Original research article

Where have i ended up? migratory experiences of coaches in the Arabian Peninsula❶

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ABSTRACT

 [GQ2] [GQ4] [GQ5]Countries in the Arabian Peninsula use professional sports as a catalyst for their development and/or as a way of sportswashing. To enhance their sporting level, they have brought in coaches from other countries. This study explores the migratory experiences of six Spanish football coaches in the region, using an abductive thematic analysis. The results are organized into three themes: Pre-migration, Post-migration, and Mental Health. Migration motives are identified (e.g., socio-labour conditions in the home country, desire for professional advancement), adaptation facilitators (e.g., previous migration experiences, geographical proximity), and barriers (e.g., club, culture, language). Regarding mental health, threats are highlighted (e.g., separation from their environment, cultural differences) and protective strategies (e.g., maintaining contact with their home environment, setting boundaries on cultural adaptation). This study highlights the need for organizations to take responsibility for facilitating coaches' cultural transitions both before and after migration. It is recommended that future research explores how coaches' personal and sociocultural characteristics impact their cultural transition and mental health, the role of clubs in this process, and the experiences of female coaches.

KEYWORDS

- Football
- migration
- mental health
- transnationalism

Introduction

 Over the past few decades, migration and transnationalism in elite sports have increased globally,[1–3] with athletes, coaches, and other technical staff living between their home countries and their new destinations.[4–6] The professional environment for coaches is complex,[7,8] as they face multiple professional challenges (e.g., media pressure, poor results, job insecurity), organizational challenges (e.g., long working hours, managing expectations from their surroundings), and personal challenges (e.g., social isolation, separation from family). These challenges, as noted by Frost et al.,[9] can pose a threat to their mental health, affecting their psychological well-being[10,11] and leading to issues such as stress,[7,12] burnout,[13,14] anxiety,[15] depression,[16] problematic alcohol consumption,[17] or sleep-related problems.[18] Frost et al.[9] systematic review also identified risk and protective factors for coaches' mental health operating at the individual, interpersonal, organizational, and social levels. However, none of the 42 studies included in the review specifically explored the impact that cultural transition might have on coaches' mental health. This and other recent research highlight the need for further exploration of coaches' mental health,[8,19] and the impact of organizational context and culture on their psychological well-being.[1,20]

 Coaches who pursue their professional careers outside their home countries must face the challenges of cultural transition. To explore this process, Samuel et al.[21] applied Ryba et al.[22] Cultural Transition Model. This model, originally developed for athletes, defines three phases: (a) the pre-transition phase, during which individuals begin considering migration and make necessary preparations (e.g., gathering information about facilities, culture, social and sporting customs); (b) the acute

cultural adaptation phase, a short-term period characterized by the renegotiation of cultural practices in daily life, social repositioning, and coping with various personal and professional challenges (e.g., adapting to new training styles, integrating into a new club, language barriers); and (c) the sociocultural adaptation phase, which involves adapting to the social and cultural norms of the host country and developing interpersonal relationships within the new environment.

Research on cultural transitions has traditionally focused on professional athletes.[23–26] However, over the past decade, interest in studying coaches' cultural transitions has grown,[1] with studies exploring the reasons behind coaches' migration.[27,28] These reasons include work-related factors (e.g., salary, financial security, recognition, higher competitiveness), social factors (e.g., family support, children's education), and factors related to seeking new experiences (e.g., living in a new culture, learning a language, facing new challenges). Research has also examined the athlete-coach relationship in international contexts[29] and coaches' migratory experiences, highlighting the personal benefits of migration (e.g., improved quality of life, personal growth) and professional benefits (e.g., recognition, financial gains), as well as the personal costs (e.g., experiences of loneliness, homesickness) and professional costs (e.g., difficulties adapting to a different sporting mentality, lack of professional autonomy) associated with these processes.[21,30] The study of coaches' acculturation processes has also gained attention in recent years. For instance, Hall et al.[31] used Berry's[32] Acculturation Model to explore how coaches navigate their own acculturation, the acculturation of the athletes they train, and the team culture. They emphasized the need for coaches to understand the cultural expectations of the host environment and to prepare for potential rejection from the host society, particularly if they are perceived as occupying jobs meant for locals or introducing changes to the environment. Schinke et al.,[5] on the other hand, analyzed the acculturation process of immigrant coaches in Canada and identified factors that could lead to frustration and, in some cases, cause coaches to withdraw from the host country's sports system: unfamiliar or lower training standards, lower levels of commitment from athletes, perceived disrespect from athletes, or doubts about their credentials and status from other coaches or sports directors. Despite this growing body of research on coaches' migratory processes, several aspects remain underexplored, such as the relationship between migration and mental health in coaches[1,33] and how transitions differ between athletes and coaches.

