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Perceived coach behaviors and athletes’ engagement and disaffection in youth sport: The mediating role of the psychological needs.

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Abstract

Understanding how coaches influence adolescents’ levels of engagement and disaffection in youth sport is important in light of the high attrition in this population. Grounded in self-determination theory, we proposed and tested a mediation model that described pathways linking perceptions of coach behavior (autonomy supportive versus controlling) to adolescents’ engagement and disaffection via psychological need satisfaction and thwarting in youth sport. One-hundred and fifty-three young soccer players (Mage = 13.96 ± 1.41) completed a questionnaire that assessed the study variables. Structural equation modelling supported the hypothesised model. Perceptions of autonomy support positively predicted psychological need satisfaction which, in turn, positively predicted engagement. Perceptions of controlling behaviors positively predicted psychological need thwarting which, in turn, positively predicted disaffection. In addition, a number of cross-over paths emerged. The findings substantiate claims that encouraging self-directed action, and reducing controlling behaviors, is critical in order to foster engagement and avoid disaffection in youth sport.

Keywords: Motivation, Athlete, Psychological Need Satisfaction, Autonomy Support
Participation in youth soccer is a popular pastime for children and adolescents. Indeed, according to the Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA, 2007), 22 million of those under the age of 16 play the game regularly worldwide. Yet beyond this age, participation in youth sports such as soccer decreases sharply (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2012a). In the United Kingdom, for instance, estimates suggest that as many as 25,000 16 year-olds drop out of youth sport each year and more than half of the population over 16 do not participate in any sport at all (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2010; 2012b). One important antecedent of continued participation is perceived coach behavior (Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Horn, 2008). Understanding coach behaviour and how it shapes experiences in youth sports such as soccer is therefore essential in order to promote participation beyond late adolescence.

**Behavioral engagement and disaffection in youth sport**

Adolescents who continue participation in youth sport appear outwardly to be displaying a pattern of behavior akin to engagement. Numerous models of engagement have been proposed in the contexts of work, education, and sport (e.g., Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Lonsdale, Hodge & Raedeke, 2007; Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002). One of the most prominent approaches to engagement is that developed by Skinner and colleagues (e.g., Skinner, Kindermann, Connell & Wellborn, 2009; Skinner, Kindermann & Furrer, 2009; Skinner, Furrer, Marchand & Kinderman, 2008). According to these researchers, the primary feature of engaged behavior is proactive and energetic involvement in achievement activities. It encompasses an array of self-regulatory strategies, including effort exertion and persistence, as well as mental efforts such as concentration, attention, asking questions, and contributing to discussions. Engagement is important to understand because it is linked to a number of adaptive outcomes for adolescents
that include greater well-being and task adherence (e.g., Blair & Razza, 2007; Duda, 2001; Guthrie, Schafer, & Huang, 2001).

The antithesis of engagement is disaffection. In contrast to engagement, disaffection captures passive and reactive behaviors reflecting a lack of self-regulation. These behaviors encompass disinterest, a lack of initiation, a lack of effort, and giving up. Disaffection also includes indicators of ritualistic participation and mental withdrawal, such as a lack of attention and concentration. Considered alongside engagement, disaffected behaviors provide additional insight into youth sport. This is because they are linked to a number of maladaptive outcomes for adolescents that include greater ill-being and higher attrition (e.g., Furrer, Skinner, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2006; Kirk, 2005; Skinner et al., 2009).

**Self-determination theory**

Self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Niemiec, Ryan, & Deci, 2010) can be used to explain the coach behaviors that catalyze engagement and disaffection in youth sport. SDT is a macro-theory of human motivation with applications to sport and exercise (Standage & Ryan, 2012). According to SDT, two coach motivational styles create the conditions necessary for engagement and disaffection. The first, autonomy support, refers to the degree to which coaches encourage athletes to take initiative in sport and be active problem-solvers, provide meaningful rationales for necessary limits, and take an athlete, rather than coach perspective (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). Such provisions are understood to allow youth sports participants to endorse external events as personally meaningful and, thus, cultivate their engagement. In support of this tenet of SDT, numerous studies have found perceptions of autonomy support to predict attentive, effortful, persistent, and active participation in sport (e.g., Curran, Hill & Niemiec, 2013; Sarrazin, Vallerand, Guillet, Pelletier & Cury, 2002; Smith, Ntoumanis, & Duda, 2007).
The second motivational style is controlling behavior. It refers to the degree to which coaches apply pressure to athletes to meet demands, solve problems on behalf of athletes and adopt their own perspective, rather than the athlete’s perspective (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2009; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). These provisions are thought to socially impose the relevance of external events to youth sports participants without cultivating personal relevance and, thus, disaffection. In comparison to the amount of research examining autonomy support, little empirical research has examined the role of controlling behavior by coaches in adolescents’ experiences in sport. However, support for this tenet of SDT is offered by qualitative studies in which many adolescents have reported controlling coach behavior as central to their decisions to withdraw (Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009; Fraser-Thomas, Côté & Deakin, 2008).

