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# Exploring the Association Between Coach–Athlete Relationship and Sport Character in Combat Athletes

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**Abstract**
The aim of this study is to examine the coach-athlete relationship and sport character of the athletes. The level of the coach-athlete relationship is important in the development and consistently associated with fair play and ethical behaviors of the athlete. The sample consisted of 180 youth athletes (90 females, 90 males) competing in combat sports (boxing, kickboxing, Muay Thai, taekwondo, and wushu sanda), who were selected using convenience sampling, a non-random sampling method. In the study, demographic questions were asked to the participants and the Coach-Athlete Scale and Sport Character Scale were conducted. According to the findings there is a positive relationship between the coach-athlete relationship and sport character. As athletes' perceived levels of closeness, commitment, and complementarity toward their coaches increased, higher scores were observed in the sport character dimensions of honesty, sportsmanship, justice, and compassion. Also the coach-athlete relationship is higher between the ages of 11-17, and this commitment level gradually decreases as the age increases. The honesty attitudes of those aged younger are better than the honesty attitudes of those aged older, and that the honesty attitude and sport character decrease as age increases. The sport character, honesty, compassion and sportsmanship levels of those who are national athletes are at lower levels. These result is important in terms of seeing the effect of the coach on the athlete.

***Key words:*** *Coach-Athlete Relationship, Sport Character, Fair Play, Ethics, Coach*

# Dövüş Sporcularında Antrenör–Sporcu İlişkisi ile Spor Karakteri Arasındaki İlişkinin İncelenmesi

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**Özet**

Bu araştırmanın amacı, sporcuların antrenör–sporcu ilişkisi ile spor karakteri düzeylerini incelemektir. Antrenör–sporcu ilişkisi düzeyi, sporcunun gelişiminde önemli bir rol oynamakta ve fair play ile etik davranışlarla tutarlı biçimde ilişkili bulunmaktadır. Araştırma örneklemi, kolayda örnekleme yoluyla seçilen, dövüş sporlarıyla (boks, kick boks, Muay Thai, tekvando ve wushu sanda) uğraşan 180 sporcudan (90 kadın, 90 erkek) oluşmaktadır. Araştırmada katılımcılara demografik bilgi formu ile birlikte Antrenör–Sporcu İlişkisi Ölçeği ve Spor Karakteri Ölçeği uygulanmıştır. Elde edilen bulgulara göre, antrenör–sporcu ilişkisi ile spor karakteri arasında pozitif yönlü anlamlı bir ilişki bulunmaktadır. Sporcuların antrenörlerine yönelik algıladıkları yakınlık, bağlılık ve tamamlayıcılık düzeyleri arttıkça; dürüstlük, sportmenlik, adalet ve merhamet boyutlarına ait ölçek puanlarının da daha yüksek olduğu görülmüştür. Ayrıca antrenör–sporcu ilişkisinin 11–17 yaş aralığında daha yüksek olduğu, yaş ilerledikçe bu ilişkinin ve bağlılık düzeyinin kademeli olarak azaldığı belirlenmiştir. Daha genç yaş grubundaki sporcuların dürüstlük tutumlarının, daha ileri yaştaki sporculara kıyasla daha yüksek olduğu; yaş arttıkça dürüstlük tutumu ve genel spor karakteri düzeyinin azaldığı saptanmıştır. Milli sporcu olan bireylerin spor karakteri, dürüstlük, merhamet ve sportmenlik düzeylerinin ise daha düşük olduğu tespit edilmiştir. Bu sonuçlar, antrenörün sporcu üzerindeki etkisinin görülmesi açısından önemli bulgular sunmaktadır.

***Anahtar Kelimeler:*** *Antrenör–Sporcu İlişkisi, Spor Karakteri, Fair Play, Etik, Antrenör*

## Introduction

Coaches play a pivotal role in athletes' character development, acting as influential role models who shape not only athletic performance but also personal growth. This influence is particularly pronounced during childhood and adolescence, when attitudes and behaviors are more likely to crystallize into long-term habits (Güllü, 2018b). In both amateur and professional sport contexts, coaches influence athletes' performance, motivation, and overall development, extending beyond technical instruction to provide psychological, health-related, and ethical guidance (Short & Short, 2005; Ashley & Gretchen, 2009; Gorgulu, 2019; Kaur & Singh, 2019). Empirical evidence consistently shows that coaching leadership and communication shape athletes' motivation, performance, teamwork, and interactions with opponents (Vallerand et al., 2003; Altıntaş & Bayar, 2012; Jowett & Cockerill, 2002; Güllü, 2019; Güllü et al., 2020). In youth sport, these effects are even more pronounced, as the coach–athlete relationship predicts developmental outcomes and the adoption of fair play values (Cumming et al., 2007; Fry & Gano-Overway, 2010; Sarrazin et al., 2002; Güllü & Şahin, 2018). Accordingly, a high-quality coach–athlete relationship is associated with respect, motivation, and prosocial conduct, whereas negative interactions correspond to antisocial tendencies. Because athletes are especially sensitive to their coach's communication style and ethical stance, the relationship becomes a central mechanism through which sportsmanship and broader aspects of sport character are internalized (Güllü et al., 2021). Building on this premise, the present study investigates how the quality of the coach–athlete relationship relates to athletes' sport character.

