

Relationship between Emotional Intelligence and Relationship Marketing in Employees of Sports Companies: The Mediating Role of Transformational Leadership

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ABSTRACT: Background and Aim: This study was developed to explore the relationship between emotional intelligence and relationship marketing among employees in sports companies, taking into account the mediating influence of transformational leadership, due to the insufficient research available on this topic.

Methods: A descriptive-correlation methodology was utilized in this study, incorporating structural equation modeling. The research involved 389 employees (115 of whom were women) from various sports companies in Tehran, with ages ranging from 19 to 44 years (average age being 31.29 ± 5.20 years). The investigation took place in Tehran, Iran, in 2023, and participants were chosen using a convenience sampling technique. Standard questionnaires were used to collect data. Pearson correlation test and the structural equation modeling were used for data analysis.

Results: Results revealed that emotional intelligence significantly affected relationship marketing ($T=4.596$). Moreover, emotional intelligence significantly affected transformational leadership ($T=5.545$). Furthermore, transformational leadership affected relationship marketing ($T=6.371$). Finally, transformational leadership has significantly mediated the relationship between emotional intelligence and relationship marketing ($P<0.001$). Results of model fit indicated that the research model has good fit.

Conclusion: Emotional intelligence plays a vital role in influencing employees' relationship marketing. Therefore, it is advised that stakeholders concentrate on improving and highlighting the aspects that shape the emotional intelligence of employees. Furthermore, there should be a stronger emphasis on factors that evoke positive transformational leadership.

Keywords: Emotional Intelligence, Relationship Marketing, Transformational Leadership, Employee, Sports Company

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary landscape, organizations play a pivotal role, with human resources recognized as the most significant assets of their stewards. Since the inception of management science, essential principles concerning

individuals and organizations, including workers, managers, systems, and networks, have evolved, influencing the perspectives and actions of managers, employees, and policymakers alike (Alhashedi et al., 2021; Boyatzis, & Soler, 2012). It is increasingly evident that the advancement and prosperity of organizations, and by extension societies, hinge on the effective utilization of human resources. Conversely, sports organizations, akin to other human entities, have undergone significant transformations and continue to evolve. Consequently, it is imperative for sports managers to align themselves with the diverse patterns and trends of individuals and to be prepared to adapt accordingly. In today's rapidly changing environment, characterized by transformation and competition, the key to achieving a competitive edge for organizations lies in harnessing a creative and dynamic workforce (Gyensare e al., 2016; Jiatong et al., 2022).

The evolution of society can be attributed to several factors, including technological advancements, increased competition, enhanced communication, and the phenomenon of globalization. Nevertheless, these factors have also led to a growing uniformity in the services offered by organizations, resulting in what is referred to as "market saturation." This scenario has compelled organizations to distinguish themselves from their competitors and prioritize internal customer engagement (Deb et al., 2023). Internal marketing is regarded as a crucial instrument for improving processes, promoting innovative practices, and fostering robust interpersonal relationships. These efforts ultimately boost employee morale, enhance commitment, strengthen teamwork, facilitate closer internal connections, reinforce organizational culture, and improve both employee motivation and customer satisfaction. For organizations to meet their goals, they need professionals who are organized and committed (Kim & Kim, 2017; Ochalski, 2015). The growth of an organization is inherently tied to the development of its workforce; therefore, ensuring that employees are satisfied, motivated, secure, and productive is of utmost importance. As a result, investing in initiatives that encourage creativity is vital. To promote internal marketing, organizations implement strategies that include cultivating a respectful organizational culture, facilitating the sharing of information and knowledge, building trust, ensuring transparency, providing encouragement and recognition, and fostering teamwork. By embracing internal marketing, organizations aim to attract and retain skilled professionals, nurture positive relationships, create a sense of community and internal cohesion, encourage effective communication, develop an inclusive culture, satisfy both internal and external customers, and enhance overall organizational productivity (Hamel & Ordun, 2022; Lee et al., 2022).

