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From Coping Strategies to Fan Well-Being: Resource Dynamics of Team Identification, Impulse Control, and Psychological Capital in Negative Experiences

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Abstract

Guided by conservation of resources theory, the authors examine how team identification, impulse control difficulties, coping strategies, and psychological capital shape fans' well-being in negative fan experiences. Surveys from 300 sport fans were analyzed using structural equation modeling. Results showed that identification promoted adaptive coping and reduced cutting off reflected failure, whereas impulse control difficulties increased denial and cutting off reflected failure. Denial unexpectedly enhanced psychological capital while reducing well-being, and venting functioned as a double-edged mediator across positive/negative pathways. Psychological capital was the strongest predictor of well-being, underscoring its role as a central resource linking coping to outcomes.

Keywords: coping strategies, impulse control, psychological capital, team identification, well-being

Sport fans experience emotional highs and lows tied to their team's performance. Wins bring pride, whereas losses trigger disappointment and distress. Fans, however, differ in their ability to sustain psychological well-being in these moments. Some remain resilient and preserve life satisfaction despite repeated defeats, whereas others struggle to regulate emotions and maintain stability. Such differences highlight the importance of individual psychological factors in shaping how fans cope with team-related stressors and how these processes influence broader well-being.

Because the seminal work on basking in reflected glory (BIRGing) and cutting off reflected failure (CORFing; Cialdini et al., 1976; Snyder et al., 1986; Wann & Branscombe, 1990), scholars have examined how fans manage identity threats associated with team outcomes. This research underscores the complexity of loyalty and coping, showing that fans strategically align with or distance from their teams depending on context (Madrigal, 1995; Trail & James, 2001). However, much of this work emphasizes observable behaviors or need-based motives, with less attention to the psychological dispositions that shape coping responses. Although studies have identified achievement unfulfillment as a driver of coping and shown that coping strategies vary in their effects on affect and self-worth (Kim & Kim, 2023), little is known about the roles of trait-like factors such as team identification level, impulse control difficulties, and psychological capital.

Drawing on Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001), this study examines how these dispositions influence coping processes that sustain or undermine well-being. COR theory holds that stress arises when valued resources are threatened or depleted, a dynamic particularly salient for highly identified fans whose investments may be vulnerable during losses (Wann, 2006). While providing belonging and support, team identification may magnify resource loss. Impulse control difficulties, reflecting challenges in emotional regulation, can further determine whether fans adopt adaptive or maladaptive strategies (Gratz & Roemer, 2004). Psychological capital—comprising hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism—serves as a reservoir that enables coping to translate into positive outcomes (Park et al., 2022). Thus, while highly identified fans remain loyal, their social resource investment becomes vulnerable during hardship, making strategic coping to strengthen psychological capital essential for well-being.

By integrating these constructs, this study clarifies how fans manage team-related stress through coping strategies and psychological resources, extending sport consumer research to the mechanisms that sustain well-being. For sport practitioners, these findings offer guidance for targeted community management during periods of poor team performance. Understanding how coping strategies shape fan well-being enables organizations to tailor interventions, manage communities effectively, and provide support that protects well-being while sustaining loyalty.

Hypothesis Development

COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001) posits that stress arises when valued resources are

threatened or lost, with losses carrying greater weight than equivalent gains (i.e., the primacy of loss principle). Accordingly, individuals are motivated to conserve existing resources and strategically invest in new ones to prevent further depletion. In sport fandom, team identification represents a social resource investment where fans commit emotional energy, time, and social capital to their team identity. This investment enhances belonging and well-being but creates vulnerability when poor team performance threatens these invested resources, producing stress and prompting coping efforts to prevent further depletion. Our hypothesized model builds on this framework. From an industry perspective, these insights enable sport organizations to design evidence-based engagement strategies that promote coping approaches aligned with fan dispositions.