**SDT’s mediation model of behavioral engagement and disaffection**

To explain the effects of coach motivational style on adolescents’ engagement and disaffection in youth sport, SDT proposes a mediation model (see Jang, Kim & Reeve, 2012) based on an organismic-dialectic outlook (Reeve, Deci & Ryan, 2004; Vansteenkiste & Deci, 2004). This outlook purports that human beings have innate motivational resources which interact with the social-context to promote optimal functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2000). These motivational resources take the form of three basic psychological needs. Autonomy is the need to experience behavior as originating from within the self. It represents the inner endorsement and self-determination of one’s behavior (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Competence is the need to feel that one can effectively negotiate their interactions with the environment. It reflects the innate desire to approach and master achievement-oriented tasks (Deci, 1975). Finally, relatedness is the need to create close bonds and attachments with significant others. It embodies the will to be immersed in caring and reciprocally appreciated
inter-personal relationships (Ryan, 1995). In sport and exercise settings, a growing body of research supports the role of the psychological needs in promoting persistence, effort and adherence (e.g., Sarrazin et al., 2002; Smith, Ntoumanis, Duda & Vansteenkiste, 2011; Teixeira et al., 2012).

Returning to SDT’s mediation model, these psychological needs represent a unifying principle – linking coach behaviors to the behavioral outcomes exhibited by youth sports participants (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). A number of studies in sport, and in other domains, have supported this mediation model as it relates to children’s cognitions and affect (e.g., Adie, Duda & Ntoumanis, 2008; Jang et al., 2012; Reinboth, Duda & Ntoumanis, 2004). This research has typically focused on examining the benefits of perceived autonomy support and psychological need satisfaction. Reinboth et al (2004), for instance, found that perceived autonomy support from coaches positively correlated with psychological need satisfaction which, in turn, correlated positively with vitality and life satisfaction in a sample of youth sports participants. Similar findings have also been reported by Adie and colleagues (Adie et al., 2008; Adie, Duda & Ntoumanis, 2012), who observed that perceived coach autonomy support was positively associated with the psychological needs which, in turn, correlated positively with vitality in adult and adolescent athletes.

Research has more recently begun to examine perceptions of controlling behavior by coaches and psychological need thwarting – the perception that the psychological needs are actively frustrated (as opposed to simply unmet). Work conducted by numerous researchers is similarly supportive of SDT’s mediation model in this regard. Specifically, in addition to replicating findings regarding autonomy support and need satisfaction, this research has reported that perceived controlling behaviors by coaches positively predicted psychological need thwarting which, in
turn, positively predicted negative affect, depression, and burnout among adult and adolescent athletes (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2011; Balaguer, González, et al., 2012). In addition, this research suggests that the effects of psychological need thwarting on negative outcomes extend beyond the contributions made by psychological need satisfaction (Gunnell, Crocker, Wilson, Mack & Zumbo, 2013). Therefore, owing to its unique explanatory ability in negative outcomes, the inclusion of the pathway from controlling behaviors to psychological need thwarting in SDT’s mediation model appears to be important.

In light of the importance of both pathways in SDT’s mediation model, research has begun to examine the unique and collective effects of psychological need satisfaction and thwarting in SDT’s mediation model. Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan and Thøgersen-Ntoumani (2011), for example, compared the predictive ability of psychological need satisfaction and thwarting and found significant effects of both on athletes’ vitality, but only psychological need thwarting was a significant predictor of athlete burnout. Similar findings are also evident in the work of Balaguer et al. (2012) and Gunnell et al. (2013) and suggest that there are occasions when psychological need satisfaction and thwarting operate in tandem and others when they operate separately depending on the outcomes assessed. Consequently, examination of the unique (captured via two separate pathways) and collective (captured via two separate pathways and two cross-over pathways) influences of psychological need satisfaction and thwarting is likely to offer further insight into their influence on negative and positive experiences in sport.

