The Impact of Gender on Learning Anxiety and English Communication Willingness among Chinese University Athletes: A Sports Psychology Analysis

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Abstract

This study investigated the influence of gender disparities and English learning apprehension on the inclination of Chinese university athletes to engage in English communication. Employing purposive sampling, 787 athletes from diverse universities in China were selected as participants. An online questionnaire survey encompassed the administration of the Learning Anxiety Scale and the Scale of ability to converse in English. Scale validation ensued through confirmatory factor analysis, while the mediation effect of the structural model, along with gender differentials in path coefficients, was scrutinized using structural equation modelling (SEM). Outcomes unveiled the noteworthy impact of gender disparities on the conversational proficiency in English and learning anxiety among Chinese university athletes. Particularly, female athletes exhibited elevated levels of English learning apprehension compared to their male counterparts, thus signifying the necessity for supplementary support and resources to bolster their confidence in English communication. These findings accentuate the significance of athletes' perceptions regarding English acquisition and their attitudes toward English communication in moulding their conversational proficiency. The study carries significant implications for the realms of sports psychology and language education, underscoring the imperative to address gender disparities and attitudes toward English learning within language education initiatives tailored for athletes.

Keywords: Chinese University Athletes, Gender Difference, English Learning Anxiety, Learning Attitude, Sports Psychology, Language Education.

1. Introduction

In the contemporary global landscape, effective English communication skills have become increasingly indispensable, particularly for college athletes who frequently engage with individuals from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Nonetheless, many athletes encounter anxiety when communicating in English, thereby adversely affecting their conversational proficiency. English has evolved into a lingua franca, spoken as either a native or secondary language in over 50 nations worldwide (Rao, 2019), surpassing its native speakers in number. Proficiency in English facilitates seamless communication and aids learners in adapting to various environments. Consequently, the cultivation of proficient and articulate English communicators within non-native English-speaking cohorts is imperative (Allahyar, 2021; Putra et al., 2020).

China boasts the largest cohort of English learners globally, with English education mandated from primary school through university, constituting a compulsory subject across all educational tiers (Gan & Lam, 2020; Sang & Hiver, 2021; Wu, 2021). However, despite rigorous exam preparations and educational directives, many Chinese learners demonstrate proficiency in passing English examinations but struggle with fluent communication (Al-Murtadha, 2021). Labelled as "silent learners," Chinese English learners often evade English-speaking situations and language exchange activities, contributing to their reticence in verbal expression (S. Hodkinson & E. Poropat, 2014). Consequently, proficiency in English communication not only fosters active participation in interactions but also correlates with academic attainment (Sari & Mirici, 2021; Zarrinabadi et al., 2021), exerting a profound influence on language acquisition (Chen et al., 2021; Elahi Shirvan et al., 2019; Sato & Csizer, 2021).

Throughout the process of acquiring a second language, both anxiety and favourable attitudes emerge as pivotal determinants influencing the inclination to engage in English communication (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2018; Martin & Alvarez Valdivia, 2017). Embedded within Krashen's (1981) affective filter hypothesis, anxiety assumes a crucial role as an emotional component shaping second language acquisition. MacIntyre et al. (1998) underscored that heightened levels of communicative ability correlate with diminished levels of communicative

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anxiety; thus, language anxiety impedes learners' propensity to engage in communication (Fujii, 2021), while a reluctance to communicate exacerbates learners' anxiety (Liu, 2006). Escalating anxiety fosters a negative learning disposition, consequently exerting an adverse influence on university students' attitudes toward English (Coşkun & Taşgın, 2018; Jain & Sidhu, 2013). Central to the dynamics is the learning attitude, serving as the principal determinant impacting communication willingness (Alrabai, 2022; MacIntyre & Blackie, 2012). Notably, a positive learning attitude positively influences communication willingness (Chen et al., 2021; Hvozdíková, 2021). In essence, learners' apprehension regarding English acquisition may impinge upon their willingness to engage in communication, with their learning attitude acting as a mediating factor within this interplay.

