

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Is identity leadership provided by coaches and athlete leaders associated with performance? A cross-cultural study in football teams

Radhika Butalia¹  | Filip Boen¹  | S. Alexander Haslam²  |
 Stef Van Puyenbroeck¹ | Pete Coffee³  | Nasrin Biglari⁴ |
 Mark W. Bruner⁵  | Aashritta Chaudhary⁶ |
 Paweł Chmura⁷  | Alyson J. Crozier⁸  | Emma S. George⁹  |
 Swanaya Gurjar¹⁰ | Chris Hartley¹¹  | Maciej Huzarski¹² |
 Francisco M. Leo¹³  | Miguel A. López-Gajardo¹³  |
 Todd M. Loughhead¹⁴ | Moe Machida-Kosuga¹⁵  |
 Colin D. McLaren¹⁶  | Seyed Reza Hosseini Nia⁴ |
 Matthew J. Slater¹⁷  | Katrien Fransen¹ 

Correspondence

Radhika Butalia and Katrien Fransen,
 Department of Movement Sciences, KU
 Leuven, Tervuursevest 101, 3001 Leuven,
 Belgium.
 Email: radhika.butalia@kuleuven.be and
katrien.fransen@kuleuven.be

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Abstract

The social identity approach to leadership contends that the most effective leaders represent, advance, create, and embed a shared social identity (i.e., a sense of ‘we’ and ‘us’) within the groups they lead. Building on previous research, our study examines whether the perceived identity leadership of coaches and athlete leaders is associated with a range of key performance indicators (notably team and individual performance and effort) through team identification and team cohesion. We also examine if these relationships are generalisable across WEIRD (Westernised, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic) and non-WEIRD countries while looking at whether they vary as a

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function of national culture (i.e., ingroup collectivism). To this end, we collected data from 3,135 football players across 211 teams in nine countries who engaged in an average of 4.02 sessions per week ($SD = 2.03$). Data were analysed using multilevel (multigroup) regressions and indicated that coaches' and athlete leaders' perceived identity leadership was associated with all performance indicators via both team identification and cohesion. For the most part, these relationships held across WEIRD and non-WEIRD countries. However, we also found some evidence that the relationships between identity leadership and performance varied cross-culturally and were generally stronger in countries high on ingroup collectivism. Together, these data suggest that identity leaders—across geographical and cultural borders—can make teams more effective and that they achieve this by leveraging 'our' strength in ways that make 'us' more cohesive.

KEYWORDS

comparative study, cross-country, cultural practice, cultural value, group dynamics, informal leader, peer leader, social influence, team captain, team effectiveness

INTRODUCTION

The social identity approach to leadership has, in recent years, had considerable impact in the field of sport psychology and is a formal extension of two social psychological theories: *social identity theory* and *self-categorisation theory* (Haslam, Reicher, & Platow, 2020; Steffens et al., 2020; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987, 1994). The central tenet of these theories is that although people can define themselves in terms of what makes them unique and different from others (i.e., their personal identities as 'I' or 'me'), they can also define themselves in terms of their social identities (as 'we' or 'us'). Social identity, then, refers to internalised group membership and is argued to be a critical determinant of both cognition and behaviour in a wide range of social contexts (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). For example, social identity is the foundation of athletes' psychological connection to their sports team, allowing them to see themselves and their teammates as 'us the team' rather than as individual entities—and therefore to be able to *play as a team*. This speaks to Turner's core observation that 'social identity is what makes group behaviour possible' (Turner, 1982, p. 21).

In this way, the social identity approach contends that when individuals come to define themselves in terms of a given social identity, this identity will be the wellspring for social action (Haslam, Reicher, & Platow, 2020). In particular, social identities are argued to be at the

heart of effective leadership as they form the basis for mutual social influence (Turner, 1991). Accordingly, leaders need to tap into social identity if they are to mobilise followers to contribute to shared goals (Haslam, Reicher, & Platow, 2020). More specifically, this analysis suggests that leaders' effectiveness hinges on their capacity for identity leadership in which they (a) create a sense of shared social identity through *identity entrepreneurship* (i.e., 'crafting a sense of us'; Reicher et al., 2005), (b) embody that shared identity through *identity prototypicality* (i.e., 'being one of us'; Hogg, 2001; Turner & Haslam, 2001), (c) promote that shared identity through *identity advancement* (i.e., 'doing it for us'; Haslam et al., 2001), and (d) then embed that shared identity through *identity impresarioship* (i.e., 'making us matter'; Haslam et al., 2011; Steffens et al., 2014).

A large body of research supports the conceptual distinction between the four dimensions of identity leadership—identity prototypicality, advancement, entrepreneurship, and impresarioship—while also highlighting their ability to predict leadership effectiveness across a range of contexts, including organisational, social, clinical, and sporting (e.g., Bracht et al., 2023; Khumalo et al., 2022; Robertson et al., 2023; Steffens et al., 2014; Stevens et al., 2021). Importantly too, this work is not confined to any particular country or culture. More specifically, studies conducted as part of the *Global Identity Leadership Development* project (i.e., GILD) have confirmed the power of identity leadership in 40 countries with differing cultural contexts across all inhabited continents (Bracht et al., 2023; Monzani et al., 2023; van Dick et al., 2018; van Dick et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, the key gap in the existing corpus of research is that this empirical cross-national research has been conducted in work contexts, thereby neglecting the range of other contexts (e.g., sport) in which leadership and team effectiveness are important. This is therefore the lacuna that the present research seeks to address. But before going into the specific aims of this study, we review the existing research on identity leadership and sport performance and introduce the specific relationships that will be examined.

Identity leadership and performance

Early qualitative work on identity leadership in sports showed that leaders foster high-performance environments that are conducive to excellence by cultivating shared social identities within the teams they lead (Slater et al., 2013; Slater et al., 2015). Evidence from experimental studies also supports these qualitative accounts. More specifically, relative to participants in a range of comparison conditions, participants in experimental conditions where their leaders (e.g., coaches and athlete leaders) behave in ways that are consistent with identity leadership principles have been found to perform better, to report greater intentions to exert effort, and then to actually exert more effort (Evans et al., 2021; Fransen et al., 2016; Miller et al., 2021; Stevens et al., 2019).

Building on this, research in naturalistic settings indicates that when athletes perceive their team's formal leaders (i.e., those who are officially appointed as leaders; e.g., the coach and the team captain) or informal athlete leaders (athletes who emerge as leaders based on their natural interactions with their teammates) to be identity leaders, those athletes report higher levels of (a) satisfaction with their team's performance, (b) individual and team performance, (c) control over an upcoming performance, (d) performance-related self-efficacy, and (e) team-focused effort (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016; Fransen et al., 2023; Fransen, McEwan, & Sarkar, 2020; Krug et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2020). Further evidence of the importance of identity leadership for sports performance comes from intervention studies, which show that programmes that seek to

develop coaches' or athlete leaders' skills of identity leadership have an impact on the effort that is subsequently exerted by team members (i.e., the number of hours practised outside of training sessions; Slater & Barker, 2019).

This body of work has also provided support for several intermediary processes implicated in the relationships between identity leadership and sport performance. These include identity leaders being able to (a) foster a sense of shared social identity amongst those they lead (Fransen et al., 2016; Fransen et al., 2023; Fransen, McEwan, & Sarkar, 2020; Krug et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2020); (b) build environments that are psychologically safe for interpersonal risk-taking (Fransen, McEwan, & Sarkar, 2020); (c) create a task-oriented motivational climate centred on encouraging athlete effort, improvement, and collaboration, rather than fostering social comparison and intra-team rivalry (Fransen et al., 2023); (d) build resilient teams (Fransen et al., 2023); and (e) support athletes' health (Fransen et al., 2023). Another potential mechanism that might help explain the relationships between identity leadership and sport performance is team cohesion.