The present research

The present research, then, had two aims. First, we intended to build upon the work of Bartholomew et al (2011) and others (Balaguer et al., 2012; Gunnell et al., 2013) by testing SDT’s mediation model in relation to engagement and disaffection in
youth sport (see Figure 1). In this model, autonomy support from coaches was hypothesised to positively predict athletes’ psychological need satisfaction which, in turn, was hypothesised to positively predict their engaged behavior. By contrast, coaches’ provision of a controlling motivational style was hypothesised to positively predict athletes’ psychological need thwarting which, in turn, was hypothesised to positively predict their disaffected behavior.

In testing this model, the second aim of the present research was to identify the unique and collective effects of the psychological needs (both satisfaction and thwarting) on engagement and disaffection. To do this, in addition to the hypothesised parallel paths, the cross-over paths in SDT’s mediation model were also examined (Figure 1; dashed arrows). On the basis of SDT, it was hypothesised that perceived autonomy support from coaches would negatively predict athletes’ psychological need thwarting which, in turn, would negatively predict their engagement. By contrast, perceived control from coaches was expected to negatively predict athletes’ psychological need satisfaction which, in turn, would negatively predict their disaffection.

**Method**

**Participants and procedure.** One-hundred and fifty-three (115 male, 38 female; M age = 13.96 years, s = 1.41, range = 12-18) young recreational soccer players were the sample of this study. The participants reported that they had been playing soccer for an average of 7.04 (SD = 2.21) years and had been attached to their clubs for an average of 3.56 (SD = 2.39) years. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was provided by the research ethics committee of a British University and parental consent was sought for the children’s participation. Data collection was conducted in a training session setting, where the lead author was on hand at all times to give general instructions and answer any questions. A multi-section questionnaire
was given to the participants. The questionnaire took approximately 20 minutes to complete.

**Instruments.** All items were responded to on a seven-point Likert scale, which ranged from 1 (*not true at all*) to 7 (*very true*).

**Behavioral engagement and disaffection.** Engaged and disaffected behaviors were assessed using the behavioral sub-scales of the Engagement Versus Disaffection with Learning Scale (EVDLS; Skinner et al., 2009; Wellborn, 1991). These items were adapted to focus participants on soccer training. Behavioral engagement was measured using five items that tapped athletes’ effort, attention, and persistence while participating in soccer (e.g. “I try hard to do well in training”). Behavioral disaffection was assessed using five items that tapped athletes’ lack of effort and withdrawal from soccer (e.g. “In training, I do just enough to get by”). These scales have been found to be valid and internally reliable in educational contexts (Skinner et al., 2008; Skinner, Kindermann & Furrer, 2009).

As the scale was adapted in the current study, it was considered necessary to more closely assess its psychometric properties. The factor structure of the adapted EVDLS for youth sport was thus examined using confirmatory factor analysis, employing structural equation modelling with maximum likelihood estimation. A measurement model was stipulated that included two correlated latent factors: behavioral engagement (five observed indicators) and behavioral disaffection (five observed indicators). This model demonstrated acceptable fit to the observed data: $\chi^2 (34) = 88.10, p < .001; \chi^2/df = 2.59; TLI = .92; CFI = .92; SRMR = .07; RMSEA = .10$ (Hu & Bentler, 1995; Hu & Bentler, 1995; Marsh, Hau & Wen, 2004; Schermelleh-Engel, Moosbrugger, & Müller, 2003). Consequently, the analyses supported the use of the adapted sub-scales.
Psychological need satisfaction. Psychological need satisfaction was assessed using the Basic Need Satisfaction in Sport Scale (BNSSS adapted for soccer; Ng, Lonsdale & Hodge, 2011). This twenty-item scale measures three aspects of autonomy satisfaction; choice (four items; e.g. “In soccer, I can take part in the decision-making process”), volition (three items e.g. “I feel I participate in soccer willingly”), and internal locus of control (three items; e.g. “In soccer, I feel I am pursuing goals that are my own”), relatedness satisfaction (five items; e.g. “In soccer, I feel close to other people”), and competence satisfaction (five items; e.g. “I have the ability to perform well in soccer”). The three aspects of autonomy were averaged to produce a score of total autonomy in current study. This scale has been found to possess adequate psychometric properties in sport (see Ng et al., 2011).