Sabiq et al. (2021) discerned notable variances in emotional and behavioural patterns between male and female learners attributable to dissimilar cognitive frameworks. In comparison to their male counterparts in English learning contexts, female learners manifested heightened levels of anxiety, often stemming from apprehensions regarding negative feedback and a heightened need for reassurance (Yih et al., 2018). Gender-based studies indicate diverse coping mechanisms employed by learners in response to anxiety. Female learners, inclined towards relational cognition, typically seek support from peers or instructors when confronted with anxiety-inducing situations. Conversely, male learners, typically less constrained in their approaches compared to females, demonstrate a greater propensity to adopt multifaceted strategies to alleviate learning-related stress (Kao et al., 2017).

The principal aim of this study was to anticipate distinctions in English learning anxiety levels between male and female university students, hypothesizing that their respective learning attitudes in the face of anxiety would yield discrepancies in their eagerness to engage in English communication. In essence, the investigation delved into the interplay among English learning anxiety, learning attitudes, and English conversational proficiency within a sample of Chinese university athletes, while also considering gender-specific nuances within these dynamics.

Effective communication stands as a cornerstone skill in the contemporary globalized milieu, particularly paramount for university athletes whose engagements traverse diverse cultural and contextual realms. Nonetheless, a considerable number of athletes encounter impediments rooted in anxiety when articulating in English, thereby encumbering their proficiency in English conversation. The present research endeavours to scrutinize the nexus between gender differentials, English learning anxiety, and the propensity of Chinese collegiate athletes to engage in English communication. The discernments derived from this inquiry hold profound implications for the domains of sports psychology and language pedagogy, underlining the imperative of tailored language training initiatives adept at addressing gender-specific disparities and attitudes towards English acquisition to augment the communicative competencies of Chinese university athletes.

2. Literature Review

Drawing from Chinese cultural contexts and the learning environments of Chinese students, Wen and Clément (2003) devised a theoretical framework elucidating the inclination of Chinese learners to engage in English communication. Within this framework, emotions emerge as pivotal determinants influencing communication readiness, with learning anxiety commonly acknowledged as a salient personal emotional factor (Martin et al., 2017; Pyun et al., 2014). Aligned with Krashen's (1981) affective filter hypothesis, learners' linguistic input undergoes emotional filtration before assimilation, with emotional variables such as curiosity, enjoyment, and anxiety either facilitating or impeding language acquisition (García Uquillas, 2021). Extant literature on language anxiety consistently underscores its detrimental impact on communication readiness (Bielak, 2022; Ehsani & Moghaddam, 2021; Fathi et al., 2021; Tâm, 2022; Wang et al., 2022).

(1957) proposition of the discovery learning theory accentuates the primacy of self-awareness in students' cognitive development, with personal factors exerting significant influence on communication behaviours, including tendencies towards reticence (Allahyar, 2021). Scholarly discourse suggests that learners' attitudes frequently mediate such dynamics. Zhang and Wang (2019) revealed that attitude modulates the link between local emotions and behavioural intentions, suggesting that learning attitude can serve as a mediating factor between emotions and behavioural intentions (Hameed & Qayyum, 2018; Ibrahim et al., 2017; Mykolenko et al., 2022). This study posits that the learning attitude of university students mediates the association between English learning anxiety and English conversational proficiency. Grounded in theoretical insights and extensive literature review, Hypothesis 1 (H1) is advanced as follows.

H1: *English learning attitude mediates the relationship between the English learning anxiety of Chinese university athlete students and their willingness to communicate in English.*

Gender disparities in second language acquisition present challenges in educational contexts (Taghinezhad et al., 2016). Numerous studies indicate significant discrepancies in learning anxiety, attitudes towards learning, and English communication willingness between men and women (Alavinia & Alikhani, 2014; Aldosari, 2014; Fariadian et al.,

2014), which in turn impact learners' emotional states and cognitive processes (Sabiq et al., 2021). Rooted in identity theory (Stryker & Burke, 2000), men typically exhibit traits of autonomy, assertiveness, and independence, while women tend towards empathy and expressiveness. Gender influences learning anxiety, with women exhibiting heightened fears of negative feedback, making errors, and facing disapproval (Hwa & Peck, 2017; Mesri, 2012; Namy Soghady et al., 2022), consequently presenting with higher levels of learning anxiety compared to men (Bensalem, 2018; Briesmaster & Briesmaster-Paredes, 2015; Piniel & Zólyomi, 2022).

