinadores, sendo importante melhorar os estilos de liderança dos treinadores.

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The large investments and pressure for results in soccer require the constant remodeling of clubs, demanding an optimized management model (Rebustini & Machado, 2020). For example, companies paid US$40 million to be an official partner in the 2006 FIFA's World Cup (Collin & MacKenzie, 2006). The management of clubs includes undertaking the training of players, and considering the expectations of fans, the press, and partners (Rebustini & Machado, 2020). One important figure involved in the management process of clubs is the coach. Coaches must possess technical and pedagogical skills, to structure sports training programs, where their ability to lead players and teams is very important (González-García, Martinent, & Nicolas, 2021; Resende, 2013; Resende & Gomes, 2020). Leadership is popularly defined as a behavioral process assumed by coaches to influence their teams and their players towards certain goals (Barrow, 1977) to increase athlete satisfaction and performance (Chelladurai & Riemer, 1998). In the case of youth soccer players, in addition to the natural functions of technical and tactical guidance, the coach has the role of stimulating the integral development of young players in terms of mental, cognitive, emotional, and social skills (Moioli & Machado, 2018; Newman et al., 2021). In this sense, it is important to analyze the extent to which players perceive their coaches' leadership and to what extent more positive leadership styles can contribute to a better relationship between coaches and players. This aspect is even more important with younger players, as they are developing physiologically and psychologically. The coach's leadership styles are decisive in the learning and development of young people, not only from a motor and physical point of view, but also from an emotional, cognitive, intellectual, and relational point of view (Gomes & Machado, 2010; Knight, Harwood, & Gould, 2017; Vealey & Chase, 2015). The literature reinforces that certain leadership styles, as is the case of transformational leadership, are more related with subjective wellbeing and performance of followers when compared with other types of leadership, as is the case of transactional leadership (Birasnav, 2014; Gomes & Resende, 2014; Rowold, 2006). This occurs due to the nature of both forms of leadership. Transformational leadership stimulate and inspire subordinates toward a positive and challenging vision that increases their efforts until a point where extraordinary results can be achieved. On the other hand, transactional leadership refers to a social exchange relationship between the leaders that define the tasks and goals to be achieved and the followers who accept to execute the tasks in exchange for some material or psychological compensation (Bass, 1985).

Consequently, it is important to understand whether the way players perceive the leadership of their coaches is related to the greater compatibility they assume about coaches. Studies on Brazilian soccer are still incipient, with little work done with coaches of young soccer categories (Conceição Junior et al., 2021). Consequently, it is important to understand how young players (especially in elite clubs who frequently are away from their families) perceive the leadership of their coaches and who this leadership can contribute to their relationship. In this study, the possible relationships between leadership styles and coach-player compatibility were analyzed. Leadership styles is defined as the specific behaviors used by coaches to achieve a specific goal when leading players, teams, organizations, and even communities and societies (Gomes, 2020). Compatibility is defined as the proximity between the way of being, thinking, and acting of the coaches and the players, in terms of personality, values, ideas, opinions, and behaviors (Gomes & Paiva, 2010). In other words, this study analyzed if the players' perception of coaches' leadership styles impacts the compatibility players manifest toward their coaches. To analyze this question, three objectives were established for the present study:

(a) Analyze whether the compatibility between coaches and players differs depending on the leadership styles of coaches.

(b) Analyze whether the compatibility between coaches and players differs depending on the closest approximation between the current and preferred behaviors of coaches perceived by players.

(c) Analyze if the perception about coaches' leadership styles changes according to players' age.

Considering these objectives, the hypotheses were:

(1) Players who perceive their coaches' leadership styles more positively assume higher compatibility with their coaches.

(2) Players who perceive a closer relationship between current and preferred behaviors in coaches' leadership styles assume higher compatibility with coaches.

(3) The perception about coaches' leadership styles changes according to players' age.

Methodology

Participants

The sample for this study was convenient as researchers had previous contact established with teams and these teams agreed to participate in the study. The study was carried out with 118 male soccer players from the categories under 15 (U-15; $n=50$); under 17 (U-17; $n=24$), and under 20 (U-20; $n=44$) of five professional clubs regularly registered with State Federations, and which had participated in

official high-performance Brazilian soccer tournaments. The competitive period comprised the 2019/20 season, adding up to approximately 10 months of training and competition promoted by the main state league. In view of the developments caused by the COVID 19 pandemic, the teams had their official activities suspended and, in the face of this challenge, the application of the questionnaire was carried out remotely without the occurrence of matches in this period. The inclusion criteria were: (a) be players and coaches in the following categories: U-15; U-17 and U-20; (b) be linked to the teams of professional clubs and regularly registered with State Football Federations; and (c) be active for at least 2 seasons in high-performance teams competing in official tournaments (of first and second division). All participants were informed about the purpose and characteristics of the study (by Declaration Helsinki of 1975) and asked to sign the informed consent form, which was approved by the University Research Ethics Committee - CAAE: 26193519.9.0000.5512.