Conceptually, the coach–athlete relationship reflects reciprocal influences on athletes' feelings, thoughts, and behaviors (Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004) and is operationalized through three core dimensions—closeness, commitment, and complementarity—each associated with trust, shared investment, and cooperative interaction (Jowett & Cockerill, 2002; Longakit et al., 2024; Abieraba, 2024; Jowett & Slade, 2021). Drawing on Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), Role Theory (Katz & Kahn, 1978), and Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969), Jowett's 3C model conceptualizes relationship quality as a dynamic and negotiated process grounded in reciprocity, emotional security, and clearly defined roles. This framework aligns closely with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), whereby closeness corresponds to relatedness, commitment reflects autonomy, and complementarity is linked to competence. Through these relational mechanisms, supportive coach–athlete relationships contribute to intrinsic motivation, prosocial behaviors, psychological safety, and engagement, while also reducing stress and burnout (Mehta, 2024; Bakar & Kassim, 2023; Weng & Cheng, 2023; Kuruzović & Đorić, 2023; Wang & Tong, 2024). At the same time, relational processes may be constrained by gender- or culture-based barriers and communication difficulties, underscoring that relationship quality is shaped by broader social contexts (Yuan, 2024; Gopalan et al., 2024).

Sport character refers to the internalization and display of moral and social values in sport-honesty, justice, compassion, sportsmanship, and resistance to antisocial behaviors (Lee et al., 2023; Jang, 2018). Unlike narrower constructs such as sportsmanship or fair play, it represents a broader moral framework grounded in moral reasoning and integrity (Kohlberg, 1976; Shields

& Bredemeier, 1995) and shaped by social, familial, and educational influences (Liu et al., 2023). Coaches and teachers play a major role in cultivating these values by modeling discipline, responsibility, teamwork, and honesty (Ansori et al., 2024). Structured sport and school programs can foster self-control and ethical reasoning, though their effectiveness depends on the values emphasized (Karve, 2015; Ansori et al., 2024). Thus, character education in sport requires intentional, value-driven instructional approaches (Lee et al., 2023).

Sport character is commonly assessed using Jang's (2013) Sport Character Scale (SCS), which captures honesty, justice, compassion, sportsmanship, and antisocial attitudes and has been adapted across diverse cultural contexts (Ogawa & Neves, 2020). Previous research indicates that demographic factors such as age, gender, and sport type shape character outcomes, highlighting the importance of context-sensitive approaches (Yildiz & Özmaden, 2020). A growing body of empirical evidence further demonstrates that supportive coach–athlete relationships are associated with higher sport character, prosocial behaviors, and fair play, whereas poorer relational climates relate to negative or antisocial tendencies (Behan et al., 2020; Kuruzović & Đorić, 2023; Mehta, 2024). Psychological safety has been identified as a key mediating mechanism in this association (Weng & Cheng, 2023), while relational qualities such as closeness and complementarity enhance confidence, engagement, and constructive behavior (Lajčin & Bočková, 2023). Moreover, coaching styles emphasizing empathy, ethical communication, and respect are linked to honesty, justice, and responsibility, whereas performance climates excessively focused on winning may undermine moral reasoning (Jowett et al., 2017; Yuan, 2024; Kim et al., 2018; Bakar & Kassim, 2023). Consistent with Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), mastery-oriented and relationship-focused coaching has been shown to promote sportsmanship, prosocial conduct, and fair play, with comparable findings reported in the Turkish context (Bolter & Weiss, 2013; Stornes & Bru, 2002; Hodge & Lonsdale, 2011; Güllü, 2018a, 2018b; Güllü et al., 2021), although results regarding antisocial behavior remain mixed depending on contextual factors (Potenciando et al., 2024; Bakar & Kassim, 2023).

Despite the growing body of research linking the coach–athlete relationship to ethical and prosocial outcomes, several gaps remain in the literature. First, although relational quality has been associated with sportsmanship and fair play, fewer studies have examined its broader association with sport character as a multidimensional construct encompassing honesty, justice, compassion, sportsmanship, and antisocial tendencies. Second, existing research has largely focused on team sports or mixed athlete samples, leaving individual combat sports underrepresented despite their distinctive relational and moral dynamics. In combat sports, coach–athlete interactions are predominantly dyadic and intensive, which may amplify the coach's influence on athletes' behavioral regulation and value internalization (Bingöl & Yıldız, 2021). At the same time, the competitive intensity and physical contact inherent in these sports raise important questions regarding the internalization of sport character values. However, empirical evidence addressing how coach–athlete relationship quality relates to sport character in youth combat sports athletes remains limited, particularly within non-Western cultural contexts. Addressing these gaps, the present study examines the association between the quality of the coach–athlete relationship and sport character among Turkish youth athletes competing

in combat sports. By integrating the 3C model of the coach–athlete relationship with moral and character-based frameworks in sport, this study aims to contribute to the literature by clarifying how relational processes are associated with sport character dimensions in a context where ethical decision-making and self-regulation are especially salient.

Overall, existing literature indicates that the coach–athlete relationship is meaningfully associated with sport character, through its links to athletes' motivation, moral reasoning, and behavioral tendencies. Based on this theoretical and empirical background, the present study examines how relationship quality relates to sport character among athletes.

Hypothesis
**H1.** There is a positive association between the coach–athlete relationship and sport character.
**H1a.** Closeness is positively associated with sport character.
**H1b.** Commitment is positively associated with sport character.
**H1c.** Complementarity is positively associated with sport character.