According to socialization theory (Carter, 2014), women tend to employ less effective coping strategies than men during the socialization process, with gender differences evident in response to negative emotions such as stress (Sigmon et al., 1995). Men typically adopt active coping styles, emphasizing confidence and autonomy, while women lean towards affective coping styles (Lewis et al., 2015; Matud, 2004). Despite being more prone to anxiety, women generally hold more positive attitudes towards academic pursuits compared to men (Aldosari, 2014; Murtafi'ah & Putro, 2020). Correspondingly, studies suggest that women tend to be more willing to communicate in English relative to men (Cheng & Xu, 2022; MacIntyre et al., 2002; Yetkin & Özer, 2022).

The intersection of English learning anxiety, learning attitudes, and gender differences significantly influences conversational proficiency in English among male and female athletes. Consequently, Hypothesis 2 (H2) posits the following.

H2: *Male and female Chinese athlete university students differ significantly in terms of their mediating structural models of English learning anxiety, learning attitudes, and conversational ability in English. Drawing upon Hypotheses 1 (H1) and 2 (H2), we formulated a conceptual model as depicted in Figure 1.*

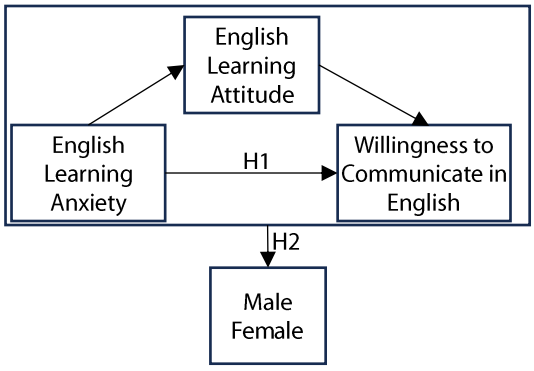

Figure 1: Hypothesis Model.

3. Research Method

3.1. Participants

This investigation targeted first- to fourth-year student athletes enrolled in three representative universities situated in Weifang, Shandong Province, China. Within these academic institutions, first- and second-year students, inclusive of athletes, are obligated to attend English courses, encompassing 15 credit hours per week each semester. Conversely, for third- and fourth-year students, English is an elective subject, with weekly credit hours ranging from 3 to 5. An online questionnaire survey was administered by counsellors affiliated with the aforementioned universities. These questionnaires were disseminated among cohorts of student athletes, with counsellors securing informed consent from participants and elucidating the absence of definitive right or wrong responses. Participants were instructed to complete the questionnaire digitally by scanning a quick-response (QR) code using their smartphones. To safeguard anonymity, the participant-provided details in the questionnaire remained undisclosed, and participants retained the prerogative to withdraw their participation at any juncture, ensuring the veracity of responses. Responses exhibiting excessively truncated or protracted completion durations were considered invalid. Additionally, the questionnaire was equipped with items designed to identify spurious responses, with responses failing this scrutiny deemed invalid. The demographic distribution of both male and female athlete participants is delineated in Table 1.

Table 1

Sample Demographics of the Athlete Participants.

	Group	Number and Rate (N = 787)	
Gender	Male Athletes	330	41.9%
	Female Athletes	457	58.1%
Grade Level	Freshman	302	38.4%
	Sophomore	211	26.8%
	Junior	179	22.7%
	Senior	95	12.1%

3.2. Research Instruments

The questionnaire deployed in this study comprises three distinct scales: the Foreign Language Anxiety Scale, Learning Attitude Scale, and Scale of Conversational Ability in English both within and outside the classroom. Each item within these scales has demonstrated robust reliability and validity, scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Foreign language anxiety denotes the fear or unease experienced by learners when tasked with communicating in a second or foreign language (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). For the assessment of foreign language anxiety, the scale developed by Li (2018) was employed in this study. Comprising 18 items, this scale evaluates three distinct dimensions: fear of negative feedback (e.g., "I worry about making errors in English class"), test anxiety (e.g., "I fear failure in my English examinations"), and language skill anxiety (e.g., "I become anxious when conversing with others in English").

