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# Transformational Leadership: A Qualitative Analysis of Effective Leadership in Women's Soccer in England

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined perceptions of effective leadership in elite women's soccer by team captains. Data were collected from a range of perspectives in four elite female soccer teams in England. For each of the four teams, data were collected from 6 participants (total N = 24 players). For each of the four teams, interviews were conducted with the captain and the coach as well as a focus group with 4 players regarding their perceptions of the captain's leadership. Data were firstly deductively categorised under the four key areas of transformational leadership: idealised influence, inspirational motivation, individualised consideration and intellectual stimulation. An inductive analysis of the relevant data which did not fit into these themes revealed the importance of captains building bridges through helping to navigate the gender gap as well as to facilitate effective relationships with and between players. The implications of these findings are discussed.

## Keywords

effective leadership; qualitative analysis; transformational leadership; women's soccer

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## INTRODUCTION

There is a significant body of work which has investigated the interactions between gender and leadership roles in sport. [Burton & Leberman \(2017\)](#) highlight issues such as how women are portrayed in the sports media, the coverage of women's sport and the gender pay gap in sport. However, one area that has received relatively less attention is that of athlete leadership within women's sport. The present study addresses this gap through exploring perceptions of what constitutes effective leadership by captains in the context of elite women's soccer in England.

### *Women Leaders in Sport*

Research has demonstrated the gender inequities regarding leadership in sport. In their systematic narrative review, [Evans & Phister \(2021\)](#) concluded that gender inequity continues to represent a significant issue in sport, particularly in relation to decision-making positions. A large body of work was reviewed which was comprised of 154 journal papers, book chapters and grey literature publications. The paper outlines how research has considered factors at the macro level (e.g. global and national trends), the meso level (e.g. the processes which contribute to gender inequities) and the micro level (e.g. individual experiences of gender inequity). However, there is also an inequity in the sense that leadership research has primarily focused on male participants or on studying women's experiences relative to men ([Evans & Pfister, 2021](#)). A systematic review by [Maitland et al. \(2015\)](#) illustrates how cultural differences across and within sports ensure that we need sport specific research in order to inform policy, education and practice. The findings from the broader literature on women leaders in sport cannot confidently be applied to captains in elite soccer and hence the present study is merited. There has been significant growth in women's soccer in England over the past decade with a clear move towards professionalization. This fast developing and significant context for women's sport is thus an important setting for research.

### *Athlete Leadership*

Leadership has been defined as the 'process of influencing groups and individuals towards set goals' ([Barrow, 1977, p. 232](#)). Leaders are an integral element of sport ([Crust & Lawrence, 2006; Cotterill & Fransen, 2016](#)). The majority of research on leadership in sport has focused on coaches ([Moscoso Sánchez, 2005](#)). However, there has been an increased interest in the study of athlete leadership over the past decade.

Athlete leadership has been defined as 'an athlete occupying a formal or informal role within a team, who influences a group of members to achieve a common goal'

(Longhead et al., 2006, p. 142). Existing research has identified a range of important attributes of effective athlete leaders, including experience (Fransen et al., 2014), being an older member of the team (Fiedler, 1996), having tactical awareness (Wright & Côté, 2003), knowledge of the club (Gould et al., 2013), as well as sporting competence and good communication skills (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016). Effective athlete leaders have been found to have significant impacts on a range of important variables, including the intrinsic motivation of their team mates, group cohesion and overall team performance (Fransen et al., 2017, 2018). One formal role involving athlete leadership is that of the captain.

### **Captains**

The role of the captain has been identified as having a wide range of responsibilities which go far beyond simply being the player who wears the armband. Based on a survey of 398 participants (226 players and 172 coaches; 41% were involved with female teams from a range of sports including Basketball, Volleyball and Soccer), Fransen et al. (2019) found that a total of 919 attributes were associated with the ideal captain. Cotterill & Cheetham (2017) highlighted the following roles of the captain in men's rugby Union: on-pitch decision-maker, motivator, problem-solver, player representative, media liaison, mentor to young players, a player-coach buffer, embodiment of the team's culture, to challenge the coach and provide feedback on performance. Away from the pitch, leaders also have a role in terms of developing and maintaining social cohesion (Fransen et al., 2014). This was found to be especially important for female teams in a survey of 531 (40% females) soccer players (Leo et al., 2019).