Throughout history, humanity has consistently pursued success and advancement. In recent decades, the accessibility of various scientific disciplines and techniques has propelled society forward. Traditionally, intelligence has been regarded as the primary determinant of an individual's capacity for learning and achieving success (Pradhan et al., 2016). However, there are numerous instances of individuals with high intelligence who excelled in university entrance examinations yet struggled in their professional and personal lives, and conversely, those who thrived despite lower academic performance (Alfonso et al., 2016). This paradox has prompted researchers across various fields to investigate the underlying factors. Individuals with elevated emotional intelligence demonstrate the ability to sustain motivation and persist through challenges, manage their responses in critical situations, defer immediate gratification, regulate their emotional states, mitigate anxiety's impact on cognitive function, empathize with others, and maintain a sense of hope (Choi & Park, 2020). Emotional intelligence can be characterized as the capacity to harness one's own and others' emotional skills in both individual and collective contexts to achieve optimal outcomes. In the realm of sports management, emotional intelligence is crucial for navigating environmental challenges and is a predictor of success. Research indicates that future competitiveness within sports organizations will favor managers who can communicate effectively and productively with their teams. In this regard, emotional intelligence emerges as a vital component in fostering relationships between sports managers and organizational members (Lee & Chelladurai, 2018; Padhy et al., 2024).

Emotional intelligence is characterized by four key dimensions: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. Self-awareness involves a profound comprehension of the emotions and mental states of others, as well as an understanding of one's own strengths and weaknesses, leading to accurate self-assessment. The second dimension, self-management, as defined by Goleman, refers to the capacity to regulate and control one's emotions, maintain composure in high-pressure situations, and possess the ability to self-motivate and articulate one's internal feelings (Budur, & Demir, 2022). Individuals proficient in self-management do not allow negative moods to overwhelm them; they are aware of the origins of their discontent and its potential duration. The third dimension, social awareness, entails an understanding of how one's words and actions impact others. Those with this skill recognize when their behavior has a detrimental effect and are willing to make necessary adjustments. Empathy serves as a prime example of social awareness (Mburu, 2020; Sendaro & Baharu, 2020).

Empathy is defined as the capacity to connect with the emotions of others or to comprehend individuals' feelings during the process of making informed decisions, whether individually or collectively. The fourth aspect of emotional intelligence, as outlined by Goleman, pertains to relationship management (Almutairi, 2016). This

encompasses the establishment of effective communication, the ability to influence others, collaborative efforts, and teamwork. Such skills are instrumental in fostering enthusiasm and resolving conflicts. While self-awareness and self-management pertain to the individual domain, social awareness and relationship management focus on interpersonal communication and the ability to sustain healthy relationships with others. Goleman asserts that emotional intelligence is essential not only for managers and organizational leaders but for all employees within an organization. However, as one ascends to higher levels within the organization, the significance of emotional intelligence becomes increasingly paramount in comparison to rational intelligence (Florescu & Nastase, 2014).

Transformational leadership represents a contemporary approach to leadership, with limited research conducted in the realm of physical education within the country. This leadership style is recognized as a significant theoretical framework globally. Transformational leaders excel in motivating their teams by validating their aspirations and ethical values, encouraging innovative thinking on various issues (Alzoubi & Aziz, 2021). Through their words and actions, these leaders' effect societal change. Their followers are expected to experience trust, respect, and loyalty towards them. The impact of transformational leaders stems from their capacity to inspire others through effective communication, insights, and actions. As noted by Pawar and Eastman, the effectiveness of a transformational leader is influenced by three key factors: the organization's position on the continuum of acceptance of change, the extent to which the transformational process is adapted for organizational success, and the transformational leadership process itself (Jyoti & Bhau, 2015). Flexibility is crucial, as it enables the organization to operate dynamically and respond swiftly to evolving competitive conditions, thereby fostering or sustaining a competitive advantage.

A transformational leader initiates change throughout the organization and establishes a vision that resonates with both managers and employees. According to Bass and Avolio, transformational leadership emerges when a leader fosters and nurtures the interests of their employees. This involves cultivating awareness and acceptance of the group's mission and objectives, while motivating employees to prioritize collective goals over individual interests (Rezvani et al., 2016). Key traits of transformational leaders include self-assurance, optimistic outlook, strong conviction, high expectations, and the ability to instill confidence in their subordinates regarding their capacity to achieve objectives that align with the organization's mission (Lee et al., 2018). Additionally, they promote an increased awareness among followers regarding challenges and potential solutions, facilitating renewal within the organization. This study was developed to explore the relationship between emotional intelligence and relationship marketing among employees in sports companies, taking into account the mediating influence of transformational leadership, due to the insufficient research available on this topic.

METHODS

A descriptive-correlation methodology was utilized in this study, incorporating structural equation modeling. The research involved 389 employees (115 of whom were women) from various sports companies in Tehran, with ages ranging from 19 to 44 years (average age being 31.29 ± 5.20 years). The investigation took place in Tehran, Iran, in 2023, and participants were chosen using a convenience sampling technique.

