Effects of Team-Member Exchange on Student-Athletes: The Mediating Role of Interpersonal Self-Efficacy and the Moderating Role of Seniority

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The concept, team-member exchange (TMX), which refers to the quality of relationships between individuals and their team members (Seers et al., 1995), has been used as an influential indicator of individuals' perceptions and behavioral outcomes, such as performance and turnover intention (Rutishauser & Sender, 2019). The large turnover rate of student-athletes is a challenging issue for the U.S. (NCSA, 2019) and other countries alike (Dias et al., 2018; Hassan et al., 2017). For example, according to the South Korean national survey, the turnover rate of collegiate student-athletes was ranged from 37.5% to 44.9% (Korea Institute of Sport Science, 2011). Accordingly, based on the social cognition theory (Bandura, 2018), this research aimed to investigate the relationship between TMX and athletes’ turnover intention. In particular, this research involved a mediator, i.e., interpersonal self-efficacy (Simões & Calheiros, 2019), and a moderator, i.e., seniority (Bader et al., 2017), to better understand the mechanisms that drive the link between the TMX and turnover intention.

Data were collected from 234 student-athletes in South Korea using a survey questionnaire and analyzed using the partial least squares—structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). The results showed that TMX had a positive impact on interpersonal self-efficacy ($\beta = .710$, $p < .001$). However, the direct effect of TMX on turnover intention was not significant ($\beta = -.170$, $p = .096$) while interpersonal self-efficacy had a positive effect on turnover intention ($\beta = -.354$, $p < .001$). Moreover, our PLS-SEM analysis using the bootstrapping procedure provided empirical evidence for the full mediation role of interpersonal self-efficacy in the relationship between TMX and turnover intention. In addition, the seniority moderated the relationship between TMX and interpersonal self-efficacy ($\beta = .130$, $p = .034$) and between TMX and turnover intention ($\beta = .163$, $p = .005$). Seniority strengthened the positive relationship between TMX and interpersonal self-efficacy and weakened the negative relationship between TMX and turnover intention.

This study suggests the importance of the quality of social relationships between teammates to building interpersonal self-efficacy and reducing the intention to leave the team. These findings are consistent with the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1997), arguing that individuals’ interpersonal self-efficacy is shaped by the social exchanges of feedback, resources, advice, assistance, support, and recognition with other members of the team (Bandura, 1993). Therefore, high-quality exchanges within the teams are more likely to reinforce an individual’s belief in his/her abilities to successfully interact with others and influence the team as a whole (Simões & Calheiros, 2019). Also, high-quality TMX can help student-athletes cultivate positive experiences from the interactions with teammates, which further contribute to the understanding of their ability and influence within the team (Liao et al., 2010). We should note that each athlete has a different role within a team and, therefore, may perceive a different level of self-importance to the team and other team members. Therefore, coaches and administrators should pay more attention to developing each athlete's interpersonal self-efficacy and value each athlete's role within the team. Once the student-athletes realize their competency and value to the team, they are less likely to leave the team.