

## **THE MEDIATING ROLE OF COACHES' SENSE OF HUMOR IN RELATIONSHIP OF GROUP EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE WITH TEAMWORK EFFECTIVENESS IN COLLEGIATE ATHLETES**

**HASSAN FAHIM DEVIN<sup>\*</sup>, DAVOOD FARBOD**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Physical Education and Sport Science, Islamic Azad University, Mashhad Branch, Mashhad, Iran.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Mathematics, Quchan University of Technology, Quchan, Iran.

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Humor is a common element of human interaction hence has an impact on work groups and sport teams. A sport team is a social organization in which achieving the goals and executing the tasks is merely possible through participation and collective work. Teamwork and perceived performance capability in a team as a whole are also essential elements of a good performance.*

*In this descriptive - correlative study, the statistical population of the study consisted of 115 student athletes (62 males and 53 females) who were in university varsity teams competing in intercollegiate sporting events in the 2015-2016 school years playing sports such as volleyball, basketball and handball. The statistical sample was equal to the statistical population (115).*

*Group emotional intelligence was measured using Hemphill's (1956) questionnaire with 4 subscales (intimacy, control, hedonic tone and viscosity), Teamwork effectiveness questionnaire developed by [Sterling H, Selesnick H, 1998] was considered to measure Team work effectiveness of college student athletes and Thorson and Powell's (1993). Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale was utilized to measure coaches' Sense of Humor. An internal consistency estimate was computed for three instruments and the alpha value for Group emotional intelligence, Sense of humor and Teamwork effectiveness were respectively, 0.80, 0.85 and 0.79.*

*The results of this study showed a positive and significant relationship between Group emotional Intelligence and its subscales with Collective Self-Efficacy and Teamwork effectiveness. No significant differences were observed between male and female athletes regarding Group emotional intelligence, CSE and Teamwork. Intelligence. Our study highlights the need for increased attention to emotional intelligence at the group level, which shapes emergent states and outcomes of work teams, and also more concentration on humor behaviours in sports organizations and teams, which have a potential to produce effectiveness and develop coach leadership.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Coaches' Sense of humor, Group emotional intelligence, Teamwork effectiveness, Collegiate athletes.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

A sport team is a social organization in which achieving goals and executing tasks is merely possible through participation and collective work. The theory of social learning and the concept of individual functionality to collective functionality was expanded by Bandura (2000). In his view, individuals' common beliefs regarding their collective ability in achieving the desired goals is a key element of

collective functionality [Shavaran S et al., 2013].

**SENSE OF HUMOR:** Humor is usually seen as a common element of human interaction and for that reason has a great impact on different groups and working organizations. Humor is generally much more than just funny jokes and concepts; it can transform into a multifunctional management tool that can be utilized in order to achieve various goals and objectives.

Aldag R and Sherony K, identified three dimensions of attitude toward workplace humor and fun: appropriateness, salience, and perceived consequences of fun. Individuals are likely to have diverging views on whether having or pursuing humor

### **ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE:**

**Hassan F. Devin**

Department of Physical Education and Sport Sciences, Islamic Azad University, Mashhad Branch, Mashhad, Razavi Khorasan Province, Iran.

Tel.: (+98)-915-311-6896

E-mail: h.fahimdevin@gmail.com

and fun at work is appropriate [Aldag R, Sherony K, 2001]. Some may think that work-hours are solely for work while others think that play and work are complementary in the workplace. Employees also have varying attitude toward the salience or importance of having humor and fun at work [Karl K et al., 2005]. Some may regard workplace humor and fun as a critical element of a job while others may regard it as a pleasant extra, but not necessarily required. People may also vary in views on expected consequences of humor and fun at work [Karl K et al., 2005]. Some may view fun activities as facilitators of individual and team performances while others may view them as impeding work processes [Choi Y et al., 2013; Karl K, Harland L, 2005].

Sports team as a business is often believed to be very serious, humor and fun can easily lighten the mood inside the team and organizational environments. A proper use of humor and fun within work groups can contribute invaluable benefits and offer even more beneficial tools for coaching staff and management to motivate staff members, improve effective communication and diminish discord [Romero E, Cruthirds K, 2006].

A research with elite coaches indicates the benefits of using humor, as well as how fine the line is between positive and negative outcomes of its use [Ronglan L, Aggerholm K, 2014]. Existing research from non-coaching settings illustrates how using humor is a balancing act. In one sense, it can be a very useful tool for strengthening relationships and groups, but care should also be taken to ensure it does not become divisive [Wanzer M et al., 2006].

