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## The Effect of Coach Identity Leadership on Athletes' Experiential Avoidance: The Mediating Role of Perceived Coach-Related Criticism Attitudes and Subjective Vitality

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**Date:** 2024-07-02T00:00:00+00:00

### Abstract

**Purpose:** To clarify the mechanism through which coach identity leadership influences athletes' experiential avoidance and to explain the mediating mechanisms of athletes' perception of coach-related criticism attitudes and subjective vitality. **Methods:** A relational model was constructed with coach identity leadership as the independent variable, athletes' experiential avoidance as the dependent variable, and athletes' perception of coach-related criticism attitudes and subjective vitality as mediating variables; a questionnaire survey was administered to 788 athletes. **Results:** (1) Coach identity leadership (identity prototype, identity advancement, identity entrepreneurship, identity embedding) had a significant negative effect on experiential avoidance; (2) Athletes' perception of coach-related criticism attitudes significantly mediated the relationship between coach identity leadership (identity advancement, identity entrepreneurship, identity embedding) and athletes' experiential avoidance; (3) Subjective vitality significantly mediated the relationship between coach identity leadership (identity prototype, identity advancement, identity entrepreneurship, identity embedding) and athletes' experiential avoidance. **Conclusion:** The four principles of coach identity leadership have different effects on reducing athletes' experiential avoidance. Therefore, coaches should adhere to the four principles of identity leadership, promptly attend to and reduce athletes' perception of coach-related criticism attitudes, and enhance athletes' subjective vitality levels, thereby reducing experiential avoidance.

## Full Text

### Preamble: Self-Check Report for *Acta Psychologica Sinica*

Please complete the following items and paste them on the first page of your manuscript.

- 1. List up to three innovative contributions of this study in the form of “Research Highlights” (must include theoretical contributions), with a total of no more than 200 words.**

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#### Response:

**Scale adaptation and cross-cultural validation:** We translated the foreign “Athletes’ Perceptions of Coach-Related Critical Attitudes Scale” and revised the “Identity Leadership Scale” for application in China’s sports domain, validating the applicability of both scales while identifying how identity leadership and athletes’ perceptions of coach criticism affect individual resources in sports teams, thereby providing research directions for scholars.

**Innovative research content:** First, few studies have examined the impact of identity leadership on experiential avoidance. Second, this research promotes interdisciplinary integration across psychology, management, and sports science.

- 2. Have you published or submitted articles using the same data as this study? If yes, please attach them for review. (We do not encourage publishing multiple articles with the same variables from one dataset or splitting a series of related studies into multiple publications.)**

**Response:** The data used in this study are for this paper only.

- 3. What methods did you use to control or demonstrate that common method bias does not affect the validity of your conclusions? (For relevant literature on common method bias, see: <http://journal.psych.ac.cn/xlkxjz/CN/abstract/abstract894.shtml>). Studies based on cross-sectional data, self-report measures only, and convenience samples are easy to conduct but typically have limited innovative value and low acceptance chances.**

**Response:** To prevent common method bias, we collected data using anonymous measures. Harman’s single-factor test was applied to all items. The

analysis revealed six factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, with the first common factor explaining 32.82% of variance, below the 40% critical threshold, indicating no serious common method bias.

**4. Did you report and analyze effect sizes (e.g., Cohen's  $d$  for t-tests,  $\eta^2$  or  $\eta^2_p$  for ANOVA, standardized regression coefficients)?** (Many studies mechanically report effect sizes without necessary analysis, such as whether they are small, medium, or large, or their theoretical/applied significance.) (Search “effect size calculator” on Google for convenient apps. For explanations of effect sizes, see Chinese: <http://journal.psych.ac.cn/xlkxjz/CN/abstract/abstract1150.shtml>; English: <http://www.uccs.edu/lbecker/effect-size.html>). **Did you report 95% CIs for statistical analyses?** (For calculations and plotting, see <https://thenewstatistics.com/itns/esci/>)

**Response:** This study reports and analyzes effect sizes and provides 95% CIs for statistical analyses.

**5. Please state the planned and actual sample sizes. If they differ, explain why. Previous psychological research has suffered from low statistical power due to insufficient sample sizes. We recommend explaining your sample size determination in the Methods section, using justified effect sizes and desired power, and reporting the software/program used. See <https://osf.io/5awp4/> for guidance.**

**Response:** Using G\*Power 3.1 for a priori sample size estimation, this study required at least 143 participants. To ensure adequate statistical power, we distributed 862 questionnaires and obtained 788 valid responses.

