

A Comparison of Coach-Related Emotional Maltreatment by Disability Status: A Study on Athletes With and Without Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The aim of this study is to investigate whether the levels of emotional maltreatment perceived by athletes from their coaches differ according to their disability status.

Method: The study was conducted using the comparative survey model, one of the quantitative research methods. The sample consisted of 64 athletes with physical disabilities (56 women, 8 men; $\bar{X}$ Age = 36.39 ± 11.83) and 69 able-bodied athletes (25 women, 44 men; $\bar{X}$ Age = 20.65 ± 2.55), totalling 133 athletes. The Coach-Athlete Relationship Emotional Maltreatment Scale, developed by Dietz, Casey, Stirling and Porter (2015) and adapted into Turkish by Çetin (2022), was used as the data collection tool. The SPSS 25.0 statistical software package was used for data analysis. In the analysis of the data obtained, the independent samples t-test was used for comparisons between the two groups, and Pearson's correlation analysis was used for correlational analyses.

Results: The research findings showed that non-disabled athletes scored significantly higher than disabled athletes on all sub-dimensions and the total score of the emotional maltreatment scale ($p < 0.05$). Furthermore, whilst a weak positive correlation was found between sporting age and the 'Embarrassing Behaviour' sub-dimension among able-bodied athletes ($r = 0.248$; $p < 0.05$), no significant correlation was found between sporting age and the other sub-dimensions or the total score. Among athletes with disabilities, however, no significant correlation was found between sporting age and 'emotional maltreatment' ($p > 0.05$).

Conclusion: These findings suggest that a more protective coaching approach may have been adopted towards athletes with disabilities in sporting environments, and that emotional maltreatment may vary depending on the sporting discipline.

Keywords: Emotional maltreatment, coaches' behaviour, athletes with disabilities, able-bodied athletes, the sporting environment

ÖZET

Antrenör Kaynaklı Duygusal Kötü Muamelenin Engel Durumuna Göre Karşılaştırılması: Engelli ve Engelsiz Sporcular Üzerine Bir Çalışma

Amaç: Bu araştırmanın amacı, sporcuların antrenörlerinden algıladıkları duygusal kötü muamele düzeylerinin engel durumuna göre farklılaşıp farklılaşmadığını incelemektir.

Yöntem: Araştırma nicel araştırma yöntemlerinden karşılaştırmalı tarama modeli kullanılarak gerçekleştirilmiştir. Araştırmanın örneklemini farklı branşlarda aktif olarak spor yapan 64 bedensel engelli sporcu (56 kadın, 8 erkek; $\bar{X}$ Yaş = $36,39 \pm 11,83$) ve 69 engelsiz sporcu (25 kadın, 44 erkek; $\bar{X}$ Yaş = $20,65 \pm 2,55$) olmak üzere toplamda 133 sporcu oluşturmaktadır. Veri toplama aracı olarak Dietz, Casey, Stirling ve Porter (2015) tarafından geliştirilen ve Çetin (2022) tarafından Türkçeye uyarlanan Antrenör-Sporcu İlişkisi Duygusal Kötü Muamele Ölçeği (ASİDKMÖ) kullanılmıştır. Verilerin analizi için SPSS 25.0 istatistik paket programı kullanılmıştır. Elde edilen verilerin analizinde iki grupta karşılaştırmalarda bağımsız gruplarda independent sample t- testi ve ilişki analizleri için pearson korelasyon analizi kullanılmıştır.

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Bulgular: Araştırma bulguları, engelli olmayan sporcuların duygusal kötü muamele ölçeğinin tüm alt boyutları ve genel toplam puanlarında engelli sporculara kıyasla anlamlı düzeyde daha yüksek puanlara sahip olduğunu göstermiştir ($p<0.05$). Ayrıca engelsiz sporcularda spor yaşı ile utandırıcı davranış alt boyutu arasında düşük düzeyde pozitif bir ilişki bulunurken ($r=0.248$; $p<0.05$), diğer alt boyutlar ve toplam puan ile spor yaşı arasında anlamlı bir ilişki tespit edilmemiştir. Engelli sporcularda ise spor yaşı ile duygusal kötü muamele arasında anlamlı bir ilişki bulunmamıştır ($p>0.05$).