Countries in the Arabian Peninsula are using professional sports as a catalyst for economic and social development and/or as a way for sportswashing.[34] In football, this has manifested through investments in local leagues, the recruitment of high-level players and technical staff, the organization of internationally significant sporting events (e.g., FIFA World Cup 2022 Qatar, the Spanish and Italian Super Cups, and the upcoming FIFA World Cup 2034 in Saudi Arabia), and the acquisition of renowned European clubs (e.g., Manchester City, Newcastle United, Paris SaintGermain). However, these initiatives have not been without controversy. Some authors have associated these practices with the phenomenon of sportswashing, a strategy aimed at improving the international image of these countries.[34,35] Meanwhile, organizations such as Amnesty[36] have denounced the precarious working conditions faced by many migrant workers in the region, as well as the persistent criminalization of homosexual relationships and the barriers women face in fully participating in society and sports, reflecting ongoing gender inequalities in the region.

The main objective of this research was to explore the migration experiences of professional Spanish football coaches during their cultural transition in the Arabian Peninsula, examining the reasons that drive them to migrate, how they prepare for migration, the facilitators and barriers they encounter in adapting to the new context, as well as the threats to their mental health and the strategies they use to maintain it.

Method

In this study, we conducted qualitative research based on the assumption that there is no single reality but rather a high degree of subjectivity, where reality is constructed through the interpretation of experiences and the meanings individuals assign to them. This manifests as multiple individual mental constructions of the world, shaped by lived experiences.[37] A relativist ontological position was adopted, assuming that coaches' migration experiences in the Arabian Peninsula are subjective constructions influenced by individual, social, and cultural factors. Epistemologically, a subjectivist and relational approach was taken, acknowledging that researchers cannot determine an objective truth about how individuals understand the world.[38] Instead, knowledge is created through interactions between researchers and participants, with the researchers' prior experiences always influencing the research process and knowledge production.[37] In line with the relativist ontological position and the subjectivist and relational epistemological stance, a constructivist philosophical position was adopted.

Participants

A convenience sampling approach was used, and six male football coaches, all of Spanish nationality, participated in the study. They had migrated to work in various roles (e.g., head coach, assistant coach, fitness coach) and at different levels (e.g., first team, youth categories) within technical staffs of clubs in Saudi Arabia or Qatar. Two of the coaches were

experiencing their first international assignment, while the other four had prior international experience in different countries (e.g., North America, East Asia) and at various levels (e.g., first division, reserve teams, youth categories). They were invited to participate through the professional network of the first author, who has experience as a football coach in several countries in the Arabian Peninsula. This region was chosen because it is one of the areas hosting the largest number of immigrant football coaches in recent years. According to available online data, at the start of the 23/24 season, 100% of the head coaches in Saudi Arabia's first division were immigrants, while in Qatar, the figure was 91.67%. These percentages are significantly lower in major European leagues, where the average is 37.67%. Two selection criteria were applied: (1) working in a country of the Arabian Peninsula at the time of the interview, and (2) not having been an elite professional footballer. Coaches who had been elite professional players were excluded, as their migration and working conditions were considered unique and not comparable to those of the majority of migrating coaches.

To ensure participants' confidentiality, no information has been provided on variables that could be associated with specific individuals. The participants' ages ranged from 25 to 35 years (M = 29.8, SD = 3.7). Four of the participants were head coaches, and two were assistant coaches. Their years of coaching experience ranged from 6 to 17 years (M = 11.5, SD = 3.17), and their time working abroad ranged from one month to eight years (M = 3.35, SD = 2.65).