Instruments

In this study, we utilized two instruments to evaluate the youth soccer players: the Multidimensional Scale of Leadership in Sport (MSLS) and the Coach-Athlete Compatibility Measure (CACM), as detailed below.

Multidimensional Scale of Leadership in Sport (MSLS; Gomes & Resende, 2014). The scale has been used previously in youth soccer players (Gomes et al., 2021). The MSLS allows the evaluation of players' perception of the behaviors assumed by their coaches, in nine leadership factors: (a) Vision (stimulation of a promising and positive future); (b) Inspiration (stimulation of the desire to give the best to achieve success); (c) Instruction (stimulation of players' abilities); (d) Individualization (consideration of players' personal needs and expectations); (e) Support (stimulation of frank and informal relationship with players); (f) Positive feedback (reinforcement of the correct actions taken by players); (g) Negative feedback (punishment of incorrect actions taken by players); (h) Active management (stimulation of the players' participation in the decisions to be taken); and (i) Passive management (delaying important decisions). For each of the nine factors, there are four questions answered on a five-point "Likert" scale (1 = *Never*; 5 = *Always*), totaling 36 questions. The score for each factor is obtained by adding the answers to the four respective questions and dividing the final value by four. The values were used to calculate the Optimal Leadership Profile Index (OPLI), detailed in the statistical analyses.

Coach-Athlete Compatibility Measure (CACM; Gomes, 2008; Gomes & Paiva, 2010). This instrument was developed from the work of Kenow

and Williams (1999) and Williams et al. (2003). It assesses the consonance and compatibility between coaches and players in professional and personal areas (behaviors, values, ideas, personality, and opinion) on a nine-point "Likert" scale (1 = *Not at all compatible*; 9 = *Very compatible*). The 'score' is calculated by averaging the values of the five items. Higher scores mean higher values of compatibility between coaches and players.

Procedures
The invitation to participate in the study was carried out through physical or electronic correspondence, according to the availability of the participant. Initially, contact was made with the technical coordinator of the teams who were asked for permission to contact possible participants. After approval, players and coaches were invited to participate in the study and instructed to use specific groups created in the WhatsApp application for communication. COVID-19 social distancing guidelines were considered for data collection. An online platform (Google Forms) was used for the distribution and collection of questionnaires (more information available per request). The collection period took place between June and July 2020.

Data quality
The test-retest reliability for the MSLS and the Cohen's Kappa coefficient (Cohen, 1968) results showed moderate reliability for replicating the questionnaire online (Kappa=0.490; p<0.001).

Statistical Analysis
For objective 1 of this study (analyze whether the compatibility between coaches and players differs depending on the leadership styles of coaches), the OPLI was calculated through the results obtained in the MSLS. The OPLI was calculated based on nine MSLS factors, belonging to three dimensions: transformational (factors 1 to 5), transactional (factors 6 and 7), and decision-making (factors 8 and 9). The values related to factors "negative feedback" and "passive management" were inverted so that higher values in these items corresponded to a better leadership profile, as in the other seven factors. Thus, higher values in the OPLI mean a more positive leadership profile for coaches. After calculating the OPLI, two groups were created based on the median of the results: (1) high optimal leadership profile (OPLI≥3.89 points); and (2) low optimal leadership profile (OPLI<3.89 points). After this procedure, the overall CACM value (average of the five items [behaviors, values, ideas, personality, and opinions]) of compatibility between coaches and players was used to compare the two OPLI groups. For this objective, the independent *t-test* was used.
For objective 2 (analyze whether the compatibility between coaches and players differs depending on the closest approximation between the current and