Sonuç: Bu bulgular, spor ortamlarında engelli sporculara yönelik daha koruyucu bir antrenörlük yaklaşımının benimsenmiş olabileceğine ve duygusal kötü muamelenin spor branşı bağlamına göre farklılaşabileceğine işaret etmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Duygusal kötü muamele, antrenör davranışı, engelli sporcular, engelsiz sporcular, spor ortamı

INTRODUCTION

The sporting environment is a vital sphere of life that supports not only individuals' physical development but also their psychological, cognitive and social development (Malm et al., 2019). Coaches are one of the most significant factors determining the quality of this environment. When considering the potential benefits coaches can bring to an athlete's development, the coach-athlete relationship emerges as a significant area of research (Gervis and Dunn, 2004). A review of the literature indicates that coaches make significant contributions to athletes' performance development and support individual development dimensions such as self-esteem, self-awareness and commitment to sport (Pan and Sui, 2025). However, recent research also reveals that coaches can, at times, exhibit oppressive, authoritarian, and even abusive behaviour (Hagerty and Felizzi, 2023).

Types of maltreatment are categorised into four: physical maltreatment, sexual maltreatment, emotional maltreatment, and neglect. Of these, emotional maltreatment is the least researched. The main reasons for this include the fact that the perpetrator is often not acting with malicious intent, that psychological aggression is culturally accepted as normal, and that it is not considered an urgent matter requiring intervention (Brassard and Donovan, 2006). The normalisation of emotional maltreatment in sport and the embedding of such behaviours within sporting culture have made it a difficult problem to address (Kerr et al., 2020). In this context, the ambiguity of the boundaries of emotional maltreatment and the fact that it often leaves no visible physical marks have led to a need for a more conceptually inclusive framework. In this context, the concept of psychological maltreatment—which encompasses both emotional maltreatment and emotional neglect—has come to the fore (Stirling and Kerr, 2008).

Psychological maltreatment is defined as intentional actions that have the potential to cause psychological harm to individuals (Crooks and Wolfe, 2007). It is known that

maltreatment directed at athletes can be observed at every age and performance level, from adolescence to adulthood (Parent et al., 2016) and from grassroots (González-Hernández et al., 2025) to elite levels (Ohlert et al., 2021). It has been reported that psychological maltreatment increases levels of anxiety, anger, depression and dissatisfaction in athletes (Stirling and Kerr, 2013); triggers eating disorders and self-harming behaviours; and creates significant negative effects on general psychological well-being (Wilson et al., 2023). Nevertheless, it is known that such behaviours are often overlooked due to a fear of losing reputation or a lack of knowledge on the subject (Mountjoy et al., 2016).

Existing data from both sporting and non-sporting contexts indicate that people with disabilities are at high risk of being subjected to mistreatment (Young et al., 1997; Tuakli-Wosornu and Kirby, 2022). In the literature, this increased risk is explained by the care needs of people with disabilities, communication differences, and structural power imbalances that can become more pronounced in the coach–athlete relationship (Kirby et al., 2008). However, it is observed that empirical findings regarding the levels of exposure to emotional maltreatment, particularly that perpetrated by coaches, among athletes with disabilities are limited (Kirby et al., 2000), and that most existing studies focus on general types of maltreatment (Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2020).

In this context, the aim of the present study is to examine whether experiences of coach-perpetrated emotional maltreatment differ according to disability status. Accordingly, the levels of emotional maltreatment perceived by athletes with and without disabilities from their coaches will be compared to determine whether there is a significant difference between the two groups.