Instrument

To ensure methodological coherence, which refers to the alignment between philosophical positioning, theoretical positioning, and the methods employed,[39] semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. As Braun et al.[40] note, this type of interview is one of the most common data collection methods in qualitative research and is particularly effective for obtaining detailed information about personal experiences.[41] For the interviews, a script was developed, consisting of three parts. First, migration-related issues were explored, drawing on Ryba et al.[22] Cultural Transition Model and its three phases: pre-transition (e.g., reasons for migrating, bureaucratic procedures, emotions experienced during this period), acute sociocultural adaptation (e.g., first impressions, challenges upon arrival, the role of the club), and sociocultural adaptation (e.g., facilitators and barriers to adaptation, ethical considerations, changes in identity). Second, questions were asked about the migrant life of the coaches (e.g., support networks, costs and benefits of being a migrant). Third, issues related to the development and planning of their professional careers were explored (e.g., career goals, alternative plans). Starting from the third interview, questions about mental health (e.g., risk and protective factors) were also included, as this emerged as a recurring theme in the first two interviews. Participants who completed the first two interviews were given the opportunity to provide additional information on this topic.

Procedure

All coaches signed the informed consent form before participating in the study, which outlined the research objectives and their rights as participants. The first author conducted the interviews in person in the countries where the coaches were working during the 2021/2022 and 2022/2023 seasons. The duration of the interviews ranged from 57 to 87 min (M = 72.6; SD = 11.25), and all interviews were recorded for subsequent transcription, resulting in a total of 140 double-spaced pages.

Data analysis

We conducted a thematic analysis following the phases proposed by Braun and Clarke[42]: familiarization with the data, generation of codes, creation of initial themes, review of themes and codes, final naming of themes, and writing of the article. An abductive analysis was performed, combining deductive analysis, which led to the generation of two overarching themes (Before Migration; After Migration), with inductive analysis, which resulted in the creation of a third overarching theme (Mental Health).
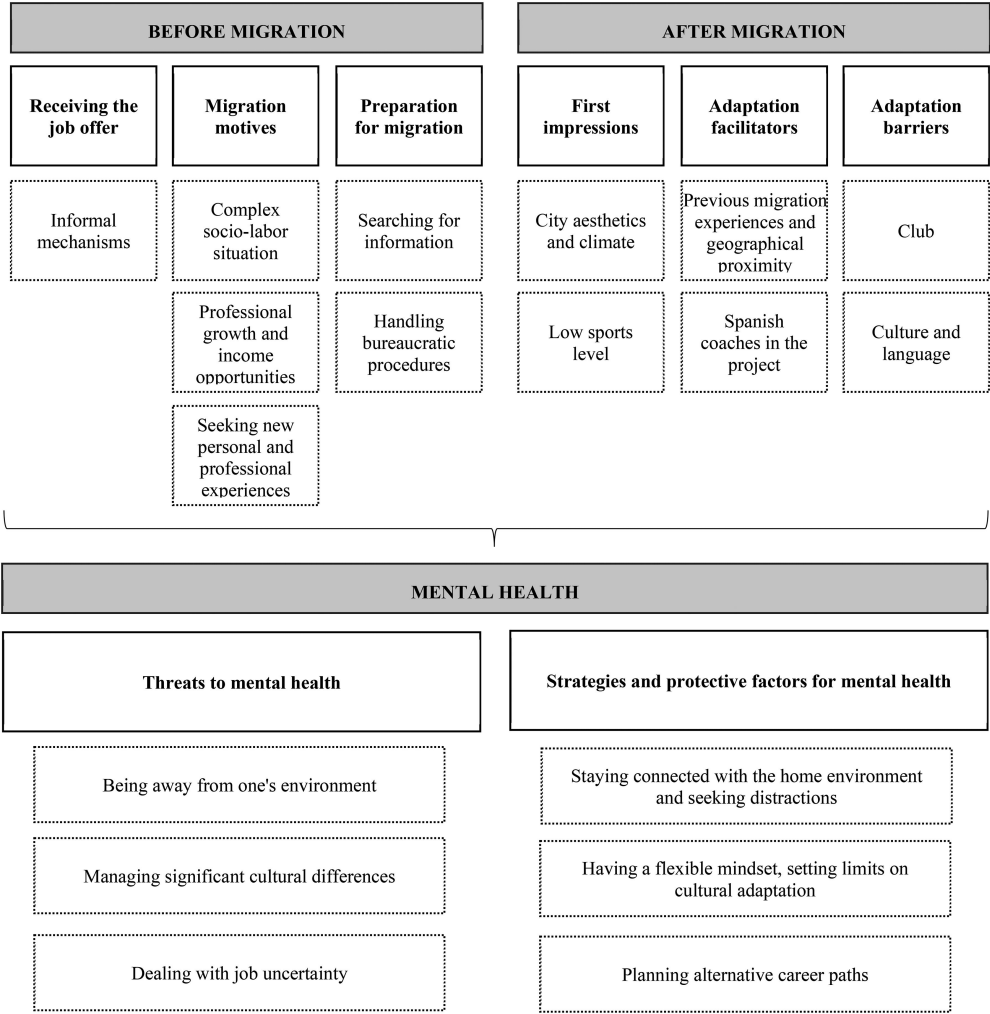
To ensure scientific rigor, the transcription of the interviews was shared with each participant to verify the accuracy of the information obtained. This provided participants the opportunity to reflect on, add to, or expand points that were previously addressed. Two participants provided additional information regarding mental health, while a third chose to add more details to some of their responses. Additionally, reviews were conducted with critical friends to encourage reflections on the process of generating and representing the themes.[43]