Psychological need thwarting. Psychological need thwarting was measured using the Psychological Need Thwarting Scale (PNTS adapted for soccer; Batholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan & Thogersen-Ntoumani, 2011). This twelve-item scale measures autonomy thwarting (four items; e.g. “I feel pushed to behave in certain ways in soccer.”), relatedness thwarting (four items; e.g. “I feel others in football can be dismissive of me.”), and competence thwarting (four items; e.g. “There are situations in soccer where I am made to feel inadequate.”). This scale has been found to possess adequate psychometric properties in sport (see Bartholomew et al., 2011).

Perceived autonomy support. An adapted sport version (Gillet, Vallerand, Paty, Gobanche, Berjot, 2010) of the Perceived Autonomy Support Scale for Exercise Settings (PASSES; Hagger, Chatzisarantis, Hein, Pihu, Soos & Karsai, 2007) was employed to measure perceived coach autonomy support. This twelve-item inventory taps athletes’ perceptions of their coaches’ provision of autonomy support (e.g. “I feel that my coach provides me with choices, options and opportunities about whether to
play soccer”). This adapted version of the PASSES has been found to possess adequate psychometric properties in sport (see Gillet et al., 2010).

**Perceived controlling motivational style.** The Controlling Coach Behaviors Scale (CCBS; Bartholomew et al., 2010) was employed to measure perceived coach controlling motivational style. This fifteen-item inventory measures athletes’ perceptions of their coaches controlling use of rewards (four items; e.g. “My coach only uses rewards or praise to make me train harder”), negative conditional regard (four items; e.g. “My coach pays me less attention if I have displeased him/her”), intimidation (four items; e.g. “My coach threatens to punish me to keep me in line in training”), and excessive personal control (three items; e.g. “My coach tries to control what I do during my free time”). This scale has also been found to possess adequate psychometric properties in sport (see Bartholomew et al., 2010).

**Analytical strategy.** Structural equation modelling (AMOS version 18.0; Arbuckle, 2007) with maximum likelihood estimation was the primary data analysis strategy. Using a two-step method, a confirmatory factor analysis was first used to assess the measurement model and was followed by an assessment of the hypothesised model (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). This approach first establishes the fit of the measurement model by examining the relation of the observed variables (e.g., psychological need satisfaction) to their underlying constructs (e.g., autonomy, competence, and relatedness). Secondly, this approach then establishes the fit of the structural model (i.e., Figure 1) by comparing the hypothesised variance-covariance matrix to the sample variance-covariance matrix. If the two variance-covariance matrices are closely matched (implied by fit indices), the conclusion is that the hypothesised model approximates the data well.

To determine the statistical significance of the mediated pathways in the current study, indirect effects were calculated and their 95% confidence intervals were
derived using a distribution of the products method (PRODCLIN programme; MacKinnon, Fritz, Williams & Lockwood, 2007). Indirect effects are the product of the coefficients (i.e., \(ab\); Hayes, 2009), where \(a\) is the path from the predictor to the mediator and \(b\) is the path from the mediator to the criterion. The 95% confidence interval denotes the upper and lower boundary of an indirect effect that would be observed 95 times out of 100 if a sample of the same size were to be drawn from the population. Provided that a null or zero effect is not observed between the upper and lower bound of the 95% confidence interval, the indirect effect is deemed significant at the \(p < .05\) level.

**Results**

**Preliminary analysis.** Missing value analysis revealed that there were 113 complete cases and 40 incomplete cases. Of the cases with incomplete data, none had more than 3 items missing (\(M = 1.38, SD = .66, range = 1-3\)). Missing values were therefore replaced with the mean of the non-missing items in the respective sub-scale for each individual case (Graham, Cumsille & Elek-Fisk, 2003). A central assumption of structural equation modelling is a normal distribution. However, while the data was considered approximately univariate normal (absolute skewness \(M = .16, SD = .49, SE = .12\); absolute kurtosis \(M = .54, SD = .29, SE = .39\), estimates of multivariate kurtosis (Mardia’s normalised coefficient = 27.52) indicated the data was multivariate asymmetrical (Kline, 1998). Conventional modelling using maximum likelihood estimation is robust to small violations of normality (McDonald & Ho, 2002). However, concerns arise regarding the type I error attached to the chi-square statistic under circumstances of moderate to major violations (Curran, West, & Finch, 1996).