Research has considered the role of the captain from various perspectives. For example, Voelker et al. (2011) interviewed 13 (6 females) high school captains. Overall, being a captain was viewed as a positive experience but challenges were identified with respect to being accountable, meeting expectations and having a lack of training for the role. Gould et al. (2013) explored the leadership development process in youth sport. A sample of 10 high school coaches (4 females) were interviewed regarding the strategies they used to facilitate the development of leadership skills in their captains. From the athlete's perspective, Smith et al. (2017) interviewed elite male cricketers regarding the leadership behaviors of their captains and coaches. The particularly important roles played by high performance expectations, individualised consideration from the coach and appropriate role modelling by the captain were highlighted. Clearly the functioning of sports teams is a multi-component process and hence studies designed to understand athlete leadership can benefit from

incorporating multiple perspectives. As a result, the present study will explore the perceptions of captains, their coaches and their team mates.

### ***Theoretical Foundation***

Our approach is grounded in the concept of transformational leadership. Bass (1985) has proposed that transformational leaders have positive expectations for their followers and are able to stimulate, inspire and empower people to achieve extraordinary outcomes. Transformational leaders are also concerned with caring for the wellbeing and development of their followers. The strategies within the framework of transformational leadership are categorised into 4 domains, referred to as the 4 Is ((Bass, 1985)):

- Idealised influence – The leader represents a role model to the followers and embodies the qualities that they want to see in their followers.
- Inspirational motivation – The leader has a clear vision and this is communicated effectively to the followers. This serves to inspire and motivate the followers to work towards the shared vision.
- Individualised consideration – The leader demonstrates care for the needs and feelings of followers. They help the followers to reach their potential and self-actualise.
- Intellectual stimulation – The leader encourages followers to be innovative and creative in ways which challenge how things are currently done.

This framework has been applied to a diverse range of settings including business (Lai et al., 2020), the military (García-Guiu et al., 2016) and sport (Arthur et al., 2017). Questionnaire-based studies in sport have provided empirical support for the importance of transformational leadership. When exhibited by leaders, these strategies have been found to be associated with both intrapersonal outcomes, such as athlete satisfaction and effort (Rowold, 2006), and interpersonal outcomes, such as task and social cohesion (Callow et al., 2009). Qualitative methods have also been utilised to study transformational leadership in sport. For example, Vallée & Bloom (2005) interviewed coaches of successful University programmes and found evidence to support the significance of the 4 'Is'. Newland et al. (2015) interviewed college athletes and provided further support for the 4 'Is' and emphasised the impact of leaders adopting a caring approach. However, the concept of transformational leadership has yet to be applied to athlete leaders in women's soccer.

## **Rationale**

The present study posed the question: How is effective leadership by captains conceptualised in elite women's soccer and to what extent does this reflect the transformational leadership approach?

This addresses a clear gap in the literature and the rationale for this research can be reiterated based on three key points. Firstly, from a theoretical perspective, there is scope for more research to explore the applicability of transformational leadership as a concept in different contexts. Secondly, there is a need for more research which explores transformational leadership in elite sport. Finally, there is a need for research into the role of the captain in elite women's soccer that incorporates views from a range of perspectives. At this time of change in the women's game, and the move towards professionalization, such research is valuable due to the potential to inform education and practice.

## **METHOD**

This study was conducted within a constructivist paradigm and adopted a transactional and subjectivist epistemology (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). In doing so, naturalistic and dialectical qualitative methods were used. The approach involved four case studies which incorporated different perspectives on captain's leadership within women's soccer.

## **Participants**

The participants were purposively recruited from 4 teams which would be defined as 'successful elite' within the taxonomy proposed by Swann et al. (2015). In other words, all participants played for a team in the top two national leagues in England associated with the Women's Super league. We purposively targeted teams who had been successful in the previous three seasons in terms of winning a trophy or promotion. More details are withheld to maintain the anonymity of the teams which took part. All four teams who were approached did agree to participate. This process was facilitated by the networks of the second author who has worked as a coach in women's soccer. Contact was made initially with the coach to gauge initial interest. Once this was approved, the second author visited a training session to explain the nature and purpose of the research to the squad. A team would only be eligible to participate if the coach, captain and at least four players all agreed to take part. If more than four players volunteered then four of these were selected at random to take part. All participants were very supportive of the research and could see the potential benefits for practice as well as for the development of the women's game.