preferred behaviors of coaches perceived by players), the following steps were taken: (1) inversion of the "negative" values of the current and preferred MSLS factors (negative feedback and passive management); (2) calculation of OPLI variable for current behaviors (already calculated and used in objective 1) and OPLI for preferred behaviors (already with the two factors inverted [negative feedback and passive management]); (3) subtraction of the values obtained in the preferred OPLI by the current OPLI, creating a new variable called Total-MSLS; (4) values closer to 0 indicate greater congruence in leadership styles, and the values obtained in the Total-MSLS were transformed into a modular variable (transforming the negative numbers into their positive mirror), the variable being designated by Total-MSLS-Modular; (5) calculation of the median of the Total-MSLS-Modular variable (1.00) was used to divide the participants into two groups: values equal to or above the median (0 = low congruence in leadership styles); and values lower than the median (1 = high congruence in leadership styles), designating the new variable as Total-MSLS-Modular-2-groups. For this objective, the independent *t-test* was used.

For objective 3 (analyze if the perception of coaches' leadership styles changes according to the age of the players), the current OPLI variable was used again, assuming the different subcategories to which the players belonged (U-15, U-17, and U-20) as an independent variable, applying Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) with Tukey's post-hoc test to find possible statistical differences. All analyzes were performed in the SPSS Software (version 28.0).

Results

Table 1 shows the descriptive results of the sample for each measure used in this study.

Table 1.
Descriptive Statistics of Variables in the Study

Variable	Mean	95% CI		SD	Median	Min.	Max.	Mean	95% CI		SD	Median	Min.	Max.
		LL	UL						LL	UL				
MSLS: Leadrship styles					*Actual behavior*							*Preferred behavior*		
Vision	3.9	3.7	4.1	0.9	4.0	1.8	5.0	4.3	4.1	4.4	0.9	4.5	2.0	5.0
Inspiration	4.4	4.3	4.5	0.6	4.5	2.0	5.0	4.6	4.5	4.7	0.6	4.8	2.0	5.0
Instruction	4.5	4.3	4.6	0.7	4.8	1.8	5.0	4.6	4.5	4.7	0.6	4.8	1.8	5.0
Individualization	4.5	4.4	4.6	0.7	4.8	2.0	5.0	4.6	4.5	4.7	0.6	4.8	2.0	5.0
Support	3.1	2.9	3.3	1.1	3.3	1.0	5.0	3.5	3.3	3.6	1.0	3.5	1.0	5.0
Positive feedback	4.0	3.8	4.1	0.7	4.0	2.0	5.0	4.3	4.2	4.5	0.7	4.5	2.0	5.0
Negative feedback	3.2	3.1	3.4	1.0	3.3	1.0	5.0	3.5	3.3	3.6	1.0	3.8	1.0	5.0
Active management	3.1	2.9	3.3	1.0	3.1	1.0	5.0	3.5	3.3	3.7	1.0	3.5	1.0	5.0
Passive management	1.6	1.4	1.7	0.6	1.3	1.0	3.8	1.6	1.5	1.8	0.7	1.5	1.0	5.0
OPLI: Optimal profile	5.2	4.8	5.6	2.0	5.0	0.0	9.0	5.8	5.5	6.2	1.9	6.0	1.0	9.0
CACM: Compatibility	7.3	7.1	7.5	1.2	7.4	2.6	9.0							
Behaviors	7.6	7.3	7.9	1.5	8.0	3.0	9.0							
Values	7.7	7.5	8.0	1.5	8.0	2.0	9.0							
Ideas	7.4	7.2	7.8	1.6	8.0	2.0	9.0							
Personality	6.5	6.2	6.9	1.9	7.0	1.0	9.0							
Opinion	7.0	6.7	7.3	1.4	7.0	3.0	9.0							

Note: CI=confidence interval; LL=lower limit; UL=upper limit; M*in*=minimum; Max=maximum.

Figure 1 presents the data related to the first objective of this study, observing the difference ($\Delta=-1.01$; $t=-5.001$; $p<0.001$) in Coach-Athlete Compatibility Measure (CACM) among players with low Optimal Leadership Profile Index (OPLI) ($n=60$; 6.78 ± 1.26), and high OPLI ($n=58$; 7.78 ± 0.86).