The researchers identified from working contexts how sharing a joke and laughter has been shown to be a signal of common ground, helping individuals feel a greater sense of belonging to a group [Holmes J, Marra M, 2002].

Sport teams coaches can integrate many styles of leadership within their teams. Leadership styles exhibited by coaches are vital in conveying and clarifying with student athletes and coaching staff. Humor may be applied as a tool to improve team climate by reducing team tension felt by athletes and coaching staff.

The researchers found that all the coaches saw a place for humor in the elite-level sport. They found it particularly useful for breaking up the seriousness, monotony and repetition governing elite athletes'

lifestyles. They saw humor as a counterbalance to this seriousness, where laughing can create a relaxed atmosphere and give athletes respite from pressure and stress, as well as an opportunity to replenish their energy. To this end, the coaches were keen to encourage humor in the group to ensure time spent together was enjoyable and not only focused on hard work [Ronglan L, Aggerholm K, 2014].

Although humor is a universal human experience, people of different societies perceive and use humor differently [Martin R, 2007; Yue X, 2010]. Because of cultural differences between Westerners and the Iranians, Iranian people are very serious when it comes to humor, especially in work situations.

**TEAMWORK EFFECTIVENESS:** Teamwork is defined by [Harris P, Harris K, (1996) as "a work-group or unit with a common purpose through which members develop mutual relationships for the achievement of goals/tasks". Teamwork implies that individuals work in a cooperative environment in the interests of a common goal by sharing knowledge/skills and being flexible enough to serve multiple roles. The literature consistently highlights that one of the essential elements of a team is its focus toward a common goal and a clear purpose [Fisher S, et al., 1997; Johnson D, Johnson R, 1995; Parker G, 1990].

Teamwork is essential to a good performance from any sports team, professional or not, and is a great way to teach children, adolescent and young athletes certain life lessons, such as cooperating with others and taking responsibility for actions. Such lessons are applicable to life outside of sports and can be applied to work or school, such as when one needs to focus without interruption on the school paper that needs to be written or work with a less-than-pleasant colleague on a project [Sugarman K, 2004]. Team effectiveness is the capacity a team has to accomplish the goals or objectives

**GROUP EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE:** The management world knows by now that to be effective in the workplace, an individual needs high emotional intelligence. What isn't so well understood is that teams need it, too. Teams with high GE behave in ways that build relationships both inside and outside the team and that strengthen their ability to face challenges. High group EI may seem like a simple matter of putting a group of emotionally intelligent individuals together. It's not. For a team

to have high EI, it needs to create norms that establish mutual trust among members, a sense of group identity, and a sense of group efficacy [Druskat V, Wolff S, 2001]. These three conditions are essential to a team's effectiveness because they are the foundation of true cooperation and collaboration. Group Emotional Intelligence (GEI) isn't a question of dealing with a necessary evil-catching emotions as they bubble up and promptly suppressing them. It's about bringing emotions deliberately to the surface and understanding how they affect the team's work. GEI is about exploring, embracing, and ultimately relying on the emotions that are at the core of team.

GEI is defined as “the ability of a group to generate as hard set of norms that manage the emotional process in a way that builds trust, group identity, and group efficacy” [Druskat V, Wolff S, 2001].

Druskat and Wolff (2000) state that those teams which have emotional intelligence show a commitment and creativity which is increasingly important for the teams' effectiveness and efficacy [Cherniss C, 2001; Brigette A, 2002]. In their study titled “the effect of GEI on team cohesiveness and effectiveness” mentioned that GEI subscales have positive relations with these variables.

**GROUP EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND TEAMWORK EFFECTIVENESS / SENSE OF HUMOR AND TEAMWORK EFFECTIVENESS:** With this increased demand for effective teamwork comes the question of what skills and capabilities these teams need to operate effectively in their organizational environments. “In an era of teamwork, it's essential to figure out what makes teams work. Our research shows that, just like individuals, the most effective teams are emotionally intelligent ones – and that any team can attain emotional intelligence” [Druskat V, Wolff S, 2001]. The term emotional intelligence refers to our capacity for recognizing our own feelings and the feelings of others, and for managing emotions in ourselves and in our relationships [Cherniss C, Adler M, 2000; Goleman D, 1998].