For each team, an interview was conducted with the captain, the coach as well as a focus group with 4 players. This resulted in a total sample of 24 participants. All captains were female, aged between 26 and 32 years old and White. All four coaches were male, aged 30–45 and White. The players were all female, aged between 18–34 with 11 being White and five being from an ethnic minority. All participants were over 18 years old and had been within their team and roles for a minimum of 6-months. To maintain the anonymity of participants, they are stated as: Captain 1–4 (C1– C4) Coach 1–4 (CO1–CO4) or Teammates (FG1–FG4). To clarify, C1, CO1 and the 4 players in FG1 were all involved with the same team. Individual identifiers for the players within the focus groups were not assigned so as to afford a level of anonymity and encourage players to feel comfortable in sharing their perceptions.

### **Data Collection**

Prior to collecting data, approval was gained from the lead author's University's Ethics Review Sub-Committee on May 31<sup>st</sup>, 2019. Convenient times and locations for the interviews and focus groups were arranged for those teams in which the 6 required representatives had agreed to take part. Participants were informed that the interviews would be anonymous, their role may be identified within the study's results, but names and indicators (e.g., demographics of specific participants or their position on the pitch which may enable identification) would not. Participants were informed that the interviews and focus groups were confidential, information would not be shared between parties and they could withdraw from the study at any time. All participants provided written informed consent. They also provided verbal consent at the start and again at the end of the interview.

One-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with the four captains and four coaches. These interviews adopted a flexible approach to be responsive to the individual participant's answers in line with the recommendations of [Smith & Sparkes \(2016\)](#). These interviews allowed an in depth exploration of each participant's perceptions and experiences. The interview guide was semi-structured with a few prompts to initiate the conversation. Examples of questions asked within the interview were: 'What do you view as effective leadership by a captain during training?', 'What do you view as effective leadership by a captain during a match?' and 'What do you view as effective leadership by a captain away from the training and match environment?'. The final part of the interview allowed for participants to add any further relevant experiences and opinions. The flexible approach complimented the qualitative approach to the study; allowing rich, individualised knowledge to be added to the set

questions (Randall & Phoenix, 2009). The interviews lasted between 35 and 60 minutes ( $M = 48$  minutes).

A total of four focus groups were conducted. Each focus group consisted of four players from the same team. Focus groups were selected as the most appropriate method for pragmatic and logistical reasons (Duggleby, 2005). This enabled the players to engage with the project after a training session and hence was the approach preferred by the clubs and participants. The focus groups also enabled discussions which sparked synergies and shared experiences which may not have been afforded through other means of data collection. The same questions as those used in the interviews formed the basis of focus groups. The focus groups lasted between 55 and 75 minutes ( $M = 64$  minutes).

All data collection took place at the training grounds in a comfortable room with only the researcher and participant(s) in the room. Each interview and focus group was voice recorded with the permission of the participants and these were then transcribed verbatim. This resulted in 167 pages of transcripts.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were transcribed and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2019). Reflexive thematic analysis is a 6 stage process through which themes and patterns within qualitative data are identified, analyzed and reported (Braun et al., 2016). Firstly, the research team became familiar with the data through reading and re-reading the interviews and focus groups. Secondly, preliminary codes were then identified through a systematic coding of the data. Thirdly, the identified codes were analysed to highlight themes related to effective leadership. Themes were conceptualized as patterns of shared meaning which are grounded in a central organized concept (Braun et al., 2014). Fourthly, we then deductively analysed the data in relation to the 4 Is of transformational leadership (Bass, 1985). The data were then inductively analysed within each of these themes and the remaining relevant quotes were also inductively analysed to highlight further findings. Fifthly, the emergent themes were defined and given an illustrative label. Finally, the results were written up.

We adopted the trustworthiness criteria outlined by Nowell et al. (2017) to guide our approach. It is argued that this is a pragmatic approach which helps to enhance the acceptability and usefulness of the findings for stakeholders (Nowell et al., 2017). Firstly, credibility concerns the coherence between the participant's perspectives and how these are represented by the researchers. This was facilitated through the second author having a prolonged engagement with the context of women's soccer with



ten years as a player and then coach. The first author has more than 15 years' experience of conducting and supervising qualitative research on issues related to sport psychology. The authors also held regular meetings to reflect on their expectations and experiences such that any biases could be identified and mitigated against. The researchers also engaged with the participants through sharing initial findings and seeking feedback.