## Material and Method

### *Research Design*

This study used a cross-sectional, descriptive, and correlational survey design to examine the association between the coach–athlete relationship and sport character in combat sports athletes.

### *Participants*

The sample consisted of 180 athletes (90 females, 90 males) competing in combat sports. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling, a non-random method. Athletes represented boxing, kickboxing, Muay Thai, taekwondo, and wushu sanda and varied in age, sport experience, national team status, international success, and years of working with their current coach (see Table 2 for detailed demographics).

The study sample consisted of 180 athletes (90 females, 90 males) actively competing in combat sports (boxing, kickboxing, Muay Thai, taekwondo, and wushu sanda). Participants were recruited using convenience sampling. Inclusion criteria were being an active combat sports athlete and willingness to participate in the study. Athletes who were not actively training or competing at the time of data collection were excluded. Data were collected through face-to-face administration of the questionnaires by the researchers. The surveys were conducted either before or after regular training sessions in the athletes' training environments. Participants completed the questionnaires individually, and no identifying information was collected. The average completion time for the questionnaires was approximately 10–15 minutes.

Table 1 shows the demographic features of the participants.

**Table 1. Demographic Features of the Participant**

| | | n | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Female | 90 | 50.00 |
| | Male | 90 | 50.00 |
| Age | age 11-17 | 46 | 25.56 |
| | age 18-21 | 50 | 27.78 |
| | age 22-25 | 34 | 18.89 |
| | age 26 and over | 50 | 27.78 |
| Sport Branch | Boxing | 25 | 13.89 |
| | Kickboxing | 72 | 40.00 |
| | Kickboxing, Muay Thai | 51 | 28.33 |
| | Muay Thai, Taekwondo and Wushu Sanda | 32 | 17.78 |
| Duration in this Sport | years 1-5 | 79 | 43.89 |
| | years 6-10 | 40 | 22.22 |
| | years 11-15 | 41 | 22.78 |
| | years 16 and over | 20 | 11.11 |
| National Athlete Status | Yes | 89 | 49.44 |
| | No | 91 | 50.56 |
| International Success Status | Yes | 57 | 31.67 |
| | No | 123 | 68.33 |
| Time with Current Coach | Less than 1 year | 43 | 23.89 |
| | years 1-2 | 38 | 21.11 |
| | years 3-4 | 25 | 13.89 |
| | years 5-6 | 39 | 21.67 |
| | years 7 and over | 35 | 19.44 |

***Data Collection Tools***

Demographic information was collected through a personal information form. In addition, two standardized scales were administered:

*Coach–Athlete Relationship Scale* (Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004; Turkish adaptation: Altıntaş & Bayar, 2012), consisting of 11 items and three sub-dimensions: Commitment, Closeness, and Complementarity. It is a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). This scale assesses athletes' perceptions of the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral quality of their relationship with their coach.

*Sport Character Scale* (Görgüt & Tuncel, 2017), consisting of 27 items across five sub-dimensions: Honesty, Antisociality (reverse coded), Compassion, Sportsmanship, and Justice. It is a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). This scale measures athletes' endorsement of moral and social values in sport, including honesty, sportsmanship, justice, compassion, and antisocial attitudes.

***Data Analysis***

SPSS 20 was used for statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage) were calculated for demographic variables. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test indicated that the data

did not meet normality assumptions; therefore, non-parametric tests were employed. The Mann-Whitney U test was used for two-group comparisons, and the Kruskal-Wallis test for comparisons involving three or more groups. The significance level was set at $p<0.05$. Additionally, correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between the two scales.

Throughout the research process, the study was conducted in accordance with the Directive on Scientific Research and Publication Ethics of Higher Education Institutions.

**Results**

**Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Scales and Sub-Dimensions**

| Scales and Sub-dimensions | Mean | Sd |
|---|---|---|
| COACH-ATHLETE RELATIONSHIP | 6.36 | 0.64 |
| Commitment | 6.25 | 0.82 |
| Closeness | 6.64 | 0.67 |
| Complementarity | 6.16 | 0.74 |
| SPORT CHARACTER | 4.29 | 0.46 |
| Honesty | 4.38 | 0.53 |
| Anti-Sociality | 3.92 | 0.91 |
| Compassion | 4.17 | 0.60 |
| Sportsmanship | 4.61 | 0.49 |
| Justice | 4.59 | 0.56 |

According to Table 2; the mean and standard deviation values of the entire 7-point Likert-type Coach-Athlete Relationship Scale were calculated as 6.36±0.64. The mean of 6.36 obtained from the scale indicates that there was a high tendency towards the “Agree” option. When the values of the sub-dimensions of the scale were examined, it could be said that the results for Commitment were 6.25±0.82 (closeness to the Agree option), Closeness 6.64±0.67 (closeness to the Agree option), and Complementarity 6.16±0.74 (closeness to the Agree option). It is similar to Sport Character Scale and sub-dimensions. It means there was a high tendency towards the “Agree” option for Sport Character Scales and its sub-dimensions.

Athletes generally reported high levels of closeness, respect, and trust toward their coaches, with the highest endorsement observed for the item ‘I respect my coach.’ In contrast, the weakest agreement appeared in the item related to acting friendly during training, suggesting that affective closeness did not always translate into informal interaction. Regarding sport character, the strongest tendencies were observed in honesty- and sportsmanship-related items, such as performing one’s best regardless of the outcome. Conversely, the lowest agreement emerged in items related to antisociality (e.g., accepting injury to an opponent to win), indicating low approval of harmful competitive behaviors. Overall, athletes demonstrated strong prosocial orientations and limited antisocial tendencies.