Research in the field of team-based Emotional Intelligence (EI) is creating an increasingly compelling business case for enhancing the EI-related skills of teams as a means for improving overall a team productivity and cohesiveness [Jordan P, Troth A, 2004; Offermann L et al., 2004; Wolff S et al., 2005].

In Luca and Tarricone's study (2001) entitled “Does emotional intelligence affect successful teamwork?”, it was found that there were many commonalities between successful teamwork and emotional intelligence. This is supported by Yost and Tucker (2000) who promote a strong relationship between successful teamwork and emotional intelligence and contend that emotional intelligence competencies are more important than the “Visible skill”.

There is more to effective teamwork than a keen intellect and grasp of technical knowledge. The difference between success and mediocrity in working relationships, especially in a team environment, can be attributed to a team member's mastery of the softer skills – abilities and approaches grounded in EI [Grossman R, 2000; Yost C, Tucker M et al., 2000].

In Garivani F et al. study entitled “Investigating the Relationship Between GEI with Collective Self-Efficacy (CSF) and Team Work Effectiveness (TWE)” revealed a positive and significant relationship between GEI and its subscales (except group control which had a negative relationship) with CSE and TWE. No significant differences were observed between male and female athletes regarding GEI, CSE and TWE [Garivani F et al. 2016].

In an article entitled “Building the Emotional Intelligence of groups,” [Druskat V, Wolff S, 2001] identify three conditions essential to a group's effectiveness:

- Trust among members
- A sense of group identity
- A sense of group efficacy

To be most effective, the team needs to create emotionally intelligent norms — the attitudes and behaviors that eventually become habits — that support behaviours for building trust, group identity and group efficacy. Group identity is described as a feeling among members that they belong to a unique and worthwhile group. A sense of group efficacy is the belief that the team can perform well and that group members are more effective working together than apart [Lassiter, 2004].

Humor is the essential element in interpersonal interaction [Romero E, Cruthirds K, 2006] and plays an important role in the cohesion and interaction within a group [Wilson C, 1979; Romero E, Pescosolido A, 2008] developed the Group humor effectiveness model to explain the positive rela-

tions between humor and group effectiveness. Their model is based on Hackman's (1986) framework of group effectiveness. In this framework effectiveness is composed of three aspects, productivity, individual development and team viability [Hackman J, 1986].

Many studies have concluded that when humor is used positively, it enhances employees' motivation [Recepoglu E et al., 2011], decreases organizational stress and alleviates the problems of employees [Malone P, 1980], and improves production [Avolio B et al., 1999].

In Hoendervoogt's (2015) study entitled "The effect of leader and follower humor on leader, team and meeting effectiveness", the results showed a significant correlation meaning that follower humor has a positive effect on leader effectiveness. In addition, two almost significant relationships were found between follower humor and leader humor, and between follower humor and meeting effectiveness.

**Significance of the Study:** Based on the research done in various contexts, the present study sought to examine if GEI is correlated with TWE in student athletes and if Coaches' sense of humor can play a mediating role between these two variables.

This study contributes to the scholarly literature in the areas of GEI, TWE and SH, team effectiveness and Sense of Humor (SH). The significance of this study is in third areas. First is an increased understanding of group levels of EI in athlete populations. Second is to provide new insights regarding the relationship between group levels of EI, SH and team effectiveness in sport environment Third is to use these findings to make recommendations for human resource practitioners, sport team members, and managers and coaches in terms of team development, team effectiveness measures, and increased feedback and communication focused on alignment around key performance factors.

#### MATERIALS AND METHODS

**Statistical sample:** The statistical sample of the study consisted of 115 student athletes (62 males and 53 females) who were in university varsity teams competing in collegiate sporting events in the 2015-2016 school years. In other words, sampling was done by census method.

**Data gathering instruments:** SH Scale -Thor-

son and Powell's (1993) 24 items, MSHS was utilized to measure EFL teachers SH with 4 principal factors (dimensions) (1) humor creativity and uses of humor for social purposes, (2) uses of coping humor, (3) appreciation of humorous people, and (4) appreciation of humor. In the current study the reliability estimate of the scale was 0.89.

**TWE** - An eleven items scale was developed by Sterling and Selesnick (1998) to measure the TWE of college student athletes. The alpha coefficient to measure the reliability of the instruments in this study was reported 0.85.

**GEI** -The GEI of athletes was measured through a scale developed by Hemphill's GEI questionnaire with 4 subscales (intimacy, control, hedonic tone and viscosity). The questionnaire gave an overall GEI score, as well as 4Subscales (dimensions) scores (Intimacy, control, hedonic tone, viscosity). In this study the reliability estimate of the scale was 0.84.