Results

Figure 1 provides a summary of the three overarching themes resulting from the thematic analysis: Before Migration, After Migration, and Mental Health. Each of these overarching themes includes its respective themes and subthemes. The subthemes were created by grouping various codes, which had been assigned to interview excerpts. To illustrate the participants' perspectives, direct quotes and analytical commentary were used.[40] Any information that could have identified

the participants was removed from the quotes to ensure confidentiality.

Figure 1. Results of the thematic analysis: overarching themes, themes, and subthemes.

BEFORE MIGRATION			AFTER MIGRATION		
Receiving the job offer	**Migration motives**	**Preparation for migration**	**First impressions**	**Adaptation facilitators**	**Adaptation barriers**
Informal mechanisms	Complex socio-labor situation	Searching for information	City aesthetics and climate	Previous migration experiences and geographical proximity	Club
	Professional growth and income opportunities	Handling bureaucratic procedures	Low sports level	Spanish coaches in the project	Culture and language
	Seeking new personal and professional experiences				

MENTAL HEALTH	
Threats to mental health	**Strategies and protective factors for mental health**
Being away from one's environment	Staying connected with the home environment and seeking distractions
Managing significant cultural differences	Having a flexible mindset, setting limits on cultural adaptation
Dealing with job uncertainty	Planning alternative career paths

Before migration

The first overarching theme, Before Migration, encompasses the period prior to the coaches' migration and aligns with the pre-transition phase of Ryba et al.[22] Cultural Transition Model. To describe this theme, three main themes were defined, each with their respective subthemes: (a) Receiving the job offer (Informal mechanisms), (b) Migration motives (Complex socio-professional situation in the home Country; Professional growth and Income opportunities; Seeking new personal and professional experiences), and (c) Preparation for migration (Searching for information; Handling bureaucratic procedures).