Identity leadership and cohesion

Cohesion is the tendency for groups to stick together and remain united in their pursuit of common instrumental goals and for the satisfaction of members' affective needs (Carron et al., 1998). Elsewhere, team cohesion has been shown to be contingent on shared social identities (that identity leaders seek to build), such that when individuals self-categorise as sport team members, they are likely to see themselves as sharing common values, norms, and ideals with their teammates (Carron et al., 1998; De Backer et al., 2022; Haslam, 2014; Haslam, Fransen, & Boen, 2020; Worley et al., 2020). This in turn heightens both (a) athletes' perceived similarity with others in the team (i.e., the ingroup) and (b) their positive attitudes towards the team (Dutton et al., 1994), which in turn makes cooperation and social attraction amongst ingroup members more likely in ways that also foster a sense of intragroup cohesion (Hogg, 1993). Therefore, to the extent that identity leadership builds shared social identity, it follows that it too should promote team cohesion and thus support performance.

Three independent lines of research support the plausibility of these links. First, identity leadership has been found to positively predict team cohesion (Schei et al., 2023; Steffens et al., 2014). Second, athletes report higher levels of team cohesion in so far as they perceive themselves to share social identity with their team members (i.e., their team identification; Chamberlain et al., 2021; De Backer et al., 2022; Worley et al., 2020). Third, team cohesion predicts performance and effort (Bray & Whaley, 2001; Filho et al., 2014). Leveraging these lines of inquiry, in this study, we will examine the relationships depicted in Figure 1.

The present study: Two key aims

As it stands, the literature on the link between identity leadership and sport performance supports two core insights. The first is that perceptions of coaches' and athlete leaders' (team captains and informal athlete leaders) identity leadership predict multiple aspects of performance, including individual and team performance, effort and satisfaction with team performance. The second core insight is that identity leaders can only achieve these outcomes if they successfully harness the strength of their team's shared identity. In addition, we have

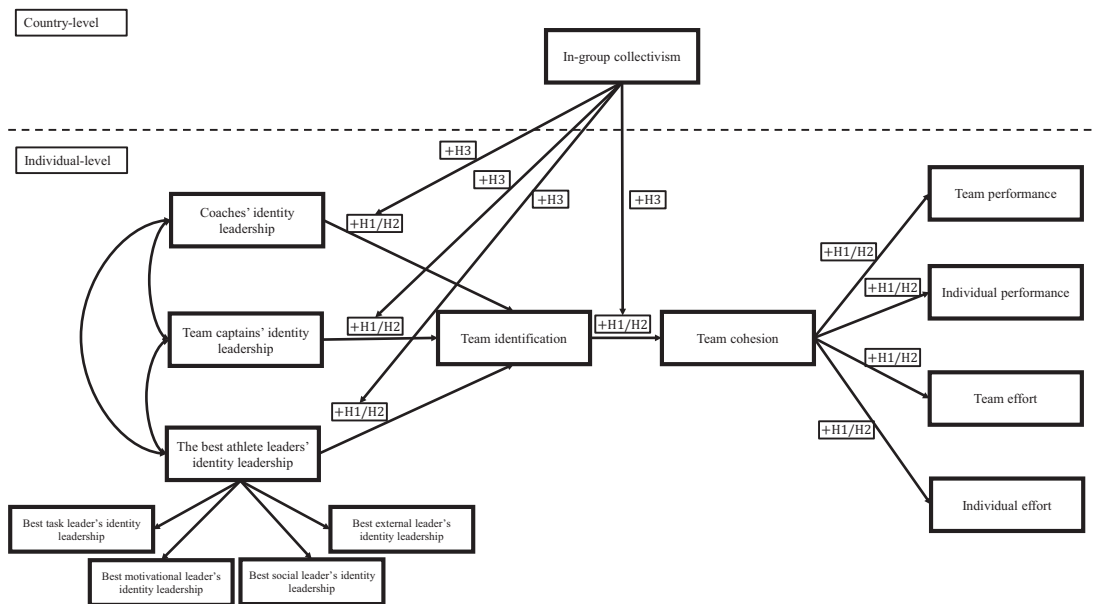


FIGURE 1 Hypothesised model.

Notes: In addition to the direct paths, we also expect ingroup collectivism to moderate the indirect path from both identity leadership and team identification to outcomes. As all three predictors tap into the construct of identity leadership, a correlation is specified amongst them. All variables are modelled as parcels except for the best athlete leaders' identity leadership, which is modelled as a latent variable. This latent variable consists of parcelled constructs including task, motivational, social and external leaders' identity leadership.

argued that it is plausible for team cohesion to mediate the relationships between identity leadership, social identification, and sport performance. Building upon these foundations, the present research seeks to advance this research agenda in two key ways.

Aim 1: To explore generalisability across countries that are both WEIRD (Westernised, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic) and non-WEIRD

Research in work contexts has found that identity leadership is consequential for important outcomes (e.g., health, team functioning) in WEIRD and non-WEIRD contexts (Bracht et al., 2023; van Dick et al., 2018; van Dick et al., 2021). However, in sport, most of the existing literature on identity leadership comes from studies that have been conducted using WEIRD samples (e.g., from countries like Belgium, the United Kingdom, and Canada; Fransen et al., 2023; McLaren et al., 2021; Slater et al., 2015) that are not particularly representative of *Homo sapiens* (Henrich et al., 2010). In fact, researchers consider participants from WEIRD countries to be global 'outliers' in terms of human behaviour (Henrich et al., 2010; Muthukrishna et al., 2020). This raises concerns about the generalisability of the identity leadership framework and its importance for sport performance in non-WEIRD samples. Addressing these concerns, the first aim of our study was to empirically examine whether the relationships between identity leadership and performance in sports teams generalise across countries that are not only WEIRD but also non-WEIRD. It is, however, important to note that the terms

WEIRD and non-WEIRD do not imply psychological homogeneity within each of these categories (Apicella et al., 2020). Rather, they serve to highlight the lack of diversity in study samples used by behavioural scientists. Therefore, by addressing this first aim, we also hope to contribute to increasing sample diversity within sport psychology, which at present is rather limited (Dorsch et al., 2023).

Aim 2: To explore ingroup collectivism as a cultural moderator

One factor that may affect the generalisability of leadership behaviours and theories across countries is *national culture* (House et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2011). Building on our study's first aim, its second aim was therefore to investigate whether national cultural practices—and more specifically ingroup collectivism (i.e., the level of pride, loyalty and cohesiveness individuals exhibit within their groups; House et al., 2004)—moderate the associations between identity leadership, team identification, and performance that are specified in Figure 1.

Ingroup collectivism may be important for identity leadership and team identification, as individuals with higher collectivistic orientations have been observed to identify more strongly with their groups and are argued to prioritise collective goals over individual ones (Bao et al., 2015; Crede et al., 2019). It is thus plausible that when an identity leader cultivates a sense of team identity in more collectivistic cultures, their behaviour will align more closely with the cultural practice of ingroup collectivism. This alignment in turn might result in stronger associations between identity leadership—through team identification—and sporting outcomes (e.g., performance). Speaking to this point, research within the GILD project has shown that the relationship between perceived identity leadership and innovation (via team identification) is stronger in more collectivistic countries (Bracht et al., 2023). By addressing this second aim, we therefore hope to gain more nuanced insight into the way that national cultural factors interact with identity leadership, team identification, and their performance correlates.

Hypotheses

In light of the literature reviewed above, our study sought to test three core hypotheses about sports leaders (i.e., coaches, team captains, and the best athlete leaders within a team):

H1. Leaders' perceived identity leadership will be positively associated with performance through both team identification and team cohesion (see Figure 1).

H2. The associations specified in H1 will hold across WEIRD and non-WEIRD countries.

H3. Ingroup collectivism will moderate the relationships specified in Figure 1 and will be stronger in countries with high (vs. low) levels of ingroup collectivism.

To test these hypotheses, we conducted a large cross-sectional study that involved collecting data from five WEIRD countries (Australia, Belgium, Canada, Spain, and the United Kingdom) and four non-WEIRD countries (India, Iran, Japan, and Poland; for detailed WEIRD/non-WEIRD classification criteria, refer to Appendix S1). Football was chosen as the primary sport

because the sport's global popularity facilitated participant recruitment (Statistics-and-Data, 2020). Restricting our sample to one sport helped to ensure the internal validity of our findings and also allowed us to isolate country-level effects rather than having them confounded with sports-specific factors (e.g., team size).