Figure 1.
Coach-Athlete Compatibility Differences according the OPLI
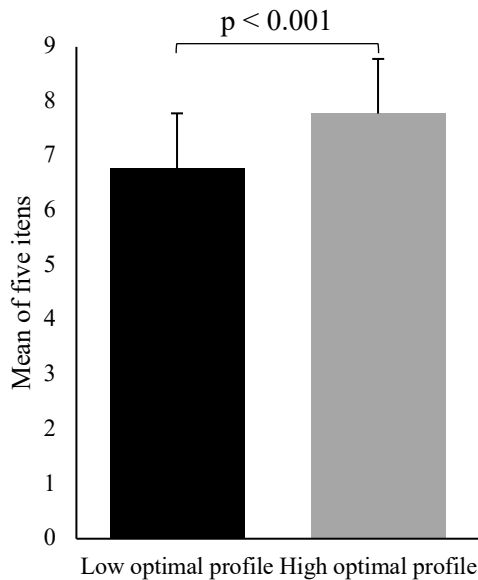
Note: the categories of the optimal profile were considered based on the median: low (OPLI<3.89) and high (OPLI≥3.89).

Figure 2 presents the data related to the second objective of this study, observing the difference ($\Delta=-0.65$; $t=-3.089$; $p=0.003$) of CACM among players with low congruence in leadership styles ($n=58$; 6.94 ± 1.29) and high congruence in leadership styles ($n=60$; 7.59 ± 0.99).

Figure 2.
Coach-Athlete Compatibility Differences According to the Actual and Preferred Behaviors of Coaches
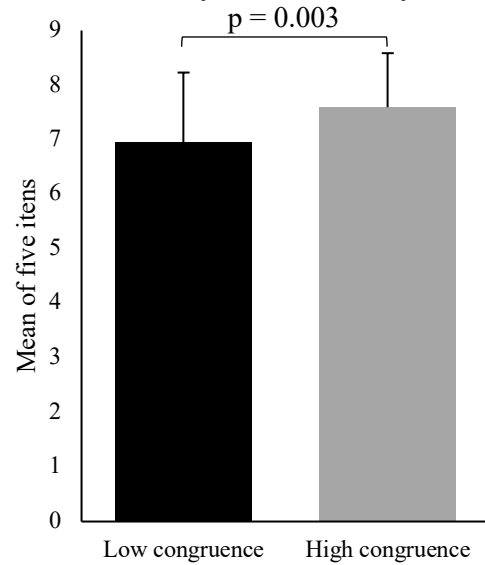
Note: the categories with the highest and lowest relationship were considered based on values equal to or above the median (1.00) of the Total-MSLS-Modular (0 = low congruence in leadership styles) and below this same median (1 = high congruence in leadership styles).

In the case of the third objective (see Figure 3), there were no significant differences in the comparison of the OPLI between the age subcategories ($F_{ANOVA}1.037$; $p=0.358$).

Figure 3.
Optimal Profile of Leadership Index (OPLI) According to Players' Age Subcategories.
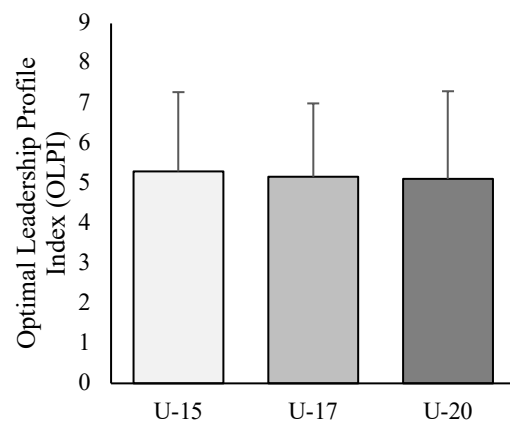
Discussion

The objectives of this study were to analyze: (a) whether the compatibility between coaches and players differs depending on the leadership styles of coaches; (b) whether the compatibility between coaches and players differs depending on the closest approximation between the current and preferred behaviors of coaches perceived by players; and (c) if the perception about coaches' leadership styles changes according to the players' age.