Receiving the job offer

All participants reported receiving the job offer through contacts with former colleagues and acquaintances: *"(Person) calls me, someone I met in (city). He tells me he's going to Saudi Arabia and that he's going to propose me as the coach for (team). Shortly after, the sporting director contacts me."*

Migration motives

The participants cited several reasons for migrating, including the challenging professional situation they faced in Spain (low salaries, the need to take on additional jobs, and a lack of opportunities for professional growth) or the need to leave a difficult socio-professional situation in another country where they were working at the time of receiving the offer. They also highlighted the opportunity to advance professionally and secure higher financial earnings as key motivators for migration. Additionally, the pursuit of new experiences, both personal and professional, was identified as a decisive factor in their decision to migrate:

> "There's an element of risk and uncertainty: What will you encounter? What will this culture be like? But at the same time, there's excitement about experiencing something new. I've always enjoyed trying new things. […] It's a good region to seek opportunities."

Preparation for migration

All participating coaches in this study stated that as soon as they received the offer, they began searching for information about their destination and consulted with acquaintances as part of their preparation for migration:

> "The first thing I did was look for information online. I checked Google Maps to see what it looked like, to get a feel for the place. I asked around, because I'm lucky to have former colleagues already here in Qatar."

Before migrating, coaches also have to start a series of bureaucratic procedures to travel and settle in the new destination. These preparations (e.g., signing a contract, handling visas, obtaining medical insurance) may vary depending on the coach's country of origin and destination, their personal characteristics, or the local federation's requirements. The participants in this study did not place much importance on these bureaucratic processes during the pre-transition phase, as they trusted the club, they were going to work for would handle everything. However, these bureaucratic procedures did eventually become a barrier to adaptation once they arrived at their destination.

After migration

The second overarching theme, After Migration, encompasses the experiences of the coaches once they arrive in the new country and aligns with the acute cultural adaptation and sociocultural adaptation phases of Ryba et al.[22] Cultural Transition Model. Following the analysis, three main themes were identified, each with their corresponding subthemes: (a) First impressions (City aesthetics and climate; Low sporting level), (b) Adaptation facilitators (Previous migratory experiences and geographical proximity; Spanish coaches in the project), and (c) Adaptation barriers (Club; Culture and Language).

First impressions

Coaches who migrated to cities in Saudi Arabia noted the city's aesthetics and the country as an element that caused a negative impression from the moment they arrived: "As soon as you arrive, you drive an hour and a half through the desert, and you say, 'Whoa! Where have I ended up?' The environment is shocking."

Another coach expressed it like this: "*I found a city that wasn't pleasant. You could already tell it wasn't a city where you'd feel at home.*" However, this perception was different for the coaches who migrated to Qatar, who referred to a city open to immigrants: "*The city is quite prepared to welcome people who aren't Arab. I don't feel like I'm in the Arab world; I don't feel like a stranger.*"

All the coaches also pointed out the climate as one of the factors that most impressed them upon arrival: "*The first thing that hits you, when you get off the plane, is the punch of humidity and heat. I knew I'd face a harsh climate, but not this much.*"

The low level of sports was another element that impressed the participants upon arriving in the new country:

> "In training sessions, I have to resort to very basic things, to tasks that are easy because the players' ability to understand is very low. That frustrates me. It's hard for me to understand why they'd hire someone so qualified for players of this level."

Adaptation facilitators

According to the participants in this study, having migrated previously seems to be an element that facilitates adaptation to future migrations. "*The only time I felt uncertain or a little afraid was the first time I left the country. When I went to (country) and said, - What awaits me? What will I find?*"

> "I approached the transition as just another one because I had already been through several. I was very calm, sure that things would go well. I went home for a few days and wanted to relax as much as possible. I thought, - Let's take advantage and enjoy these days, and I'll deal with the situation once I'm there."

One of the coaches also mentioned that the fact that the time difference with Spain was minimal, compared to other projects he had worked on, helped his adaptation: "*The adaptation was much better than in (country) because of the time difference. It was much harder to maintain good communication there because there was a six-hour time difference, and many times, a day would go by without talking to my partner.*"

Another element that the coaches identified as a facilitator of their adaptation in the Arabian Peninsula was the presence of other coaches of the same nationality working in the same sports project: "*If I were at a club where everyone was Arab, it*

would be much harder for me. In the club I'm currently at, we have many Spanish coaches."