Learning attitude delineates an individual's predisposition towards language acquisition (Zulfikar et al., 2019). For the evaluation of learning attitude, the scale devised by Tian (2009) was utilized in this study. Comprising 15 items, this scale assesses three dimensions: cognition (e.g., "I perceive English as highly significant"), affection (e.g., "I am intrigued by the prospect of learning English"), and conation (e.g., "I actively participate in responding to questions posed by the English teacher").

Communication willingness denotes the propensity of language learners to engage in communication utilizing a second or foreign language across diverse scenarios (Botes et al., 2020). For the assessment of communication willingness, the scale of Conversational Ability in English both within and outside the classroom, developed by Wu (2021), was employed in this study. Comprising 11 items, this scale evaluates two dimensions: willingness to communicate within the classroom (e.g., "During English class, I engage in English communication with classmates in small groups") and willingness to communicate outside the classroom (e.g., "When encountering foreign acquaintances on campus, I proactively initiate conversations in English").

3.3. Data Analysis

In this investigation, descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, and validity analysis were conducted using SPSS and AMOS software packages. A measurement model was employed to assess the reliability and validity of the scale, while the bootstrap method within structural equation modelling was utilized to examine mediation effects. Subsequently, a multigroup analysis was undertaken to discern disparities between male and female students concerning the path coefficients of a structural equation model.

3.4. Reliability and Validity

Based on the three measured constructs—English learning anxiety, English learning attitude, and conversational ability in English—a confirmatory factor analysis measurement model incorporating three variables and eight factors was established.

The English Learning Anxiety Scale underwent evaluation, revealing skewness values ranging from -0.363 to 0.150, kurtosis values spanning from -0.865 to -0.364, and a Mardia value of 232.513, below the threshold of 360. Similarly, the English Learning Attitude Scale exhibited skewness values between -1.019 and -0.012, kurtosis values ranging from -1.079 to 0.180, and a Mardia value of 178.497, below the critical value of 255. The findings pertaining to the Scale of Conversational Ability in English yielded skewness values between -0.660 and 0.014, kurtosis values ranging from -0.713 to 0.119, and a Mardia value of 93.513, all falling below the critical value of 143. The reliability of the results was affirmed with a sample size of 787 demonstrating a normal distribution, in accordance with Kline (1998).

The confirmatory factor analysis of the measurement model demonstrated excellent fit indices, with a χ^2/df value of 15.735, SRMR of 0.067, RMSEA of 0.070, NFI of 0.939, CFI of 0.939, PNFI of 0.568, and PCFI of 0.912 (Raykov & Marcoulides, 2008). The constructs of anxiety, learning attitude, and communication willingness exhibited high internal consistency, as evidenced by Cronbach's α coefficients of 0.921, 0.961, and 0.964, respectively. Factor loadings for the scales ranged from 0.675 to 0.942, with all composite reliability values exceeding 0.70, specifically, 0.87, 0.86, and 0.93, respectively (Hair et al., 1998; Schumacker & Lomax, 2004). Additionally, the AVE values were substantial, registering at 0.69, 0.67, and 0.87, surpassing the threshold of 0.50 and aligning with the findings of Hair et al. (2010). Moreover, the confidence interval bounds did not encompass the value of 1, as noted in Torkzadeh et al. (2003).