METHOD

Procedure

The study employed a cross-sectional design and was part of a larger project (i.e., Cross-Cultural Research Of Leadership in Sport or CROLIS), which aimed to examine leadership expectations, practices and effectiveness across both WEIRD and non-WEIRD countries in sporting contexts. Ethical approval for the project was obtained at the first author's university (G-2019 10 1810). Collaborators in Australia (202911), Canada (REB 102432), Japan (21-25), and the United Kingdom (GUEP 787R) sought additional ethics approval at their respective institutes to ensure compliance with country-specific regulations.

To ensure the relevance and quality of the collected data, specific sample inclusion criteria were applied. First, all participating football teams were required to compete in official competitions. Second, teams needed to have a minimum of two training sessions per week. Third, participants were required to be over the age of 16. Collaborators were encouraged, where possible, to collect data from both male and female football teams.

The study questionnaire was developed in English by project coordinators (i.e., the first, second, and last author) and translated to Dutch, Persian, Japanese, Polish, and Spanish by study collaborators. This was done to ensure that participants could respond to the questionnaire in their native language. Translation was performed using back-translation techniques (Brislin, 1970) in all cases except for Japan, where collaborators took a collaborative approach (Douglas & Craig, 2007). A mix of convenience and purposive sampling techniques were used to recruit teams, and the data in Australia, Belgium, Canada, Iran, Japan, Poland, and Spain were gathered in person after team training sessions (Etikan et al., 2016). However, in India and the United Kingdom, most of the data (respectively 60% and 80%) were gathered online.

Before data collection, participants were informed that their involvement in the study was entirely voluntary. In most countries, participants were not provided with any compensation except for the debriefing of the study findings. The exceptions to this were Canada, where participants received a 10-dollar gift card, and India, where the participating teams were offered a free sport psychology workshop on a topic of their liking. The study questionnaire took approximately 30 min to complete. Data were collected over a period of 3.5 years—noting that the process of data collection was prolonged due to restrictions on sport participation during COVID-19.

Participants

Participants who met any of the following criteria were removed from the dataset prior to analyses: participants who (a) had more than 50% missing data, (b) were under the age of 16, (c) were coaches, or (d) identified with genders other than being a man or woman.¹ The

TABLE 1 Sample characteristics.

	N Athletes	N teams	% female athletes	Mean _{age} (SD)	Mean Training sessions/week (SD)	Ingroup collectivism M (SD) = 4.92 (.72)
Australia	85	7	8.20%	23.25 (4.35)	2.69 (.64)	4.17 (low)
Belgium	414	32	55.30%	22.62 (5.46)	2.55 (1.77)	4.21 (low)
Canada	285	18	41.40%	20.31 (2.64)	4.11 (1.66)	4.26 (low)
India	380	31	7.60%	19.73 (3.27)	5.67 (3.02)	5.92 (high)
Iran	341	26	8.20%	25.01 (6.36)	3.23 (1.29)	6.03 (high)
Japan	435	16	9.70%	18.56 (1.81)	5.92 (.43)	4.63 (low)
Poland	481	32	48.90%	19.87 (4.57)	4.36 (1.86)	5.52 (high)
Spain	461	30	46.00%	23.05 (5.32)	3.31 (.90)	5.45 (high)
United Kingdom	253	19	50.60%	20.95 (3.88)	2.84 (1.04)	4.08 (low)

final sample included a total of 3,135 athletes (32.80% women) from 211 teams. Of these participants, 1,498 (40.30% women) were from WEIRD countries, and 1,637 (18.62% women) were from non-WEIRD countries. On average, participants were 21.28 ($SD = 4.88$) years old and engaged in 4.02 ($SD = 2.03$) training sessions per week. Table 1 presents sample characteristics for each of the participating countries.

Measures

Individual-level variables

Unless specified otherwise, participants responded to measures that were anchored on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Identity Leadership Inventory—Short Form (ILI-SF)

We assessed the identity leadership separately for the coach, the team captain and the best athlete leaders on the team. To determine the team's best athlete leaders, participants evaluated the leadership qualities of each teammate across four leadership roles: (a) task leadership (i.e., providing tactical guidance), (b) motivational leadership (i.e., encouraging teammates), (c) social leadership (i.e., creating a good team atmosphere), and (d) external leadership (i.e., acting as the liaison between the team and external entities; Fransen et al., 2014). These evaluations were conducted using Likert scales that ranged from 0, denoting a *very bad leader*, to 10, indicating a *very good leader*.

After this, participants evaluated the perceived identity leadership of the highest-rated athlete leader in each of the four leadership roles. More specifically, leaders' perceived identity leadership was measured using the ILI-SF (Steffens et al., 2014). Items were prefaced with either 'Our coach/team captain...' or 'the task/motivational/social/external leader...' and included the following items: '...is a model member of my team', '...acts as a champion for my team', '...creates a sense of cohesion within my team' and '...creates structures that are useful for team members'.

Social Identification in Sports Questionnaire (SISQ)

Participants' identification with their football team was assessed using the SISQ, which is a nine-item questionnaire designed to measure three dimensions of social identification, including ingroup ties, centrality, and affect (Bruner & Benson, 2018). Illustrative items include: 'I find it easy to form a bond with other members in this team' (capturing ingroup ties), 'Overall, being a member of this team is an important part of my self-image' (capturing cognitive centrality), and 'Generally, I feel good when I think about myself as a member of this team' (capturing ingroup affect). The composite score of social identification was used in our analyses.

Group Environment Questionnaire (GEQ)

The 18-item GEQ was used to measure the four dimensions of team cohesion: individual attractions to the group—task (e.g., 'I am happy with the amount of playing time I get'), individual attractions to the group—social (e.g., 'I enjoy being a part of the social activities of my team'), group integration—task (e.g., 'Our team is united in trying to reach its goals for performance'), and group integration—social (e.g., 'Members of our team would rather get together as a team than to go out on their own'; Carron et al., 1985). We modified the negatively worded items of the GEQ to be positively worded, as this version tends to be more reliable (Eys et al., 2007). Study analyses utilised the mean score of cohesion.

Performance indicators

Participants evaluated their team's and their own (a) performance since the beginning of the season and (b) effort during practice sessions and games on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (*very bad*) to 7 (*very good*).

Covariates

Gender. Participants indicated their gender identification by selecting one of the following three options: (a) 'Female', (b) 'Male', or (c) 'Other'.

Age. Participants provided their age in response to the question, 'What is your age?'

Sessions per week. As competition levels are identified using a range of different labels across countries, we used amount of training as a proxy to assess participants' team level. This was assessed by asking, 'How many practice sessions do you have per week?'

Country-level variables

Ingroup collectivism

Ingroup collectivism scores for each country (shown in Table 1) were obtained from the *Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE, 2020)* project database. Since scores for Belgium and Scotland were unavailable in this database, we used Germanic cluster scores for Belgium and England scores for Scotland.² To facilitate comparative analysis, the mean of ingroup collectivism scores across all countries was calculated. Countries that had scores above the mean were classified as 'high on ingroup collectivism', while those below the mean were classified as 'low on ingroup collectivism'.

DATA ANALYSES AND RESULTS

Preliminary data analyses were conducted in R Studio (R Studio Team, 2019), while hypotheses testing were performed using Mplus Version 7.4 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2012). The corresponding analyses code are accessible at: https://osf.io/qy8b7/?view_only=f074a20c776a41e59dcd982ff8f071a7.

Data structure

As participants were nested within sports teams and sports teams were nested within countries, we calculated intraclass correlations (ICC1) for study variables at the team and country levels (Bliese, 1998). ICC(1) values for all variables are displayed in Table 2 and suggest that there was more variation in variables at the team level than at the country level. Also, all ICC(1) values exceeded .01, therefore, multilevel analyses, which account for clustering and provide more accurate estimates for standard errors, were used for testing both the validity of the measurement instruments and the study hypotheses (Bliese, 1998).

