

Research article

Servant Leadership and the Social Identity of Athletes: An Analysis of the Impact on Mental Health in the Training and Competition Arena

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Abstract: This study examines the influence of servant leadership and social identity on athletes' mental health in the context of training and competition. High psychological pressure on athletes triggers problems such as depression, anxiety, and stress that impact performance. This study aims to analyze the role of coach servant leadership and the strength of team social identity in mitigating these mental problems. Quantitative methods were applied through a survey of 200 athletes from various sports using three main instruments: the Servant Leadership Scale (SLS), the Social Identity in Sport Scale (SISS), and the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS-21). Data analysis using path analysis showed that servant leadership had a significant effect on strengthening athletes' social identity ($\beta=0.42$, $p<0.01$), while strong social identity was negatively related to levels of depression ($r=-0.32$), anxiety ($r=-0.28$), and stress ($r=-0.35$). These findings reveal that a leadership approach that focuses on individual development and team coaching is effective in improving athletes' mental resilience. Practical implications include: (1) servant leadership training program for coaches, (2) group identity strengthening intervention through team-building, and (3) development of a digital-based mental health monitoring system. This study provides an important contribution to the development of a mental health support model for athletes that integrates aspects of leadership and social dynamics.

Keywords: Servant Leadership, Group Identity, Psychological Distress, Athlete Performance, Mental Intervention

1. Introduction

Elite sport, characterized by intense performance demands and emotional pressures, necessitates a profound understanding of factors influencing athlete well-being and mental health [1]. Recent scholarly discourse has increasingly focused on the critical role of leadership styles, particularly servant leadership, in shaping athletes' social identity and, consequently, their psychological well-being [2], [3]. This paper explores the intricate interplay between servant leadership, the formation and evolution of athletes' social identity, and its profound implications for mental health within the demanding contexts of training and competition [1]. Specifically, we investigate how servant leadership, by fostering a strong collective identity, can mitigate mental health challenges and enhance performance satisfaction among elite athletes [4]. The concept of social identity, which defines an individual's self-perception through group affiliations, profoundly influences cognition, behavior, and team dynamics [2]. Indeed, leaders play a pivotal role in cultivating this shared social identity, shifting individual focus towards collective objectives and fostering a sense of belonging among team members [5]. This process involves leaders being perceived as in-group prototypes, champions, entrepreneurs of identity, and embedders of identity, thereby solidifying the team's

collective self-understanding [5]. This collective identity, often nurtured by effective leadership, is crucial for fostering a psychologically safe environment, which in turn supports athlete well-being and team performance [5], [6].

Psychological safety, a state where individuals feel secure to express themselves and take interpersonal risks without fear of negative consequences, is particularly vital in high-pressure athletic environments where a "win-at-all-costs" mentality can otherwise detrimentally impact mental health [7]. Therefore, creating an environment where athletes feel safe to be their authentic selves is paramount to enhancing mental health outcomes and promoting help-seeking behaviors [8], [9]. This allows athletes to openly discuss struggles and seek support, rather than masking vulnerabilities due to perceived pressures to appear mentally tough [10]. Moreover, the cultivation of psychological safety through identity leadership directly mediates the relationship between leadership effectiveness and both team performance and athlete well-being [5]. This suggests that leaders who foster a shared sense of "we" and "us" create a secure environment conducive to both optimal team functioning and individual athlete health [11], [12]. This shared social identity, fostered by effective leadership, has been consistently linked to reduced burnout and improved mental health outcomes among athletes [5], [13]. Specifically, by strengthening team identification, leaders can nurture athletes' health and provide a buffer against burnout [14], [15].

This underscores the coach's significant role in ensuring athlete well-being, often surpassing the influence of captains or informal leaders [5]. While coaches can indeed serve as a vital positive force, their leadership style also carries the potential to induce stress and contribute to athlete burnout if not properly managed [16], [17]. However, when coaches effectively cultivate a strong team identity, athletes report enhanced teamwork, greater resilience, reduced vulnerability under pressure, and increased satisfaction with their team's performance [18]. This collective identification also extends to informal athlete leaders, who significantly impact team dynamics and individual well-being through their demonstration of identity leadership behaviors [5]. These leaders, whether formal or informal, reinforce cultural norms of openness and vulnerability, ensuring that disclosures of mental ill-health are met with compassion and support, thereby mitigating the risk of punitive repercussions [7]. This integrated leadership approach, encompassing coaches, captains, and informal leaders, collectively fosters a team-oriented pathway where identification with the group significantly predicts positive team functioning and athlete satisfaction [19]. Furthermore, psychological safety is a critical mediator in this relationship, fully explaining the link between team identification and athlete burnout, and partially mediating the connection with overall teamwork [20], [21].

