Original Article

Gender Based Disparities in Anxiety Experienced by Athletes and their Coping Mechanisms

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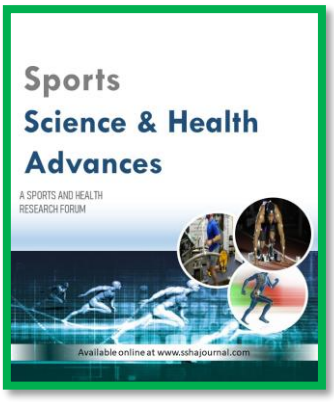

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to examine the anxiety levels experienced by male and female athletes and their coping skills in managing anxiety. The research aimed to address gaps in understanding how psychological traits, beyond biological sex, influence athletes' anxiety and coping strategies. Additionally, the study focused on age- and sport-specific differences by concentrating on younger athletes participating in handball, volleyball, and basketball. **Method:** Data were collected from 60 athletes (30 males and 30 females) aged 12-16 years, representing handball, volleyball, and basketball. The Athletic Coping Skill Inventory-28 and the Sports Anxiety Scale-2 questionnaires were used to assess coping skills and anxiety levels, respectively. Statistical analyses, including descriptive statistics, independent sample t-tests, and Pearson correlation, were conducted using IBM SPSS-27. **Results:** The results showed no statistically significant gender differences in total anxiety ($p = 0.106$), the three sub-domains of anxiety-somatic anxiety ($p = 0.158$), worry ($p = 0.886$), concentration disruption ($p = 0.136$)-or coping skills ($p = 0.903$). However, female athletes exhibited slightly higher anxiety levels than males. Pearson correlation analysis revealed a weak negative relationship between sports anxiety and coping skills for both genders, but these correlations were not statistically significant for males ($r = -0.113$, $p = 0.551$) or females ($r = -0.227$, $p = 0.228$). **Conclusions:** The study concludes that individual psychological traits and training experiences may play a more significant role in shaping anxiety and coping responses than gender alone. The authors recommend future research with larger and more diverse samples to further clarify these relationships and inform targeted psychological interventions for athletes.

Keywords: Sports Anxiety, Coping Skills, Gender Differences, Competitive Athletes, Psychological Resilience

Introduction

The meaning of anxiety is described as “A trait and or state-like response to a stressful sport-related situation, which the individual perceives as potentially stressful, resulting in a range of cognitive appraisals, behavioral responses, and/or physiological arousals” (Ford et al., 2017). Whereas sports-related anxiousness or sports anxiety

refers to an athlete's emotional response to stressors in competitive settings, often manifesting as nervousness, tension, or fear of failure. It is categorized into two categories by Ford et al., (2017): Cognitive anxiety, which causes worry and self-doubt, and somatic anxiety, which involves physical reactions like stiff muscles and a raised heart rate. While extreme anxiety might affect concentration, judgment, and overall athletic performance, moderate anxiety can improve performance. Several researchers investigated the gender disparities in anxiety related to sports, and the findings indicate that social expectations, self-evaluation, and psychological predispositions cause female athletes to express increased anxiety levels as compared to male athletes (Correia & Rosado, 2019; Kushwaha & Tyagi, 2023; Mohamed Ali, 2013). Nonetheless, effective anxiety management can be achieved by coping strategies like goal-setting, relaxation, and constructive self-talk. Sports performance can be positively or negatively impacted by anxiety. While severe anxiety, whether somatic or cognitive, decreases coordination, moderate anxiety increases motivation and focus. According to the inverted-U hypothesis, performance increases as anxiety levels rise to a certain degree, after which excessive anxiety causes performance to fall (Yerkes & Dodson, 1908). The Catastrophe Model emphasizes sudden performance failure brought on by high levels of anxiety and physiological arousal (Hardy & Parfitt, 1991). Athletes can control their anxiety and maintain optimal performance by using coping strategies. Individualized psychological training regimens can enhance mental toughness and overall competitive performance.