Secondly, transferability is achieved through providing descriptions of the data and findings to enable others to determine the extent to which the findings can be generalised to their case. Thirdly, dependability was demonstrated through having a traceable process with key stages being recorded. The process was audited by the third and fourth authors to check and challenge the procedures used. Finally, confirmability has been demonstrated through justifying our approach at each stage from the theoretical foundations and the project's rationale through to data collection, analysis and presentation.

## **RESULTS**

All of the participants perceived that the captain had played a key role in facilitating the success of the team. For example, one coach explained 'She was vital to the success of the team...we wouldn't have ended up with the performance success without her... she lead us to the title' (CO4). Participants identified that it was only in games when the normal captain had been absent due to injury that their true influence had been recognised. One player said 'On the pitch, when she wasn't there, we missed her as a player' (FG1).

The analysis highlighted five higher order themes, each of which are now described and illustrated with participant quotes. These relate to the four key areas of transformational leadership: idealised influence, inspirational motivation, individualised consideration and intellectual stimulation. A fifth theme, concerning how captains help to build bridges between the coach and the team as well as facilitate effective relationships with and between players also emerged from the analysis. The higher and lower order themes are summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1***Overview of the higher and lower order themes*

Higher Order Themes	Lower Order Themes
Idealised Influence	Having experience
	Leading by example during training
	Leading by example on the pitch
Inspirational Motivation	Reinforcing the vision for the team
	Communicating positivity
Individualised Consideration	Providing tailored support
	Getting the best out of each player
Intellectual Stimulation	Representing the view's of the team
	Promoting player autonomy
Building Bridges	Developing effective coach-player relationships
	Developing effective player-player relationships

**Theme 1: Idealised influence**

Participants explained how effective leaders represented a role model for the rest of the players in the team. This was built on the sub-themes of having experience, leading by example during training and leading by example on the pitch. Experience was identified across all three participant groups as providing the foundation for effective leadership by a captain. Experience appeared to be of importance in the captain's ability to lead, gain respect, answer questions and guide the team. For example, one coach stated:

'Our captain has previously been a captain at the highest level and she has a vast amount of experience of playing at the highest level, she's a very mature person and so you just trust them and want to follow them.' (CO1)

All participant groups highlighted that the captain displayed effective leadership through modelling the required behaviors through leading by example during training. Talking about the captain, one coach said 'She'd be 1st to do things during training session, always leading by example' (CO2). A player from the same team also observed the following when discussing training: 'She just set a good example for our team, being a good leader and showing everybody what we should aspire to be' (FG2). A coach from another team supported this point by saying: 'She just set standards higher than anyone else, always turning up on time, turning up in the right kit, being focused' (CO1).

The importance of role-modelling was also discussed in relation to captains leading by example during matches. This can be illustrated by the captain working hard during a match. One coach said that an effective leader 'Leads by example with your work rate' (CO4). Both the captains and the coaches identified how the captain's

performance on the pitch impacted the performance of the other players: 'Her ability and on pitch performance had a massively positive impact' (CO1). The captain also acknowledged: 'If I was scoring and things like that, then it would make others do the same... Or if I was messing about then they will probably do the same.' (C1). Interestingly, this impact was not highlighted by the other players, who talked more about the leadership behaviors of the captain on and off the pitch as opposed to their performance.

### ***Theme 2: Inspirational motivation***

Captains were viewed as demonstrating effective leadership when they re-enforced the vision for the team and communicated positivity to motivate the team. Team 3 had developed a vision around a culture of intensity which was reinforced by the captain and recognised by the team. The players explained how their captain helped to realise this vision and highlighted how she would 'Keep the tempo up, keeping intensity high, picking up the level of training' (FG3). The captain had a similar perspective and outlined how her focus was on 'Keeping the intensity high, keeping the players on it' (C3). The captain went on to explain how this extended to the match environment: 'Raise the tempo, get them ready for the game, whenever there's a performance it's important for me to deal with that' (C3).

The coach of team 4 identified that their vision was about creating an inclusive culture built on equality. This was viewed as helping to develop and maintain a positive atmosphere amongst the team. The captain was viewed as playing a key role in re-enforcing this vision:

'one thing we were complimented on from very early on in the season was the environment and the atmosphere within our training sessions and our team in terms of enjoyment, in terms of just the integration of everybody as a team...I suppose a big part of that is down to the captain' (CO4).