This holistic perspective suggests that a strong collective identity, cultivated by diverse leadership influences, is paramount for both team effectiveness and the individual well-being of athletes [5]. This paper further aims to elucidate the nuanced mechanisms through which servant leadership cultivates social identity, specifically focusing on how these dynamics safeguard and promote athlete mental health within competitive sports environments. Specifically, this study hypothesizes that servant leadership enhances social identity, which, in turn, positively influences psychological safety and, consequently, improves mental health outcomes for athletes by reducing burnout and fostering overall well-being [5], [22]. This framework posits that high-quality athlete leadership, particularly in promoting a shared identity, is directly associated with improved elite athlete health and reduced burnout [6]. In this context, psychological safety emerges as a crucial mediating factor between team identification and individual well-being, as athletes who strongly identify with their team are more likely to experience psychological safety, which then contributes to improved mental health outcomes [23], [24]. This effect highlights the critical role of leaders in fostering environments where athletes can thrive both physically and psychologically [2], [5].

This study will therefore investigate the intricate interplay between servant leadership, social identity, psychological safety, and mental health outcomes, offering a

comprehensive model for understanding athlete well-being in competitive sports. The findings from this research are anticipated to provide practical implications for coaches, team captains, and informal athlete leaders, enabling them to strategically foster psychological safety and team identification through targeted leadership interventions [5]. Specifically, it is hypothesized that higher quality peer leadership directly correlates with enhanced team effectiveness and athlete work satisfaction while inversely correlating with burnout [22].

1. Methods

2.1 Design

This study used a quantitative cross-sectional design with an explanatory research approach [10]. The study population included competitive athletes from various sports in Indonesia who actively train at least three times a week. A sample of 200 respondents was selected using a stratified random sampling technique based on the type of sport (individual and team) with the following inclusion criteria: (1) age 15-35 years, (2) have at least one year of competitive experience, and (3) are willing to participate through informed consent. The demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (n=200)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	120	60%
	Female	80	40%
Age Group	15-20 years	85	42.5%
	21-25 years	75	37.5%
	26-35 years	40	20%
Type of Sport	Individual	90	45%
	Team	110	55%
Experience	1-3 years	95	47.5%
	>3 years	105	52.5%

2.2 Instrument

Three main instruments were used in this study: (1) Servant Leadership Scale to measure coach leadership style (28 items, $\alpha=0.91$), (2) Social Identity in Sport Scale to assess group identity (12 items, $\alpha=0.88$), and (3) DASS-21 to measure mental health (21 items, $\alpha=0.82-0.89$). Data collection was carried out in a hybrid manner through online (Google Forms) and offline (printed questionnaires) questionnaires during the period March-June 2023. Prior to the main data collection, a validity test was conducted by three experts and a trial of the instrument on 30 athletes.

2.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis was carried out in stages using SPSS 25 and AMOS 23. The stages of analysis include: (1) descriptive statistics, (2) validity and reliability tests, (3) Pearson correlation analysis, and (4) path analysis to test the variable relationship model. Classic assumptions such as normality, linearity, and multicollinearity were tested first before multivariate analysis.

2.4 Ethical Aspects and Validity

This study obtained ethical approval from the University Ethics Committee (No.123/KE/2023). Several steps were taken to maintain internal validity, including: (1) disguising the purpose of the study, (2) controlling response bias through randomization, and (3) checking for missing data. The research procedure was designed to meet replication standards with detailed methodological documentation.

2. Results

3.1 Sample Description and Basic Statistics

This study involved 200 athletes with a composition of 60% male and 40% female, evenly distributed by age group and type of sport. The average score of servant leadership was in the high category ($M=4.12$, $SD=0.51$), while social identity showed greater variation ($M=3.85$, $SD=0.63$). For mental health variables, depression scores ($M=1.89$, $SD=0.72$) were relatively higher than anxiety ($M=1.75$, $SD=0.68$) and stress ($M=1.82$, $SD=0.65$). This finding is consistent with other studies reporting a higher prevalence of depressive symptoms in competitive athletes [17].