**Data analysis:** Descriptive statistical such as mean and standard deviation of the employee's responses to variables were calculated in order to determine the athlete's GEI, TWE and SH.

Afterwards, Pearson's correlation coefficient test was used to determine the relationship between these variables. A *step-wise multiple regression analysis* was conducted to determine the predictors of TWE. Structural equation analysis using LISREL software was applied to analyze the data. For more information about structural equation modeling with LISREL we refer the readers to, for example, Kelloway (1998).

#### RESULTS

**DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS RESULTS:** Table 1 displays the means, and standard deviations (SD) of variables. From SH perspective student athletes (male and female) perceived their coaches low in having SH ( $x = 2.50$  from maximum possible 5) which was below the average. It means that from student athletes' perspective coaches studied in this research will view humor as a controversial disposition in social interactions and a personality trait possessed largely by specialists in humor-related fields. The mean of students' GEI was 3.87 out of a possible maximum of 5 and TWE ( $x = 2.07$  of a possible maximum of 5) which is considered low (Table 1).

### Correlation results

Pearsons' correlation test was used to investigate the relationship between GEI and SH and their subscales with TWE (Tables 2 and 3). According to the results, there are significant correlations between these variables.

### Comparison results

Independent t-test has been used to compare SH, TWE and GEI in male, female, students and athletes. According to the Table 4 results, there are no significant differences between male and female in the rate of these 3 variables (SH, TWE and GEI).

**Multiple Regression result:** In table 5, a multiple regression to predicts TWE through GEI and SH was done. The result shows that by adding SH variable, 0.02 is added to the percent of differences (changes) expression, and this amount is significant.

It means that TWE can be predicted through having SH and GEI in student athletes, therefore it should be emphasized in individuals and team as a whole and must be practiced in training sessions.

**In figure 1 Mediating Role,** tests of SH as a mediating variable between GEI and TWE was shown.

Table 6 shows the fitting amount of the model. In order SH has a mediating role these criteria has to be met. Since the main amount of model, means that the ratio of Chi-Square to the degree of freedom and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) of estimation error is gained in optimal level, therefore the model is confirmed. Hence, indirect effects can also be analyzed.

In table 7, amount of indirect standard effect coefficient was proposed. The results shows that that GEI through SH has 0.34 effect on TWE. In other word, by increasing 1 credit (point) in GEI grade, 0.34 credit (point) is added to that grade through SH.

### DISCUSSION

EI competencies have been shown to be significantly related to individual and team performance [Boyatzis R, 1982] both in cognitive tasks where the individual is under stress and in tasks where individuals are interdependent on one another [Druskat V, Jordan P, 1999]. At the team level, the study of emotions and the effects of emotions, especially GEI on team performance is a relatively new avenue of research. Since teamwork is an in-

TABLE 1.

Descriptive statistics of variables  
in student athletes

Variables	Male		Female	
	M	SD	M	SD
SH	2.50	0.04	2.70	0.31
Team Work Effectiveness	2.07	0.01	2.02	0.2
Group Emotonal Intelligence	3.87	0.02	3.91	0.41

TABLE 2.

Correlation results between GEI and  
its subscale with TWE

	Pearson(R)	Sig
Intimacy	0.47	0.001
Control	0.51	0.001
Hedonic tone	0.44	0.001
Viscosity	0.34	0.001
GEI	0.48	0.001

TABLE 3.

Correlation results between SH and  
its subscale with TWE

	Pearson(R)	Sig
Factor 1	0.39	0.001
Factor 2	0.40	0.001
Factor 3	0.36	0.001
Factor 4	0.35	0.001
SH	0.37	0.001

TABLE 4.

Independent T - test for male and female athletes

	t	DF	Sig	Mean for male	Mean for female
SH	-1.83	113	0.061	2.50	2.70
TWE	0.2	113	0.99	2.07	2.02
GEI	0.24	113	0.98	3.87	3.91

TABLE 5.

A multiple regression to predicts TWE through  
GEI and SH

	R	R Square	SEE	R Square change	Sig
GEI	0.48	0.23	0.04	0.23	0.001
SH	0.50	0.25	0.03	0.02	0.021

TABLE 6

Fitting amount of the model		
Criteria	Accepted amount	Acquired amount
Chi Square	-	5.72
DF	-	3
Chi Square/DF	Less than 2	1.9
GFI	More and equal to 0.9	0.88
NFI	More than >0.9	0.91
CFI	More than >0.9	0.9
RFI	-	0.91
RMSEA	Less than 0.05	0.031

TABLE 7.