**6. In hypothesis testing, if using Null Hypothesis Significance Testing (NHST), report exact p-values rather than ranges (report ranges only for  $p < 0.001$ ). Does your paper meet this requirement? For Bayes factors, report sensitivity to prior distribution assumptions.**

**Response:** This study reports exact p-values, not ranges.

**7. If data were excluded in statistical analysis, is this reported in the text? Why? How would results change if included? How were missing data handled? Were any scale items deleted? Why? How would results change if included? Were any measured variables not reported? Why? State where in the paper this is addressed.**

**Response:** We screened collected data and excluded missing and patterned responses to prevent affecting the study. Since scales used were validated domestically and internationally, no individual items were deleted. All measured variables are reported in the text.

**8. Are unpublished experimental materials, scales, or questionnaires attached for review? If not, explain why. If published, are you willing to share these materials with other researchers?**

**Response:** If published, all authors are willing to share these materials with other researchers.

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**Response:** This study used human subjects and obtained ethical approval from our institution.

**12. Has the abstract been reviewed by English-proficient professionals or edited by professional SCI/SSCI editing services?**

**Response:** This paper includes a 400-500 word English abstract following the “English Abstract Writing Guidelines” on the editorial website, reviewed by English-proficient professionals.

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**Response:** I am not a student; no supervisor email is required.

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## The Effect of Coach Identity Leadership on Athletes' Experiential Avoidance: The Mediating Role of Athletes' Perceptions of Coach-Related Critical Attitudes and Subjective Vitality

### Abstract

**Objective:** To clarify the mechanism through which coach identity leadership influences athletes' experiential avoidance, explaining the mediating roles of athletes' perceptions of coach-related critical attitudes and subjective vitality.

**Methods:** We constructed a model with coach identity leadership as the independent variable, athletes' experiential avoidance as the dependent variable, and athletes' perceptions of coach-related critical attitudes and subjective vitality as mediators. A questionnaire survey was administered to 788 athletes.

**Results:** (1) Coach identity leadership (identity prototypicality, identity advancement, identity entrepreneurship, identity impresarioship) had significant negative effects on experiential avoidance. (2) Athletes' perceptions of coach-related critical attitudes significantly mediated the relationship between coach identity leadership (identity advancement, identity entrepreneurship, identity impresarioship) and athletes' experiential avoidance. (3) Subjective vitality significantly mediated the relationship between coach identity leadership (identity prototypicality, identity advancement, identity entrepreneurship, identity impresarioship) and athletes' experiential avoidance. **Conclusion:** The four principles of coach identity leadership have different effects on reducing athletes' experiential avoidance. Coaches should adhere to these four principles, attend to and reduce athletes' perceptions of coach-related critical attitudes, and enhance athletes' subjective vitality to decrease experiential avoidance.

**Keywords:** identity leadership, athletes' perceptions of coach-related critical attitudes, subjective vitality, experiential avoidance

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Experiential avoidance refers to the phenomenon that occurs when an individual is unwilling to maintain contact with specific private experiences (such as bodily sensations, emotions, thoughts, memories, behavioral tendencies) and takes measures to alter the form, frequency, or context that triggers these events (Hayes et al., 1996; Hayes et al., 2004). As a core concept in psychological pathology models, experiential avoidance is considered a harmful coping strategy that consumes cognitive resources to inhibit or escape from aversive or unwanted experiences (Hayes et al., 2004). It is also recognized as a risk factor affecting mental health and behavior, preventing individuals from committing to their values and pursuing lifelong goals (Hayes et al., 1996). High levels of experiential avoidance may induce more negative emotions and lead to psychological distress and behavioral disorders (Asher et al., 2021). Previous research indicates that athletes with high experiential avoidance tend to adopt strategies such as distraction, eating disorders, and self-harm to avoid discomfort, ultimately preventing them from focusing on their goals and performance (Henriksen, 2019). Furthermore, experiential avoidance is positively correlated with athlete burnout, with high levels leading to increased burnout (Zhang et al., 2016). Thus, experiential avoidance is a pathogenic factor for maladaptive behavior and psychological problems, and reducing it can improve mental health (Yela et al., 2020). Therefore, decreasing athletes' experiential avoidance has become increasingly important in sports contexts.