METHODS

Research Design

Cross-sectional studies are a research approach aimed at describing a situation as it exists, whether in the past or at present. The comparative survey model, on the other hand, aims to compare two or more groups in terms of specific variables (Karasar, 2017). As this study compares the experiences of emotional maltreatment by coaches among disabled and non-disabled athletes, it has been addressed within the framework of the comparative survey model.

Participants

A total of 133 athletes participated in the study, comprising 64 athletes with physical disabilities and 69 athletes without disabilities. The athletes' sporting experience and age details are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Mean ages and sporting experience of participants by disability status

		N	Min.	Max.	M	SD
Athletes with Disabilities	Age	64	17,00	62,00	36,390	11,827
	Sports Experience	64	1,00	30,00	9,640	5,587
Athletes without Disabilities	Age	69	18,00	30,00	20,652	2,548
	Sports Experience	69	1,00	14,00	6,536	3,428
All Participants	Age	133	17,00	62,00	28,225	11,507
	Sports Experience	133	1,00	30,00	8,030	4,835

The mean age of athletes with disabilities was 36.39 ± 11.83 , with a mean sporting career of 9.64 ± 5.59 ; for athletes without disabilities, the mean age was 20.65 ± 2.55 , and the average sporting age was 6.54 ± 3.43 ; for all athletes participating in the study, the average age was 28.23 ± 11.51 , and the average sporting age was 8.03 ± 4.84 .

Data Collection Methods and Tools

This research was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the Atatürk University Faculty of Sports Sciences Unit Ethics Committee at its meeting dated 25/05/2025, Decision No: E-70400699-050.02.04-2500166526.

The data collection tools used were a personal information form developed by the researchers and the Coach-Athlete Relationship Emotional Maltreatment Scale. The scale was developed by Dietz, Casey, Stirling and Porter (2015) and adapted into Turkish by Çetin (2022). It consists of 5 sub-dimensions ("performance-based disparagement", "direct personal disparagement", "embarrassing behaviours", "indirect personal disparagement", "intimidating behaviours") and 19 items. In the Turkish adaptation study of the scale, the Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficient for the overall scale was reported as .983, indicating a high level of internal consistency. As a result of the internal consistency analysis of the scale, the Cronbach Alpha value of the scale (total) was determined as $\alpha=0.857$, $\alpha=0.769$ for performance-based disparagement, $\alpha=0.813$ for direct personal disparagement, $\alpha=0.799$ for embarrassing behaviors, $\alpha=0.875$ for indirect personal disparagement, and $\alpha=0.804$ for intimidating behaviors.

Data Analysis

The SPSS 25.0 statistical analysis programme was used for the statistical analysis of the research data. Participants' demographic information was calculated as percentages (%) and frequencies (f). A normality test was conducted on the data. According to the results of the normality analysis, it was determined that the variables exhibited a normal distribution (+1.5, -1.5) (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2013). For the analyses, the independent samples t-test was used for comparisons between two groups, and Pearson's correlation analysis was used for correlational analyses. In terms of correlation, correlation coefficients ranging from 0.00 to 0.350 represent a low-level relationship, 0.350 to 0.700 a moderate-level relationship, and 0.700 to 1.000 a high-level relationship. The significance level for the study was set at $p < 0.05$.

RESULTS

Table 1. Distribution of demographic characteristics of the athletes participating in the study

Variables		Athletes with Disabilities		Athletes without Disabilities	
		f	%	f	%
Gender	Male	56	87,5	44	63,8
	Female	8	12,5	25	36,2
Level of Education	Primary education	6	9,4	1	1,4
	Secondary education	36	56,3	8	11,6
	University	18	28,1	57	82,6
	Postgraduate	4	6,3	3	4,3
Disability Status	Congenital	27	42,2	0	0
	Acquired	37	57,8	0	0

Table 1 shows that 87.5% (56) of the disabled athletes participating in the study were male and 12.5% (8) were female, whilst 63.8% (44) of the non-disabled athletes were male and 36.2% (25) were female.