4. Results

4.1. Total Mediation Effects

The current investigation devised a mediation model integrating learning anxiety, learning attitude, and conversational ability in English to assess H1 and H2. Initially, a direct impact model was formulated to scrutinize the relationship between learning anxiety and the inclination to engage in English communication. The findings revealed that learning anxiety concerning English acquisition contributed to 3% of the variance in conversational ability in English ($\gamma = -.18$, $p < .001$). Subsequently, English learning attitude exerted a comprehensive influence on the direct model, prompting the construction of a total mediation model (depicted in Figure 2), where path coefficients for direct effects vanished (English learning anxiety → English learning attitude, $\gamma = -.06$, $p > .005$). Conversely, significant path coefficients for indirect effects were observed, encompassing the paths "English learning anxiety → English learning attitude" ($\gamma = -.19$, $p < .001$) and "English learning attitude → willingness to communicate in English" ($\gamma = .68$, $p < .001$). The variance attributable to learning anxiety in English acquisition was 3%. Collectively accounting for 48% of the variance in conversational ability in English, both attitudes towards English learning and the presence of anxiety emerged as significant determinants of this outcome.

The total mediating model demonstrated a reasonable and consistent fit ($\chi^2 = 267.488$, $p < .001$, χ^2/df = 15.735, GFI = .939, CFI = .939, RMR = .071, RMSEA = .080, PNFI = .568, NFI = .935). Factor loadings for the complete mediation model ranged from 0.67 to 0.94. Overall effects, encompassing both the direct and indirect impacts of learning anxiety on

conversational ability in English, were estimated utilizing a 95% confidence interval. The findings illustrated that English learning attitude fully mediated the association between learning anxiety and the inclination to communicate (θ = −0.061, p > .05; depicted in Table 2), thereby validating H1.

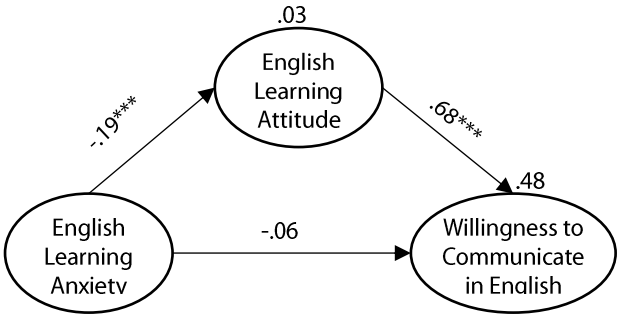

Figure 2: Mediator Model.

Table 2

Bootstrap Estimates for Total Mediating Effect.

Mediating Effect	Path Value	Bias-Corrected 95% CI		Percentile 95% CI	
		Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper
Total Effect (English Learning Anxiety-conversational ability in English)	-.189**	-0.286	-0.091	-0.286	-0.091
Direct Effect (English Learning Anxiety-conversational ability in English)	-.061	-0.139	0.020	-0.142	0.018
Indirect Effect (English Learning Anxiety-conversational ability in English)	-.128**	-0.194	-0.056	-0.196	-0.057

** p < .01.

The mediation models for the male and female cohorts are delineated in Figure 3. In the male athlete group, the direct relationship between "English learning anxiety" and "conversational ability in English" displayed a negative predictive effect when devoid of a mediator, with an explained variance (R^2) of 3% and a path coefficient (γ) of −.56 (p < .001). Subsequently, upon integration of "attitude towards English learning" as a mediator, the coefficients for the structural paths between anxiety in learning and conversational ability in English decreased from −0.56 (p < .001) to −0.05 (p > .05). Additionally, English learning anxiety exhibited a negative impact on English learning attitude (R^2 = 2%, γ = −.16, p < .01), with 48% of the variance in willingness to communicate and attitude towards English learning being explained by English learning anxiety and attitude (γ = .70, p < .01).

In the female athlete group, the absence of a mediator in the relationship between "anxiety" in learning English and "willingness to communicate in English" elucidated that anxiety stemming from learning English negatively influenced conversational ability in English, with an R^2 value of 13% and a path coefficient of -.36 (p < .001). However, upon introduction of "attitude towards learning English" as a mediator, the path coefficient decreased from -.36 (p < .001) to -.18 (p < .001), indicating a weakened relationship between the two variables. Furthermore, anxiety exerted a negative effect on learning attitude (R^2 = 8%, γ = −.28, p < .001), and the combined contribution of anxiety and learning attitude in elucidating the variance in conversational ability in English was 51%. Both anxiety related to learning English (γ = −.18, p < .001) and attitude towards English learning (γ = .64, p < .001) demonstrated a proclivity towards English communication.