**Tablo 3. Scales and Sub-Dimensions Scores Across Age Groups**

| Age | Sequence | Variables | n | Mean Rank | $x^2$ | p | Variance Group |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| COACH-ATHLETE RELATIONSHIP | 1 | age 11-17 | 46 | 113.37 | 15.93 | 0.01* | 3-1<br>4-1 |
| | 2 | age 18-21 | 50 | 94.16 | | | |
| | 3 | age 22-25 | 34 | 74.54 | | | |
| | 4 | age 26 and over | 50 | 76.65 | | | |
| | | Total | 180 | | | | |
| Commitment | 1 | age 11-17 | 46 | 108.33 | 8.10 | 0.04* | 3-1<br>4-1 |
| | 2 | age 18-21 | 50 | 88.64 | | | |
| | 3 | age 22-25 | 34 | 81.65 | | | |
| | 4 | age 26 and over | 50 | 81.98 | | | |
| | | Total | 180 | | | | |
| Closeness | 1 | age 11-17 | 46 | 107.84 | 13.77 | 0.03* | 3-1<br>4-1 |
| | 2 | age 18-21 | 50 | 96.31 | | | |
| | 3 | age 22-25 | 34 | 74.81 | | | |
| | 4 | age 26 and over | 50 | 79.41 | | | |
| | | Total | 180 | | | | |
| Complimentarity | 1 | age 11-17 | 46 | 107.63 | 12.21 | 0.01* | 3-1<br>4-1 |
| | 2 | age 18-21 | 50 | 97.97 | | | |
| | 3 | age 22-25 | 34 | 76.25 | | | |
| | 4 | age 26 and over | 50 | 76.96 | | | |
| | | Total | 180 | | | | |
| SPORT CHARACTER | 1 | age 11-17 | 46 | 103.98 | 9.68 | 0.02* | 4-1 |
| | 2 | age 18-21 | 50 | 93.76 | | | |
| | 3 | age 22-25 | 34 | 94.46 | | | |
| | 4 | age 26 and over | 50 | 72.15 | | | |
| | | Total | 180 | | | | |
| Honesty | 1 | age 11-17 | 46 | 108.46 | 15.40 | 0.02* | 4-1 |
| | 2 | age 18-21 | 50 | 92.89 | | | |
| | 3 | age 22-25 | 34 | 95.75 | | | |
| | 4 | age 26 and over | 50 | 68.02 | | | |
| | | Total | 180 | | | | |
| Anti-Sociality | 1 | age 11-17 | 46 | 105.22 | 7.33 | 0.06 | |
| | 2 | age 18-21 | 50 | 92.81 | | | |
| | 3 | age 22-25 | 34 | 86.94 | | | |
| | 4 | age 26 and over | 50 | 77.07 | | | |
| | | Total | 180 | | | | |
| Compassion | 1 | age 11-17 | 46 | 96.87 | 5.51 | 0.14 | |
| | 2 | age 18-21 | 50 | 89.65 | | | |
| | 3 | age 22-25 | 34 | 102.09 | | | |
| | 4 | age 26 and over | 50 | 77.61 | | | |
| | | Total | 180 | | | | |
| Sportsmanship | 1 | age 11-17 | 46 | 87.27 | 0.33 | 0.95 | |
| | 2 | age 18-21 | 50 | 91.71 | | | |
| | 3 | age 22-25 | 34 | 89.91 | | | |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 4 | age 26 and over | 50 | 92.66 | | | |
| | | Total | 180 | | | | |
| | 1 | age 11-17 | 46 | 85.03 | | | |
| | 2 | age 18-21 | 50 | 96.24 | | | |
| Justice | 3 | age 22-25 | 34 | 89.47 | 1.33 | 0.72 | |
| | 4 | age 26 and over | 50 | 90.49 | | | |
| | | Total | 180 | | | | |

Table 3 presents the Kruskal–Wallis test results by age group. Significant differences were observed in the Coach–Athlete Relationship Scale ($x^2$=15.93, p<0.05) and its sub-dimensions Commitment ($x^2$=8.10, p<0.05), Closeness ($x^2$=13.77, p<0.05), and Complementarity ($x^2$=12.21, p<0.05). The mean rank scores of athletes aged 22–25 and 26+ were significantly lower than those of the 11–17 group.

Similarly, a significant difference emerged in the Sport Character Scale ($x^2$=9.68, p<0.05) and in the Honesty sub-dimension ($x^2$=15.40, p<0.05), with younger athletes (11–17) scoring higher than older age groups. No significant differences were found in the other sub-dimensions.