Regarding the educational level of athletes with disabilities, it was found that 9.4% (6) had primary education, 56.3% (36) had secondary education, 28.1% (18) had university education, and 6.3% (4) had postgraduate education. Among non-disabled athletes, 1.4% (1) had primary education, 11.6% (8) had secondary education, 82.6% (57) had university education, and 4.3% (3) had postgraduate education.

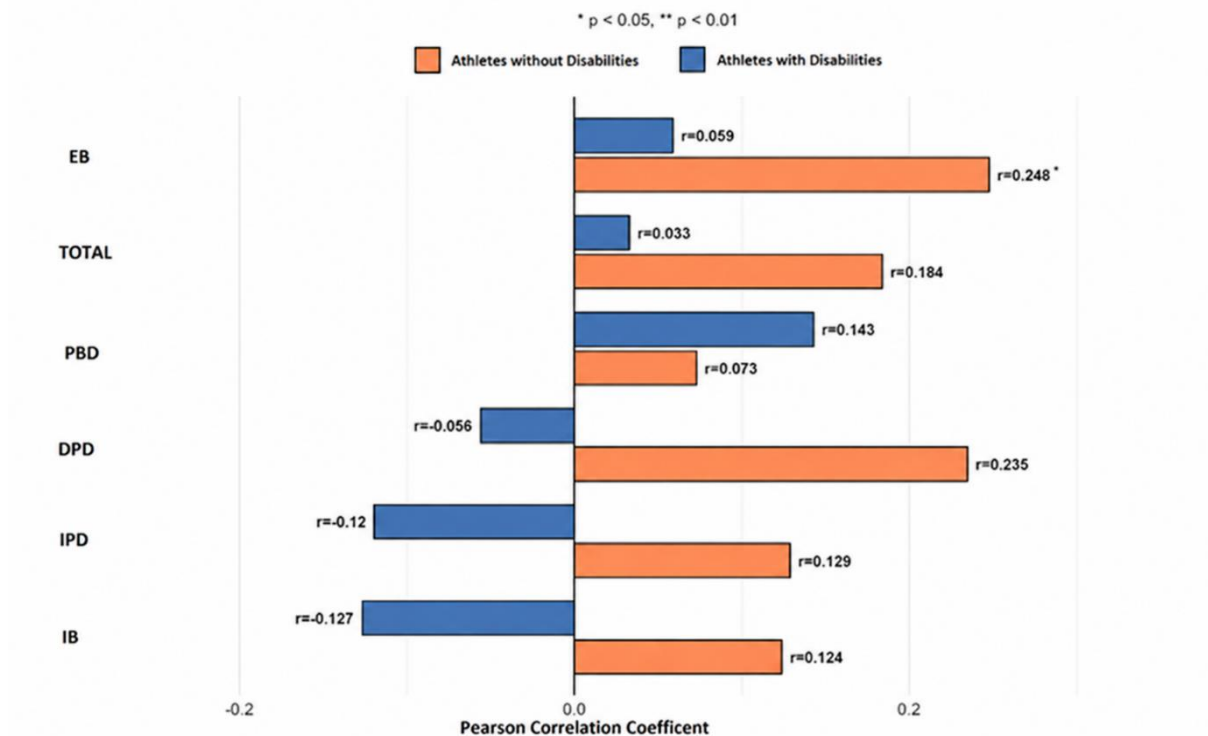
When the nature of the disability among athletes with disabilities was examined, it was determined that 42.2% (27) had a congenital disability, whilst 57.8% (37) had acquired a disability later in life. This variable did not apply to the group of athletes without disabilities (0).

