

Foreign high-performance sport coach's professional experience: A case study of Japanese water polo coach in Singapore

JUN MIZUSHIMA¹, TAKAFUMI TOMURA²

¹Department of Health and Sports Sciences, Toyo University, JAPAN

²Department of Economics, Fukuyama University, JAPAN

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to describe the professional experience of a Japanese high-performance water polo coach in Singapore. Informed by the Job Demands-Resource (JD-R) theory, we adopted a life story approach within a single case study design to capture the coach's first-hand perspectives on navigating a culturally distinct coaching environment. The participant was one Japanese coach at the Singapore national men's water polo team. Data were collected through a demographic questionnaire, a face-to-face semi-structured interview, and follow-up e-mail. We analysed the data using reflexive thematic analysis. Throughout the analysis process, we drew on both deductive insights from JD-R theory and inductive findings emerging from the data, ensuring a nuanced understanding of the coach's experiences. To enhance trustworthiness, we employed member checking and conducted peer debriefing sessions. Three core themes emerged from the analysis. First, Job Demands encompassed producing strong results for major competitions in a socio-cultural context distinct from Japan, adapting to local work cultures, and negotiating differences in team members' motivations. Second, Job Resources included the coach's personal competencies, high levels of work engagement and self-efficacy, and organizational resources such as scientific support and full-time assistant coaches. Despite these supports, limited staff welfare benefits for foreign coaches posed a challenge. Third, the coach's capacity to Balance Job Demands and Resources allowed him to craft challenging tasks—beyond his employer's immediate expectations—to promote a more sustainable coaching and player development system. These findings underline the importance of fostering cultural adaptation, clarifying role expectations, and offering sufficient resources to foreign high-performance coaches. They further highlight how coaching expertise, autonomy, and proactive job crafting can enhance both individual well-being and team performance. Ultimately, the study offers insights for policymakers, sport organizations, and practitioners seeking to optimize cross-border coaching and global coaching systems.

Key Words: - Elite sport, Job demands-resource theory, Work engagement, Cross-cultural adaptation, Organisational support

Introduction

Coaching within high-performance sport is described as a dynamic, complex, and challenging vocation (Mallett, 2011). Over the past decades, the increasing professionalisation and globalisation of modern sport have accelerated these challenges: national sporting bodies worldwide employ foreign coaches to enhance their international competitiveness and promote sports development (Tao, Rynne, & Mallett, 2019). For instance, at the Olympic Games Tokyo 2020, the Chinese delegation included 30 foreign coaches from 19 different countries and placed second in medal success at the Games (Xinhua, 2021). Furthermore, as a part of SPORT FOR TOMORROW, the Tokyo 2020 legacy programme jointly implemented by the Japanese public and private sectors, a considerable number of Japanese sport coaches have been dispatched to sport organisations worldwide, including developing countries (Japan Sport Council, 2022).

The nature and demands of employment may vary among foreign coaches, depending on their coaching context; however, they all transition across borders, languages, and cultures (Tao, Rynne, & Mallett, 2019). This presents sport coaches with the new challenge of developing cross-cultural coaching abilities where they may face obstacles such as learning multiple languages and different communication styles. While these foreign coaches may be technically proficient, it is unlikely the employment of foreign coaches will achieve the desired goal of optimising performance unless they can assimilate into the host nation's culture and/or athletes and working staff are prepared to accommodate cultural differences (Tao, Rynne, & Mallett, 2019). In addition to the complex nature of high-performance coaching (Rynne & Mallett, 2012), such unique demands of coaching in different socio-cultural environments potentially cause job burnout if sufficient resources are not provided. Therefore, it is critical to understand how foreign high-performance sport coaches manage to cope with their job demands and stay engaged within the cultural contexts in which they work. This issue is related to each coach's competitiveness, effectiveness, and overall well-being.

Multiple studies have examined the professional experience of foreign sport coaches. The majority of these empirical studies have explored the cross-border experiences of non-Western coaches in Western countries or vice versa (Tao, Rynne, & Mallett, 2019; Mizushima et al., 2017). However, each society, organisation, or group has specific cultures (Yamazaki & Kayes, 2004), so it is necessary to investigate coaches who experience a transition within Western or non-Western countries separately. To address this issue, the present study focuses on a high-performance water polo coach who transitioned from Japan to Singapore, both non-Western countries being in Asia.