Similarly, the coach of team 1 highlighted how the vision of their team was about equality and highlighted that they had worked with the captain to: 'Try to create an atmosphere where everybody is equal' (CO1). The captain of this team acknowledged their role in this and the impact on team unity as a result: 'We've grown so much as a team... Unity within players... I've helped the growth of the team' (C1).

Captains were also perceived to demonstrate effective leadership through communicating positivity to motivate the team. Effective captains were perceived to be loud and positive. One coach explained: 'Loud in positive terms... I think loudness is important in reinforcing positivity' (CO3). However, this is not just about being loud all of the time, as explained by another coach: 'I think we get too drawn into thinking that the person who is the loudest is the leader' (CO4). It appears to be more about being

loud at appropriate times and this may be manifested in the captain having a clear presence within the squad.

Captain's highlighted how they had a specific role just before kick-off: 'Then you go into the pre-match huddle and probably that's one of the key points where as a captain you've got to motivate everyone' (C2). Captains also had an important impact at critical points of the season. One player from a team who went on to win the cup explained: 'as soon as we got into the cup run, I think we all started to believe it but she kept that motivation and kept it promising' (FG1).

The use of re-enforcing the vision and positive communication, which are aligned to inspirational motivation, were viewed by the players as having a motivational impact. Players in team 2, for example, explained how such strategies can be rather subtle. One Players from this team said: 'She can motivate people but you wouldn't know that she's actually motivating you' (FG2) and 'It sounds silly, but it's true, she just motivates you' (FG2).

### ***Theme 3: Individualised consideration***

This theme was demonstrated through the captain's providing tailored support and helping to get the best out of each player. In terms of support, developing and maintaining an effective relationship with each player in the squad was perceived to be an important aspect of effective leadership. This embedded the impacts of the captain at the group level through being able to adapt the approach to the preferences of each individual player. The older and more senior members of the club often fulfilled the captaincy roles. Their maturity was seen as helpful in terms of them adopting this supportive role. Indeed, one captain said: 'I'm older, a lot of them see me as a mum' (C4). It was also enhanced through effective communication skills at the dyadic level, which complemented their effective communication discussed at the group level in the previous section. Effective leaders were perceived to be 'easy to talk to' (FG2), 'positive' (FG4), and 'approachable' (FG4). These all enabled the individualised consideration through creating relationships in which players felt comfortable seeking and receiving support from the captain. These characteristics were important both on and off the field. This in turn was viewed as having an impact on the broader atmosphere: 'Those little things they did for people ... to help the team as a whole, I think just helps make the atmosphere more fun anyway or more positive' (FG3).

Individualised consideration was also evident in relation to the captains helping to get the best out of everyone. One player explained how this was based on an understanding of what motivates each player: 'The captain notices what motivates you as a player...uses that to utilise you' (FG4). This was also discussed by the coach of the

same team: 'She's really brought on the confidence as well, even if they've been in the club for a year or two' (CO4). Another coach also highlighted the impact on confidence: 'She gives a lot of confidence to individuals' (FG1).

#### ***Theme 4: Intellectual stimulation.***

This theme was discussed with respect to the captain helping to create a drive towards continual improvement. This was based on them collating and representing the views of the team to the coach. One coach viewed an effective leader as 'Acting as a medium between the coaches and the rest of the squad and someone who is supposed to reflect the ideas and values of both the coaches and the rest of the team' (CO2). For example, captains were said to used their tactical knowledge to identify ways in which the team could become more effective. One coach explained: 'She started to pick up on tactical and technical things to assist the coaches' (CO2). Another coach highlighted how their captain was not afraid to provide honest feedback: 'I knew she wouldn't hold back on feedback and I knew if we messed up then she would give it us in the neck' (CO1).

Coaches reported that captains could promote a level of autonomy within the team. This helped to move away from coach dependence towards a shared sense of self-sufficiency and shared leadership across the team. Interestingly, this theme was primarily discussed by the coaches and was acknowledged by the captains. However, it was not mentioned by the players.