Adaptation barriers

The coaches identified the club they worked for as one of the main barriers to their adaptation. They highlighted the lack of help with bureaucracy needed to settle in the new country: *"I arrived here without the proper papers. I came as a tourist and have been here for over a month. I haven't signed a contract yet. I'm working without a contract or medical insurance."*

They also pointed out a lack of communication from the club, which led them to not understand what was expected of them and what the team's goals were: *"No one tells you anything. I didn't meet with anyone. There was no welcome where they said, 'This is what we're looking for, this is what we want to develop'. We didn't talk about anything. It was just arriving and starting to coach."* The coaches also noted overly high club expectations with unrealistic goals as another barrier to adaptation: *"The club's goals weren't met. They were too ambitious and didn't align with reality."*

One participant explained how conflicts within their technical team also became a barrier to adaptation: *"I've felt a lot of rejection from my staff, with communication and attitude problems both on and off the field. I've felt unwelcome, like I'm a problem for them because I'm pushing them out of their comfort zone."*

The participating coaches noted that working with colleagues of the same nationality reduced the impact of not mastering the local language. However, they acknowledged that it affected their professional communication with players and other members of the technical team. One coach, however, saw the language barrier as an opportunity to manage certain situations effectively:

> *"The fact that there's that language difference allows you to do and undo what you want, closing your ears when it suits you and opening them when it's in your interest. I don't see it as a limiting factor; on the contrary, sometimes a barrier is created that's even healthy."*

The cultural differences between their country of origin and destination were another element highlighted by the participating coaches as barriers to their adaptation. All participants mentioned the role of women in society and the challenging situation of other migrant workers: *"You could say there are slaves in this country. They work like slaves, even though they have certain rights. It's very hard to see and very difficult to explain, but that's what we experience on a daily basis."*

Mental health

The third and final overarching theme, "Mental health", emerged inductively. Two main themes were identified along with their corresponding subthemes: (a) Threats to mental health (Being away from one's environment; Managing significant cultural differences; Dealing with job uncertainty) and (b) Strategies and protective factors for mental health (Staying connected with the home environment and seeking distractions; Having a flexible mindset, setting limits on cultural adaptation; Planning alternative career paths).

Threats to mental health

All the coaches expressed that one of the main threats to their mental health was being physically separated from their family and social environment: *"You move away from your family and friends. I used to have many friends, but now I have few because distance complicates things."* They also expressed distress over not being present for important family or social events (e.g., the death of a family member, a partner's pregnancy, the birth of a child):

> *"My wife was pregnant. We tried to share all the physical and emotional challenges she faced from a distance. It didn't make daily life easier. It was always a concern—not just because I wasn't physically available, but also because of the guilt I felt for abandoning my wife during such an important and difficult time."*

Some of the coaches also expressed concern and emotional distress as their loved ones grew older, worrying about the possibility of them falling ill or passing away: *"Sometimes I think about how my mother is getting older. Luckily, my brother is close to her, but it's not fair that I'm not there to help when needed."*

Due to the significant cultural differences between their home country and the host country, as well as the internal ethical debate this provoked, one participant revealed that they encountered serious psychological issues, leading them to make the decision to resign from their position just days before the interview:

> *"I don't feel well. Not professionally. When I'm on the field, I'm happy, but on a personal level, being in a context that clashes directly with my essence is hard. (…) I recently decided*

> "to leave. I'm not happy with what I'm doing or what I can do here, and I believe money doesn't make up for the gaps I'm experiencing."

The participants also mentioned job uncertainty as a threat that arises when the season ends and their contract expiration date approaches:

> "This is a topic that generates negative emotions for me. I manage uncertainty very poorly in any area of my life. It's really difficult for me; I dwell on it a lot, even when it's out of my control. It's multiplying my distress."

One of the participants, who had extensive international experience, expressed that he was no longer worried about the possibility of losing his job. Now, his concerns had shifted to family matters:

> "Five years ago, I would have been a little more nervous and restless. Now I'm more worried about off-field issues: things like my wife's visa, my son's new passport, whether we'll be able to visit family or not… rather than what will happen at work. Because if they didn't want me here, I would just look for another place. I'd probably find something. Surely, out of the need to find something quickly, it wouldn't be what I wanted, but in the end, I'd manage. I'm not too worried in that sense."