Table 2. Analysis of the emotional maltreatment scale in the coach-athlete relationship according to the athletes' disability status

		N	M	SD	t	p	Cohen's d
PBD	Athletes with Disabilities	64	7,906	3,284			
	Athletes without Disabilities	69	12,498	4,776	-6,405	<,001*	-1,15
DPD	Athletes with Disabilities	64	4,609	1,569			
	Athletes without Disabilities	69	5,782	2,879	-2,886	,005*	-0,51
EB	Athletes with Disabilities	64	3,421	1,095			
	Athletes without Disabilities	69	4,318	2,186	-2,956	,004*	-0,53
IPD	Athletes with Disabilities	64	3,265	,781			
	Athletes without Disabilities	69	4,246	1,889	-3,857	<,001*	-0,67
IB	Athletes with Disabilities	64	3,312	1,110			
	Athletes without Disabilities	69	4,550	2,193	-4,059	<,001*	-0,72
CAREMS-TOTAL	Athletes with Disabilities	64	22,515	6,416			
	Athletes without Disabilities	69	31,391	11,345	-5,496	<,001*	-0,97

*p<0.05, PBD: Performance-Based Disparagement, DPD: Direct Personal Disparagement, EB: Embarrassing Behaviours, IPD: Indirect Personal Disparagement, IB: Intimidating Behaviours, CAREMS-TOTAL: Total score obtained from the scale. The M-value is the mean obtained by dividing the total score from each sub-factor on the scale by the number of items.

As shown in Table 2, when the emotional maltreatment scale in the coach-athlete relationship was analysed according to the athletes' disability status in terms of sub-factors and total score, significant differences were found in the PBD dimension (Performance-Based Disparagement), DPD (Direct Personal Disparagement), EB (Embarrassing Behaviours), IPD (Indirect Personal Disparagement), IB (Intimidating Behaviours) and the total score, significant differences were identified based on disability status (p<0.05). Based on these findings, it was observed that athletes without disabilities had higher mean scores across all sub-factors and the total scale score.



*p<0.05, PBD: Performance-Based Disparagement, DPD: Direct Personal Disparagement, EB: Embarrassing Behaviours, IPD: Indirect Personal Disparagement, IB: Intimidating Behaviours, TOTAL: Total score from the scale.

Figure 1. Analysis of the relationship between the athletes' sporting age and the emotional maltreatment scale in the coach-athlete relationship for athletes with and without disabilities

Looking at Figure 1, when examining the relationship between the sub-factors of the coach-athlete relationship emotional maltreatment scale and the scale's total score according to the sporting age of the participating athletes with and without disabilities, a significant correlation was found in the EB (Embarrassing Behaviours) sub-factor for athletes without disabilities ($p < 0.05$). This relationship was found to be positive and of a low magnitude ($r = 0.248$). Accordingly, it was observed that as the sporting age of non-disabled athletes increased, the scores they obtained on the EB sub-factor of the Coach-Athlete Relationship Emotional Maltreatment Scale also increased. However, for athletes without disabilities, no significant correlation was found between the total score of the scale and other sub-factors (PBD, DPD, IPD, IB) and sports age.

When examining the relationship between the sub-factors of the coach-athlete relationship emotional maltreatment scale and the scale's total score according to the athletes' sporting age (both disabled and non-disabled), it was found that there was no significant correlation between the scale's total score and any of its sub-factors ($p > 0.05$).

DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION

In the study, the levels of emotional maltreatment perceived by athletes from their coaches were assessed in relation to both the variables of sporting experience and disability status. The findings indicated that non-disabled athletes had higher average scores than disabled athletes across all sub-dimensions and the total score of the emotional maltreatment scale. However, despite the differences observed between the groups, the total and sub-dimension scores indicate that the levels of emotional maltreatment reported by both disabled and non-disabled athletes were generally low. Although statistically significant differences were found between the groups, it is noteworthy that emotional maltreatment scores were low in both groups. This indicates that the higher scores among athletes without disabilities do not necessarily imply a high level of emotional maltreatment in this group. The observed difference should therefore be considered as a difference between the groups within an overall pattern of low scores.