#### ***Theme 5: Building bridges***

A fifth theme emerged through the data analysis that went beyond the four dimensions of transformational leadership. This concerned the captain building interpersonal bridges through facilitating an effective relationship with the coach as well as supporting effective coach-player and player-player relationships. The captains were perceived to have effective relationships with the coach and this was viewed as having a range of benefits. Captains provided practical support to coaches during training sessions and on match days. Captains talked about how they perceived effective leadership as including tasks such as: 'Helping the coach out...doing the warm-up and the cool down or just helping out while they set up or put away' (C2). Another captain said: 'There's so many other things than just game day and being in the changing room: Who's got the kit? Which changing room... The music being sorted' (C3).

Captains also helped to facilitate the relationships between the coach and the team. This was bi-directional such that the captain not only communicated the coach's key messages to the players but also represented the views of the players

back to the coach. This was recognised by the captains and valued by both the coaches and the other players. One captain viewed her role as 'I am a supporter and mediator between our coach and the players' (C3). Players viewed this aspect of the captain's role as a further example of effective leadership: 'A good communicator between the coaches and the players' (FG2). This was supported by a player who viewed their captain as: 'A step in between the rest of the players and the coaches... a point of contact before the coaches' (FG2). This role became particularly important when managing conflict. The captain was viewed as the mediator of conflict through helping to raise issues and find mutually agreeable solutions. This was valued by coaches, one of whom explained: 'Any kind of conflict or whatever she would let me know, because it can completely change the dynamic of the changing room' (CO1). Coaches almost viewed the captain as being part of the coaching team, for example, one coach said: 'It's almost a bit like an assistant coach' (CO1).

Captains also played a role in helping to bridge the gender gap which was identified due to the coaches all being male and typically having limited experience in the women's game. Captains were able to provide valuable support due to their knowledge of the hierarchy, workings and processes of their club. This knowledge was valued by the coaches due to their lack of experience of working within female football. One male coach explained: 'Pretty much my first ever experience of coaching in women's football... having an experienced member helped immensely' (CO4). Players perceived that the social elements were particularly important within the women's game and hence the captain played a key role in representing the leadership team socially: 'Socially the role is important... Rallying the troops... women's football is so social it has to be within the role' (FG2).

Captains were viewed as helping to develop and maintain player-player relationships as well as the overall social cohesion of the team. This aspect of the leadership role was highlighted by the captains and players and not by the coaches. For one captain, this meant going outside of her comfort zone: 'Always go to socials, get everyone to come out... If I wasn't captain I probably wouldn't do that' (C4). This also extended to maintaining contact with players through social media. One player valued the fact that their captain would: 'message away from football' (FG1).

## DISCUSSION

The present study explored how effective leadership was conceptualised by captains in elite women's soccer and investigated the extent to which this was aligned to the key elements of transformational leadership. The findings build on the limited number of studies which have utilized qualitative methods to investigate this topic in elite

sport ([Smith et al., 2017](#)). It also overcomes the limitations of existing research through seeking the perspectives of captains, players and coaches. It thus makes a significant contribution to the literature at this critical stage of growth for female football.

Captains were found to exhibit transformational leadership behaviors in the form of idealised influence through their experience and leading by example during training sessions and matches. Effective captains therefore appeared to 'walk the talk' in a way which encouraged other players to follow them ([Fiedler, 1996](#); [Fransen et al., 2014](#)). This was valued by coaches through captains embodying the required standards. This supports previous research which has highlighted the importance of role modelling ([Smith et al., 2017](#)). The coaches and captains also identified the captain's performance as a form of role modelling, although this was not reported by the players. It is noteworthy that captains are by default in a different leadership domain than coaches in that they are actually performing on the pitch alongside the people they are leading. This affords the opportunity to role model the required behavior in a literal sense during training and on match days.

Captains were also found to exhibit transformational leadership behaviors through inspirational motivation by re-enforcing the vision for the team and communicating positivity. This supports previous research that has highlighted the motivational impact of the captain ([Cotterill & Fransen, 2016](#)). Previous research has suggested that fostering acceptance of group goals leads to a shared vision ([Arthur et al., 2012](#)). It is interesting that the visions described by the participants in the present study primarily discussed the cultures created in the teams rather than specific goals to be achieved. For instance, one team had a shared vision related to intensity at all times whilst other teams emphasised the importance of equality. This linked to the examples of idealised influence, in terms of Social Identity Theory, as the captains represented a prototypical member of the visionary team ([Slater et al., 2014](#)). This helped to unite the team through the captain showing the way towards achieving the vision through, for example, competing with intensity or prioritising equality in the way in which they lead the team.