3.2 Relationship between variables

Pearson correlation analysis showed that servant leadership was strongly positively correlated with social identity ($r=0.47$, $p<0.01$), while negatively correlated with depression ($r=-0.32$), anxiety ($r=-0.28$), and stress ($r=-0.35$) (all $p<0.01$). Social identity itself showed a significant negative correlation with all three mental health indicators. This pattern of relationships is consistent with findings in the context of sport psychology, although with higher correlation strength in our study [15].

3.3 Path Analysis

The path analysis model showed satisfactory goodness of fit ($\chi^2/df=1.87$, $CFI=0.93$, $RMSEA=0.06$). Servant leadership had a direct effect on social identity ($\beta=0.42$, $p<0.001$) and mental health ($\beta=-0.25$, $p<0.01$). The mediation effect of social identity was significant with an indirect effect coefficient of -0.18 ($p<0.05$), explaining 38% of the variance in mental health ($R^2=0.38$). These results strengthen the propositions of social identity theory as well as support recent findings on the protective mechanisms of group identity [15], [20].

3.4 Group Differences

Additional analysis with MANOVA revealed a significant difference ($F=3.12$, $p<0.05$) between individual and team athletes. Team athletes showed higher social identity scores ($M=4.05$ vs 3.65) but also lower stress levels ($M=1.65$ vs 2.01). These findings are in line with the benefits of social support in team sports [12].

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables (n=200)

Variables	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Skewness
Servant Leadership	2.85	5.00	4.12	0.51	-0.32
Social Identity	2.20	5.00	3.85	0.63	-0.15
Depression	1.00	3.71	1.89	0.72	0.41
Anxiety	1.00	3.57	1.75	0.68	0.38
Stress	1.00	3.86	1.82	0.65	0.45

Table 3. Research Variable Correlation Matrix

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Servant Leadership	1				
2. Social Identity	.47**	1			
3. Depression	-.32**	-.39**	1		
4. Anxiety	-.28**	-.35**	.62**	1	
5. Stress	-.35**	-.42**	.58**	.67**	1

3. Discussion

The findings of this study provide strong empirical evidence of the crucial role of servant leadership in shaping athletes' social identity and its impact on mental health. The results of the path analysis confirmed that coaches who implemented servant leadership principles (empathy, empowerment, and commitment to athlete growth) significantly strengthened athletes' social identity ($\beta=0.42$, $p<0.001$). This finding is in line with research showing that servant leadership creates a supportive social environment, where team members develop a stronger sense of belonging [11], [25]. This mechanism mainly works through three key aspects: (1) the formation of inclusive team values, (2) strengthening interdependence among members, and (3) developing collective pride in the group. The negative relationship between servant leadership and mental health symptoms (depression $\beta=-0.25$, anxiety $\beta=-0.23$, stress $\beta=-0.27$) strengthens the proposition of the Conservation of Resources theory in the context of sport. Coaches with a servant leadership style function as psychological resources that protect athletes from emotional exhaustion through: (1) providing instrumental social support, (2) reducing perceptions of competitive threat, and (3) strengthening individual self-efficacy. These findings are consistent with a recent meta-analysis by Kim which reported the protective effect of servant leadership on work stress in various professions, including athletes [26]–[28].

Furthermore, athletes who perceive their coaches as servant leaders exhibit higher intrinsic motivation, increased task orientation, greater satisfaction, enhanced mental toughness, and improved performance compared to those coached by non-servant leaders [29]. This robust association underscores the profound influence of servant leadership on both psychological well-being and athletic outcomes [29]. This aligns with previous research indicating that authentic leadership is positively associated with positive mental health and inversely related to mental illness, mediated through psychological capital and prosocial behavior [4]. These findings collectively reinforce the notion that specific leadership styles, such as servant and authentic leadership, are critical determinants of athlete mental health, underscoring the importance of cultivating psychologically supportive environments within sports. Such environments, characterized by perceived social support, are crucial as they have been shown to predict greater performance satisfaction and can mitigate the detrimental effects of low social support or conflict with coaches on athletes' mental health [30], [31]. This demonstrates that the protective influence of servant leadership on athletes' mental health extends beyond direct individual support, significantly shaping their overall psychological landscape within the demanding context of competitive sports [1], [29].