Amount of Indirect standard effect coefficient		
Variables	Standard indirect Effect	Sig.
GEI TWE	0.34	0.001

herently social activity, emotions play an important role in team effectiveness.

The current study explored the links between Coaches' SH, GEI and TWE in collegiate athletes. Group-level EI were shown to have a significant positive correlation with team member ratings of TWE.

It has been found that there is much commonality between successful team work and EI. This is supported by [Yost C, Tucker M, 2000], who promote a strong relationship between these two variables, and they contend that EI competencies are more important than visible skills, such as technical competencies.

There is more to effective team work than a keen intellect and grasp of technical knowledge. In order to promote positive, progressive and effective working environments, team members need to have a combination of technical knowledge and

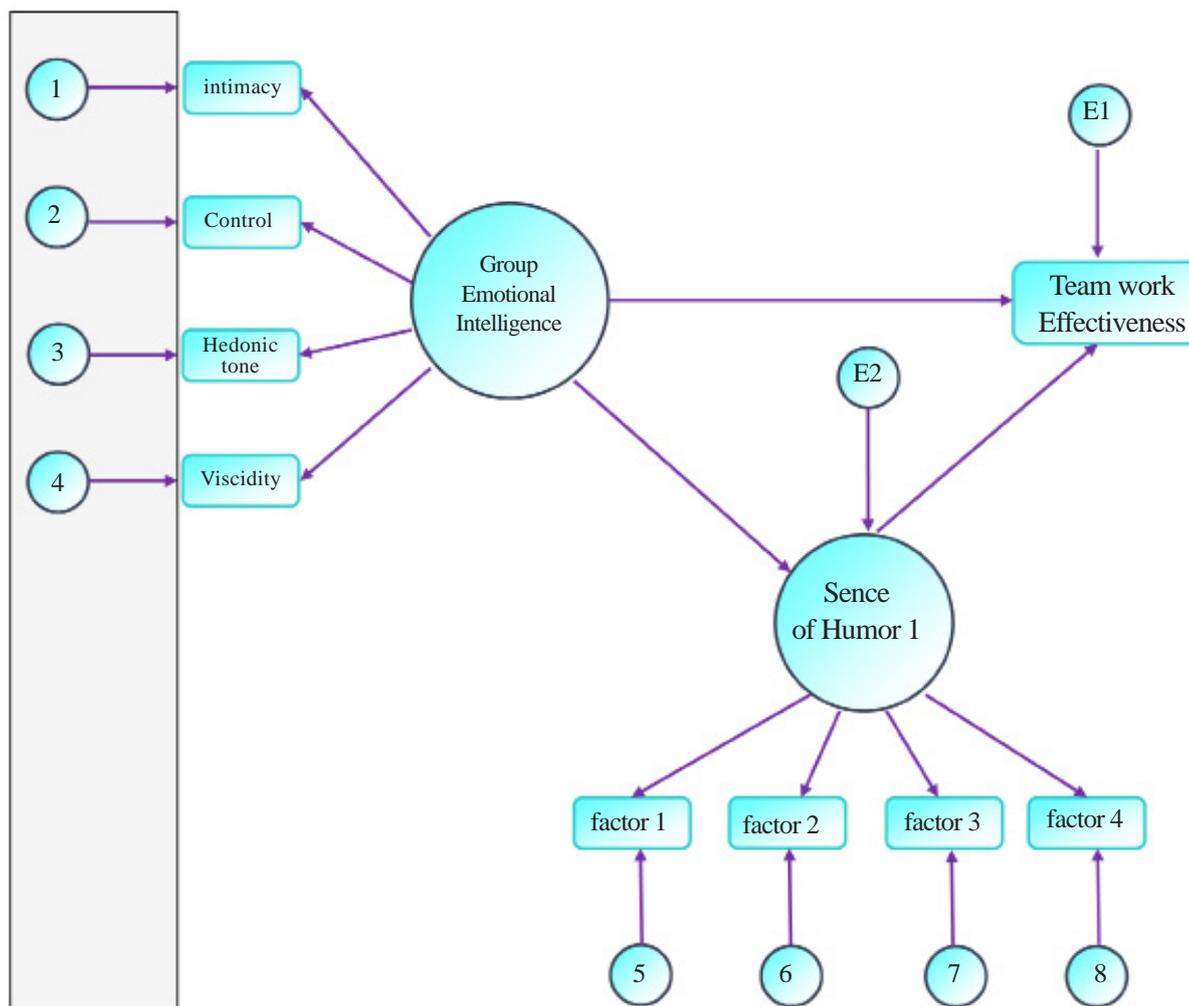


FIGURE 1. Conceptual model of structural equation of the study.