Coaches are leaders of sports teams, and their thoughts and behaviors directly influence athletes' perceptions, emotions, and performance (Huang et al., 2021). Scholars have found that coaches represent a core social environmental factor for improving athletes' mental health and reducing experiential avoidance (Huang, 2023; Wang et al., 2023). Research shows that coach identity leadership effectively promotes positive psychological resources and prevents negative outcomes (Fransen et al., 2020; Van Dick et al., 2018). However, few studies have examined the impact of coach identity leadership on athletes' experiential avoidance. This study investigates this relationship and tests the mediating roles of athletes' perceptions of coach-related critical attitudes and subjective vitality to clarify the internal mechanisms, expand research themes, and help coaches understand how identity leadership may influence athletes' experiential avoidance.

### **The Impact of Coach Identity Leadership on Athletes' Experiential Avoidance**

Leadership is one of the most important organizational factors affecting psychological readiness and performance. Grounded in social identity and self-categorization theories, the social identity approach defines identity leadership as a social influence process whereby leaders represent, advance, create, and em-

bed a shared social identity among group members (Steffens et al., 2014). Identity leadership comprises four principles: identity prototypicality (representing the group's distinctive qualities and what it means to be a member), identity advancement (promoting the group's core interests over personal or other groups' interests), identity entrepreneurship (creating a shared "we" consciousness that unites different members), and identity impresarioship (organizing events and activities that give the group significance and embed collective "we" consciousness) (Steffens et al., 2014).

Coach identity leadership dimensions are significantly positively correlated with athletes' self-efficacy, which serves as a protective factor that reduces negative outcomes (Miller et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2010). When leaders are perceived as group prototypes, members gain support and develop stronger identification and trust (Steffens et al., 2021), which improves challenge states and reduces experiential avoidance (Huang et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2023). Although the four dimensions have been conceptualized, they overlap substantially (Steffens et al., 2014). To deepen understanding, this study examines specific dimensions. We hypothesize: **H1a** Coach identity prototypicality significantly negatively predicts athletes' experiential avoidance; **H1b** Coach identity advancement significantly negatively predicts athletes' experiential avoidance; **H1c** Coach identity entrepreneurship significantly negatively predicts athletes' experiential avoidance; **H1d** Coach identity impresarioship significantly negatively predicts athletes' experiential avoidance.

### **The Mediating Effect of Athletes' Perceptions of Coach-Related Critical Attitudes**

Athletes' perceptions of coach-related critical attitudes reflect their views on coaches' criticism of their performance and abilities, representing an unhealthy coach-athlete relationship (Oliveira et al., 2022). Coaches' critical attitudes are crucial for athletes' development and positively correlate with psychopathological indicators, leading athletes to avoid or quit sports (Oliveira et al., 2022). Siekanska et al. (2013) noted that excessive criticism inhibits athletic development. When athletes fail to meet expectations, coaches' criticism triggers negative emotions like fear, frustration, anger, and guilt, fostering avoidance (Sagar & Jowett, 2012). Concerns about criticism and expectations also increase experiential avoidance to escape negative self-awareness (Moroz & Dunkley, 2015; Moroz & Dunkley, 2019).

Coach leadership affects the coach-athlete relationship (Gosai et al., 2023; Lopez et al., 2021). Shared social identity and leader prototypicality reduce negative perceptions and enhance identification (Steffens et al., 2014). Wekesser et al. (2021) found that coaches indirectly influence athletes' intention to continue participation through the coach-athlete relationship. We hypothesize that coach identity leadership reduces experiential avoidance by inhibiting unhealthy coach-athlete relationships. Therefore: **H2a** Athletes' perceptions of coach-related critical attitudes mediate the relationship between coach identity prototypical-

ity and experiential avoidance; **H2b** Athletes' perceptions mediate between identity advancement and experiential avoidance; **H2c** Athletes' perceptions mediate between identity entrepreneurship and experiential avoidance; **H2d** Athletes' perceptions mediate between identity impresarioship and experiential avoidance.