Preliminary data analyses and results

We conducted post-hoc power analyses in Mplus using Monte Carlo Simulations (Muthén & Muthén, 2002). Detailed information on the procedure, interpretation, and results of these analyses is presented in Appendix S2. Notably, results revealed that we had sufficient power to test H1, H2 in Belgium, Canada, Japan, Spain, and the United Kingdom, as well as H3. Regarding H2 in Australia, we lacked sufficient power to test the identity leadership-performance relationships, so we excluded it from our analyses. The H2 results for India, Iran, and Poland varied depending on the effect in question. Specifically, in India, we had sufficient power to detect all effects except for one indirect effect of team captains' identity leadership on team effort. However, in Iran and Poland, we lacked sufficient power to detect any direct or indirect effects of team captains' identity leadership on the outcome variables. In Iran, we also had limited power to detect the relationships between the best athlete leaders' identity leadership and outcomes. Although we have analysed and presented the results for Iran, India, and Poland, the insufficient power for some tested relationships is a limitation of this study. Thus, readers should interpret our findings for the relationships in question with caution.

Next, missing values accounted for only .01% of the dataset and were omitted from the analyses. Measurement invariance tests were conducted³ using the alignment optimisation method (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2014). As shown in Table 2, all measures were approximately invariant with their R^2 values approaching 1 (values close to one indicate a higher degree of invariance; Fischer & Karl, 2019; Muthén & Asparouhov, 2014). Also, the average percentage of non-invariant factor intercepts (i.e., an estimate of scalar invariance) and loadings (i.e., an estimate of metric invariance) was below the 25% recommended threshold.

We also examined the validity of the study measures by specifying one-factor multilevel (accounting for clustering at the team level) Confirmatory Factor analyses (CFA)³. Model fit was assessed using the Comparative Fit Index (i.e., CFI; Bentler, 1990), Tucker–Lewis Index (i.e., TLI; Tucker & Lewis, 1973), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (i.e., RMSEA; Steiger, 1990), and the Standardised Root Mean Square Residual (i.e., SRMR; Bentler, 1995).

TABLE 2 Intraclass correlation (ICC), measurement invariance, and measurement validity.

Variable name (measure name)	ICC (I):		ICC (1):		R ² (λ)	R ² (ν)	% of non-invariant λ	% of non-invariant ν	M % of non-invariant λ and ν	χ ² /df	RMSEA/SRMR	CFA/TLI
	country level	sports team level	country level	sports team level								
1. Coach's identity leadership (ILI-SF)	.05	.31	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	.00%	25.00%	12.50%	25.90/2	.06/.01	1.00/.99
2. Team's captain identity leadership (ILI-SF)	.04	.20	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	.00%	8.30%	4.15%	49.59/2	.09/.02	.99/.96
3. Task leader's identity leadership (ILI-SF)	.05	.16	.99	1.00	1.00	1.00	.00%	16.70%	8.35%	42.27/2	.08/.02	.98/.95
4. Motivational leader's identity leadership (ILI-SF)	.07	.19	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	.00%	22.20%	11.10%	59.02/2	.10/.02	.98/.93
5. Social leader's identity leadership (ILI-SF)	.05	.13	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	.00%	16.70%	8.35%	57.75/2	.10/.02	.98/.93
6. External leader's identity leadership (ILI-SF)	.04	.13	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	.00%	8.30%	4.15%	32.01/2	.07/.01	.99/.97
7. Team identification (SISQ)	.06	.17	.99	1.00	1.00	1.00	.00%	29.60%	14.80%	813.25/27	.10/.05	.90/.87
8. Team cohesion (GEQ)	.05	.26	.99	1.00	1.00	1.00	.00%	27.80%	13.90%	2576.80/153	.07/.06	.85/.83
9. Team performance	.06	.47										
10. Individual performance	.11	.17										
11. Team effort	.03	.27										
12. Individual effort	.05	.16										

Note: λ (factor loadings); ν (factor intercepts).

Abbreviations: CFA, Confirmatory Factor Analyses; GEQ, Group Environment Questionnaire; ILI-SF, Identity Leadership Inventory—Short Form; RMSEA, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation; SISQ, Social Identification in Sports Questionnaire; SRMR, Standardised Root Mean Square Residual; TLI, Tucker–Lewis Index.

Good model fit was indicated by CFI and TLI values $\geq .90$, RMSEA values $\leq .07$, and SRMR values $\leq .08$ (Hooper et al., 2008). The results presented in Table 2 confirmed the validity of all versions of the ILI, with at least three of the four model fit indices meeting the criteria for good model fit. For the SISQ and GEQ, at least two of the four model fit indices suggested a good model fit, meaning that these questionnaires possessed marginal (but not good) measurement validity. One explanation for the below-ideal model fit in two of the four indices is the non-invariance of some SISQ and GEQ items across countries (see Table 2), which may be impacting the overall model fit indices.

Cronbach's alpha was used to calculate internal consistency³ and all measures met the adequate standards set at $\geq .70$ (see Table 3; Nunnally, 1978). Given the cross-sectional nature of this study, Harman's single-factor test was used to examine common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The results indicated that this was not a significant concern since the average variance explained by the latent factor was 32%, which is well under the established 50% cut-off (Aguirre-Urreta & Hu, 2019). Next, we conducted normality checks for all measurement items. All items met the criteria for normal distribution, with skewness within the ± 2 range and kurtosis values < 7 (Hair et al., 2009). Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) and correlations were computed for both the entire dataset and for the data grouped by country. Results can be found in Table 3 and Appendix S3, respectively. Notably, there are strong correlations between team identification and cohesion in both the overall and country-specific samples. To ensure these concepts are not only theoretically but also empirically distinct, we conducted discriminant validity testing using the overall sample and the CFCFA procedure (Rönkkö & Cho, 2022). We found that the upper limit of the confidence interval for the correlation between team identification and cohesion was .81, indicating that, despite their high correlation, these constructs can still be considered to be empirically distinct.

Hypothesis testing⁴

H1

We used multilevel structural equation modelling to test the hypothesis that leaders' perceived identity leadership would be positively associated with performance through both team identification and team cohesion. More specifically, a two-level model was specified to account for team-level clustering, while the complex function in Mplus was used to account for country-level clustering. We employed the robust maximum likelihood estimation method and tested a random intercept-only model.⁵ Following Zhao et al.'s (2010) recommended methodology, we modelled the paths from the independent variables to the mediators and from the mediators to the dependent variables. We then evaluated the indirect effect of the independent variables on the dependent variables. Model fit was assessed using the same indices and criteria as those employed in the CFAs above.

Study results indicated that the hypothesised model was a good fit for the data. More specifically, in line with H1, perceived identity leadership (on the part of coaches, team captains, and the best athlete leaders within a team) was associated with team and individual (a) performance and (b) effort via team identification and cohesion (see Figure 2 and Table 4). Additionally, the indirect effects of identity leadership, provided by coaches and the best athlete leaders within a team, on team and individual performance and effort were comparable. In contrast, the indirect effects of identity leadership provided by team captains on these same

TABLE 3 Means, standard deviations, correlations and internal consistency.

Variable name	M	SD	α [CI]	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Coach's identity leadership	5.57	1.23	.91 [.90–.92]											
2. Team captain's identity leadership	5.66	1.17	.87 [.86–.88]	.46**										
3. Task leader's identity leadership	5.70	1.02	.85 [.84–.87]	.38**	.57**									
4. Motivational leader's identity leadership	5.74	1.05	.88 [.87–.89]	.38**	.57**	.76**								
5. Social leader's identity leadership	5.65	1.11	.90 [.89–.91]	.34**	.57**	.68**	.72**							
6. External leader's identity leadership	5.52	1.19	.92 [.91–.93]	.38**	.53**	.63**	.66**	.71**						
7. Team identification	5.57	1.03	.92 [.91–.92]	.44**	.42**	.40**	.41**	.40**	.39**					
8. Team cohesion	5.24	.99	.93 [.93–.94]	.43**	.41**	.36**	.38**	.36**	.37**	.69**				
9. Team performance	4.73	1.45		.29**	.26**	.18**	.21**	.17**	.19**	.33**	.48**			
10. Individual performance	4.75	1.42		.20**	.17**	.15**	.15**	.14**	.15**	.33**	.40**	.44**		
11. Team effort	5.21	1.20	.80 [.77–.81]	.33**	.32**	.24**	.26**	.22**	.24**	.38**	.53**	.58**	.39**	
12. Individual effort	5.59	1.15	.80 [.78–.82]	.22**	.20**	.19**	.22**	.18**	.17**	.33**	.38**	.34**	.55**	.50**