Japan, with its long history spanning thousands of years, is often perceived as a monolithic society, with a single, homogeneous culture and set of values shared by all its members (Davies, 2002). Moreover, with more than 150 years of modern sports history, the country is currently recognised as a leading sporting nation. As the host country of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics Games, Japan won a total of 27 gold medals, solidifying its status as a sporting powerhouse (Koh et al., 2024). Despite not winning a medal, the Japanese water polo team participated in Tokyo 2020 as one of two countries represented from the Asian region.

On the other hand, in the same Asian region, Singapore promotes diversity, multi-racial identity, and encourages the use of multiple languages (Aquino et al., 2022). In the country's 59-year history, with a total population of nearly 6.0 million as of 2024, Singapore has won only one gold medal at the Olympics Games. Although not yet at the international level, the Singapore national men's water polo team has been dominant at the Southeast Asian (SEA) Games, winning the gold medal for 50 years until they were defeated in 2019. Given the differences in coaching and sports cultures between Japan and Singapore (Koh et al., 2024), coaches transitioning between these two countries may face potential concerns and challenges leading to coaching dilemmas.

Theoretical Framework and Purpose

This study used the Job Demands-Resource (JD-R) theory as the theoretical framework. This theory explains the complex interplay between job demands and job resources in an employee's career, which can influence their well-being (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, 2014). Job demands refer to the physical, psychological, social, or organisational aspects of a job that require physical and/or psychological effort and can have associated cost (Demerouti et al., 2001). On the other hand, job resources are the physical, psychological, social, and organisational resources that (1) enable goal achievement; (2) reduce or buffer against job demands and the associated physiological and psychological costs, and (3) stimulate personal growth, learning, and development (Bakker, 2011). Job demands are not necessarily negative, but when resources are not available to help meet those demands, this can interfere with an individual's ability to achieve professional growth (Cavanaugh et al., 2000). Furthermore, when resources are inadequate to meet demands, it can also impact an individual's personal life, upsetting the work-life balance necessary to help prevent health problems including mental illness (Lunaum et al., 2014).

The JD-R theory has been supported by empirical studies across a variety of occupational contexts (see Bakker & Demerouti, 2014, 2017). For instance, Hakanen, Perhoniemi, and Toppinen-Tanner (2008) examined Finnish dentists and found that job demands predicted burnout over time, which leads to predicted future depression, whereas job resources at work diminished the negative influence of job demands on work engagement. Another recent study by Sato, Mason, and Kataoka (2020) investigated Japanese elementary school teachers and revealed that there were few resources available to help them cope with demands placed on them in their working environment. The authors of the present study believe that the JD-R theory has the potential to provide novel insights to explore the nature of the demands and resources of high-performance sport coaches working in different sociocultural contexts from their background. More specifically, JD-R theory helps the authors gain a critical lens to describe the complex social relationship between the demands and resources, and their roles or meaning for the Japanese coach at the Singapore national water polo team.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to describe and explain experiences and coaching practices of a Japanese high-performance water polo coach in Singapore to gain insight into the needs and demands of foreign coaches operating in a cross-cultural coaching environment. The research questions guiding the study were: (1) What are the major demands and challenges faced by a Japanese high-performance water polo coach in Singapore, and (2) What resources, if any, are available to a Japanese high-performance to cope with these demands?

Material & methods

This study utilised a life story approach within a single case study design, grounded in an interpretive paradigm. A life story is one form of narrative inquiry defined as "the story a person chooses to tell about the life he or she has lived, told as completely and honestly as possible, what is remembered of it and what the teller wants others to know of it" (Atkinson, 1998, p.8). The goal of a single participant life story is not to provide generalisations from a positivistic standpoint, but to provide opportunity to illuminate the complexities of life (Jones, Armour, & Potrac, 2003). Webster and Mertova (2007) suggest that "Narrative tends to highlight critical episodes and events, and in so doing provides insights into human understanding, as well as manageable ways of

focusing outcomes and recommendations for improvement” (p.69). The authors obtained approval to implement the study from the university’s institutional board (approval number: 022-52).