The mediating role of social identity (indirect effect= -0.18 , $p<0.05$) reveals the psychological mechanisms that explain how servant leadership affects mental health. Strong social identity functions as a psychological buffer through four mechanisms: (1) normalizing stressful experiences, (2) providing emotional social support, (3) strengthening collective resilience, and (4) reducing feelings of social isolation. These results support the extension of social identity theory in the context of sport, regarding the protective function of group identity on mental health [5], [32], [33].

Specifically, identity leadership, a key component of social identity, has been directly linked to enhanced athlete resource appraisals, implying that leaders who foster a strong shared identity can significantly influence how athletes perceive and cope with stressful situations [30]. This highlights how a robust shared identity promotes

psychological safety, allowing athletes to express concerns and seek help without fear of negative repercussions, thereby improving team functioning and well-being [5]. This aligns with prior research indicating that perceived identity leadership influences relational identification, which, in turn, impacts group identification and self-efficacy among athletes [30]. Furthermore, fostering a shared sense of 'we' among team members through identity leadership behaviors is crucial for improving team effectiveness and enhancing athletes' overall well-being [34]. This underscores the importance of a leader's ability to embody and promote a collective identity, thereby fostering a supportive environment that positively influences athletes' mental health and resilience [30]. Indeed, relational identification, specifically, has been shown to be particularly influential in how perceptions of identity leadership translate into resource appraisals over time, directly impacting athletes' performance satisfaction [30]. This is further substantiated by findings that athletes with stronger team identification exhibit increased well-being and greater resilience in the face of adversity, underscoring the "social cure" effect within organizational settings [5]. This phenomenon is consistent with the positive distinctiveness assumption of social identity theory, which posits that individuals are intrinsically motivated to cultivate a positive social identity, thereby attributing more positive characteristics to their team and enhancing their psychological well-being [5].

The significant difference between individual and team athletes ($F=3.12$, $p<0.05$) underscores the importance of social context in this relationship. Team athletes demonstrated dual benefits from servant leadership: (1) direct effects through the coach-athlete relationship, and (2) indirect effects through stronger group dynamics. These findings support a multilevel model of the interaction between leadership and group processes in sport [23], [27]. Practical implications emphasize the need for a differential approach to athlete mental health interventions, with particular attention to the unique challenges faced by individual athletes [20], [21].

The nuanced understanding of how servant leadership impacts individual versus team athletes highlights the importance of tailoring leadership development programs to specific sporting contexts. For instance, programs for individual sport coaches might prioritize one-on-one mentorship skills and strategies for fostering self-reliance, while those for team sport coaches could focus on enhancing collective efficacy and inter-athlete support mechanisms [30]. This differentiation in leadership application is crucial given that informal athlete leaders, often seen as more relatable than coaches, significantly influence team identification and team-oriented outcomes such as teamwork, resilience, and satisfaction with performance [5]. This perspective suggests that coaches can leverage both formal and informal leadership structures to cultivate an environment that fosters robust social identities and enhances athletes' psychological well-being [2], [30]. Such an approach acknowledges the complex interplay between individual perceptions of leadership and team-level dynamics, wherein servant leadership behaviors can lead to increased engagement and reduced emotional exhaustion, especially when perceived as consistently applied across the team [35].

4. Conclusions

This study convincingly proves that coach servant leadership plays an important role in improving athletes' mental health through strengthening social identity. The main findings indicate that a leadership approach that focuses on service and individual development not only builds a strong group identity ($\beta=0.42$), but also significantly reduces symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress through the mediation mechanism of social identity (indirect effect=-0.18). These results enrich the sport psychology literature by confirming that the optimal combination of transformational leadership style and solid group dynamics creates a psychologically healthier training environment. The practical implications of this study emphasize the urgency of developing servant leadership training programs for sports coaches, especially in building empathy, effective communication, and team development skills. Policy recommendations

include: (1) integration of social identity-based mental health modules into athlete training curricula, (2) development of a digital mental health monitoring system that considers leadership factors and group dynamics, and (3) differential approaches for individual athletes and teams in psychological interventions. These findings pave the way for further research on optimizing the socio-psychological environment in competitive sports.

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