Team identification represents a social resource that provides belonging, meaning, and pride, yet also creates vulnerability when teams underperform (Wann, 2006). Social identity research demonstrates that strong identification enhances well-being through social connection, and empirical studies show positive links between identification and life satisfaction (Madrigal, 1995; Trail & James, 2001). Wann (2006) argued that identification enhances psychological health by reducing loneliness and increasing life satisfaction. Consistent with COR theory's view that social resources generally benefit well-being despite occasional threats, we hypothesize that team identification positively influences well-being (H1).

Impulse control difficulties, in contrast, reflect deficits in self-regulatory resources. COR theory suggests that individuals with fewer regulatory resources are more vulnerable to loss spirals, and research confirms that poor impulse regulation increases susceptibility to anxiety and depression (Gratz & Roemer, 2004), particularly in emotionally challenging contexts. Fans' self-perceived success in relationships, self-esteem, purpose, and optimism may be undermined by deficits in impulse regulation. Therefore, we expect that impulse control difficulties negatively influence well-being (H2).

Coping strategies can be understood as resource investment behaviors. According to COR theory, adaptive strategies such as social support and positive reinterpretation help protect and restore resources, whereas maladaptive strategies such as denial and CORFing may fail to prevent depletion. Drawing from Kim and Kim's (2023) findings that these strategies have differential effects on well-being, we extend the application to encompass fans' dispositional characteristics. Accordingly, we hypothesize that coping strategies mediate the relationship between team identification and well-being (H3) and between impulse control difficulties and well-being (H4).

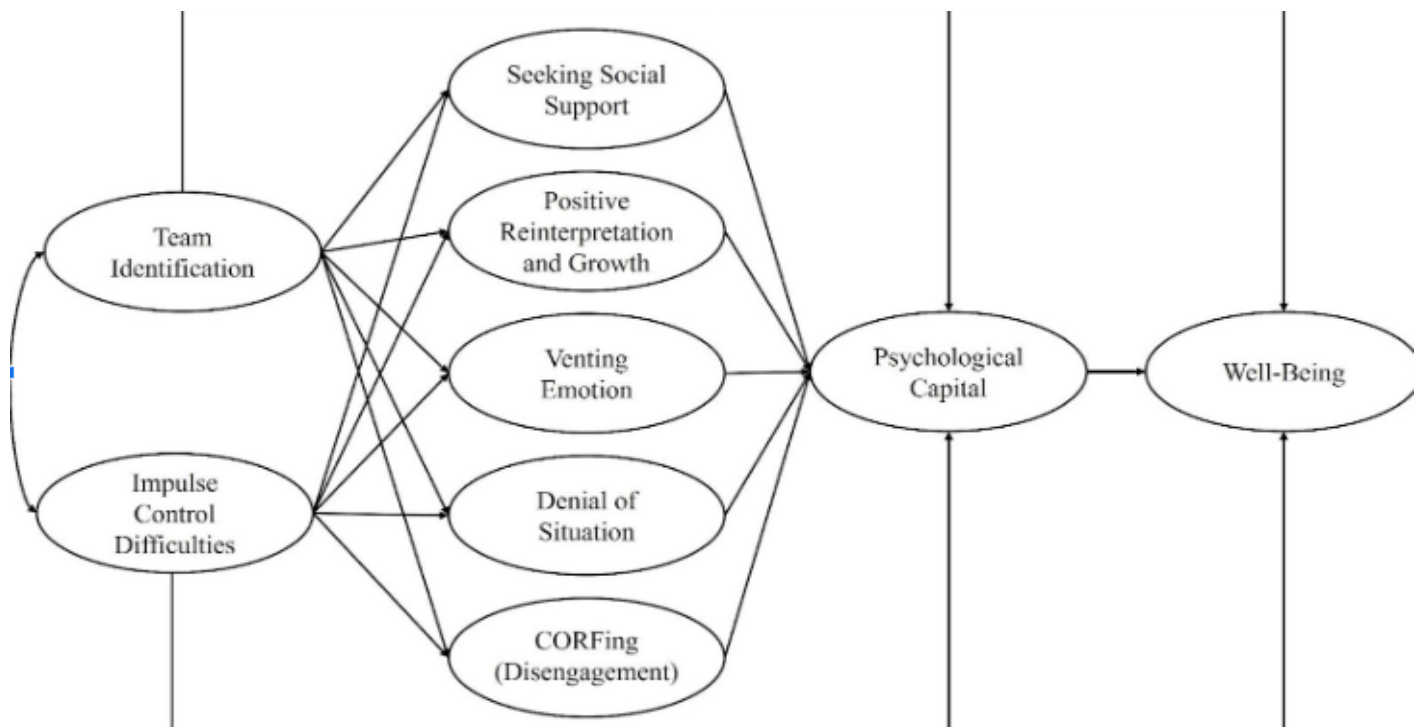
Psychological capital represents a higher order resource pool encompassing hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism (Luthans et al., 2007). Research indicates that social identification can enhance psychological capital in sport contexts, whereas regulatory deficits may wear down these resources. Social identification enhances psychological capital by fostering collective efficacy, shared hope, and community resilience, allowing highly identified individuals to draw strength from group membership during adversity (Park et al., 2022). In contrast, self-regulatory deficits erode psychological capital over time, as repeated failures at emotional