As ascertained through the bootstrap method, it was evident that English learning attitude mediated the impact of English learning anxiety in both male and female athlete groups.

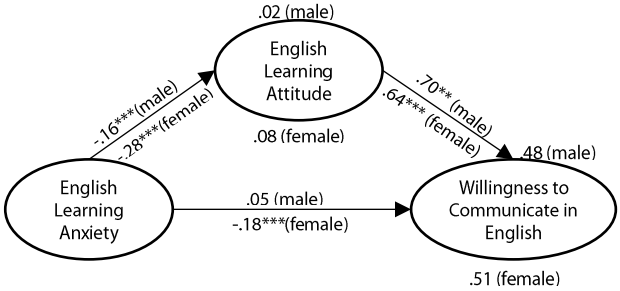

Figure 3: Demonstrates the Mediation Model for a Male and Female Group (** p < .01, *** p < .001).

4.2. Mediation Effects on Male and Female Groups

A total of 330 valid questionnaire responses were obtained from male athletes, while 457 valid questionnaire responses were received from female athletes. Subsequently, the model underwent multigroup comparison analysis, and the ensuing fit index results underscored the adequacy of the structural model: χ^2 = 323.933, p < .001, χ^2/df = 9.527, GFI = .912, CFI = .929, RMR = .078, RMSEA = .080, PNFI = .56, NFI = .922 (Kline, 2023). Factor loadings within the mediation models for both the male group (ranging from 0.61 to 0.99) and female group (ranging from 0.59 to 0.94) were deemed satisfactory (Kline, 2023).

*** p < .001.

Table 3

An Analysis of Bootstrapping Estimates for Male and Female Athletes.

Mediating Effect	Path Value	Bias-Corrected 95% CI		Percentile 95% CI	
		Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper
Male					
Total Effect	-.059**	-0.126	-0.027	-0.127	-0.028
Direct Effect	.051	-0.100	0.178	-0.097	0.182
Indirect Effect	-.110*	-0.173	-0.036	-0.174	-0.037
Female					
Total Effect	-.356***	-0.458	-0.249	-0.459	-0.250
Direct Effect	-.176***	-0.275	-0.082	-0.274	-0.080
Indirect Effect	-.180***	-0.273	-0.098	-0.274	-0.098

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

In the study of male athletes, Table 3 revealed a significant and adverse association between learning anxiety and conversational ability in English, with a confidence interval estimation of -0.059 (p < .01). However, the favourable impact of learning attitude towards English effectively counteracted this negative influence, as indicated in the table. The indirect effect's value was -0.110, with a p-value below 0.05, signifying statistical significance. Moreover, the direct effect decreased to 0.51, with a p-value exceeding 0.05, implying a weakened relationship. In the subgroup analysis of female athletes, the confidence interval estimated an overall effect of -0.356 for the association between learning anxiety and conversational ability in English, with a p-value below 0.001, indicating a statistically significant effect. The association between attitude towards learning English and the propensity to communicate effectively was partly offset by the adverse impact of anxiety towards learning English. Specifically, the indirect effect was determined to be −.180 (p < .001), while the direct impact diminished to −0.176 (p < .001).

4.3. Multigroup Analysis

In the parallel model, it is postulated that the three structural paths for male and female mediation models are equivalent (Byrne, 2010), suggesting a direct association between English learning anxiety and the willingness of both male and female students to communicate in English (Paulssen et al., 2014). Utilizing the default model as a benchmark, the study examined the structural invariance between male and female athlete groups. Upon conducting multigroup comparisons, notable disparities were identified between the default model and the parallel model, as evidenced by the following values:

(χ^2 = 323.933, p < .001, χ^2/df = 9.527, GFI = .912, CFI = .929, RMR = .078, RMSEA = .080, PNFI = .56, NFI = .922) for the default model and (χ^2 = 338.872, p < .001, χ^2/df = 9.159, GFI = .908, CFI = .926, RMR = .091, RMSEA = .070, PNFI = .607, NFI = .918) for the parallel model.