Bar-On Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (Kumari et al., 2022): This assessment comprises 117 items and 15 scales, administered by Bar-On to a sample of 3,831 individuals across five countries: Argentina, Germany, India, Nigeria, and South Africa. The demographic breakdown revealed that 48.8% of participants were male, while 51.2% were female. The questionnaire has also been standardized in North America, with the standardization results indicating a satisfactory level of validity and reliability. Additionally, historical data shows that this test has been standardized in Isfahan. In the present study, five components that align closely with other emotional intelligence models have been utilized. These components are emotional self-awareness, motivation, self-management, empathy, and social skills. The response options are structured on a 5-point Likert scale, where responses range from 1 (completely agree) to 5 (completely disagree). For certain negatively phrased questions, the scoring is reversed, with 5 indicating complete agreement and 1 indicating complete disagreement. The total score for each scale is derived from the sum of the individual item scores, and the overall test score is the aggregate of the scores from all five scales. A higher score on this assessment reflects greater proficiency in the respective scale or overall, while a lower score indicates the opposite. For instance, a higher score in the self-awareness scale signifies enhanced self-awareness in the individual.

The internal marketing standard questionnaire (Pulido-Martos et al., 2024) consists of 23 questions, which were developed by Saidi in 2005. This questionnaire encompasses nine components, namely: internal marketing, job security, satisfaction with rights and benefits, empowerment, information, family work support, leader relationships, the reduction of discrimination between positions, and customer socialization.

The instrument utilized for assessing transformational leadership was the questionnaire developed by Bass and Avolio in 1997 (Baba et al., 2021). This instrument comprises 20 items and encompasses four dimensions: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. The transformational leadership questionnaire has been employed in numerous studies, with its validity and reliability well established. For instance, in the study conducted by Hosseini et al. (2009), the validity of the questionnaire was affirmed through confirmatory factor analysis, while its reliability was indicated by a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.90. In the current research, the reliability of the transformational leadership questionnaire was determined to be 0.896, based on the same Cronbach's alpha coefficient.

We utilized SPSS-26 and Lisrel software to analyze the data. Descriptive statistics such as means and standard deviations were employed to characterize the variables. Pearson correlation test was conducted to assess the relationships between the variables. The structural equation method was applied to investigate the relationship between emotional intelligence and relationship marketing among employees in sports companies, taking into account the mediating influence of transformational leadership. The significance level was set at $P < 0.05$.

RESULTS

Descriptive data are presented in Table 1. Descriptive results show that in general the level of emotional intelligence is higher than the average. However, relationship marketing and transformational leadership were at medium level. The results of Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests revealed that all variables were normally distributed (all $P > 0.05$). Results of Independent t tests showed that there were no significant differences between men and women in all variables of the study.

Table 1. Descriptive Data

	Emotional Intelligence	Relationship Marketing	Transformational Leadership
Mean	2.96	2.41	2.58
SD	0.85	0.47	0.68

Bivariate relationships between emotional intelligence with relationship marketing and transformational leadership are demonstrated in Table 2. Results revealed significant direct relationship between emotional intelligence and relationship marketing ($P < 0.001$). Moreover, emotional intelligence was directly and significantly associated with transformational leadership ($P < 0.001$). Finally, transformational leadership was directly and significantly associated with relationship marketing ($P < 0.001$).

Table 2. Results of Bivariate Relationships between Variables

	1	2	3
1. Emotional Intelligence	-		
2. Relationship Marketing	r=0.457 P<0.001	-	
3. Transformational Leadership	r=0.550 P<0.001	r=0.637 P<0.001	-

Table 3 and Figure 1 show the results of structural equation modelling. Results revealed that emotional intelligence significantly affected relationship marketing ($T=4.596$). Moreover, emotional intelligence significantly affected transformational leadership ($T=5.545$). Furthermore, transformational leadership affected relationship marketing ($T=6.371$). Finally, transformational leadership has significantly mediated the relationship between emotional intelligence and relationship marketing ($P < 0.001$). Results of model fit are presented in Table 4 and indicated that the research model has good fit.