**Table 4. Sport Character Scale and Sub-Dimension Scores by Years Working With the Current Coach**

| | Sequence | Variables | n | Mean Rank | $x^2$ | P | Variance Group |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SPORT CHARACTER | 1 | less than 1 year | 43 | 101.37 | 12.98 | 0.01* | 4-1<br>4-3 |
| | 2 | years 1-2 | 38 | 97.49 | | | |
| | 3 | years 3-4 | 25 | 101.16 | | | |
| | 4 | years 5-6 | 39 | 64.96 | | | |
| | 5 | years 7 and over | 35 | 90.40 | | | |
| | | Total | 180 | | | | |
| Honesty | 1 | less than 1 year | 43 | 101.44 | 11.44 | 0.02* | 4-1 |
| | 2 | years 1-2 | 38 | 99.26 | | | |
| | 3 | years 3-4 | 25 | 98.76 | | | |
| | 4 | years 5-6 | 39 | 67.54 | | | |
| | 5 | years 7 and over | 35 | 87.23 | | | |
| | | Total | 180 | | | | |
| Anti-Sociality | 1 | less than 1 year | 43 | 100.94 | 10.86 | 0.03* | 4-3<br>4-1 |
| | 2 | years 1-2 | 38 | 97.01 | | | |
| | 3 | years 3-4 | 25 | 105.26 | | | |
| | 4 | years 5-6 | 39 | 71.10 | | | |
| | 5 | years 7 and over | 35 | 81.67 | | | |
| | | Total | 180 | | | | |
| Compassion | 1 | less than 1 year | 43 | 106.60 | 18.28 | 0.00* | 4-1<br>4-2 |
| | 2 | years 1-2 | 38 | 98.37 | | | |
| | 3 | years 3-4 | 25 | 97.52 | | | |
| | 4 | years 5-6 | 39 | 60.83 | | | |
| | 5 | years 7 and over | 35 | 90.21 | | | |
| | | Total | 180 | | | | |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sportspmanhip | 1 | less than 1 year | 43 | 90.73 | 7.35 | 0.12 | |
| | 2 | years 1-2 | 38 | 74.22 | | | |
| | 3 | years 3-4 | 25 | 96.26 | | | |
| | 4 | years 5-6 | 39 | 89.90 | | | |
| | 5 | years 7 and over | 35 | 104.44 | | | |
| | | Total | 180 | | | | |
| Justice | 1 | less than 1 year | 43 | 91.69 | 6.16 | 0.19 | |
| | 2 | years 1-2 | 38 | 80.18 | | | |
| | 3 | years 3-4 | 25 | 95.30 | | | |
| | 4 | years 5-6 | 39 | 83.15 | | | |
| | 5 | years 7 and over | 35 | 105.00 | | | |
| | | Total | 180 | | | | |

Table 4 presents significant differences in the Sport Character Scale ($x^2$=12.98, $p<0.05$) and in the sub-dimensions of Honesty ($x^2$=11.44, $p<0.05$), Antisociality ($x^2$=10.86, $p<0.001$), and Compassion ($x^2$=18.22, $p<0.05$) according to years of working with the current coach. No significant differences were found in Sportsmanship or Justice ($p>0.05$). Post-hoc comparisons indicated that athletes working with their coach for fewer years (less than 1–4 years) reported higher scores in Honesty and Compassion, whereas those with 5–6 years of experience showed lower scores in these dimensions. In contrast, Antisociality scores tended to be higher in shorter and mid-range relationships (particularly around 1–4 years), but decreased in longer-term relationships (5+ years), suggesting that sustained engagement with a coach may help mitigate antisocial tendencies.

**Tablo 5. Scales and Sub-Dimensions Scores by Years of Sport Experience**

| Year of Seniority | Sequence | Variables | n | Mean Rank | $x^2$ | p | Variance Group |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| COACH-ATHLETE RELATIONSHIP | 1 | years 1-5 | 79 | 101.08 | 8.56 | 0.04* | 4-1 |
| | 2 | years 6-10 | 40 | 86.24 | | | |
| | 3 | years 11-15 | 41 | 86.66 | | | |
| | 4 | years 16 and over | 20 | 65.10 | | | |
| | | Total | 180 | | | | |
| Commitment | 1 | years 1-5 | 79 | 98.63 | 3.88 | 0.28 | |
| | 2 | years 6-10 | 40 | 82.99 | | | |
| | 3 | years 11-15 | 41 | 87.27 | | | |
| | 4 | years 16 and over | 20 | 80.05 | | | |
| | | Total | 180 | | | | |
| Closeness | 1 | years 1-5 | 79 | 96.56 | 4.77 | 0.19 | |
| | 2 | years 6-10 | 40 | 81.93 | | | |
| | 3 | years 11-15 | 41 | 94.11 | | | |
| | 4 | years 16 and over | 20 | 76.33 | | | |
| | | Total | 180 | | | | |
| Complimentarity | 1 | years 1-5 | 79 | 100.71 | 14.08 | 0.00* | 4-1 |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 2 | years 6-10 | 40 | 96.36 | | | |
| | 3 | years 11-15 | 41 | 82.35 | | | |
| | 4 | years 16 and over | 20 | 55.15 | | | |
| | | Total | 180 | | | | |
| SPORT CHARACTER | 1 | years 1-5 | 79 | 105.16 | 12.57 | 0.01* | 4-1 |
| | 2 | years 6-10 | 40 | 79.56 | | | |
| | 3 | years 11-15 | 41 | 84.22 | | | |
| | 4 | years 16 and over | 20 | 67.35 | | | |
| | | Total | 180 | | | | |
| Honest | 1 | years 1-5 | 79 | 104.13 | 11.13 | 0.01* | 4-1 |
| | 2 | years 6-10 | 40 | 81.54 | | | |
| | 3 | years 11-15 | 41 | 84.05 | | | |
| | 4 | years 16 and over | 20 | 67.83 | | | |
| | | Total | 180 | | | | |
| Anti-Sociality | 1 | years 1-5 | 79 | 106.44 | 14.00 | 0.00* | 4-1<br>2-1 |
| | 2 | years 6-10 | 40 | 78.71 | | | |
| | 3 | years 11-15 | 41 | 81.38 | | | |
| | 4 | years 16 and over | 20 | 69.83 | | | |
| | | Total | 180 | | | | |
| Compassion | 1 | years 1-5 | 79 | 101.58 | 7.69 | 0.053 | |
| | 2 | years 6-10 | 40 | 87.78 | | | |
| | 3 | years 11-15 | 41 | 80.77 | | | |
| | 4 | years 16 and over | 20 | 72.13 | | | |
| | | Total | 180 | | | | |
| Sportsmanoship | 1 | years 1-5 | 79 | 90.70 | 2.93 | 0.40 | |
| | 2 | years 6-10 | 40 | 82.49 | | | |
| | 3 | years 11-15 | 41 | 100.38 | | | |
| | 4 | years 16 and over | 20 | 85.48 | | | |
| | | Total | 180 | | | | |
| Justice | 1 | years 1-5 | 79 | 90.22 | 0.55 | 0.91 | |
| | 2 | years 6-10 | 40 | 88.44 | | | |
| | 3 | years 11-15 | 41 | 94.91 | | | |
| | 4 | years 16 and over | 20 | 86.68 | | | |
| | | Total | 180 | | | | |