### The Mediating Effect of Subjective Vitality

Subjective vitality refers to individuals' sense of positive energy and aliveness, serving as an indicator of physical and mental well-being (Ryan & Frederick, 1997). It provides positive resources that help individuals approach difficult situations as challenges rather than threats, reducing experiential avoidance over time (Elliot & Thrash, 2002; Ryan & Frederick, 1997). High subjective vitality enhances internal resources like self-efficacy and mental health, reducing distress and the use of avoidance strategies (Ryan & Frederick, 1997; Wang et al., 2010). Empirical research shows athletes' subjective vitality is significantly negatively correlated with and predicts experiential avoidance (Öğütü et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2023).

Coaches shape the social environment that influences athletes' subjective vitality (Felton & Jowett, 2013). When leaders are seen as group prototypes, members receive stronger support, enhancing vitality (Reinboth et al., 2004; Steffens et al., 2021). Identity leadership from coaches, captains, and informal leaders improves psychological safety, which positively predicts subjective vitality (Fransen et al., 2020; Gosai et al., 2023). Subjective vitality also mediates between perceived coach autonomy support and experiential avoidance (Wang et al., 2023). We hypothesize that coach identity leadership reduces experiential avoidance by enhancing subjective vitality. Therefore: **H3a** Subjective vitality mediates between coach identity prototypicality and experiential avoidance; **H3b** Subjective vitality mediates between identity advancement and experiential avoidance; **H3c** Subjective vitality mediates between identity entrepreneurship and experiential avoidance; **H3d** Subjective vitality mediates between identity impresarioship and experiential avoidance.

The theoretical model is shown in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper].

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### Participants

This study examined the effect of coach identity leadership on athletes' experiential avoidance and the mediating roles of athletes' perceptions of coach-related critical attitudes and subjective vitality. Using G\*Power 3.1 for a priori sample size estimation with  $\alpha = 0.05$ , power  $(1-\beta) = 0.8$ , and medium effect size (0.15), we required at least 143 participants. To ensure adequate statistical power, we randomly selected two sports teams from each grade (freshman to senior) across eight universities with athletes (sporting level 二级及以上) in Shandong, Fujian, Hunan, and Jilin provinces. We distributed 862 questionnaires and obtained 788

valid responses (91.4% valid). The sample included 496 males (62.9%) and 292 females (37.1%); 370 二级运动员 (47.0%), 372 一级运动员 (47.2%), and 46 national-level athletes (5.8%). Mean age was 20.52 years (SD = 1.81) and mean training experience was 6.29 years (SD = 2.53). Sports included boxing, taekwondo, wrestling, discus, weightlifting, judo, gymnastics, soccer, basketball, volleyball, badminton, rugby, etc.

## Measures

**Identity Leadership Scale** We used the Identity Leadership Scale developed by Steffens et al. (2014), validated across 20 countries (Van Dick et al., 2018). As it had not been used in China's sports context, we slightly modified wording (e.g., "immediate supervisor" to "coach"). The 15-item scale includes four dimensions: identity prototypicality, identity advancement, identity entrepreneurship, and identity impresarioship. Items include "My coach is a model team member" and "My coach creates useful organizational structures." Rated on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree), higher scores indicate stronger identity leadership. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was 0.96 for the total scale and 0.76, 0.85, 0.97, and 0.98 for the four dimensions. Confirmatory factor analysis showed good structural validity:  $\chi^2/df = 3.62$ , RMSEA = 0.06, SRMR = 0.02, IFI = 0.99, CFI = 0.99, NFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.99.