Participants

Due to the specific nature of the research questions of this study, purposeful sampling was used (Silverman, 2013). One Japanese coach in Singapore was selected based on the following three criteria characterising a high performance and foreign coach: (1) a Japanese coach engaged in coaching in Singapore, (2) a proven performance record in sport, having played/coached at international level, and (3) the majority of his/her general life experience and formal education, having considerable experience in athletic and coaching activities outside of Singapore.

After receiving approval from the university’s institutional review board, the first author contacted the participant provided information sheets, and directly explained the general nature of the study. The participant agreed to participate and provided written consent. In addition, the participant was informed that he could withdraw at any time without fear of reprisals, and he would be given opportunities to clarify or change his responses at any point (i.e. extended forms of member checking). We determined not to use a pseudonym with the participant’s permission considering his particular status (i.e., no other Japanese coach has coached in Singapore).

The participant in this study, referred to here as Coach Wataru, was 41 years old at the time of the study. He served as the full-time head coach at the Singapore national men's water polo team, not only directly coaching national senior squads (National A and National B) but also supervising the head coaches of national youth squads (U15 and U17). He started practising water polo when he was 15 years old and had been a member of the Japanese national team since his final year at high school in 1999. He played water polo as a professional player in Europe (Spain 1999-2000, Italy 2003-2006, Montenegro 2007-2009) and participated in the European Champions League as the first Japanese player, reaching the quarter-final in 2006. During off-season (two to three months per year), he lectured on the European water polo system all over Japan from 2003 to 2009 and coached the team of University of Tsukuba in Japan from 2007 to 2009. In 2009, he joined Niigata Sangyo University as a faculty member and started to build a professional water polo club in Niigata prefecture as the head coach and general manager. The club won the national championships within two and a half years. He completed his degree in physical education in 2004 and his master’s degree in economics in 2012. With his knowledge and experience, he pursued economic revitalisation strategies through water polo with ambitions towards Tokyo 2020 in Niigata prefecture. One of his initiatives was to invite Singapore, a hub in a growing region in terms of economy and popularisation of sport, for practice matches with his club. After Tokyo 2020 ended, he received an offer from the Singapore men's national water polo team to serve as the head coach, which he accepted and started in 2021.

Data collection

Data for this study were collected using three types of data collection: a demographic questionnaire, a face-to-face semi-structured interview, and follow-up e-mail (Yin, 2003). First, demographical profile data (years of coaching, educational standard and type of degree, athletic experiences, coaching accreditation level, and other occupational experience) were collected to gain descriptive information as to the participant’s personal history. After completing the demographic questionnaire, the lead author implemented a face-to-face semi-structured interview with the participant to ask a total of 10 questions developed by the lead author based on the concept of the JD-R theory and additional unstructured follow-up questions (based on participant's responses) in order to investigate his coaching experience in Singapore. The lead author concerned, a Japanese who was based in Singapore at the time of the study, had previous experiences conducting interviews as well as a significant background in coaching. The questions went through pilot testing, after which they were modified. The interview lasted 120 minutes. The following are examples of interview questions utilised in this study:

1. What expectations do you have from your employer as a coach, and what specific outcomes do you hope to achieve in your role?
2. What are some of the challenges of working as a coach in Singapore?
3. What resources (physical, psychological, social, human and organisational) and support are provided by your employer for you to coach the team?

Translation process

In order to prepare the data collected in Japanese for analysis and reporting in English, a cross-cultural translation technique was employed (Banville, Desrosiers, & Genet-Volet, 2000). The technique involves a group of researchers proficient in both languages working individually and collaboratively in order to ensure that meaning is retained through the translation process. In this study, four translators (A [the main researcher], B, C, and D) were Japanese-English bilingual researchers in the field of coaching and sports psychology. The first two researchers (A and B) individually translated the transcripts into English and compared their versions to arrive at an agreement. The two other bilingual researchers (C and D) then retranslated the transcripts back to Japanese. The four translators critically compared and discussed their translations to preserve the meaning of the original transcripts and made edits as necessary. Finally, all members were given a copy of the completed translation for final comments and critiques.

Data analysis

The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2019) to explore the participants' experiences and coaching practices through the lens of JD-R theory. This analytical approach emphasizes the active role of the researcher in generating themes, rather than treating themes as passively emerging from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This approach allows for flexibility, subjectivity, and deep engagement with the data, making it well-suited for exploring complex socio-cultural experiences such as those of a foreign high-performance coach.