There are still few studies that have verified the perception of players about the leadership of their coaches in youth soccer teams, especially if the variables included in our study are considered. Gomes et al. (2008) studied 200 Portuguese players (30 women) from 11 to 36 years old who practice futsal and soccer and found that some preferred behaviors that were superior to the current ones assumed by players (as in our study) and verified differences between the players' ages in the perception of coaches' leadership behaviors (not verified in our study). Perhaps the reason that in our study it was not observed differences according to the players' age was the greater uniformity of our sample in terms of the path and sports experience, since our sample represents elite Brazilian football teams. In another study carried out by Correia and Silva (2017), with 107 (69 female) senior futsal players from the Portuguese national division, a positive and moderate relationship between the Coach-Athlete Compatibility Measure (CACM) and the players' perception of leadership (Optimal Leadership Profile Index-OPLI, in most Multidimensional Scale of Leadership in Sport-MSLS factors) was found, which corroborates our findings. Another study that corroborates our results (positive relationship between MSLS and CACM) was that of Resende et al. (2013), where MSLS factors explained between 57 and 73% of CACM variability. Also important, our data reveals that positive leadership styles (measured by the OPLI) corresponds to a higher compatibility between coaches and players. Research on organizational domains (Hobman et al., 2011; Singh et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2011) and sports domains (Callow, Smith, Hardy, Arthur, & Hardy, 2009; Rowold, 2006; Stenling & Tafvelin, 2014) reinforce the advantages of leaders and coaches who assume positive leadership styles, particularly the ones related to transformational leadership, in order to increase the positive impact on others. For example, Rowold (2006), in a study with martial arts athletes, found that transformational leadership adds unique variance beyond that of transactional leadership for predicting leader effectiveness.

Regarding the age of the players, our study found no differences between the leadership profile when the different age subcategories in elite players of Brazilian soccer were compared. As mentioned earlier, in the study of Gomes et al. (2008), carried out with Portuguese futsal and football players, there were differences between the sports levels (U-12, U-

14, U-16, U-18 and professionals) in some dimensions of the MSLS analyzed separately (p<0.001). In our study, no differences were found as a function of age, but it is also worth noting that in our study the data were compared only as a function of the OPLI (combining all factors), and therefore was not possible to specify each of the athletes perceived leadership factors. Marques (2012) also did not find differences in the MSLS factors between players of different subcategories, in the comparison between U-18 (n=90) and professionals (n=93) Portuguese soccer players. The only exception was the positive feedback, which was higher for the U-18. In another study, Jaria (2014) compared 314 federated soccer players from five clubs; when analyzing three age groups (U-14, between 14 and 18 years old, and over 18 years old), in almost all MSLS factors there was a reduction in scores as the players were older, corroborating our findings (although in our case, this decrease was not statistically significant).

Strengths and Limitations
A strength of the study was the sample size of professional soccer clubs (*n*=5; 25% of an entire elite league), with 118 players studied with a good representation of the Brazilian elite soccer.
One limitation was the cross-sectional nature of our study, which prevents the interpretation of cause-and-effect relationships. Future longitudinal studies are needed to verify whether the reductions in the leadership profile are consistent with the change of category of players. In addition, the tools used (MSLS and CACM) were applied remotely (via an online questionnaire), which may have reduced the reliability of the data obtained. However, the data was collected during the COVID-19 Pandemic, when there was physical social distancing in most of the club cities where players were.

Implications for Research and Practice
As implications for research, more studies must use the questionnaires applied in our study to trace and comprehend the perception of youth players about the leadership of their coaches. Future longitudinal studies need to verify the relationship of leadership indicators with the performance of clubs, analyzing the change in profiles during the season and the relationship with the competitive results.
As implications for practice, the application of the tools used in our study (MSLS and CACM) is encouraged to understand the leadership profile of coaches according to the players' perspective. This will allow to identify players who have perceived worse leadership profiles and less congruence with their coaches' ideas and goals. Intervening with these players to improve these indicators could contribute to an increase in the effectiveness of coaches' management of players. Additionally, the establishment of theses leadership profiles should be

done by sport psychology professionals who can also increase the ability of coaches to use positive and effective leadership styles to improve the compatibility between players and coaches.

Final Reflections

Participants in this study with lower OPLI (i.e., who rated their coaches' leadership styles more negatively) had lower levels of compatibility with their coaches' leadership ideas. However, players with higher OPLI assumed greater compatibility with the ideas of their coaches. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 of this study was confirmed. The same is true when players were distributed by the difference between current (as is) and preferred (as I would like it) behaviors of coaches' leadership styles. Players who portrayed the greatest difference in congruence (distance between what they like and what happens) had less compatibility with the coaches' ideas. On the other hand, those who had greater congruence also had greater compatibility with the coaches' leadership ideas. These results confirmed Hypothesis 2 of this study.

Elite Brazilian soccer players from youth categories assume greater compatibility with their coaches when coaches display more positive styles and leadership. The level of perceived leadership did not differ between age groups. These results did not confirm Hypothesis 3 of this study.

In sum, leadership styles are important to reinforce the compatibility between coaches and players, being important that sports clubs intervene with psychology professionals to improve the leadership of coaches and the subsequent compatibility with players.

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