Table 5 presents the Kruskal–Wallis test results by years of seniority. A significant difference was found in the Coach–Athlete Relationship Scale ($x^2$=8.56, $p<0.05$), particularly in the Complementarity sub-dimension ($x^2$=14.08, $p<0.05$). Athletes with 1–5 years of experience reported significantly higher mean rank scores compared to those with 16 or more years of experience, while no significant differences were observed in Commitment and Closeness. Similarly, significant differences emerged in the Sport Character Scale ($x^2$=12.57, $p<0.05$), as well as in the Honesty ($x^2$=11.13, $p<0.05$) and Antisociality sub-dimensions ($x^2$=14.00, $p<0.05$).

Athletes with 1–5 years of experience scored higher in these dimensions compared to those with 16+ years of experience. No significant differences were found in Compassion, Sportsmanship, or Justice.

**Tablo 6. Sport Character Scale and Sub-Dimension Scores by National Athlete Status**

| | | n | Mean Rank | Mann-Whitney U | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SPORT CHARACTER | Yes | 89 | 79.12 | 3036.50 | 0.00* |
| | No | 91 | 101.63 | | |
| | Total | 180 | | | |
| Honesty | Yes | 89 | 79.21 | 3045.00 | 0.00* |
| | No | 91 | 101.54 | | |
| | Total | 180 | | | |
| Anti-Sociality | Yes | 89 | 76.54 | 2807.00 | 0.00* |
| | No | 91 | 104.15 | | |
| | Total | 180 | | | |
| Compassion | Yes | 89 | 81.87 | 3281.00 | 0.03* |
| | No | 91 | 98.95 | | |
| | Total | 180 | | | |
| Sportspmanship | Yes | 89 | 95.98 | 3562.00 | 0.14 |
| | No | 91 | 85.14 | | |
| | Total | 180 | | | |
| Justice | Yes | 89 | 94.42 | 3700.50 | 0.28 |
| | No | 91 | 86.66 | | |
| | Total | | | | |

Table 6 presents that there is a significant difference in the Sport Character Scale (U=3036.50, p<0.05), Honesty sub-dimension (U=3045.00, p<0.05), Anti-Sociality sub-dimension (U=2807.00, p<0.05), and Compassion sub-dimension (U=3281.00, p<0.05) according to the variable of being a national athlete or not. This difference is in favor of those who are not national athletes.

**Table 7. Coach–Athlete Relationship and Sub-Dimension Scores Scores by International Success Status**

| | | n | Mean Rank | Mann-Whitney U | P |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| COACH-ATHLETE RELATIONSHIP | Yes | 57 | 74.02 | 2566.00 | 0.00* |
| | No | 123 | 98.14 | | |
| | Total | 180 | | | |
| Commitment | Yes | 57 | 79.33 | 2869.00 | 0.05* |
| | No | 123 | 95.67 | | |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Total | 180 | | | |
| Closeness | Yes | 57 | 84.30 | | |
| | No | 123 | 93.37 | 3152.00 | 0.23 |
| | Total | 180 | | | |
| Complementarity | Yes | 57 | 70.51 | | |
| | No | 123 | 99.76 | 2366.00 | 0.00* |
| | Total | 180 | | | |

Table 7 presents that there is a significant difference in the overall Coach–Athlete Relationship Scale (U=2566.00, p<0.05) and in the Complementarity sub-dimension (U=2366.00, p<0.05), as well as a borderline significant difference in the Commitment sub-dimension (U=2869.00, p=0.05), according to the variable of having international success. No significant difference was found in the Closeness sub-dimension (p=0.23).