This result differs from studies suggesting that disabled athletes are at greater risk in the sporting environment compared to non-disabled athletes. These studies emphasise that athletes with disabilities may be more exposed to maltreatment due to various care requirements, power imbalances and communication differences (Kirby et al., 2008). The findings of the present study do not fully align with those in the literature. Nevertheless, the literature also suggests that emotional maltreatment in sport may be influenced by factors beyond disability status, and that athletes' experiences of maltreatment can differ according to individual and sport-related characteristics (Baykan, 2026). Thus, the higher scores observed among non-disabled athletes in the present study may reflect differences in the sporting context and in how coaching behaviours are experienced and perceived, rather than disability status alone. This result can be explained in several ways. Firstly, individuals with disabilities are perceived as more vulnerable than those without disabilities in sporting environments; this leads to greater consideration of the individual needs of disabled athletes and may result in coaches adopting a more sensitive, attentive and, at times, protective approach towards these athletes (Liu et al., 2024; Townsend et al., 2016). The concepts of athlete well-being and safe sport, which have been frequently used in sporting environments in recent years, may also have contributed to increased awareness regarding athletes with disabilities (Mountjoy et al., 2016). In this context, coaches behaving more carefully and supportively towards athletes with disabilities may have led to these athletes perceiving lower levels of emotional mistreatment.

Another possible reason relates to how athletes with disabilities perceive their coaches' behaviour. Athletes' attitudes towards mistreatment may vary depending on their identity characteristics (Wilson et al., 2023). This evidence is particularly relevant to the present findings because it indicates that disability status is not necessarily the sole factor associated with differences in perceived maltreatment and that individual characteristics may contribute to variation in athletes' experiences. For example, according to the findings of Çetin's (2023) study, male athletes were found to experience more coach-perpetrated emotional maltreatment than female athletes. The finding that emotional maltreatment may differ according to athlete characteristics provides further support for considering the higher scores of non-disabled athletes in the present study within a broader individual and contextual framework. As sport often serves as a means of social participation, psychosocial support (Al-Harashsheh et al., 2022) and rehabilitation (Winnick, 2017) for people with disabilities, this may have led athletes to evaluate coaches' behaviour in a more positive light.

Another finding of the study is that the relationship between sporting age and emotional maltreatment was significant only among able-bodied athletes and solely within the 'Embarrassing Behaviours' sub-dimension. Accordingly, it was determined that as the sporting age of able-bodied athletes increased, their perception of embarrassing behaviour also increased, albeit to a low degree. In their study, Gervis et al. (2016) suggested that the perception of emotional maltreatment varies according to the level of competition and performance. . This finding also provides a possible context for understanding why non-disabled athletes reported higher emotional maltreatment scores in the present study, particularly because exposure to different competition and performance environments may shape athletes' perceptions of coaching behaviours. This finding suggests that as athletes' sporting age increases, the diversification of the performance environments they are in may contribute to an increase in their perceptions of embarrassing behaviour in particular. In contrast, the absence of a significant relationship between sporting age and emotional maltreatment among disabled athletes is noteworthy. This situation may be explained by the fact that the coaching behaviours to which disabled athletes are exposed do not change as their sporting experience increases.

Overall, this study demonstrates that emotional maltreatment in sporting environments may vary not only according to individual characteristics but also depending on the sporting context and social dynamics. The findings suggest that, whilst the experiences of athletes with disabilities may be shaped within a more homogeneous and controlled structure, athletes

without disabilities may experience more negative experiences due to competition and performance pressures. However, considering the generally low emotional maltreatment scores observed in both groups, these findings should be interpreted as relative differences between the groups rather than as evidence of a high level of emotional maltreatment among non-disabled athletes. Accordingly, the findings highlight the importance of considering disability status together with individual characteristics, sporting experience and contextual factors when interpreting athletes' perceptions of emotional maltreatment.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this study is that data on sport-specific characteristics of the participants, such as sport discipline, participation in individual or team sports, and competition level, were not collected.

Suggestions

It is anticipated that future studies, conducted with larger samples and taking into account different sports disciplines, performance levels and age groups, will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of coach-perpetrated emotional maltreatment in sporting environments.

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