The analysis began with a familiarisation phase, during which the researchers immersed themselves in the data by reading the transcripts multiple times, noting initial impressions, and actively engaging with the participant's narrative. Next, the researchers generated initial codes by identifying meaningful segments of text that captured relevant aspects of the participant's experiences. Following coding, the researchers moved to the theme construction phase, where they examined the relationships between different codes and clustered them into broader themes. After constructing the preliminary themes, the theme review phase involved a recursive process of refining and reevaluating the themes to ensure coherence and distinctiveness. The researchers revisited the coded data to confirm that the themes accurately represented the participant's experiences and that there was a clear distinction between different themes. Once the themes were clearly defined, the researchers moved on to defining and naming the themes, ensuring that each theme provided a compelling and coherent account of the participant's experience. Finally, in the writing phase, the themes were synthesized into a structured narrative, integrating direct quotations from the participant to illustrate key points and enhance the credibility of the findings.

The broader literature on JD-R theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2014, 2017) was drawn upon to provide the most accurate description of the phenomena under study, thereby improving the credibility of the findings. Throughout this deductive-inductive analysis process, the two authors acted as a "critical friend" to challenge and develop the interpretations until they reached consensus (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established by using member checking and peer-debriefing processes. Member checking and peer-debriefing are useful to seek the relative accuracy of the data as opposed to seeking universal truth (Braun & Clarke, 2019). For example, member checking enables researchers to reduce the impact of subjective bias by ensuring agreement between researcher and participants (Patton, 2002). The researcher sent copies of the interview transcripts and analysed data to the participant. Trustworthiness in the transcripts and researcher's interpretations was established when the participant acknowledged their accuracy (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Peer debriefing allows a qualified peer researcher to review and assess the transcribed data, emergent codes and categories and final themes in a given study to assure credibility (Janesick, 2015). For this study, one professor who had expertise in qualitative research participated as a peer debriefer. The debriefer agreed with the interpretations of the data.

Results

The results for the present study were categorised into three themes: (1) *Job demands—results in a different socio-cultural environment*, (2) *Job resources—strong work engagement and commitment*, and (3) *Balance between demands and resources—crafting challenging job demands for the greater good*.

Theme 1: Job demands—results in a different socio-cultural environment

The major demand identified was achieving good performance results in major sporting games in the region. As Kan stated:

Our next target is to finish 6th place or higher in the Asian Games because they finished 6th last time. I personally want to aim for 4th or 3rd place. But still, our main goal is to win the Southeast Asian Games and bring the gold medal to Singapore. That is also what the association (his employer) is expecting from me.

In discussing job demands, Wataru acknowledged several concerns were identified. Firstly, he perceived *the different work culture* as a challenge. Since there were plenty of variables to manage in high-performance coaching contexts, he believed that the team staff, including coaches, needed to work as one team. Additionally, he felt that there was room for improvement, particularly with regard to certain "grey areas", such as administrative tasks that were not explicitly assigned to anyone. He noted that these areas were not being adequately covered by the team staff beyond direct coaching duties. Specifically, he mentioned:

We can consider water polo to be a minor sport, not a major commercialised sport in Singapore. Furthermore, we do not have the manpower, so we have to cover for each other even if it is not our area of expertise. [...] It is not just about going to the pool and coaching; you have to learn other skills in management. In Japan, other administrative works such as organising training camps, booking hotels, and preparing tables for organising the tournament are also considered as a part of coaching. I think it would be a similar situation in Singapore if we do not have the manpower.

Secondly, Wataru had difficulty working in non-native languages, especially for documentation. He needed to learn Singapore standard business writing styles, which were different from those in Japan. As he stated an area that he needed to strengthen:

Language. In particular, the style of business writing rather than the way of speaking. The way we do things in Japan is different from the way we do things here in Singapore, so it is difficult to understand Singaporean business standards. For example, in Japan, we write, ‘*Haikei* (Dear Sir or Madam) and *Keigu* (Best regards) when you send official documents to business partners. It would be great if someone could tell me how to write business documents, proposals, and plans in the Singapore context.