control heighten vulnerability to stress and create cycles of resource depletion (Gratz & Roemer, 2004). Based on this logic, we hypothesize that psychological capital positively mediates the relationship between team identification and well-being (H5) and reversely between impulse control difficulties and well-being (H6).

Finally, coping and psychological capital are likely to operate sequentially, reflecting what COR theory describes as a resource investment process. Adaptive coping can foster resilience and optimism, reflected by psychological capital, and ultimately support well-being, whereas maladaptive coping may hinder this process. Therefore, we propose that coping strategies and psychological capital serially mediate the relationship between team identification and well-being (H7) and between impulse control difficulties and well-being (H8). The hypothesized model is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Research Model



Method

Participants

Three hundred self-identified sport fans were recruited through Prolific (compensation = \$3) and completed an online Qualtrics survey (IRB approved). Eligibility required being 18 years or older, living in the United States, regularly watching professional sporting events, and recalling an emotionally challenging team loss. On a 5-point Likert-type scale, participants reported an average upset score of 3.66

(median = 4, mode = 5). The final sample consisted of 168 males (56.0%), 129 females (43.0%), and three non-binary participants, with a mean age of 41.96 years (SD = 11.03, range = 19–65).

Measures

All measures were drawn from previously validated scales and retained their original anchors. Coping strategies were assessed with five three-item subscales (i.e., social support, positive reinterpretation, denial, venting, CORFing) developed by Kim and Kim (2023). Sample items included (a) I talked to friends, family or other fans about how I feel; (b) I looked for something good in what happened in the game; (c) I let my emotions out; I pretended that it hasn't really happened; and (d) I considered the team's loss as "their" loss rather than "our" loss. Impulse control difficulties were measured with a three-item subscale from the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (Gratz & Roemer, 2004; e.g., When I'm upset, I become out of control). Team identification was measured with four items from James and Ross (2002; e.g., the [team name] are my team). Psychological capital was assessed as a second-order factor reflected by a 12-item scale capturing hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism (Park et al., 2022; e.g., I always look on the bright side of things regarding my future). Well-being was measured with a seven-item scale of subjective well-being (Diener et al., 2010; e.g., I lead a purposeful and meaningful life).

Data Analysis

A Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted to assess the measurement model, followed by Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to test the hypothesized model. Standard SEM principles (Kline, 2011) were applied for all analysis using Mplus 8.8 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). The significance level was set at .05.

Results

The CFA indicated an acceptable model fit ($\chi^2 = 1380.683$, $df = 739$, CFI = .937, TLI = .930, SRMR = .046, RMSEA = .054). Convergent and discriminant validity were supported (see Tables 1 and 2). The SEM showed acceptable fit ($\chi^2 = 1531.171$, $df = 749$, CFI = .923, TLI = .916, SRMR = .064, RMSEA = .059). Direct and indirect effects are reported in Tables 3 and 4. We explain these results in greater detail in the discussion.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) Results of Items