** $p < .01$.

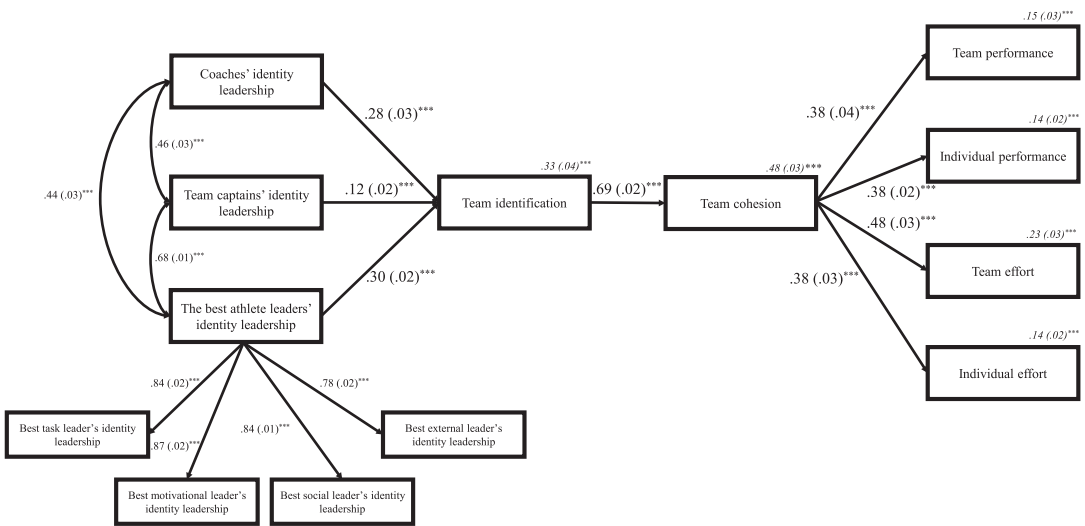


FIGURE 2 Regression Coefficients, Standard Errors, and R-Square for H1.

Notes: $R^2 * p < .05$; $** p < .01$; $*** p < .001$; The R^2 values can be found in the top right section of each parcel.

Furthermore, the standard errors are presented in brackets next to the standardised regression (or correlation) coefficients or R^2 values.

dependent variables were smaller. The magnitudes of most of the relationships specified by H1 were small with the exception of the relationship between team identification and team cohesion which was medium-sized (Cohen, 1988).

H2

To test whether the associations specified in H1 would hold across WEIRD and non-WEIRD countries, we conducted two-level (accounting for clustering at the team level) multilevel structural equation modelling for each country (except for Australia—for reasons of low statistical power). In line with H2, most of the results related to H1 replicated across all countries, both WEIRD and non-WEIRD.⁶

Nevertheless, two general observations (including some inconsistencies) warrant further attention. First, we found that identity leadership provided by coaches and athlete leaders was more strongly associated with both team and individual performance and effort across countries than the identity leadership provided by the team captain. Indeed, except for India and Spain, the indirect effect of team captains' identity leadership on performance and effort was not significant in any of the surveyed countries. However, it is important to note that, even in India and Spain, the associations between identity leadership and performance and effort were stronger for coaches and athlete leaders than for the team captain.

Second, the association between identity leadership and performance and effort, both team and individual, was stronger for athlete leaders than coaches in Belgium, Canada, India, and the United Kingdom. Notably, in Canada, the associations between coaches' identity leadership, team and individual performance and effort were not significant. Meanwhile, in Japan, Poland, and Spain, the identity leadership of coaches and athlete leaders was associated with

TABLE 4 Standardised regression coefficients, and standard errors for H1, H2 and H3.

	H1		H2								H3		
	Overall		Belgium	Canada	India	Iran	Japan	Poland	Spain	UK	High IGC	Low IGC	
Direct effects													
Coach's identity leadership → team identification	.28(.03)***		.20(.07)**	.09(.05)	.23(.10)*	.43(.07)***	.27(.06)***	.21(.08)**	.33(.08)***	.25(.06)***	.31(.02)***	.21(.03)***	
Team captain's identity leadership → team identification	.12(.02)***		.06(.11)	.07(.12)	.16(.08)*	.16(.09)	.10(.08)	.12(.08)	.14(.06)*	-.04(.12)	.15(.02)***	.08(.05)	
Athlete leader's identity leadership → team identification	.30(.02)***		.33(.08)***	.36(.11)***	.36(.09)***	.13(.08)	.25(.09)**	.25(.09)**	.33(.08)***	.40(.14)**	.30(.02)***	.32(.04)***	
Team identification → team cohesion	.69(.02)***		.70(.03)***	.72(.04)***	.58(.05)***	.67(.04)***	.67(.04)***	.72(.03)***	.72(.03)***	.65(.09)***	.68(.05)***	.69(.01)***	
Team cohesion → team performance	.38(.04)***		.37(.09)***	.55(.06)***	.50(.06)***	.44(.06)	.36(.05)***	.50(.05)***	.50(.05)***	.48(.09)***	.44(.02)***	.32(.03)***	
Team cohesion → individual performance	.38(.02)***		.36(.06)***	.38(.06)***	.40(.07)***	.44(.06)***	.35(.04)***	.36(.05)***	.36(.06)***	.27(.07)***	.41(.03)***	.33(.02)***	
Team cohesion → team effort	.48(.03)***		.46(.07)***	.57(.05)***	.57(.05)***	.57(.05)***	.46(.04)***	.57(.04)***	.57(.04)***	.37(.12)**	.56(.02)***	.40(.04)***	
Team cohesion → individual effort	.38(.03)***		.33(.06)***	.39(.04)***	.46(.06)***	.43(.07)***	.34(.06)***	.37(.05)***	.33(.05)***	.19(.10)*	.42(.03)***	.33(.03)***	
Indirect effect													
Coach's identity leadership → team performance	.07(.01)***		.05(.03)*	.04(.02)	.07(.03)**	.12(.03)***	.06(.01)***	.08(.03)**	.12(.04)***	.08(.03)**	.09(.01)***	.05(.00)***	
Team captain's identity leadership → team performance	.03(.01)***		.02(.03)	.03(.05)	.05(.02)*	.05(.03)	.02(.02)	.04(.03)	.05(.02)*	-.01(.04)	.05(.01)***	.02(.01)	
Athlete leader's identity leadership → team performance	.08(.01)***		.09(.03)**	.14(.06)**	.10(.03)***	.04(.02)	.06(.03)*	.09(.03)**	.12(.03)***	.12(.05)**	.09(.01)***	.07(.01)***	

(Continues)



TABLE 4 (Continued)