**Athletes' Perceptions of Coach-Related Critical Attitudes Scale** We used the scale by Oliveira et al. (2022), a 10-item unidimensional measure (e.g., "My coach never tries to understand my mistakes"). Items are rated on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), with higher scores indicating greater perceived critical attitudes. Following standard localization procedures and with Oliveira's permission, two bilingual experts conducted back-translation (McCrae et al., 1998). Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was 0.93. Confirmatory factor analysis indicated good structural validity:  $\chi^2/df = 2.50$ , RMSEA = 0.04, SRMR = 0.01, IFI = 0.99, CFI = 0.99, NFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.99.

**Subjective Vitality Scale** We used Ryan and Frederick's (1997) 7-item Subjective Vitality Scale (e.g., "I feel alive and vital"), a unidimensional measure with one reverse-scored item ("I don't feel very energetic"). Rated on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all true to 7 = very true), higher scores indicate greater vitality. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was 0.75. Confirmatory factor analysis showed good structural validity:  $\chi^2/df = 3.50$ , RMSEA = 0.06, SRMR = 0.02, IFI = 0.99, CFI = 0.99, NFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.98.

**Acceptance and Action Questionnaire-II** We used the Chinese version of the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire-II translated and revised by Cao et al. (2013). This 7-item unidimensional scale (e.g., "Painful experiences make it difficult for me to live a vital life") is rated on a 7-point scale (1 = does not describe me at all to 7 = describes me very well), with higher scores indicating greater experiential avoidance. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was 0.97.

## Data Analysis

We used SPSS 26.0 and AMOS 23.0 for data analysis, including reliability and validity tests, confirmatory factor analysis, common method bias tests, descriptive statistics, ANOVA, correlation analysis, regression analysis, and Bootstrap analysis.

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## Common Method Bias Test

As self-report questionnaires were used, we employed anonymous data collection to prevent common method bias. Harman's single-factor test revealed six factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, with the first factor explaining 32.82% of variance, below the 40% critical standard, indicating no serious common method bias.

## Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis examined relationships among identity prototypicality, identity advancement, identity entrepreneurship, identity impresarioship, athletes' perceptions of coach-related critical attitudes, subjective vitality, and experiential avoidance (see Table 1 ). Results showed: coach identity prototypicality was significantly positively correlated with subjective vitality and negatively correlated with experiential avoidance, but not with athletes' perceptions of critical attitudes; identity advancement, identity entrepreneurship, and identity impresarioship were significantly negatively correlated with perceptions of critical attitudes and experiential avoidance, and positively correlated with subjective vitality; athletes' perceptions of critical attitudes were significantly positively correlated with experiential avoidance but not with subjective vitality; subjective vitality was significantly negatively correlated with experiential avoidance. Correlations among significantly related variables were below 0.70, indicating no multicollinearity and supporting subsequent mediation tests.

## Direct Effects of Coach Identity Leadership on Experiential Avoidance

After controlling for demographics (gender, age, training years, and sport level), hierarchical regression analysis examined direct effects. With experiential avoidance as the dependent variable and the four identity leadership dimensions as independent variables, results showed: identity prototypicality ( $\beta = -0.16$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), identity advancement ( $\beta = -0.10$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), identity entrepreneurship ( $\beta = -0.16$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and identity impresarioship ( $\beta = -0.14$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) all significantly negatively predicted experiential avoidance. Thus, H1a-H1d were supported, with identity prototypicality and entrepreneurship showing stronger effects than advancement. Coaches adhering to all four principles can effectively inhibit athletes' experiential avoidance strategies.

### Mediating Effects of Athletes' Perceptions and Subjective Vitality

We tested mediation using the SPSS macro Process 4.1, with identity leadership dimensions as independent variables, experiential avoidance as the dependent variable, and athletes' perceptions of critical attitudes and subjective vitality as mediators (see Table 2).