Lastly, Wataru identified the different sporting culture as a concern. Specifically, he perceived that Singaporean players did not place as high a priority on training, even when they were part of the national team, in contrast to Japanese players who tend to prioritise training above all else when representing their country. He found it challenging to manage varying motivations in the team when he started coaching in Singapore. He said:

In terms of personal pressure, the mentality of the Singaporeans is, of course, different from that of the Japanese, so things do not go as planned. Even though the players are highly capable and have a good understanding of the sport, their motivation to participate in training, for example, is different from that of the Japanese. The discipline of the players is different. You cannot bring the Japanese way of working into Singapore.

And he continued:

I believe players have to practise to improve performance. To practise, they need to secure time. However, they have to sacrifice a lot of things, such as hanging out with friends, spending time with their families, and they also have to study and work. So, it is difficult to find a good balance. The players have to consider how serious they are about the sport, and motivation varies from player to player. So, it is hard for me to manage varying motivations in the team. In Japan, it is normal for players to come to practise, but that’s not the norm here in Singapore.

Theme 2: Job resource—strong work engagement and commitment

This theme identified personal resources as the foundation of Wataru’s strong work engagement and commitment. He had already been coaching Singapore national men's water polo team for a year at the time of the study and he was confident in the competitiveness of the Singapore national men's water polo team. He believed that the team was originally competitive among Southeast Asian countries and that the players’ levels were improving. As he stated:

I am confident [that we will win at the SEA Games] because I can see how much training they needed to get better. I can see the levels of the players improving. Singapore’s competitiveness is high to begin with among Southeast Asian countries as we had been winning for more than 50 years until 2019. There is no reason for the competitiveness to have dropped after one loss [at the SEA Games in 2019]. I also got feedback from the players that I helped them learn advanced strategies and tactics and improve their skills.

Wataru’s confidence was also underpinned by his playing and coaching experience, demonstrating a sense of self-efficacy as he mentioned:

I am the only Japanese professional player who was successful outside of Japan and the only person who has built a professional water polo club in Japan from scratch and made it grow greatly. When I first started, I was criticised and accused of not being able to do it, but I made it. I was also the first person in Japan to get sponsorship for the Japanese national team as well as for a water polo club.

In addition, Wataru was motivated to accept the offer of head coach in the Singapore national men's water polo team with a desire for personal growth as a global talent. He said:

I left Japan when I entered my 40s, thinking that it was definitely my last chance to go abroad and become competent to work as a coach globally, which includes improving my coaching knowledge and skills.

In addition to personal resources identified earlier, several organisational job resources that were available to Wataru were identified. These resources included support from the Singapore sport science institute (SSI) and the presence of full-time assistant coaches. Wataru believed that these resources helped him meet his job demands and contributed to his overall work engagement and commitment. He stated:

I think the most amazing thing is the sport science team, formed by the SSI, who support the national water polo team. The other thing is that I have a budget for hiring assistant coaches and currently I have three of them. This is great. All of them are working part-time or full-time, and they all get paid. I think having these coaches is more important than anything else. In Japan, coaches are volunteers, so you can’t force them to work. We need to ask them to coach though they all have family roles and jobs to do. In Singapore, I can ask them to coach as a job, which I think is a big difference compared to Japan.

While Wataru acknowledged the availability of rich resources in his workplace, as mentioned above, he also highlighted the lack of staff welfare benefits for foreign coaches in his organisation, which was different from his previous experience in Japan. He said:

There are little welfare benefits for foreign employees. I think the amount of salary is sufficient. But if there are home support, school support, and insurance for the family members, it would be even better as a working environment.

Theme 3: Balance between Job demands and resources—crafting challenging job demands for the greater good

Wataru appreciated the flexibility of his job tasks to meet the job demands, which were performance results in major sporting games in the region, in a way he can control and strategise them in order to optimise his working environment. He said:

The amount of work I do depends on me as I have the flexibility to decide how much work I take on. Well...if we focus solely on winning the SEA Games, I do not believe the workload needs to be excessively heavy. But, if we aim to win the SEA Games and become a winning team over the next decade, then we have a significant amount of work ahead of us.

Under such circumstances, Wataru created challenging job demands beyond what his employer expected, with the aim for the greater good such as building a sustainable coaching system. He said:

I think it is crucial to establish a sustainable coaching system that can continue even after I leave. Teaching people how to coach water polo in the Japanese way applying my coaching philosophy is important, but creating a lasting system is even more essential. [...] Well, that is because everything is built upon accumulated knowledge. So, by sharing my knowledge with Singapore water polo community and having other coaches contribute their own knowledge, the sport can continue to evolve and develop. If I want the system I have built to remain in the future, I think Singapore needs to aim not only win the SEA Games in two years, but also work towards building a system that can sustain a winning culture for the next 10 or 20 years.