	H1			H2							H3		
	Overall	Belgium	Canada	India	Iran	Japan	Poland	Spain	UK	High IGC	Low IGC		
Coach's identity leadership → individual performance	.07(.01) ^{****}	.05(.02) [*]	.03(.02)	.05(.02) ^{**}	.123(.03) ^{****}	.06(.01) ^{****}	.06(.02) ^{**}	.09(.02) ^{****}	.04(.02) ^{****}	.09(.01) ^{****}	.05(.01) ^{****}		
Team captain's identity leadership → individual performance	.03(.01) ^{****}	.02(.03)	.02(.03)	.04(.02) [*]	.05(.03)	.02(.02)	.03(.02)	.04(.02) [*]	-.01(.02)	.04(.00) ^{****}	.02(.01)		
Athlete leader's identity leadership → individual performance	.08(.01) ^{****}	.08(.02) ^{****}	.10(.04) ^{**}	.08(.03) ^{**}	.04(.03)	.06(.03) ^{**}	.07(.03) ^{**}	.08(.03) ^{**}	.07(.03) [*]	.08(.01) ^{****}	.07(.01) ^{****}		
Coach's identity leadership → team effort	.09(.01) ^{****}	.07(.03) [*]	.04(.02)	.08(.03) [*]	.16(.04) ^{****}	.08(.02) ^{****}	.09(.03) ^{**}	.14(.04) ^{****}	.06(.03) [*]	.12(.01) ^{****}	.06(.01) ^{****}		
Team captain's identity leadership → team effort	.04(.01) ^{****}	.02(.04)	.03(.05)	.05(.03)	.06(.04)	.03(.03)	.05(.03)	.06(.03) [*]	-.01(.03)	.06(.01) ^{****}	.02(.02)		
Athlete leader's identity leadership → team effort	.10(.01) ^{****}	.11(.03) ^{****}	.15(.06) ^{**}	.12(.03) ^{****}	.05(.03)	.08(.03) ^{**}	.10(.04) ^{**}	.13(.03) ^{****}	.09(.04) ^{****}	.12(.01) ^{****}	.09(.01) ^{****}		
Coach's identity leadership → individual effort	.07(.01) ^{****}	.05(.02) [*]	.03(.02)	.06(.03) ^{**}	.12(.04) ^{****}	.06(.01) ^{****}	.06(.02) ^{**}	.08(.02) ^{****}	.03(.02) [*]	.09(.01) ^{****}	.05(.00) ^{****}		
Team captain's identity leadership → individual effort	.03(.01) ^{****}	.01(.02)	.02(.03)	.04(.02) [*]	.04(.03)	.02(.02)	.03(.02)	.03(.01) ^{**}	.00(.01)	.04(.00) ^{****}	.02(.01)		
Athlete leader's identity leadership → individual effort	.08(.01) ^{****}	.08(.02) ^{****}	.10(.04) ^{**}	.10(.03) ^{**}	.04(.03)	.06(.02) ^{**}	.07(.03) ^{**}	.08(.03) ^{**}	.05(.03)	.09(.01) ^{****}	.07(.01) ^{****}		
Coach's identity leadership → team cohesion	.19(.02) ^{****}	.14(.05) ^{****}	.07(.04)	.13(.06) [*]	.28(.05) ^{****}	.18(.03) ^{****}	.15(.06) ^{**}	.24(.06) ^{****}	.16(.06) ^{****}	.21(.02) ^{****}	.15(.02) ^{****}		
Team captain's identity leadership → team cohesion	.08(.01) ^{****}	.04(.07)	.05(.09)	.09(.05) [*]	.10(.06)	.07(.06)	.09(.06)	.10(.05) [*]	-.02(.08)	.10(.01) ^{****}	.06(.03)		
Athlete leader's identity leadership → team cohesion	.20(.02) ^{****}	.23(.06) ^{****}	.26(.08) ^{**}	.21(.05) ^{****}	.09(.05)	.17(.06) ^{**}	.18(.07) ^{**}	.23(.06) ^{****}	.26(.09) ^{**}	.21(.02) ^{****}	.22(.03) ^{****}		
Team identification → team performance	.26(.02) ^{****}	.26(.07) ^{****}	.39(.05) ^{****}	.29(.04) ^{****}	.29(.05) ^{****}	.24(.04) ^{****}	.36(.04) ^{****}	.36(.04) ^{****}	.31(.07) ^{****}	.30(.03) ^{****}	.22(.03) ^{****}		

TABLE 4 (Continued)

	H1			H2							H3		
	Overall	Belgium	Canada	India	Iran	Japan	Poland	Spain	UK	High IGC	Low IGC		
Team identification → individual performance	.26(.01)***	.25(.05)***	.27(.05)***	.23(.04)***	.29(.05)***	.23(.03)***	.26(.04)***	.26(.04)***	.18(.05)***	.28(.02)***	.23(.02)***		
Team identification → team effort	.33(.02)***	.32(.06)***	.41(.04)***	.33(.04)***	.38(.04)***	.31(.04)***	.41(.04)***	.41(.04)***	.24(.08)**	.38(.02)***	.28(.03)***		
Team identification → individual effort	.26(.02)***	.23(.05)***	.28(.04)***	.26(.04)***	.29(.05)***	.23(.04)***	.27(.04)***	.23(.04)***	.12(.06)*	.28(.02)***	.23(.03)***		
R ² team identification	.33(.04)***	.24(.06)***	.21(.06)***	.46(.06)***	.38(.05)***	.26(.05)***	.23(.06)***	.40(.04)***	.28(.11)**	.40(.02)***	.26(.01)***		
R ² team cohesion	.48(.03)***	.48(.05)***	.52(.05)***	.33(.06)***	.44(.05)***	.45(.05)***	.52(.05)***	.51(.05)***	.42(.12)***	.47(.07)***	.48(.02)***		
R ² team performance	.15(.03)***	.14(.07)*	.30(.06)***	.25(.06)***	.19(.05)***	.13(.04)***	.25(.05)***	.25(.05)***	.23(.09)**	.20(.02)***	.10(.02)***		
R ² individual performance	.14(.02)***	.13(.04)***	.14(.05)**	.16(.05)**	.19(.05)***	.12(.03)**	.13(.04)**	.13(.04)**	.07(.04)*	.17(.02)***	.11(.02)***		
R ² team effort	.23(.03)***	.21(.06)***	.33(.05)***	.32(.05)***	.33(.06)***	.21(.03)***	.32(.05)***	.32(.05)***	.13(.09)	.31(.02)***	.16(.03)***		
R ² individual effort	.14(.02)***	.11(.04)**	.15(.03)***	.21(.06)***	.18(.06)***	.11(.04)**	.14(.04)***	.11(.04)**	.04(.04)	.17(.03)***	.11(.02)***		
χ ² /df	800.13/60	136.51/45	152.72/45	102.43/45	138.75/45	88.73/45	118.40/45	112.16/45	41.03/45	905.31/127			
CFI/TLI	.93/.91	.92/.88	.93/.90	.96/.94	.93/.90	.98/.98	.96/.94	.96/.94	1.00/1.01		.94/.92		
RMSEA/SRMR	.06/.05	.07/.07	.09/.11	.06/.06	.08/.08	.05/.07	.06/.07	.06/.06	.00/.03		.06/.05		

Note: Bold and italics indicate a divergence of country-level results from the overall results.

Abbreviations: CFI, Comparative Fit Index; IGC, ingroup collectivism; RMSEA, root mean square error of approximation; SRMR, standardised root mean square residual; TLI, Tucker–Lewis Index.

p* < .05, *p* < .01, and ****p* < .001.

performance and effort to a similar extent. Contrastingly, in Iran, the association of coaches' identity leadership with these same outcomes was more pronounced than that of athlete leaders. In fact, Iran stands out as the only country where the indirect effect of the best athlete leaders' identity leadership on performance and effort was not significant.

H1 and H2 were tested with and without the inclusion of covariates (i.e., gender, age, and number of sessions per week). Results showed that the differences in the standardised regression coefficients between the two models (i.e., with covariates vs. without) were $\leq .10$ and therefore negligible (see Appendix S4; Becker et al., 2016). As a result, all subsequent analyses were conducted without covariates.

H3

To test whether ingroup collectivism would moderate the relationships specified in Figure 1 and be stronger in countries with high as opposed to low levels of ingroup collectivism, we conducted multigroup complex two-level multilevel structural equation modelling. As we had when testing H1, we controlled for clustering at both the country level (using the complex function in Mplus) and the team level (as a function of specifying the two-level model). The results of the first phase of these analyses, which involved independently specifying the hypothesised model across countries high and low on ingroup collectivism, indicated that our model fitted the data for both groups: (a) countries high on ingroup collectivism (CFI = .97, TLI = .96, RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .05) and (b) countries low on ingroup collectivism (CFI = .93, TLI = .90, RMSEA = .07, SRMR = .06). In the second phase, the model was concurrently fitted across countries that were high as well as low in ingroup collectivism. The results of this phase are presented in Table 4 and suggest that the hypothesised model was a good fit for the data.

In the third phase, we used Wald tests to examine whether ingroup collectivism moderated the direct and indirect paths specified in H3. Results were partially in line with H3, indicating that ingroup collectivism moderated the relationships between coaches' identity leadership and (a) team identification, (b) team cohesion, and (c) team and individual performance and effort. More specifically, these relationships were significant in both groups but they were stronger in countries with high ingroup collectivism. Ingroup collectivism also moderated the indirect paths from team captains' identity leadership to team performance and effort. While these indirect paths were significant in countries that were high in ingroup collectivism, they were not significant in those low in ingroup collectivism. Finally, there was evidence that ingroup collectivism moderated the indirect effect of team identification on (a) team and individual performance and (b) team effort, with these effects holding across both groups and being stronger in countries high on ingroup collectivism. All in all, ingroup collectivism moderated some but not all the hypothesised paths specified in H3.