Notes: factor 1 - humor creativity, factor 2 - uses of coping humor, factor 3 - appreciation of humorous people, factor 4 - appreciation of humor.

well-developed EI including intimacy, control, hedonic tone, self-awareness, empathy, viscidly and social skills.

Goleman D. believes that team members' EI plays a pivotal role in determining the success and functionality of the team and the quality of the final product being developed. [Goleman D, 1995]

It would appear that EI skills underpin the collaboration and communication skills needed to manage conflict and keep the team focused on developing a required product.

The results of the study by Garivani et al. (2016) entitled "Investigating the relationship between GEI with TWE" revealed a positive and significant relationship between GEI and its subscales (except group control which had a negative relationship) with TWE.

Jordan PJ and Troth AC (2004) and Offerman LR et al.,(2004) found that teams with higher levels of EI performed better than teams with lower levels of EI. When assessing the team's EI, all three research teams, used measures that assessed each individual team member's EI. The current study varies from previous research in that we used a team-level measure to assess the team's overall EI [Feyerherm A, Rice C, 2002, Jordan P, Troth A, 2004; Offerman L et al. 2004].

Significant positive correlation was also observed between coaches' SH with TWE, and also coaches' SH had a mediating role between GEI and TWE.

Hackman's (1986) model of overall group effectiveness lists three distinct aspects of effectiveness (productivity, learning and viability), among them, productivity is perhaps the most salient of these. Productivity measures vary from group to group depending upon the task in which the group is engaged and the concerns of key stakeholders see showed that humor is connected to both individual and unit performance indicated that humor may be helpful in controlling group production through work group norms [Romero E, Pescosolido A, 2008; Avolio et al. 1999, Collinson D,1988]. There is evidence that humor produces an increase in physical and psychological energy resulting in workers who are likely to put forth more effort when engaging in challenging tasks [Dienstbier R, 1995].

Meanwhile, humor decreases the social distance between supervisors and subordinates [Coser R, 1960]. It can be suggested that the reduction in social distance that results from humor use facili-

tates closer relationships between leaders and followers. This encourages free and more open communication within the group, which is congruent with high group performance. Improved communication effectiveness will lead to fewer misunderstandings and a freer exchange of information. Humor improves the quality and increases the frequency of inter-group communication concerning negotiations, clarification, information gathering and sharing, and can improve performance.

Some researchers identified that all the coaches saw a place for humor in elite-level sport. They found it particularly useful for breaking up the seriousness, monotony and repetition governing elite athletes' lifestyles.

**IMPLICATIONS:** Our study makes two key contributions to the literature on GEI, CSE and Team work effectiveness. The first contribution of this paper is that the study is conducted among University student athletes, while the earlier studies focused on employees, managers and adults. The second contribution of this study is that it provides further evidence of the important role that EI and SH may play in positively impacting the performance and work attitudes of student athletes and potentially may contribute to a sport team's competitive advantage.

**LIMITATIONS:** There are several limitations in this study. Firstly, many of the participants were asked to fill in the questionnaires after class or around university campus, so their responses might have been affected by surrounding distractions. A more systematic approach to recruiting participants should be employed, and a more controlled environment should be provided for participants when they fill in the questionnaires. Secondly, all participants in this study were university students, which might not represent the general picture of adult EI and SH as a personality trait among all population.

Thirdly, this study did not control for possible confounding variables, such as family background, social status, and religious beliefs. Future studies should take these into consideration. Fourthly, this study was a self-reported-based survey study, and it cannot guarantee that participants were not biased or deceiving the accurate information when answering the items in the questionnaire. A combination of different methods of assessment is encouraged for future studies.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Sport managers and coaches should make the environment of the sport organizations and teams conducive by bringing EI in practice.
2. The management should provide training to the sport employers and sport teams athletes to im-

prove their emotional handling.

3. Management and coaching training programs may also concentrate more on humor behaviours which have a potential to produce effectiveness and develop coach leadership.

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