Wataru also recognised that sport is a part of education and its capacity to instil values such as discipline, self-governance, and autonomy in players. As a Japanese coach, he believed that he could impart these values using his personal resources. Nonetheless, he was in the process of determining the extent of action he could take, taking into account that his actions might not necessarily directly align with the demands placed upon him. As he stated:

When I came to Singapore, I felt again that coaching in Japan basically started with school sports, so people believe that sport is a part of education. From my experience, education is about supporting one's autonomy. In other words, education is about how much autonomy you can encourage oneself to have. Japanese coaches, of course, teach sports, but through coaching, athletes learn the discipline of life and learn to be self-governing. [...] I do not know if this is something the association expected from a Japanese coach and that is the reason they hired me, though.

Although Wataru could control his work tasks and he had many desired achievements, he maintained equilibrium by finding a good balance between his personal ideals and the demands placed on him. He was achieving this by building a team that did not go beyond what was demanded of him and make some concessions to his own values, which were shaped by his past experiences.

I need to compromise, compromise, and compromise my ideals to some extent, and practice and build a team. Otherwise, we probably will not do well. I find that very stressful because things do not go as planned. But I think it is necessary to accept that in order to do well abroad. Well, it might be the same when changing environments within Japan. The way of thinking is different from organisation to organisation, so you have to be content with 70% or 80% instead of striving 100%. [...] If I get too attached to my own ideals, it can be overwhelming, but if I learn to let go and go with the flow, progress can be made.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the coaching practices and experiences of a Japanese high-performance water polo coach who works in Singapore, using the lens of JD-R theory. Overall, the coach attempted to optimise his working environment and kept motivated by balancing job demands and resources, while also addressing the challenges and cultural differences in the coaching and sports between Japan and Singapore. The result of this study provided valuable insight into high-performance sport coaches who work in different sociocultural contexts, and can potentially inform their employers' practice in hosting foreign coaches.

Our first research question centred upon identifying the job demands placed on the coach. Our findings indicated that the primary expectation of the employer, Singapore Swimming Association, for the Japanese coach, Coach Wataru, was to attain a high level of performance in competition. This is consistent with previous research by Mallett and Côté (2006) that emphasises a result-oriented approach, where winning medals is often taken as the evaluation of the quality of a coaches' work. While winning was the top priority in a high-performance sport environment the participant was in, he faced numerous uncertainties and challenges such as differences in working cultural context, usage of language, and sporting culture between Japan and Singapore. In general, collective culture in Japan influence Japanese coaches to place a high value on group solidarity within their teams, expecting their athletes to prioritise and work collectively towards shared goals, such as winning

games (Sawaumi et al., 2015). More specifically, in this study, the coach who came from a nation with a strong collective culture and a reputation for sporting excellence, believed that success in sports (i.e. winning medals) within a national team depended on teamwork and a shared commitment. However, in Singapore, he faced challenges collaborating with team staff who were unwilling to contribute outside their job responsibilities, as well as individual players who had diverse prioritisation and motivations for competing. These results suggest that high-performance sport coaches encounter comparable challenges when transitioning within Asian countries, similar to those experienced between Western and non-Western countries (Tao, Rynne, & Mallett, 2019), if they do not understand and accept the host countries' social norms and values.

Our second research question aimed to understand job resources available to the Japanese coach in order to cope with the job demands. The results showed that the coach possessed significant personal resources derived from his life experiences, which had a direct positive effect on work engagement at a personal level. According to Bakker and Demerouti (2017), individuals with high levels of optimism and self-efficacy tend to believe that good things will happen to them and that they are capable of handling unforeseen events. At an organisational level, on one hand, it was found that the coach received scientific support from the sport science institute and had paid assistant coaches as interpersonal and social resources, which he did not have in Japan. This provided social support and performance feedback, which may have been functional in achieving work goals and stimulating his learning and development (Demerouti et al., 2001). On the other hand, the results of this study also indicated that the coach felt a lack of resources due to differences in the benefit supports, such as rent allowance, education benefits, and insurance coverage, that he had received while working in Japan. It is a necessary step for foreign coaches to establish a new foundation for their lives, sometimes with their family members, in a country with a different social and economic system (e.g., healthcare and education) while working as a coach. These findings offer valuable insights into the organisational resources that could help alleviate the financial burdens faced by foreign coaches and their families, as well as enhance their engagement and well-being in the workplace.