This problem was remedied in two ways. Firstly, model fit was not solely based on the interpretation of the chi-square. Following guidelines provided by Hu & Bentler (1995), two absolute (Standardised Root Mean Square Residual [SRMR] and
Root Mean Squared Error of Approximation [RMSEA]) and two incremental (Tucker Lewis Index [TLI] and Confirmatory Fit Index [CFI]) fit indexes were reported. Fit was deemed acceptable in the current study if; TLI and CFI > .90 and RMSEA < .10 (Hu & Bentler, 1995; Marsh et al., 2004; Schmeller-Engel et al., 2003). Secondly, structural equation analysis was followed by a bootstrapping procedure that drew 5000 replication samples to test parameter stability. Bootstrapping produces an empirical representation of the sampling distribution of path coefficients by treating the observed sample as a representation of the population in miniature, one that is repeatedly resampled as a means of reproducing the original sampling process (Hayes, 2009). Provided the bootstrap estimate closely approximates the sample coefficient, high path stability can be inferred.

**Assessment of the measurement model.** The measurement model consisted of seven related latent factors that represented all study variables. Scores for each item were used as the measured variables for the latent engagement and disaffection factors. Subscales were used as measured variables for the latent factors; perceived controlling motivational style, psychological need satisfaction and psychological need thwarting. As perceived autonomy support contained a large number of items, three random parcels of items were used as manifest variables (Little, Cunningham, Shahar & Wilderman, 2002). Standardised factor loadings for the manifest variables were significant (autonomy support $M \beta = .88$, range = .78-.93; control $M \beta = .83$, range = .68-.97; psychological need satisfaction $M \beta = .86$, range = .79-.96; psychological need thwarting $M \beta = .85$, range = .79-.91; engagement $M \beta = .75$, range = .63-.85; disaffection $M \beta = .64$, range = .50-.83), and each of these latent factors demonstrated acceptable composite reliability (see Table 1; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Furthermore, the measurement model exhibited an acceptable fit to the data: $\chi^2 = 377.86$ (215), $p < .05$; $\chi^2/df = 1.57$; TLI = .92; CFI = .93; SRMR = .06; RMSEA = .07.
and the error free correlations between all latent factors were in the expected
directions and significant (see Table 1).

**Structural equation modelling.** The hypothesised model that was tested can
be seen in Figure 2. Fit indexes suggested the hypothesized model possessed an
adequate fit to the data: χ² (221) = 422.14 , p < .05; χ²/df = 1.91; TLI = .90; CFI = .92;
SRMR = .07; RMSEA = .08. Autonomy support predicted psychological need
satisfaction (γ = .68, p< .01) and thwarting (γ = -.31, p< .01). Likewise, a controlling
motivational style predicted psychological need satisfaction (γ = -.21, p< .01) and
thwarting (γ = .51, p< .01). Psychological need satisfaction, in turn, predicted
behavioral engagement (β = .78, p< .01) and disaffection (β = -.44, p< .01).
Psychological need thwarting predicted behavioral disaffection (β = .23, p< .05) but
not engagement (β = .00, p > .05). The hypothesised model accounted for 65% of the
variance in psychological need satisfaction, 52% of the variance in psychological need
thwarting, 61% of the variance in behavioral engagement and 35% of the variance in
behavioral disaffection.

**Bootstrap analysis.** Bootstrapping was employed to test the stability of the
hypothesised model parameters. The resulting means for each standardised path
coefficient across the 5000 iterations were almost identical to those derived from the
maximum likelihood estimation method (see Table 1). Therefore, high parameter
stability can be inferred.

**Indirect effects.** Specific indirect effects were calculated to further test the
mediating role of psychological need satisfaction and thwarting. With the exception of
the specific indirect effects of the two inter-personal styles on engagement via
psychological need thwarting, all specific indirect effects were significant (see Table
2).