Strategies and protective factors for mental health

Several participants in this study highlighted maintaining contact with people from their home country as a protective factor for their mental health: "It's important not to lose the connection with your people, to maintain a relationship with them and not disconnect."

Coaches with partners also considered their support essential for maintaining good mental health: *"I think I'm fortunate because my partner understands my professional ambitions and accepts, sometimes reluctantly, that I'm doing what I'm doing, even if it means being far from her and our child. Without that, I couldn't do it."* However, one coach pointed out the difficulty of managing a period when their partner was not adapting well to the new country: *"During the first year here, she wasn't working. She wants to do things, and the fact that she wasn't comfortable affected me. Because you see it, you suffer for her. And she's here because of you."*

They also noted that sharing activities and leisure time with colleagues was a protective factor for their mental health. One participant stated that living in the same condominium as other colleagues from the same nationality made his daily life easier: *"We have created routines of sharing meals and dinners with colleagues, and having some joint hobbies. We live like in a big house with small houses. You have your privacy, but we can share common spaces."*

The participants also referred to the need to manage loneliness well and to maintain a flexible mindset, both personally and professionally. They emphasized the need to adjust their working methodology and their expectations of what clubs and players expect from them: *"You have to understand that the culture is not going to be the same; you can't expect what you've always had. There will be different thoughts, opinions, or habits, and you have to be prepared to encounter them."*

Another strategy used by the coaches was to set limits on their own adaptation. In this regard, several coaches expressed that they had no intention of embracing the new culture: "When you come here and your entire environment is Spanish, it's not an adaptation to the Arab world. I don't have my friend Mohamed or my friend Rashid." They also expressed the need to avoid certain conversations or thoughts about changing local customs:

> "When you come to this country, you close your eyes, knowing that we are in a country where, at times, respect for human rights may be limited. You have to accept it, no matter how much you don't share it or understand it. There are conversations that must be avoided. Never think that I am capable of changing anything, because that is not our job. Our job is to improve a sports project, and that's it. But that always lingers; it becomes a taboo subject and is always uncomfortable. You learn to ignore it, even though that may not necessarily be the right thing to do."

Having or working on an alternative career plan is, according to the participants themselves, a useful strategy for dealing with job uncertainty, providing them with peace of mind and favouring the maintenance of good mental health. As one of them explained:

> "I got my teaching degree because working in football is very difficult. My stable life would be as a physical education teacher, and I would be fine with that; I wouldn't have any problem.

But having this security allows me to invest in football and see how far I can go."

Discussion

Our findings on the experiences of migrant coaches in the Arabian Peninsula suggest that the migration process requires a better planned preparation, a welcoming process upon arrival, and professionalized and personalized follow-up by the host clubs to ensure a smooth transition and prevent coaches from repeating the "Where have I ended up?" experience that gives this article its title. This narrative is not exclusive to coaches and has also been identified in the migration experiences of athletes.[44] These accounts suggest a broader narrative of the dislocation experienced by migrants in sports contexts, which warrants further research.

The results should be interpreted with the understanding, as Schinke et al.[45] have previously noted, that each sporting and host context is unique, and that cultural norms, as well as the intersection of identity aspects (e.g., age, gender, sexual orientation, religion), influence how individuals experience migratory processes. In our case, the findings reinforce what other authors have highlighted regarding the crucial role that contact networks play in the hiring of coaches[21,30] and the need for migrants to seek information about their destination during the pre-transition phase.[22,46] The study also identifies several motivations for migration previously noted in the literature: seeking alternatives to a complex socio-professional situation, pursuing professional growth, seeking better economic opportunities, or new experiences.[21,27,47] However, none of the coaches mentioned greater competitiveness in the environment or access to better training resources as reasons for migration, factors that have been highlighted in other studies.[28] This could suggest that, for coaches migrating to the Arabian Peninsula, the need to escape a complex socio-professional situation, the desire for professional growth, economic factors, or the pursuit of new experiences carry more weight than the competitiveness of the environment or training resources. This might also explain why participants did not reference difficulties or problems encountered on the field during the interviews, beyond mentioning the language barrier or a certain frustration at having to simplify some training tasks due to the lower technical level of the players.