Items	Descriptive analysis				CFA	
	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	λ	SE
OPT (AVE = .849, CR = .918)						
OPT1	5.230	1.401	.871	.183	.899	.014
OPT2	5.320	1.399	-.961	.438	.943	.011
HOP (AVE = .639, CR = .876)						
HOP1	5.290	1.406	-.818	.221	.857	.017
HOP2	5.393	1.130	-.648	.728	.685	.032

HOP3	4.753	1.518	-.550	.393	.807	.022
HOP4	5.347	1.2	-.771	.664	.838	.020
SEF (AVE = .747, CR = .898)						
SEF1	5.637	1.148	-1.215	1.811	.845	.020
SEF2	5.473	1.173	-.909	.717	.901	.014
SEF3	5.757	1.078	-1.305	2.764	.845	.019
RES (AVE = .794, CR = .921)						
RES1	5.283	1.372	-.929	.601	.859	.018
RES2	4.993	1.356	-.693	.247	.914	.013
RES3	4.923	1.511	-.797	.114	.900	.014
TID (AVE = .570, CR = .839)						
TID1	4.780	.501	-3.037	13.544	.660	.038
TID2	4.753	.508	-1.970	3.034	.680	.037
TID3	4.407	.821	-1.450	1.945	.883	.022
TID4	4.370	.803	-1.112	.660	.776	.029
SUP (AVE = .694, CR = .871)						
SUP1	5.377	1.349	-1.332	1.801	.817	.024
SUP2	4.693	1.648	-.619	-.454	.764	.028
SUP3	5.213	1.421	-1.166	1.194	.912	.019
GRO (AVE = .743, CR = .896)						
GRO1	5.413	1.391	-1.135	1.000	.824	.023
GRO2	4.930	1.515	-.811	.105	.881	.019
GRO3	5.077	1.452	-.988	.585	.879	.019
VNT (AVE = .810, CR = .928)						
VNT1	5.093	1.471	-.978	.659	.916	.013
VNT2	5.230	1.427	-.945	.597	.886	.016
VNT3	5.230	1.448	-1.057	.819	.898	.015
DEN (AVE = .605, CR = .820)						
DEN1	2.803	1.609	.825	-.192	.848	.022
DEN2	2.833	1.706	.860	-.134	.744	.017
DEN3	3.143	1.927	.589	-.887	.736	.029
COR (AVE = .674, CR = .859)						
COR1	3.097	1.800	.582	-.784	.646	.037
COR2	2.597	1.572	.821	-.342	.910	.020
COR3	2.437	1.531	1.113	.538	.882	.021
IMP (AVE = .855, CR = .946)						
IMP1	1.563	.915	1.803	2.755	.940	.010
IMP2	1.527	.884	1.855	3.099	.957	.009
IMP3	1.583	.866	1.683	2.788	.875	.015
WB (AVE = .855, CR = .946)						

WB1	5.550	1.354	-1.209	1.174	.868	.017
WB2	5.533	1.294	-1.198	1.461	.738	.028
WB3	5.703	1.167	-1.144	1.315	.814	.022
WB4	5.767	1.085	-1.231	2.508	.711	.030
WB5	5.927	.977	-.947	.940	.761	.026
WB6	5.833	1.079	-1.350	2.731	.860	.017
WB7	5.583	1.266	-1.163	1.056	.857	.018

Note. λ = Standardized factor loading (all loading were significant, $ps < .001$); AVE = Average Variance Extracted; CR = Composite Reliability. OPT = Optimism; HOP = Hope; SEF = Self-Efficacy; RES = Resilience; TID = Team Identification, SUP = Seeking Social Support; GRO = Positive Reinterpretation and Growth; VNT = Venting Emotion; DEN = Denial of Situation; COR = CORFing (Disengagement); IMP = Impulse Control Difficulties; WB = Well-Being.