**Discussion**
The purpose of this study was two-fold. First, we intended to test SDT’s mediation model in relation to behavioral engagement and behavioral disaffection in youth sport. In this model, perceived autonomy support from coaches was hypothesised to positively predict athletes’ psychological need satisfaction which, in turn, was hypothesised to positively predict their engagement. By contrast, perceived control from coaches was hypothesised to positively predict athletes’ psychological need thwarting which, in turn, was hypothesised to positively predict their disaffection. Second, in addition to the hypothesised parallel paths, the cross-over paths were concurrently tested to examine unique and collective effects in SDT’s mediation model. It was hypothesised that perceived autonomy support from coaches would negatively predict athletes’ psychological need thwarting which, in turn, would negatively predict their engagement. By contrast, perceived controlling behavior from coaches was expected to negatively predict athletes’ psychological need satisfaction which, in turn, would negatively predict their disaffection.

Findings indicated that the hypothesised model possessed an adequate fit to the observed data. Furthermore, the parallel paths were significant and in the hypothesised directions. Additional support for the model was provided by the indirect effects, with all but two (those containing a non-significant cross-over path from psychological need thwarting to engagement) reaching significance. As regards the second aim of this study, with the exception of the psychological need thwarting to engagement path, the hypothesised cross-over paths were also statistically significant and in the expected directions.

**Relationships between perceptions of the coach and youth sports participants’ engagement and disaffection**

At the zero-order level, the provision of autonomy support from coaches positively correlated with engagement and negatively correlated with disaffection. By
contrast, a controlling motivational style negatively correlated with engagement and positively correlated with disaffection. These findings indicate that the two types of coaching behavior have a differential relationship with engagement and disaffection in a manner observed for affective outcomes by others (Adie et al., 2008; Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2011; Balaguer et al., 2012; Reinboth et al., 2004). In doing so, the results substantiate the notion that encouraging self-directed action and tempering the use of controlling behavior have high predictive utility in sport. Notably, in an extension to extant research, our findings indicate that the predictive utility of perceived autonomy support and control extend to the adherence and attrition fostering self-regulatory strategies (e.g., attention, persistence and effort versus passivity, disinterest and a lack of initiation) evident in engagement and disaffection.

**SDT’s mediation model**

Consistent with findings from previous research (Adie et al., 2008; Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2011; Balaguer et al., 2012; Jang et al., 2012; Reinboth et al., 2004), the effects of perceived coach autonomy support and perceived coach control to engagement and were mediated, to varying degrees, by the satisfaction and thwarting of the psychological needs. As was expected, perceptions that coaches’ provide autonomy support corresponded with higher engagement via higher psychological need satisfaction. Moreover, autonomy supportive coaches also appear to quell disaffection. This is because autonomy support indirectly predicted lower disaffection via lower psychological need thwarting and higher psychological need satisfaction. In this regard the current findings closely mirror the mechanisms described in SDT. Psychological need fulfilment ensures personal endorsement of sports participation and this volitional regulation paves the
way for enjoyment, effort and persistence which, here, promotes proactivity and offers
resistance to passivity in youth sport (Ntoumanis, 2012).

Perceptions of controlling coach behaviors, by contrast, indirectly contributed
to higher disaffection and lower engagement. This is because a controlling
motivational style predicted higher psychological need thwarting and lower
psychological need satisfaction. According to SDT, low psychological need
satisfaction and high psychological need thwarting provoke adolescents to relinquish
the personal endorsement of their sporting participation for compensatory
environmental motives (e.g., others approval, rewards, punishment avoidance). This
controlled regulation is influential in athletes’ negative affect and boredom
(Ntoumanis, 2012) and appears to promote passivity and disinterest as well as a
waylay to effort and persistence in youth sport. Overall, these findings support and
build upon extant research (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani,
2011; Balaguer et al., 2012; Gunnell et al., 2013) by further indicating that
psychological need thwarting is important alongside psychological need satisfaction in
order to understand positive and negative experiences in sport.