It is also interesting to observe patterns of associations within cultural contexts. Specifically, in cultures that were both high and low on ingroup collectivism, the identity leadership of coaches and athlete leaders was more strongly associated with outcomes—namely, performance and effort—than the identity leadership of the team captain. Meanwhile, the associations between identity leadership on the part of coaches and athlete leaders and team and individual performance and effort were comparable across cultures that were either high or low on ingroup collectivism.

DISCUSSION

This study advances current understanding of the social identity approach to leadership, shedding light on its generalisability across WEIRD and non-WEIRD countries and cross-culturally. More specifically, in line with H1, we found that perceived identity leadership on the part of coaches, team captains, and the best athlete leaders in a team was positively associated with both performance and effort through team identification and team cohesion. In line with H2, these relationships generally held across WEIRD and non-WEIRD countries. There was, however, one consistent exception to this pattern: Perceptions of team captains' identity leadership were not associated with performance or effort in most countries.

Finally, we also found partial support for H3 in so far as the effect of identity leadership on outcomes varied cross-culturally. In particular, our results showed that the source of identity leadership (i.e., coaches vs. team captains vs. best athlete leaders) determined whether or not ingroup collectivism moderated identity leadership-outcome relationships. That is, while the coach's identity leadership was significantly associated with all measured outcomes (see Figure 1) in cultures that were both high and low on ingroup collectivism, these relationships were significantly stronger in cultures that were high on ingroup collectivism. Furthermore, the team captain's identity leadership was significantly and positively associated with team performance and team effort in countries that were high (but not low) on ingroup collectivism. However, contrary to expectations, ingroup collectivism did not moderate the relationships between the best athlete leaders' identity leadership and any outcome.

Major findings

Three major findings emerge from this study. First, aligning with previous research, our study found that the relationship between the identity leadership of coaches and the best athlete leaders with performance is consistent across most WEIRD and non-WEIRD countries ($N = 9$) and cultures sampled (Bracht et al., 2023; van Dick et al., 2018, 2021). Along these lines, the ICC(1) values presented in Table 3 show that there is more variation in identity leadership from team to team (i.e., some team leaders are good, while others are not) than from country to country (countries have similar levels of good and poor identity leaders). Taken together, the study results support the cross-country and cross-cultural relevance of the claim that sports leaders who foster a sense of shared social identity amongst group members can effectively guide collective and individual efforts towards common goals while also contributing to the realisation of these goals (Bray & Whaley, 2001; Chamberlain et al., 2021; Filho et al., 2014; Steffens et al., 2014, 2020).

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that we studied team members' responses to leaders who differ in the extent to which they are seen as representing, advancing, creating, and embedding social identity in their teams. It seems likely, however, that the actual behaviours of identity leadership might look very different in different teams and countries. For example, the behaviours that are seen as prototypical in one group may not be seen as such in another group. In future research, it would be interesting, therefore, to discover exactly what identity leadership behaviours look like in practice (e.g., through interviews and observations) and how they might vary at both the team and country levels.

The one noteworthy caveat to the generalisability of the identity leadership framework across WEIRD and non-WEIRD countries was that team captains' identity leadership was only associated with performance in two of the eight countries, namely, Spain and India. And, even in these two

countries, the indirect effect of team captains' identity leadership on performance-related indicators was smaller than the associations of these indicators with the identity leadership of coaches and athlete leaders. It is possible that these results reflect several underlying issues. First, they may reflect the fact that team captains are often not selected for their ability to lead (Fransen et al., 2019). Second, they may reflect the fact that other athletes within a team take on a more central leadership role when it comes to promoting performance (Fransen, McEwan, & Sarkar, 2020).

In fact, building upon this last point, the second major finding of our study is that identity leadership provided by leaders within the team (i.e., the best athlete leaders) is almost always more important in terms of its relative contribution to performance than that of team captains. At the same time, though, the identity leadership provided by coaches and the best athlete leaders was equally important across cultures and in three of the eight countries. Nevertheless, in four of the eight countries studied, the identity leadership of the best athlete leaders within a team was even more important than that provided by the coach. These results are in line with a decade of research that emphasises that leaders within a team who may not be formally appointed to leadership roles are nevertheless central actors in making teams better (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016; Fransen, McEwan, & Sarkar, 2020; Haslam et al., 2024). It is, however, important to recognise that the relative importance of the coach versus the team captain versus the leaders within the team may vary by sport, and therefore, our findings should be retested in sports that are characteristically different from football. For example, in cricket, the team captain plays a particularly crucial role, as they make most of the on-field decisions (e.g., deciding who will bowl the next over or setting up the field). In contrast, in football, the coach typically makes the most important decisions (e.g., selecting the starting 11 or making half-time changes).

The third major finding of the present study is that, while, for the most part, the benefits of identity leadership are universal, they do not preclude cultural variation. Expanding on this point, it appears that identity leadership on the part of coaches and team captains is more effective in countries that are characterised by high ingroup collectivism. But while coaches' identity leadership is also effective in countries with low ingroup collectivism, this is not the case for the team captain's identity leadership. These findings are in line with those of Bracht et al. (2023) and suggest that identity leadership is more effective for team members when a country's cultural practices align with the principles of identity leadership. However, these conclusions do not hold for athlete leaders, as ingroup collectivism did not moderate the associations between the best athlete leaders' identity leadership and outcomes. It is possible, though, that these results differ from those of Bracht et al. (2023) because their research studied leaders who had all been formally appointed in a way that our athlete leaders had not.

Synthesising these insights, they can be seen to support the refined hypothesis that *identity leadership of formal leaders will be particularly effective when its core principles (i.e., its emphasis on the collective) align with the social-structural fabric of societies*. Going forward, we think that future research should seek to test this hypothesis further in other contexts (e.g., organisations), using other methods (e.g., longitudinal) or outcomes (e.g., mental health), and across a larger number of countries. Doing this should help to promote a global, culturally informed psychology of identity leadership.

Strengths, limitations, and future research

This study had four significant strengths. First, by purposefully selecting samples from non-WEIRD countries, we included understudied segments of the global population in the

knowledge generation process (Dorsch et al., 2023). This is crucial because sports psychology has been observed to have an over-reliance on WEIRD participants, which in turn has the potential to both distort research evidence and compromise the generalisability of the conclusions that are drawn from it (Dorsch et al., 2023). In addressing this issue, the present research confirms that the social identity theory of leadership has broad relevance to sport leadership around the world—not just a small, privileged part of it. Second, the present study broadens the scope of cross-cultural leadership inquiry and leadership research more generally to encompass different types of leaders (i.e., formal and informal) within a team. This is an issue that has received little attention to date and has been observed to dog the field of leadership as a whole (Haslam et al., 2024). Third, in a similar vein, this is one of only a few studies in psychology that systematically compares the strength of the associations between leadership provided by differentiated sources and outcomes within countries, across countries, and cross-culturally. Last but not least, this is the first cross-national study in the field of identity leadership to look at intact teams where the leader's identity leadership has been rated by multiple members of the same team. Such analysis arguably produces more well-rounded and robust evidence for the effectiveness of identity leadership than having only one member of a given team rate their team leader (as is the norm in previous research, e.g., Bracht et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, as with all research, this study had limitations. First, due to limited power at the country level ($N = 9$), we employed a mean split approach to classify countries as either high or low in ingroup collectivism. A limitation of this approach is that it overlooks the variation in collectivism between countries (Rucker et al., 2015). For instance, countries with slightly above-average ingroup collectivism scores were grouped together with those having much higher scores. To address this first limitation, future studies could broaden their scope by including more countries (at least 30 countries with 30 observations per country; Kreft & de Leeuw, 1998). Researchers would then be able to examine the cross-level interaction between culture (at the country level) and identity leadership (at the individual level) and explore whether it moderates the relationship between identity leadership and its outcomes.