Despite facing challenges in meeting the job demand with some resource deficiencies, the coach exhibited high engagement in his work and seemed to feel largely fulfilled. His personal resources may have mitigated the undesirable impact of job demands on strain and enhanced the desirable impact of challenging job demands on motivation (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Additionally, the coach demonstrated cultural adaptability by making efforts to compromise his ideal in coaching praxis to accommodate cultural differences. This cultural adaptability may have been developed through his extensive experience in adapting to different cultures, including playing as a professional water polo player in the Western countries and previously coaching and managing a water polo club in Japan.

Furthermore, the participant had full autonomy over his job tasks, which may have made it relatively easy for him to optimise the balance between his job demand and resources through job crafting. Job crafting involves proactive changes that employees make in their job demands and resources (Tims, Bakker, & Derks., 2012). Specifically, employees proactively seek to increase their job resources and challenge job demands while reducing hindrance job demands. In this sense, from the results of this study, the coach can be understood as having increased job resources by building trust with each stakeholder (e.g., players, sport science staff, and assistant coaches) and challenging job demands beyond what the employer expected for him, with the aim of promoting greater good such as building a sustainable coaching system to the team staff and teaching discipline, self-governance, and autonomy to the players. His job crafting behaviour may have also contributed to higher levels of personal resources and motivations, as Vogt et al. (2016) found that employees who proactively create a resourceful and challenging work environment for themselves increase their own psychological capital (hope, resilience, self-efficacy, and optimism) and work engagement.

While the current study provided valuable insights into the cross-border experience of a foreign high-performance sport coach who transitioned from Japan to Singapore, given the diversity in terms of languages, ethnicity, race, religion in Asia, further research is also necessary to gain an understanding of the professional experience of foreign coaches who transitioned among other Asian countries. In addition, longitudinal research would be useful to investigate causal and reversed causal effects between job demands, resources, and well-being in high-performance sport coaches working in different sociocultural contexts beyond their own background.

Recommendations

The results of this study suggest several practical implications for organisations that hire foreign high-performance sport coaches. Firstly, employers need to understand the nature of sport and the demands of high-performance sport coaching in order to provide the necessary job resources for coaches. Specifically, employers should be aware of the necessary functions of a high-performance sport organisation, such as athlete selection, administrative tasks, competition and travel scheduling, management initiatives related to sport science and scientists (Reade & Rodgers, 2009). Secondly, employers need to support the cultural adaptation of foreign high-performance sport coaches to the host country by offering guidance on the country's culture including language usage and manners, as well as providing insights into the history of sports and sport organisations in the country. In addition, providing welfare support for foreign coaches and their family members, taking into account their

different social and economic systems, may enhance their work engagement and overall well-being. Lastly, employers should ensure that coaches are an active participant in understanding their demands and available resources. In the case of this study, employers could also recognise the foreign high-performance coach as multifaceted talents and negotiate to expand his role, such as being a mentor coach for assistant coaches.

Conclusions

This study set out to examine how a Japanese high-performance water polo coach navigated the socio-cultural intricacies of coaching in Singapore, using the Job Demands–Resource (JD-R) theory as the analytical lens. The findings reveal that the coach faced distinct demands—such as adapting to a different work culture, managing varying athlete motivations, and delivering medal-worthy performances—while leveraging personal, social, and organizational resources (e.g., extensive playing and coaching experience, sport science support, and paid assistant coaches) to maintain engagement and effectiveness. By balancing these demands and resources through proactive job crafting, the coach demonstrated resilience and optimism, as well as a capacity to contribute to the long-term development of water polo in the host country. The results of this study encourage future longitudinal research to explore how demands and resources evolve over time, as well as the reciprocal influences between coach well-being, team performance, and organizational outcomes in diverse cultural settings. By investigating additional cases in various Asian contexts and beyond, researchers and practitioners can refine strategies for ensuring the long-term success and sustainability of international coaching appointments.

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