Examination of the cross-over pathways provided further insight into the
unique and combined effects of the psychological satisfaction and thwarting. The
findings provided support for the findings of some previous studies (e.g., Aide et al.,
2008; Balaguer et al., 2012; Gunnell et al., 2013), but not others (Bartholomew,
Ntoumanis, Ryan & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2011), in that psychological need
satisfaction uniquely contributed to both positive (viz. engagement) and negative
outcomes (viz. disaffection) whereas psychological need thwarting uniquely predicted
only disaffection (and not engagement). These effects suggest that although
psychological need satisfaction is principally understood to contribute to positive
experiences, it can also prevent the emergence of negative experience via a
development of the psychological resources necessary for effective coping (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). By contrast, contrary to expectations, psychological need thwarting appears to elicit only negative experiences with an absence of any effect on positive experience. Accordingly, although less likely to contribute to athletes’ disaffection, coaches who merely provide reduced opportunity for psychological need thwarting are unlikely to promote any engagement.

Limitations and future research

The current study has a number of limitations. First, it employed a non-experimental, cross-sectional design. Accordingly, it is not possible to infer causality between the studied variables. Developing this line of research should involve the use of longitudinal data to support the temporal precedence implied by SDT’s mediation model. This particularly important in light of Jang et al’s (2012) finding that children’s psychological need satisfaction and engagement share a reciprocal relationship, and Reeve’s (2009) assertion that disaffection may evoke controlling (rather than autonomy-supportive) strategies from socializers over time. Second, data were collected among youth soccer players in the UK. Such a homogeneous sample limits the generalizability of the findings. It is important for future research to examine these dynamics in other, more competitive, sport contexts. Third, the current study did not assess perceptions of structure from coaches. According to SDT, structure refers to the help, support, rules and limits that coaches provide to support children’s competence in sport (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). Recent studies have shown that structure and autonomy support interact to predict higher psychological need satisfaction and engagement in school (Jang, Reeve & Deci, 2010; Sierens, Vansteenkiste, Goossens, Soenens & Dochy, 2009) and sport (Curran et al., 2013). Therefore, it is important for future research to integrate both autonomy support and structure within SDT’s mediation model.
Creating bridges between motivation and self-regulation in sport and exercise

The relationship between motivation related concepts (e.g., needs, goals, efficacy) and self-regulation (e.g., planning, monitoring, meta-cognition) is dynamic and reciprocal (Martin, 2012; Zimmerman & Capillo, 2003). SDT offers a distinctive account of this relationship. This is because SDT centres on innate motivational resources (viz. the psychological needs) and how they govern behaviour. This deviates somewhat from other approaches to motivation that might guide practice, such as achievement goal theory (Nicholls, 1984). For example, within achievement goal theory, individual differences (e.g., goal orientations) are understood to be developmentally acquired. By contrast, SDT assumes inherent internal actualisation tendencies reside within each individual that must be cultivated. In addition, in achievement goal theory, high perceptions of competence (regardless of how it is construed) contribute to adaptive self-regulation. However, in SDT, high competence is, in isolation, insufficient to promote optimal self-regulation, as complementary needs for autonomy and relatedness must also be fulfilled (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Although these differences may appear subtle, the ramifications for practice may be considerable if one approach or the other is adopted since coaches might seek to nurture (as opposed to impart) the antecedents of self-regulation by offering support for a wider array of motivation resources (as opposed to just competence).

As discussed, within the SDT framework autonomy-support describes the motivational style through which coaches and others create conditions to nurture athletes’ inner motivational resources. This includes listening to, and acting upon, athletes’ ideas, offering them opportunity to take initiative, providing them with meaningful rationales for necessary limits, acknowledging any negative experiences and providing them with a number of desired choices (Reeve, 2006). Similarly, providing adequate structure that fosters competence is also known to be important.
(Grolnick & Ryan, 1989). This includes providing rules and limits prior to an activity, help and support during and activity, and informational feedback after an activity (Reeve, 2006). By providing structure in a context of autonomy support, coaches provide fertile conditions for athletes’ self-regulation via the concurrent facilitation of autonomy and competence (Curran et al., 2013).

Above all, our results underscore the need for effective coach education. In youth sport, coaches are typically parent volunteers (Wiersma & Sherman, 2005) and receive very little formal training in how their behaviors influence athletes’ underlying motivation. The key message stemming from this study is that supporting athletes’ autonomy, and resisting the temptation to utilize controlling behaviours, is central to the cultivation of positive experiences in youth sport. We therefore encourage a greater focus among sport psychologists on the evaluation of interventions aimed at enhancing coaches’ ability to recognise, and support, the psychological needs of their young athletes. By this means, coaches will be better equipped to promote athletes’ adaptive self-regulation (viz. engaged behaviors) and, thereby, greater adherence to youth sport.