Second, this study's reliance on a cross-sectional study design limits our capacity to infer causality (Cummings, 2018). It would therefore be valuable for future research to explore the same relationships through more robust quantitative and qualitative methodologies. It is important to acknowledge, however, that the hypotheses tested in the present study are rooted in decades of social identity theorising and supported by a large base of empirical evidence that includes a host of experimental and longitudinal studies (Fransen et al., 2023; Haslam, Reicher, & Platow, 2020; Mertens, Boen, Steffens, Haslam, Bruner, et al., 2021; Mertens, Boen, Steffens, Haslam, & Fransen, 2021; Stevens et al., 2019, 2021).

A third limitation of this study relates to the generalisability of its sample. Specifically, the exclusive focus on football teams, while enhancing internal validity, inevitably places limits on the external validity of our findings. Future research should therefore consider examining the same relationships across a broad range of team sports (e.g., with different team sizes and structures). This could be combined with a focus on leadership dynamics within individual sports, which might differ from traditional team sports due to variations in the level of interdependence amongst group members (Evans et al., 2012). Furthermore, it is important to note that data collection in this study was restricted to participants aged 16 and over. Thus, the implications of our study might not extend to younger athletes, who may differ from adults in terms of their group or peer-based interactions (Eys & Brawley, 2018; Rubin et al., 2006).

The fourth noteworthy limitation of this study is that it included only subjective measures of performance. At the same time, though, there are problems associated with objective

performance measures, as they tend to neglect uncontrollable factors such as sport-specific talent in the team, the strength of opponents, or other factors that bear upon performance (e.g., injuries; López-Gajardo et al., 2021). To address this, future scholars might look to use a combination of subjective and objective performance measures (see Leo et al., 2022).

Practical applications

Our findings underscore the importance of the identity leadership provided by coaches and the best athlete leaders in maximising sport performance across countries and cultures. Accordingly, practitioners across diverse contexts can benefit from developing leadership programmes that not only focus on coaches (as is traditionally the case) but also strengthen the leadership qualities of the best athlete leaders within the team. Specifically, these programmes should focus on developing these leaders' identity leadership. Indeed, numerous studies have demonstrated that guiding leaders through a structured identity leadership programme (e.g., the 5R^s programme) not only strengthens participants' identity leadership but also serves as a catalyst for group engagement, performance, and well-being (Fransen, Haslam, et al., 2020; Haslam et al., 2017; Slater & Barker, 2019).

In this study, we also found that while identity leadership provided by coaches and the best athlete leaders was associated with performance across most countries and cultures, the identity leadership provided by team captains was only associated with performance in Spain, India, and societies high on collectivism. Therefore, only practitioners working in these specific contexts might benefit from developing the identity leadership of team captains.

In some cases, developing the leadership skills of coaches and athlete leaders may be resource intensive. In such cases, practitioners could leverage the country-or-culture specific findings of this study to first identify and then develop the skills of the leadership source that has the strongest associations with performance. For example, in Iran, practitioners may want to prioritise nurturing the coaching staff's identity leadership, whereas in Canada, the focus may be the best athlete leaders within the team.

Lastly, our study's findings could be incorporated into the leadership module used to train sport psychology practitioners. The hope is that this will enhance practitioners' cultural competence (i.e., awareness, knowledge, and skills) and enable them to deliver more effective and ethical psychological services to coaches, athletes, and their teams across different cultures (Ryba et al., 2013).

Conclusion

To expand the horizons of identity leadership research in sport, we conducted a large cross-sectional cross-cultural study across WEIRD and non-WEIRD countries. Our results indicated that perceived identity leadership (on the part of coaches and athlete leaders) is associated with team and individual performance and effort through processes of team identification and team cohesion. These relationships were, for the most part, observable across countries (WEIRD and non-WEIRD) and cultures (i.e., operationalised as ingroup collectivism). We also found some—albeit mixed—evidence that identity leadership-performance relationships were stronger in countries that had high ingroup collectivism. In practical terms, this suggests that identity

leadership is a cornerstone of effective teams around the world but that it is likely to be particularly effective where it falls on the fertile ground of a culture that is already attuned to its core messages about the importance of ‘we-ness’.

AFFILIATIONS

¹Department of Movement Sciences, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium

²School of Psychology, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia

³Department of Psychology, School of Social Sciences, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh, UK

⁴Independent Researcher, Shahrud, Iran

⁵School of Physical and Health Education, Nipissing University, North Bay, Canada

⁶Independent Researcher, Delhi, India

⁷Department of Team Games, Wroclaw University of Health and Sport Sciences, Wroclaw, Poland

⁸Alliance for Research in Exercise, Nutrition and Activity, University of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia

⁹School of Health Sciences, Western Sydney University, Sydney, Australia

¹⁰Department of Psychology, Cleveland State University, Cleveland, Ohio, USA

¹¹Faculty of Health Sciences and Sport, University of Stirling, Stirling, UK

¹²Institute of Physical Culture Sciences, University of Rzeszow, Rzeszow, Poland

¹³Faculty of Teacher Training, Universidad de Extremadura, Extremadura, Spain

¹⁴Department of Kinesiology, University of Windsor, Windsor, Canada

¹⁵School of Physical Education, Osaka University of Health and Sport Sciences, Kumatori, Japan

¹⁶Department of Experiential Studies in Community and Sport, Cape Breton University, Sydney, Canada

¹⁷School of Health, Education, Policing, and Sciences, Staffordshire University, Staffordshire, UK

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Not all the data used in this study can be made openly available due to legal restrictions. However, certain sections of the dataset may be shared upon request by contacting the first, second, or last authors.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethics approval for the project was obtained from the first author's university. To ensure compliance with country-specific ethics regulations, collaborators in Australia, Canada, Japan, and the United Kingdom also obtained approval from their respective institutional review board.

ORCID

Radhika Butalia  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7288-3103>

Filip Boen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5295-4776>

S. Alexander Haslam  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9523-7921>

Pete Coffee  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1055-0052>

Mark W. Bruner  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3534-3321>

Paweł Chmura  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4211-0393>


Alyson J. Crozier  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9652-6757>

Emma S. George  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9936-1911>

Chris Hartley  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5531-4467>

Francisco M. Leo  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0971-9188>

Miguel A. López-Gajardo  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8364-7632>

Moe Machida-Kosuga  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1892-0564>

Colin D. McLaren  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6760-8713>

Matthew J. Slater  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2470-2790>

Katrien Franssen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6294-7257>

ENDNOTES

- ¹ This was necessary because gender was used as a covariate in the analyses, and with only 12 participants identifying with genders other than man or woman, there was insufficient statistical power to include them as a separate group in the analyses.
- ² The countries included in this study represent a range of collectivism levels: high (Iran, India, Spain, and Poland), medium (Japan) and low (Australia, Belgium, Canada, and the United Kingdom) as benchmarked against other nations in the GLOBE study (House et al., 2004).
- ³ Measurement invariance, measurement validity, and internal consistency for team and individual performance could not be calculated as only one item was used to measure each of these variables. Additionally, when we tested the measurement invariance and validity of team and individual effort, the models could not be identified and, consequently, have not been reported. Problems with model identification likely arose due to the limited use of items (i.e., two items) to measure each variable.
- ⁴ To determine the appropriate modelling approach for our variables (i.e., latent vs. observed), we calculated the number of free parameters in the model illustrated in Figure 1, if all variables were modelled as latent factors. This calculation indicated that the model would have 129 free parameters. Given the rule of thumb recommending at least 10 participants per free parameter, we would need a minimum of 1,290 participants to appropriately model our variables as latent factors (Kyriazos, 2018). Although we achieved this sample size for H1 and H3 testing, we did not reach it for H2 testing. Consequently, to maintain consistency across our analyses, we decided to model all variables as observed variables.

- ⁵ A random slopes model was tested for H1; however, this model did not converge, likely due to limited statistical power at the country level ($N = 9$). Limited power at the country level is also why we did not use multilevel moderated mediation to test H3, which would involve treating ingroup collectivism as a continuous variable.
- ⁶ Mplus generated warnings regarding the precision of standard errors in nearly all country-level multilevel structural equation models. To address this, we conducted single-level regression analyses (which did not account for team-level nesting). These single-level analyses produced results that were largely consistent with the original multilevel findings. Consequently, the results presented in this study are based on the multilevel analyses.

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