Table 2*Factor Correlations*

	TID	SUP	GRO	VNT	DEN	COR	IMP	PSY	WB
TID	(.754)								
SUP	.555	(.833)							
GRO	.420	.547	(.743)						
VNT	.547	.624	.470	(.900)					
DEN	.103	.159	.126	.135	(.777)				
COR	-.181	-.118	-.103	-.054	.511	(.820)			
IMP	.108	.036	.045	.084	.321	.402	(.924)		
PSY	.271	.199	.279	.198	.062	-.168	-.193	(.860)	
WB	.304	.314	.299	.320	-.080	-.239	-.256	.824	(.924)

Note. Diagonal values in parentheses report the square root of average variance extracted, and off-diagonal elements report the correlations among constructs. TID = Team Identification; SUP = Seeking Social Support; GRO = Positive Reinterpretation and Growth; VNT = Venting Emotion; DEN = Denial of Situation; COR = CORFing (Disengagement); IMP = Impulse Control Difficulties; PSY = Psychological Capital; WB = Well-Being.

Table 3*Direct Effect Results*

Predictors	Endogenous outcomes						
	SUP	GRO	VNT	DEN	COR	PSY	WB
TID	.631*** (.072)	.501*** (.076)	.614*** (.058)	.084 (.061)	-.215*** (.066)	.224 (.117)	-.023 (.075)
IMP	-.032 (.052)	-.007 (.059)	.020 (.052)	.311*** (.070)	.430*** (.069)	-.232*** (.069)	-.078 (.043)
SUP						-.065 (.097)	.118 (.065)
GRO						.177* (.083)	(.065) (.056)
VNT						.013 (.096)	.142** (.052)
DEN						.144* (.063)	-.136** (.046)
COR						-.090 (.071)	.004 (.047)
PSY							.787*** (.039)
R ²	.396	.250	.380	.109	.211	.183	.739

Note. TID = Team Identification; IMP = Impulse Control Difficulties; SUP = Seeking Social Support; GRO = Positive Reinterpretation and Growth; VNT = Venting Emotion; DEN = Denial of Situation; COR = CORFing (Disengagement); PSY = Psychological Capital; WB = Well-Being. Standard errors in parentheses.

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

Table 4*Significant Indirect Effects*

Indirect path	Standardized coefficient	SE	BC intervals	
			UL	LL
TID→VNT→WB	.087**	.034	.027	.163
TID→GRO→PSY→WB	.070*	.034	.009	.147
IMP→DEN→WB	-.042*	.017	-.086	-.017
IMP→PSY→WB	-.183***	.055	-.292	-.076

Note. TID = Team Identification; VNT = Venting Emotion; WB = Well-Being; GRO = Positive Reinterpretation and Growth; PSY = Psychological Capital; IMP = Impulse Control Difficulties; DEN = Denial of Situation. SE = standard error. BC intervals refer to the bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals of standardized estimates obtained from bootstrap analysis, UL = upper 95% confidence limit; LL = lower 95% confidence limit.

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

Discussion

Framed by COR theory, we examined how team identification, impulse-control difficulties, coping strategies, and psychological capital interact to shape sport fans' well-being. Coping was conceptualized as resource investment, whereas venting demonstrated a paradoxical effect depending on its point of origin. Additional mediation effects further highlighted the dynamics of resource processes.

Team identification positively predicted well-being (H1), reinforcing its role as a social resource that fosters belonging and psychological health (Madrigal, 1995; Trail & James, 2001; Wann, 2006). Impulse control difficulties negatively predicted well-being (H2), confirming that regulatory deficits heighten vulnerability to distress (Gratz & Roemer, 2004). The mediation hypotheses (H3–H8) were partially supported, with several pathways yielding novel theoretical insights.

Identification promoted adaptive coping, particularly social support and positive reinterpretation, while reducing CORFing. This aligns with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), which posits that identification keeps loyalty behaviors even after team losses. This is also consistent with team identification literature indicating that highly identified fans rarely engage in CORFing but still employ coping strategies during poor team performance (Wann, 2006; Wann & Branscombe, 1990). In contrast, impulse control difficulties increased reliance on denial and CORFing, which is in line with COR theory's assertion that resource-depleted individuals gravitate toward avoidance-based coping.