Table 4

The Comparison of Male and Female Athletes Based on Pairwise Parameters.

	Default Model	Parallel Model	Differences Between the Group
χ2 Value	323.933	338.872	
Group Number	Male (N)	330	
	Female (N)	457	
Structural Path Value			
English Learning Anxiety-English Learning Attitude			
Male Athletes (γ)	-.16**	-.18**	-1.91
Female Athletes (γ)	-.28***	-.27***	
English Learning Anxiety- Conversational ability in English			
Male Athletes (γ)	.05	-.08	-3.262*
Female Athletes (γ)	-.18***	-.12***	
English Learning Attitude- Conversational ability in English			
Male Athletes (γ)	.70***	.69***	1.368
Female Athletes (γ)	.64***	.63***	

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

The present study revealed distinct path coefficients between male and female athlete groups in the mediation model. Examination of pairwise parameter comparisons unveiled measurement invariance across three structural paths, as delineated in Table 4. The paths "English learning anxiety → English learning attitude" and "English learning attitude → conversational ability in English" exhibited no significant differences, indicating invariance between male and female athlete groups. However, a notable disparity emerged in the path "English learning anxiety → willingness to communicate in English" (Z = −3.262, p < .05), signifying significant differences between male and female groups regarding the association between English learning anxiety and willingness to communicate in English.

Within the female athletes' group, the mediation effect of English learning attitude resulted in English learning anxiety exerting a significantly negative impact on conversational ability in English (γ = −.18, p < .001). Conversely, in the male students' group, attitude towards learning English completely mediated the effect of learning anxiety, leading to no significant influence on their conversational ability in English (γ = .05, p > .05). Consequently, due to the mediation of attitude towards learning English, anxiety exhibited varying effects on the readiness to communicate among male and female athlete participants. The multigroup analysis results validated the H2.

5. Discussion

The total mediation model was utilized to corroborate H1, revealing the significant role of English learning attitude in mediating the association between anxiety in learning English and conversational ability among university athletes (depicted in Figure 3). The outcomes pertaining to H1 signify that anxiety associated with learning English directly and adversely predicted conversational proficiency in

English. This observation underscores the substantial impact of learning anxiety on the reluctance of college athletes to engage in English communication, as noted in previous literature (Li, 2021) (Fujii, 2021; MacIntyre et al., 1998). Anxious athletes often exhibit diminished self-assurance and apprehension regarding receiving unfavourable performance evaluations, thus fostering a disinclination to participate in English communication activities (Liu, 2006). The findings concerning H1 align with Bruner (1957) discovery learning theory and Krashen's (1981) affective filter hypothesis, suggesting that negative emotions stemming from anxiety associated with learning English can impede learning progress and diminish conversational proficiency in English among college athletes. Notably, the results of H1 underscore that anxiety related to learning English can entirely forecast willingness to communicate through the lens of the learning attitude towards English, highlighting the pivotal role of English learning attitude as an emotional determinant (Hvozdíková, 2021). In accordance with Wen et al. (2003) theoretical model of willingness to communicate, athletes harbouring a positive learning attitude towards English are predisposed to greater motivation, consequently enhancing their conversational proficiency in English (Chen et al., 2021). Thus, cultivating reflective practices and adjusting learning attitudes may aid university athletes in surmounting anxiety hurdles and communicating more effectively in English.

H2 was substantiated through multigroup analysis, revealing noteworthy distinctions between male and female university athletes regarding the mediation effects of English learning anxiety on conversational proficiency in English. Among female athletes, English learning attitude served as a partial mediator in this relationship, whereas among male athletes, it acted as a complete mediator, mitigating the adverse impact. A consistent trend was observed across both groups, denoting varying degrees of attenuation in the detrimental effects of anxiety associated with learning English on the aptitude for effective communication. Specifically, female athletes exhibited a partially diminished negative effect, whereas male athletes demonstrated a fully mediated negative effect. These findings imply that English learning anxiety exerts a more pronounced influence on conversational proficiency in English among female athletes compared to their male counterparts.