Captains demonstrated individualised consideration through providing tailored support to individual players and helping to get the best out of everyone. This supports previous research which has shown that effective leadership is about developing individuals through a tailored approach ([Price & Weiss, 2011](#); [Gould et al., 2013](#); [Cotterill & Fransen, 2016](#); [Smith et al., 2017](#)). The use of intellectual stimulation was less evident in the data. Examples were highlighted by coaches and captains of the ways in which captains had helped to provide constructive feedback through representing the views of the players as well as promote autonomy in the team. This was not dis-



cussed by the players and hence this focus on empowerment may not be viewed as a form of leadership by the players. There is scope for education in this regard through informing stakeholders of the potential benefits of leadership strategies associated with intellectual stimulation.

The final theme of building 'interpersonal bridges' was a particular contribution of this study. Participants discussed the key role of the captain with respect to developing and maintaining effective relationships within the team. This concerned their own relationship with the coach, the relationships between the coach and the players, and the relationships between players. There has been a series of studies which have shown the importance of relationship maintenance in sport but this has focused on the coach-athlete relationship ([Rhind & Jowett, 2010, 2011](#); [Rhind et al., 2012](#)). Captains do not exist in a social vacuum, but instead are embedded in a web of interpersonal relationships with their teammates, coach and other external stakeholders. It was through showing leadership by managing these relationships that captains were viewed as having a significant impact on the functioning of the team.

Captains helped the male coaches to bridge the gender gap ([Fransen et al., 2014](#); [Leo et al., 2019](#)). In other words, they supported the coach to understand the norms, values and functioning of the women's game and their team ([Gould et al., 2013](#)). This finding supports the rationale for the research in that it is important to recognise the cultural differences between sports, teams and associated with the demographic characteristics of those involved.

More research is required to explore these specific differences and to investigate whether any such differences are evident and, if so, at which levels these differences are manifested. One specific issue discussed by the captains and players in particular was the social side of the game. Previous research has identified the need for leaders to achieve social distancing ([Antonakis & Atwater, 2002](#)). This concerns having clear boundaries through managing the professional and social relationships between the leader and followers. However, the participants in this study actually highlighted the importance of the captain being social with their teammates and continuing to be one of them off the pitch. Again this may be specific to the teams who took part in this study but it merits further exploration through empirical research.

Further research is now merited in this field. There is scope for research which quantitatively investigates the extent to which the 4 'Is' are used in sport. The ways in which the 4 'Is' may be associated with other individual variables (e.g., how gender interacts with other characteristics through recognising the need for intersectionality), relational variables (e.g., relationship length) and contextual variables (e.g., competitive level, sport type) could be investigated. There is also further scope for qualitative



research. Case studies and longitudinal research could be conducted through following teams throughout a season to explore the use of the 4 'Is' and how they may be associated with other variables. Such research would expand the evidence base upon which policies, education and training could be developed. This could then be evaluated in terms of the identification, development and subsequent impact of future captains.

It is important to acknowledge the methodological limitations of this study. The retrospective nature of the interviews might have resulted in events being recalled and described inaccurately. For instance, subsequent success or failure in sport might have the potential to influence how coaches or players look back on their previous captains. Furthermore, although the anonymous and confidential nature of the research was emphasized, the participants may not have fully disclosed their experiences, particularly in the context of the focus group. This may be overcome through the use of other forms of data collection, such as online surveys. This research also focuses on teams which had been successful. The findings may therefore not generalize to other less successful teams.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, this study has important implications for a range of stakeholders. At the individual level, the research can be utilised to educate captains, coaches and players regarding effective leadership strategies in women's soccer. At the club level, the themes may support efforts to identify and develop captains. At the national level, The Football Association can also use the themes identified through this research when developing future strategies and educational opportunities. Indeed, the captain may have a key role to play in helping The Football Association to achieve their aspirations of growing the game through facilitating the recruitment and retention of players.

There are also implications for the research community. The context of women's football represents an opportunity for further investigations to support the growth of the game. There also remains clear scope for transformational leadership to be further applied across leadership in sport from more informal leadership roles and coaches through to senior management roles within governance organizations. The true impact of the female football captain remains in its infancy. All participants were unanimous in highlighting the significance of the captain in a wide range of areas. Through understanding and utilising this potential, female soccer teams can work to maximise the impact of their captain. It is clear that the captain in female soccer is far more than just the player who wears the arm band.

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