Acknowledgements

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References


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Figure 1. Hypothesised motivation mediation model of coach inter-personal style, psychological need satisfaction/thwarting and behavioral engagement/disaffection. Path letters denote paths in Table 4.1. Note. dashed lines indicate a hypothesised negative relationship; un-dashed lines indicate a hypothesised positive relationship.
Figure 2. Results of structural equation modelling for the hypothesised motivation mediation model. *p < .05, **p < .01. Note. figures above the exogenous variables refer to the variance explained ($R^2$) by the endogenous variables. The exogenous variable residuals were uncorrelated.
Table 1. Composite reliabilities and zero-order correlations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Autonomy Support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Controlling inter-personal style</td>
<td>-.55***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Psychological need satisfaction</td>
<td>.77***</td>
<td>-.55***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Psychological need thwarting</td>
<td>-.57***</td>
<td>.67***</td>
<td>-.67***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Engagement</td>
<td>.67***</td>
<td>-.55***</td>
<td>.74***</td>
<td>-.49***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Disaffection</td>
<td>-.44***</td>
<td>.44***</td>
<td>-.55***</td>
<td>.50***</td>
<td>-.65***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composite Reliability (Dillon-Goldstein’s ρ)</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***p < .001
Table 1 Standardised coefficients for the paths in the hypothesized model and results from the bootstrap analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Path</th>
<th>Standardised coefficient</th>
<th>Bootstrap analysis for hyp. model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hypothesised model</td>
<td>Mean st. coefficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy support to psychological need satisfaction (γ₁)</td>
<td>.68**</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy support to psychological need thwarting (γ₂)</td>
<td>- .31**</td>
<td>-.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controlling IPS to psychological need satisfaction (γ₃)</td>
<td>- .21**</td>
<td>-.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controlling IPS to psychological need thwarting (γ₄)</td>
<td>.51**</td>
<td>.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological need satisfaction to engagement (β₁)</td>
<td>.78**</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological need satisfaction to disaffection (β₂)</td>
<td>-.44**</td>
<td>-.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological need thwarting to engagement (β₃)</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>-.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological need thwarting to disaffection (β₄)</td>
<td>.23**</td>
<td>.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correlation autonomy support and controlling IPS (r)</td>
<td>-.55**</td>
<td>-.54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. St. coefficient = standardised coefficient; CI = confidence interval; hyp = hypothesised. Bootstrap analysis was based on 1000 iterations. The standardised coefficient columns denote the standardised betas or gammas of the various paths with the exception of $r$ which denotes the bivariate correlation. *p < .05, **p < .01.
Table 2  Specific indirect effects.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor (X) → Mediator (M) → Outcome (Y)</th>
<th>Indirect effect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ab (SE)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Engagement</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy support → Need satisfaction → Behavioral engagement</td>
<td>.53 (.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy support → Need thwarting → Behavioral engagement</td>
<td>-.00 (.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controlling IPS → Need satisfaction → Behavioral engagement</td>
<td>-.16 (.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controlling IPS → Need thwarting → Behavioral engagement</td>
<td>.00 (.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Disaffection</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy support → Need satisfaction → Behavioral disaffection</td>
<td>-.30 (.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy support → Need thwarting → Behavioral disaffection</td>
<td>-.07 (.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controlling IPS → Need satisfaction → Behavioral disaffection</td>
<td>.09 (.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controlling IPS → Need thwarting → Behavioral disaffection</td>
<td>.11 (.04)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The 95% confidence intervals for the indirect effects were those derived from the PRODCLIN programme that produces confidence intervals on the basis of a distribution-of-the-product-method (Mackinnon et al., 2007).
Appendix A

Items for the modified version of the Engagement Versus Disaffection with Learning Scale

(behavioral subscales)

1. I try hard to do well in training
2. When I’m in training, I listen very carefully
3. I don’t try very hard in training
4. In training, I do just enough to get by
5. When I’m in training, my mind wanders
6. When I’m in training, I just act like I’m trying
7. When I’m in training, I think about other things
8. In training, I work as hard as I can
9. I pay attention in training
10. When I’m in training, I participate in training discussions

Notes. Items 1, 2, 8, 9, and 10 are used to assess engagement. Items 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 are used to assess disaffection.