From a physiological standpoint, the discernible variances in English learning behaviours between genders can be ascribed to discrepancies in brain structure and higher cognitive functions (Keefe, 1982). Notably, men frequently demonstrate a higher prevalence of left hemisphere dominance compared to women (Banich, 1997). This study encompasses university athletes as its cohort. Psychologically, women typically manifest heightened emotional sensitivity, introversion (Razak et al., 2017), susceptibility to external stimuli (Huo, 2009), and an increased propensity for experiencing anxiety in contrast to men. Conversely, men tend to internalize their learning-related anxieties and exhibit a greater inclination towards self-regulation. Conversely, women are more inclined to seek external support when grappling with learning anxiety, and their recovery process tends to be lengthier compared to men (Lewis et al., 2015). These distinctions may also be influenced by factors such as English proficiency and perceived sense of security. For instance, within predominantly patriarchal societies, the social milieu in which women are nurtured and educated can engender feelings of insecurity (Park & French, 2013). Women raised in such contexts often grapple with diminished self-assurance and may harbour sentiments of inferiority, thereby amplifying the impact of anxiety on their willingness to engage in English communication (Rafek et al., 2014). Conversely, the influence of anxiety stemming from English learning on men's readiness to communicate in English appears to be comparatively less pronounced, with their learning attitudes often mitigating this effect.

6. Implications

In this study, university athletes participated as subjects, revealing that the learning attitude towards English serves as a mediator between anxiety related to learning and proficiency in English conversation, a trend observed across both male and female athlete cohorts. These outcomes indicate that disparities in anxiety levels and self-assurance between genders may detrimentally impact the inclination of female university athletes to engage in English communication. To mitigate this challenge, China's Undergraduate Business English Teaching Guidelines for General Colleges and Universities (2020) underscore the necessity for Chinese university students to attain a proficient level of English language skills. Educators should prioritize female students exhibiting elevated anxiety levels and strive to grasp their cultural contexts and learning backgrounds for a more comprehensive understanding of their anxiety patterns (Gerencheal, 2016; Liu & Chen, 2013; Rehman et al., 2022). Additionally, educators should foster a relaxed learning environment and engage in regular conversational interactions with female university athletes to bolster their attitudes towards English learning and alleviate their anxiety (Namy Soghady et al., 2022). By acknowledging and addressing these anxiety concerns, students can cultivate positive learning attitudes, thereby enhancing their overall learning outcomes (Liu, 2021; Zhao, 2022).

7. Limitations and Scope for Future Research

The current study is subject to several limitations. It primarily surveyed a specific region of China and exclusively included university athletes as participants. Future research endeavours should aim for larger sample sizes and extend the scope of inquiry to encompass vocational college and postgraduate students. Such an approach would facilitate a deeper understanding of disparities among diverse demographic groups, yielding more comprehensive and generalizable findings. Furthermore, due to the inherent complexities of investigating multifaceted interactions, this study solely focused on personal factors influencing the English conversational proficiency of university athlete students. Subsequent investigations could incorporate qualitative methods such as interviews to explore additional environmental and personal factors shaping the communicative abilities of university athlete students.

8. Conclusion

This research aimed to explore how gender disparities and English learning anxiety influence the willingness of Chinese university athletes to engage in English communication. The findings underscored the pivotal role of gender in shaping the relationship between learning anxiety and English conversational proficiency among Chinese university athletes. Notably, female athletes exhibited heightened levels of English learning anxiety compared to their male counterparts, underscoring the necessity for additional support and interventions to bolster their confidence in English communication. The study underscored the significance of athletes' perceptions of English learning and their attitudes toward English communication in determining their inclination to engage in English discourse. These results underscore the importance of addressing gender disparities and fostering positive attitudes toward English learning within language education initiatives tailored for athletes. The study holds significant implications for both sports psychology and language education, advocating for the development of targeted interventions aimed at enhancing the English communication abilities of Chinese university athletes.

9. References

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