Two findings complicate conventional coping classifications. First, denial unexpectedly enhanced psychological capital. Although often labeled maladaptive, denial may preserve optimism in the short term by shielding fans from acute stress, functioning as a temporary conservation tactic in COR terms, even if counterproductive over time. Or else, it may be reflecting possible model misspecification (Zhao et al., 2010). Ultimately, it is notable that the direct effect of denial on well-being was negative. Second, venting emerged as a double-edged strategy and the strongest mediator across positive and negative pathways. For highly identified fans, venting fostered connection and well-being through shared expression, whereas for those with impulse control difficulties it amplified distress and drained resources. This paradox underscores that coping effectiveness depends on dispositional traits, with same coping strategies producing divergent outcomes.

Psychological capital was the most robust predictor of well-being, confirming its role as a higher order resource reservoir (Luthans et al., 2007). It was strengthened by positive reinterpretation and, unexpectedly, denial, but diminished by impulse control difficulties. Consistent with COR theory, psychological capital buffered resource threats and translated coping efforts into well-being outcomes.

The mediation patterns highlight distinct resource dynamics. For team identification, the strongest positive pathway operated through venting, followed by the sequential path through positive reinterpretation and psychological capital. From a practical standpoint, this pathway suggests that organizations could support fan well-being by helping highly identified fans develop positive reinterpretation skills through structured interventions. Encouraging counterfactual thinking that reframes loss as growth offers one practical approach. For impulse control difficulties, the strongest negative pathway also centered on venting, combined with reduced psychological capital and heightened denial. These results extend Kim and Kim's (2023) findings by showing that coping effectiveness is shaped not only by strategy type but

also by individual resource availability and dispositional traits.

Theoretical Contributions

This study demonstrates that venting and denial can function as both adaptive and maladaptive strategies depending on fans' identification strength and impulse control. Several contributions emerge. First, it refines COR theory by showing that coping strategies operate as resource investments, with outcomes contingent on individuals' regulatory capacity. Second, it extends Wann's (2006) Team Identification–Social Psychological Health Model by demonstrating that identification influences not only direct well-being outcomes but also the choice and effectiveness of coping processes. Third, it challenges binary adaptive–maladaptive classifications by illustrating that strategies such as denial and venting are context-dependent, with their value determined by fans' underlying dispositions.

Practical Implications

Sport organizations should recognize the complexity of coping and create environments that channel emotional responses constructively. Although adaptive strategies such as social support and positive reinterpretation should be encouraged, organizations should also provide healthy outlets for venting (e.g., moderated forums, structured post-game discussions, or community events that allow expression without escalating negativity). Findings suggest that fan well-being depends less on team outcomes than on how psychological resources are mobilized to manage them. Because venting and denial can be helpful for some fans but harmful for others, organizations and practitioners should avoid one-size-fits-all approaches. Brief assessment tools with a few targeted questions can segment fans into intervention groups without being intrusive. Profile-based strategies that strengthen psychological capital offer more effective ways to sustain engagement and protect well-being during periods of team struggle.

Tailored approaches are especially important. For highly identified fans, community-building initiatives and optimism-focused messaging can reinforce positive coping. Reinforcing team history, player development, and future prospects can help fans sustain positive coping during losing periods. For fans with impulse control difficulties, interventions should minimize destructive venting and CORFing while promoting psychological capital through resilience programs, peer mentorship, or mindfulness workshops (Park et al., 2022). Managers should redirect destructive venting into constructive discussion, and digital platforms can employ cooling-off periods to limit escalation. Recognizing sport spectating as a form of everyday escape, organizations can also integrate wellness-oriented messaging and programming to help fans regulate emotions in healthier ways. Community events can be structured to build hope, resilience, and collective efficacy among fans.

Conclusion

Drawing on team identification and impulse control, this study shows that venting and denial, often considered maladaptive, can either support or undermine well-being depending on fans' psychological resources. Fan well-being is shaped less by team outcomes than by how these resources are mobilized to manage emotional strain. The findings refine COR theory, extend sport consumer research, and underscore psychological capital as a central mechanism linking coping and well-being. For practitioners, the results suggest moving beyond one-size-fits-all approaches and instead tailoring interventions to fan profiles, fostering psychological capital while maintaining the emotional investment that sustains fandom.

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