Participants also indicated that having prior migration experiences and being geographically close to their home country facilitated cultural adaptation.[30,33] The environment and support network also played a fundamental role in their adaptation. In this regard, participants considered having teammates from the same nationality in their club as a facilitator, providing both a broader support network and cultural and linguistic familiarity—two of the main adaptation barriers previously identified by other authors.[5,23] The club itself was also identified as a barrier to adaptation for various reasons (e.g., lack of assistance with bureaucracy, excessively high expectations, internal conflicts). We have not found other studies analyzing the role of clubs in the adaptation process of immigrant coaches.

Regarding mental health, previous research has described how both migrant athletes and coaches may experience mental health issues due to unfavorable sociocultural adaptation, which in some cases can lead to high levels of frustration, performance decline, or even premature withdrawal from both the host sports system and the profession itself.[3,23,45] This was expressed by one of the coaches participating in this study, who decided to resign from his position after experiencing difficulties in managing cultural differences. These difficulties primarily referred to the ethical conflict of not sharing certain customs or ideas present in the host country's society. While the intention to leave has been studied in coaches,[48] we have not found evidence linking unfavorable cultural transitions with a desire to quit in coaches. This study has also identified other mental health risks for migrant coaches previously noted by other researchers,[10,49] such as being distanced from their home environment or struggling to cope with job uncertainty.

Practical implications

This work yields several practical implications that may be useful for developing strategies to facilitate the cultural transition of migrant coaches, reducing some of the threats to their mental health and, in turn, increasing their satisfaction and professional performance.

On one hand, clubs that hire coaches should strive to facilitate, during the pre-transition phase, the obtaining of information (e.g., local norms, traditions, and customs; areas in which to live) and carry out the necessary bureaucratic procedures (e.g., processing visas, health insurance). Once migration occurs and coaches are in the new country, clubs should, as suggested by the participants themselves, address basic needs such as temporary accommodation or transportation, enable coaches to bring their families (e.g., handling bureaucratic procedures, international schooling for children), provide a cultural advisor to introduce them to local social and sporting norms, and effectively communicate the club's expectations and short-, medium-, and long-term goals. Federations, on the other hand, should aim to prepare coaches during their training phase to face the professional and personal challenges they will encounter if they pursue a migratory professional career.

Participants expressed the need for their federation to pay attention to their professional careers even if these develop in other countries, facilitating the possibility of taking online training and updating courses, as well as providing access to specialized psychological support.

Limitations and future research

This study has certain limitations. Firstly, ensuring the confidentiality of the participants has forced us to omit some quotes that provided relevant information about the experiences of migrant coaches. Secondly, despite the need highlighted by several authors to attend to female coaches[50] and the growth of women's football in recent years in countries of the Arabian Peninsula,[51] no female coaches participated in this study. It would therefore be interesting for future research to explore the role of female coaches in countries of the Arabian Peninsula and their cultural adaptation, as well as potential differences in this process between male and female coaches. Future studies should also investigate how personal, professional, and sociocultural characteristics of coaches (e.g., age, role, family situation) may influence their migratory experiences, as well as differences in this process depending on the country to which they migrate or potential differences between the cultural transitions of athletes and coaches. Additionally, how cultural transition affects the mental health of coaches and the role of clubs as facilitators or barriers to their adaptation are other topics that future research should explore.

Conclusions

This article is, to our knowledge, the first qualitative study exploring the migratory experiences of football coaches in the Arabian Peninsula. It highlights the role of clubs as one of the main barriers to coaches' adaptation and underscores the need for clubs to begin preparing coaches for their transition before it occurs, facilitate their arrival and integration into the new country, and provide ongoing support to ensure an effective transition and prevent the narrative of dislocation. Future research should continue to explore the migratory processes of coaches, focusing on how their personal characteristics affect the transition and how this transition may impact mental health.

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