**Table 8. Correlation Between Coach-Athlete Relationship and Sport Character**

| | | COACH-ATHLETE R. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1-Commitmet | r | 0.86** | 1 | | | | | | | | |
| | p | 0.00 | | | | | | | | | |
| | N | 180 | 180 | | | | | | | | |
| 2-Closeness | r | 0.88** | 0.68** | 1 | | | | | | | |
| | p | 0.00 | 0,00 | | | | | | | | |
| | N | 180 | 180 | 180 | | | | | | | |
| 3-Complimentarity | r | 0.87** | 0.59** | 0.63** | 1 | | | | | | |
| | p | 0.00 | 0,00 | 0.00 | | | | | | | |
| | N | 180 | 180 | 180 | 180 | | | | | | |
| 4-SPORT CHARACTER | r | 0.37** | 0.30** | 0.33** | 0.35** | 1 | | | | | |
| | p | 0.00 | 0,00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | | | | | | |
| | N | 180 | 180 | 180 | 180 | 180 | | | | | |
| 5-Honesty | r | 0.40** | 0.35** | 0.32** | 0.37** | 0.87** | 1 | | | | |
| | p | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0,00 | | | | | |
| | N | 180 | 180 | 180 | 180 | 180 | 180 | | | | |
| 6-Anti-Sociality | r | 0.15* | 0.07 | 0.17* | 0.13 | 0.71** | 0.45** | 1 | | | |
| | p | 0.05 | 0.33 | 0.02 | 0.07 | 0.00 | 0.00 | | | | |
| | N | 180 | 180 | 180 | 180 | 180 | 180 | 180 | | | |
| 7-Compassion | r | 0.20** | 0.17* | 0.13 | 0.23** | 0.72** | 0,53** | 0.29** | 1 | | |
| | p | 0.01 | 0.03 | 0.09 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | | | |
| | N | 180 | 180 | 180 | 180 | 180 | 180 | 180 | 180 | | |
| 8-Sportsmanship | r | 0.38** | 0.32** | 0.40** | 0.29** | 0.58** | 0.42** | 0.28** | 0.33** | 1 | |
| | p | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | | |
| | N | 180 | 180 | 180 | 180 | 180 | 180 | 180 | 180 | 180 | |
| 9-Justice | r | 0.34** | 0.28** | 0.33** | 0.28** | 0.68** | 0.55** | 0.29** | 0.47** | 0.63** | 1 |

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| p | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | |
| N | 180 | 180 | 180 | 180 | 180 | 180 | 180 | 180 | 180 | 180 |

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

According to the results of the correlation analysis (Table 8), the overall Coach–Athlete Relationship Scale was positively and moderately correlated with the Sport Character Scale ($r=0.37$, $p<0.01$). Among the sub-dimensions, significant associations were found with Honesty ($r=0.40$, $p<0.01$), Compassion ($r=0.20$, $p<0.01$), Sportsmanship ($r=0.38$, $p<0.01$), and Justice ($r=0.34$, $p<0.01$). A weaker but significant positive relationship was also observed with Antisociality ($r=0.15$, $p<0.05$).

When sub-dimensions of the coach–athlete relationship were examined:

**Commitment** showed positive correlations with Sport Character ($r=0.30$, $p<0.01$), Honesty ($r=0.35$, $p<0.01$), Compassion ($r=0.17$, $p<0.05$), Sportsmanship ($r=0.32$, $p<0.01$), and Justice ($r=0.28$, $p<0.01$).

**Closeness** correlated positively with Sport Character ($r=0.33$, $p<0.01$), Honesty ($r=0.32$, $p<0.01$), Antisociality ($r=0.17$, $p<0.05$), Sportsmanship ($r=0.40$, $p<0.01$), and Justice ($r=0.33$, $p<0.01$).

**Complementarity** was positively correlated with Sport Character ($r=0.35$, $p<0.01$), Honesty ($r=0.37$, $p<0.01$), Compassion ($r=0.23$, $p<0.01$), Sportsmanship ($r=0.29$, $p<0.01$), and Justice ($r=0.28$, $p<0.01$).

**Discussion**

In this study, the relationship between the coach–athlete bond and athletes' sport character was examined. Correlation analysis (Table 8) revealed a positive and moderate association between the overall Coach–Athlete Relationship Scale and the Sport Character Scale ($r = 0.37$, $p < 0.05$), supporting the hypotheses (H1, H1a, H1b, H1c). In line with the 3C model and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), higher levels of closeness, commitment, and complementarity were linked to stronger honesty, sportsmanship, justice, and compassion. These findings underscore the coach's role not only as a performance facilitator but also as a moral guide in athletes' character development.

These patterns also align with Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) and Role Theory (Katz & Kahn, 1978), which together suggest that athletes internalize moral values when relational expectations are clear and reciprocal. When coaches provide consistent support and well-defined role structures, athletes may perceive the relationship as more trustworthy and

predictable, facilitating the internalization of honesty, fairness, and responsibility. Thus, the present findings reinforce the idea that sport character emerges not only from personal dispositions but also from stable relational exchanges established within coach–athlete dynamics.

Descriptive results showed very high means for items reflecting respect and effort (e.g., "I respect my coach"; "I do my best whether I win or lose") and comparatively lower endorsement of antisocial items such as "In order to win, an opposing player may get injured." Overall, athletes reported strong orientations toward respect, honesty, and rule adherence, while antisocial attitudes remained relatively limited. However, these high scores should be interpreted with caution, as self-report measures on morally loaded constructs are particularly vulnerable to social desirability bias.