Bootstrap results showed: (1) For identity prototypicality and experiential avoidance, when adding athletes' perceptions, the direct effect was -0.312 [95% CI: -0.441, -0.184] and the indirect effect was -0.010 [95% CI: -0.059, 0.041], indicating no significant mediation. When adding subjective vitality, the direct effect was -0.221 [95% CI: -0.369, -0.073] and the indirect effect was -0.101 [95% CI: -0.149, -0.059], indicating partial mediation. Thus, H2a was not supported while H3a was supported. (2) For identity advancement and experiential avoidance, athletes' perceptions showed partial mediation (direct effect: -0.149 [95% CI: -0.288, -0.010]; indirect effect: -0.074 [95% CI: -0.129, -0.024]), while subjective vitality showed full mediation (direct effect: -0.114 [95% CI: -0.270, 0.043]; indirect effect: -0.110 [95% CI: -0.161, -0.068]). Thus, H2b and H3b were supported. (3) For identity entrepreneurship, both athletes' perceptions (indirect effect: -0.128 [95% CI: -0.193, -0.072]) and subjective vitality (indirect effect: -0.114 [95% CI: -0.168, -0.067]) showed partial mediation. Thus, H2c and H3c were supported. (4) For identity impresarioship, both athletes' perceptions (indirect effect: -0.097 [95% CI: -0.148, -0.049]) and subjective vitality (indirect effect: -0.114 [95% CI: -0.165, -0.070]) showed partial mediation. Thus, H2d and H3d were supported.

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### Direct Effects of Coach Identity Leadership

All four dimensions of coach identity leadership negatively predicted athletes' experiential avoidance. First, coaches demonstrating identity prototypicality embody shared norms, beliefs, values, aspirations, and goals, providing support and recognition that mobilizes athletes' energy, enhances confidence, and positively influences attitudes and behaviors. This makes athletes more motivated, courageous in facing challenges, and self-regulating, thereby inhibiting experiential avoidance (Steffens et al., 2021). Second, coaches showing identity advancement are effective problem-solvers who interact and communicate with athletes to prevent conflicts, reflect on achievements and improvements, reducing negative impacts and helping athletes understand and address their weaknesses, thereby suppressing avoidance strategies (Herbison et al., 2022). Third, coaches exhibiting identity entrepreneurship show sensitivity to athletes' needs and abilities, highlight athletes' contributions, provide experience and encouragement, and foster belonging. This promotes social identity, enhances psychological adaptation and control, and helps manage training and competition pressures, reducing negative emotions and experiential avoidance (Herbison et al., 2022; Parker et al., 2021; Rees et al., 2015; Rowe & Slater, 2021). Fourth,

coaches practicing identity impresarioship create group activities that advance team values and vision, positively benefiting athletes' social identity. This increases recognition and trust in coaches and team identification, motivating athletes to pursue coaches' visions rather than avoid challenging goals (Slater et al., 2014; Van Dick et al., 2021). Thus, coaches' adherence to all four principles effectively reduces athletes' experiential avoidance.

### **Mediating Role of Athletes' Perceptions of Critical Attitudes**

Athletes' perceptions of coach-related critical attitudes partially mediated the relationship between identity advancement, identity entrepreneurship, identity impresarioship and experiential avoidance, but not between identity prototypicality and experiential avoidance. First, identity advancement promotes team members' interests, enhancing athletes' support and identification with coaches, which reduces perceptions of critical attitudes (Davies et al., 2022). Reduced perceptions decrease self-criticism and negative emotions, reducing concerns about criticism and expectations, improving mental health, and encouraging active rather than avoidant coping (Moroz & Dunkley, 2015; Oliveira et al., 2022; Sagar & Jowett, 2012). Second, identity entrepreneurship clarifies group membership meaning, creates meaningful norms and values, and develops athletes' experience and teamwork, fostering belonging (Steffens et al., 2018). This increases support and reduces critical attitude perceptions, thereby decreasing their impact on experiential avoidance (Slater et al., 2014). Third, identity impresarioship embeds athletes' identity through structures, rituals, and solidarity activities that enhance social identity and cohesion (Chamberlain et al., 2021). Increased "we-ness" promotes coach-athlete relationship identification, improves impressions of coaches, reduces critical attitude perceptions, and thus decreases experiential avoidance (Miller et al., 2020). Therefore, identity advancement, entrepreneurship, and impresarioship reduce experiential avoidance by decreasing athletes' perceptions of coach-related critical attitudes.