Table 3. Results of Structural Equation Modelling

Path	β	T-value
1 emotional intelligence => relationship marketing	0.456	4.596
2 emotional intelligence => transformational leadership	0.560	5.545
3 transformational leadership => relationship marketing	0.638	6.371
	Z	P-value
4 emotional intelligence => transformational leadership => relationship marketing	8.451	P<0.001

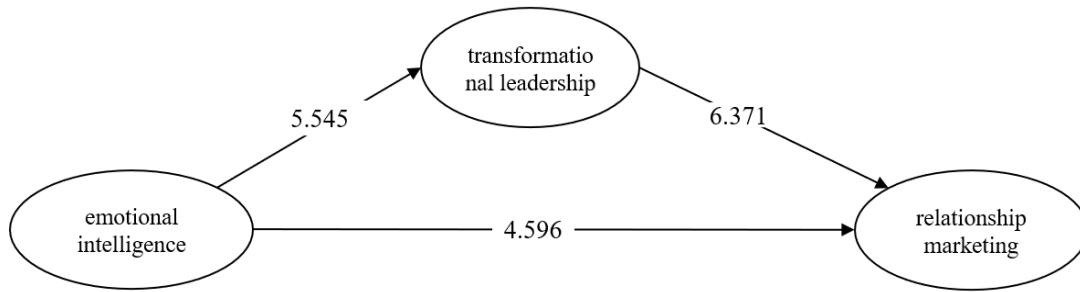


Figure 1. Structural Equation Modelling in the form of T-Values

Table 4. Results of Model Fit

Index	Optimal Range	Obtained Value	Conclusion
RMSEA	< 0.08	0.06	Good fit
X ² / df	< 3	2.95	Good fit
RMR	Closer to 0	0.03	Good fit
NFI	> 0.9	0.96	Good fit
CFI	> 0.9	0.95	Good fit

DISCUSSION

This study was developed to explore the relationship between emotional intelligence and relationship marketing among employees in sports companies, taking into account the mediating influence of transformational leadership, due to the insufficient research available on this topic. Results revealed that emotional intelligence significantly affected relationship marketing. Moreover, emotional intelligence significantly affected transformational leadership. Furthermore, transformational leadership affected relationship marketing. Finally, transformational leadership has significantly mediated the relationship between emotional intelligence and relationship marketing.

Employees who leverage their emotional intelligence and demonstrate creativity in response to the ever-evolving demands and preferences of customers, along with the swift advancement of communication technologies and superior tools, will experience enhanced efficiency and effectiveness (Tian et al., 2020). This, in turn, will result in improved productivity, increased recognition, and higher revenue. A growing number of companies are recognizing this trend. When sales personnel exhibit strong emotional intelligence, they are better equipped to accurately assess customer needs and preferences, thereby shaping the customer's perception of the product and persuading them to make a purchase. Consequently, it can be concluded that a high level of emotional intelligence among sellers and marketers significantly contributes to the success of marketing initiatives (Ariyabuddhiphongs & Kahn, 2017).

The findings of Hater's research suggest that the way female sports coaches assess their emotions can significantly influence their perceptions of leadership style and behavior within their teams, as well as indirectly impact their beliefs regarding efficiency. Specifically, coaches who possess a keen awareness and control over their emotional regulation, aimed at fostering a positive atmosphere for themselves and their athletes, are likely to demonstrate effective leadership styles and behaviors (Abdullahi et al., 2020). This includes providing constructive feedback that encourages athletes to persist in their activities, even in the face of performance errors. Furthermore, such coaches are inclined to engage in optimal training practices, which encompass effective planning of training sessions, consistent and thorough evaluation of athletes' performances, and the selection of coaching styles that align with the varying skill levels of players and the demands of competition. Additionally, the research aims to explore the mediating factors that may influence the relationship between emotional intelligence and leadership style (Hur et al., 2011).

Transformational leadership serves as a crucial organizational factor by fostering motivation and support for individuals' self-development behaviors. This approach enhances the capacity of individuals within the organization to comprehend and swiftly adapt to changes, thereby promoting the organizational agility of schools. Specifically, transformational leadership that emphasizes self-development has a direct impact on the agility of human capital. As previously noted, this focus on the human element creates an environment conducive to acceptance, bolsters self-

reliance and self-efficacy, and, through the lens of self-development, enhances human capital, ultimately leading to improved performance (Megheirkouni, 2022). Conversely, if individuals are not equipped with self-development training, their potential remains underutilized, resulting in a limited understanding of their autonomy and initiative in response to both internal and external pressures. Consequently, the influence of transformational leadership on human capital may diminish. While there exists a relationship between transformational leadership and human capital, it has not been as robust as a causal connection (Haryanto et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

To summarize, it is evident that emotional intelligence plays a vital role in influencing employees' relationship marketing. Moreover, it is important to highlight that transformational leadership can significantly amplify the impact of emotional intelligence on employees' relationship marketing. Therefore, based on the results of this study, it is advised that stakeholders concentrate on improving and highlighting the aspects that shape the emotional intelligence of employees. Furthermore, there should be a stronger emphasis on factors that evoke positive transformational leadership.

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