The pattern of associations between the coach–athlete relationship and antisociality was more nuanced. Although athletes displayed low antisociality on average, the Commitment and Complementarity sub-dimensions were not strongly related to antisocial tendencies. This is consistent with work suggesting that coaching methods have limited or inconsistent effects on antisocial conduct (Potenciando et al., 2024; Bakar & Kassim, 2023). Kassing and Infante (1999) similarly reported that aggressive coach communication reduced athletes' satisfaction and sportsmanship without clearly suppressing antisocial attitudes. In the Turkish context, Güllü (2023) showed that unethical coaching behaviors were positively associated with moral disengagement, whereas Güllü et al. (2021) found that mutual respect and appreciation in boxer–coach dyads supported sportsmanship and fair play. Taken together, these findings suggest that while coaches substantially foster prosocial values, their impact on reducing antisocial tendencies is indirect and context-dependent rather than uniformly preventive.

Age-, experience-, and relationship-related findings converged on a similar pattern. Younger athletes reported higher honesty and overall sport character than older athletes (Table 3), and those who had worked with their current coach for fewer years showed higher honesty, compassion, and total sport character (Table 7-yenisi table 4). Athletes with 1–5 years of sport seniority also reported stronger coach–athlete relationships (particularly in complementarity) as well as higher honesty and antisociality compared to those with longer experience (Table 4-yenisi table5). These results may indicate that early in their careers athletes are more idealistic, rule-oriented, and dependent on coaches for technical and emotional guidance. Over time, they may rely less on external guidance, develop more autonomous approaches, and recalibrate their moral and relational priorities.

This interpretation is compatible with Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969), which conceptualizes coaches as potential attachment figures who provide security and guidance in early stages, thus reinforcing both relational quality and moral development. It is also consistent with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which emphasizes the role of relatedness in fostering motivation and value internalization. In the Turkish literature, Güllü et al. (2020) observed higher coach–athlete relationship scores among athletes with fewer years of experience, and Güllü (2018b) reported higher sportsmanship orientations in less experienced

university athletes, both supporting the present findings. Although Karademir and Türkçapar (2016) found that longer coach–athlete relationships improved communication skills and perceptions of communication, these results can be reconciled: early relationships may be more decisive for value transmission and moral socialization, while long-term relationships increasingly emphasize professional communication and role clarity. In the specific context of combat sports, Bingöl and Yıldız (2021) highlighted the centrality of coaching approaches in shaping boxers' behavioral norms and attitudes toward opponents, further underlining the formative power of early relational experiences.

National and international success added another layer of complexity. National athletes reported lower overall sport character, honesty, compassion, and sportsmanship than non-national athletes (Table 5-yenisi table 6), and athletes without international success perceived stronger coach–athlete relationships (especially in commitment and complementarity) than those with international success (Table 6-yenisi table 7). These patterns suggest that elite performance contexts, which heavily prioritize winning, autonomy, and competitive pressure, may not automatically foster stronger moral orientations or closer relational bonds with coaches. At first glance, this appears to contrast with findings by Güllü (2023), who reported lower moral disengagement among national and internationally successful athletes. However, the constructs differ: moral disengagement reflects the avoidance of justifying unethical behavior, while sport character captures the proactive endorsement of honesty, compassion, and sportsmanship. It is therefore plausible that elite athletes refrain from overt moral disengagement yet do not consistently score higher on everyday expressions of sport character under intense performance pressures.

Overall, this study extends previous work by examining the coach–athlete relationship and sport character together in Turkish combat sports athletes, a group where issues of aggression regulation, fair play, and moral decision-making are particularly salient. The findings provide empirical support for the applicability of the 3C model and moral development frameworks in this cultural and sport-specific context.

## Conclusion

This study showed that the quality of the coach–athlete relationship - defined in terms of closeness, commitment, and complementarity- is positively associated with sport character among youth combat sports athletes. Higher levels of closeness, commitment, and complementarity were linked to stronger honesty, compassion, sportsmanship, and justice, while antisocial tendencies remained at comparatively low levels. The findings emphasize the coach's dual role as a technical expert and a moral role model and point to the early phases of athletic development as a critical window for fostering prosocial orientations. Supportive, mastery-oriented coaching environments appear essential for sustaining these values across different stages of athletes' careers and competitive levels.

## Practical Implications

The findings of this study offer several practical implications for coaches, sport organizations, and coach education programs. First, the results highlight that the coach's role extends beyond technical instruction to include moral guidance and value transmission, particularly during the early stages of athletic development. Coaches who foster closeness, commitment, and complementarity may contribute meaningfully to athletes' honesty, compassion, sportsmanship, and sense of justice.

Second, coach education and certification programs should integrate relational competencies, ethical leadership, and fair play principles alongside performance-oriented content. Emphasizing mastery-oriented climates, respectful communication, and clearly defined role expectations may enhance athletes' internalization of prosocial values while indirectly limiting antisocial tendencies.

Third, the finding that elite and internationally successful athletes reported weaker relational perceptions and lower sport character scores suggests a need for value-focused interventions in high-performance settings. Sport federations and clubs may benefit from incorporating structured reflection sessions, mentoring systems, or fair play workshops to counterbalance competitive pressure and maintain ethical orientations.

Finally, given that younger and less experienced athletes displayed stronger moral orientations and closer coach–athlete relationships, early-stage interventions emerge as particularly critical. Embedding value-based coaching approaches at the beginning of athletic careers may support more sustainable character development across different stages of sport participation.

## Ethical Approval

This study was approved by the Istanbul University–Cerrahpasa Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee. The ethics approval was obtained on March 28, 2025, with the approval number 2025/150.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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