### **Mediating Role of Subjective Vitality**

Subjective vitality mediated the relationship between all four identity leadership dimensions and experiential avoidance. While vitality reduces experiential avoidance (Gosai et al., 2023), no empirical research has examined whether coach identity leadership enhances vitality. Few studies have directly tested vitality as a mediator, though research suggests coaches are important for vitality and that vitality affects experiential avoidance (Wang et al., 2023). First, identity prototypicality connects team goals closely with team identity (Steffens et al., 2021). Prototypical coaches show respect and humility, enhancing athletes' identification. Strong team identification provides direction and motivation, and vitality supplies energy resources to cope with demands, reducing depletion and experiential avoidance (Ryan & Frederick, 1997; Weinstein & Ryan, 2011; Weinstein et al., 2011). Second, identity advancement promotes group interests, building connections and trust. Trust is a prerequisite for vitality, and

identified athletes show greater vitality when expected to perform (Hoegh & Bourgeois, 2002), reducing avoidance. Third, identity entrepreneurship clarifies team goals and purpose (Steffens et al., 2018), helping members see meaning and value in their work, which stimulates vitality and its impact on reducing experiential avoidance (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006; Shir & Ryff, 2022). Fourth, identity impresarioship introduces structures and activities that enhance social identity and cohesion (Chamberlain et al., 2021). Cohesion is a key source of social support in sports (Eys et al., 2019). Greater support increases belonging and security, providing guidance to improve skills and enabling athletes to engage with enthusiasm and confidence, reducing experiential avoidance (Gu & Xue, 2022). Thus, inhibiting avoidance requires attention to subjective vitality, which can be enhanced through coaches' adherence to identity leadership principles.

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## Conclusion

This study reveals that specific dimensions of coach identity leadership significantly reduce athletes' experiential avoidance. Some dimensions (identity advancement, identity entrepreneurship, identity impresarioship) operate through reducing athletes' perceptions of coach-related critical attitudes, while all dimensions work through enhancing subjective vitality. These findings illuminate the internal mechanisms linking coach identity leadership to athletes' experiential avoidance, providing practical guidance for coaches to address this issue effectively.

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## Appendices

### Identity Leadership Scale

1. My coach embodies the team's culture and values.
2. My coach is no different from other team members and can represent them.
3. My coach is a model team member.
4. My coach is the best example of what it means to be a team member and what is required.
5. My coach seeks to promote team members' interests.

6. My coach acts as the team's advocate.
7. My coach champions the team.
8. My coach always keeps the team's interests at heart.
9. My coach makes people feel they are part of the team.
10. My coach builds cohesion within the team.
11. My coach helps everyone understand what being a team member means.
12. My coach shapes team members' values and ideals.
13. My coach comes up with activities that unite the team.
14. My coach arranges activities that help the team function effectively.
15. My coach creates organizational structures useful for team members.

### **Athletes' Perceptions of Coach-Related Critical Attitudes Scale**

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	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree
1. I feel my coach expects me to be perfect.				
2. The standards/goals my coach sets for me are too high.				
3. Only outstanding performance can satisfy my coach.				
4. My coach never tries to understand my mistakes.				
5. I strive to meet my coach's expectations.				
6. I feel my coach's expectations exceed my abilities.				
7. My coach cannot tolerate mistakes.				
8. My coach gets upset when I fail at something.				
9. I realize my coach becomes anxious/angry when I fail.				
10. My coach criticizes me harshly when I don't meet goals.				

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### **Subjective Vitality Scale**

1. I feel alive and vital.
2. I don't feel very energetic. (R)
3. Sometimes I feel so alive I just want to burst.
4. I have energy and spirit.

5. I look forward to each new day.
6. I almost always feel alert and awake.
7. I feel energized. (R = reverse scored)

**Acceptance and Action Questionnaire-II**

1. Painful experiences make it difficult for me to live a vital life.
2. Certain feelings make me scared.
3. I worry I cannot control my worries and feelings.
4. Painful memories ruin my pleasant life.
5. Emotions disrupt my life.
6. Most people seem better able to cope with life than me.
7. Worrying about the future hinders my success.

*Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.*

*Source: ChinaXiv — Machine translation. Verify with original.*