The techniques athletes employ to deal with stress, anxiety, and performance pressure are referred to as coping mechanisms or skills in sports. These tactics support concentration, boost self-esteem, and maximize output in competitive settings. Coping can be broadly divided into two categories: emotion-focused coping, which tries to control emotional reactions (e.g., self-talk, mindfulness, relaxation techniques), and problem-focused coping, which actively addresses the source of stress (e.g., goal setting, strategic planning) (Lazarus, 1984). Although avoidance coping strategies like distraction or withdrawal are sometimes less successful over time, athletes may nevertheless employ them. Less experienced athletes might employ emotion-focused or avoidance techniques, and research suggests that elite-level athletes typically rely more on problem-focused coping. Effective coping lessens the detrimental effects of worry, increases mental resilience, and improves decision-making. Cognitive restructuring, Controlled breathing, and Imagery are examples of psychological training that assist athletes in creating individualized coping mechanisms for long-term performance enhancement. Performance, motivation, and stress management are all significantly impacted by gender-based psychological variations in sports. According to previous research, female athletes frequently have higher anxiety and emotional sensitivity levels, which may have an impact on their confidence level and coping mechanisms. The frequent use of focused-emotion coping practices like mindfulness and looking for social support are been employed by female athletes. Male athletes, on the other hand, have a greater level of self-assurance, less worry, and greater resilience on problem-focused coping mechanisms like goal setting and method modification. These variations affect training strategies, coaching techniques, and psychological treatments. Coaches and sports psychologists can create customized tactics that can improve performance, mental toughness, and general well-being in competitive sports by having a better understanding of gender-specific mental reactions.

Objectives of the Study

- To assess the difference in the sports anxiety level between male and female athletes.
- To assess the level of anxiety experienced by athletes of the Sports Anxiety Scale-2 (Somatic Anxiety, Concentration Disruption, Worry).
- To analyses gender differences in coping skills.
- To determine whether coping strategies and anxiety are correlated within gender groups.

Significance of the Study

Enhancing athlete performance, mental toughness, and psychological well-being requires research on gender differences in sports anxiety and coping mechanisms. Anxiety is experienced and managed differently by male and female athletes, which affects their self-esteem, concentration, and performance in competition. Coaches, psychologists, and sports experts can create customized training plans, enhance stress management methods, and maximize mental health initiatives by being aware of these distinctions. This study helps to develop more effective interventions, promote equal opportunities, and encourage long-term athletic performance across all sports disciplines by identifying gender-specific coping mechanisms.

Research Gap

1. There is a lack of research investigating how individual psychological traits and training experiences, rather than gender alone, influence anxiety and coping mechanisms among young athletes.
2. Existing studies rarely explore sport-specific and age-specific differences in anxiety and coping skills, particularly among adolescent athletes across different team sports such as handball, volleyball, and basketball.
3. Most prior research has not sufficiently examined the relationship between coping strategies and anxiety within gender groups using larger and more diverse athlete samples to clarify the nuanced interplay between these variables.

Review of Literature

Anxiety, as described, is "A trait and/or state-like responses to a stressful sport-related situation, which the individual perceives as potentially stressful, resulting in a range of cognitive appraisals, behavioral responses, and/or physiological arousals" (Ford et al., 2017). The feeling that appears in stressful or risky situations is called anxiety. Although it is a normal response to danger, it could be regarded as an anxiety disorder if it persists for a long period or becomes overwhelming (Dean, 2016). Whereas Sports anxiety is "A complicated adverse feeling, comprising a combination of physical, psychological, and cognitive symptoms" (Martens et al., 1990). Additionally, a greater degree of anxiety related to sports is competition anxiousness, described as "A sentiment of worry when an upcoming situation is perceived as threatening by the individual. It arises due to a state of competition or disagreement" (Mellalieu et al., 2015). Smith & Smoll, (1990) discussed the two main components of sports anxiety: 1. The mental component of anxiety, known as "cognitive anxiety", is characterized by negative thoughts, performance concern, and self-doubt. It involves overthinking, fear of failure, and reduced concentration. A high level of competition anxiety impairs concentration and decision-making, which lowers performance in competitive sports. Athletes experiencing high cognitive anxiety expect bad things to happen, which makes them more stressed. 2. The physical component of anxiety, known as "somatic anxiety", describes the physical signs of anxiety, such as stiff muscles, perspiration, nausea, and an accelerated heartbeat. It frequently appears before or during competitions and is a physiological reaction to stress. By raising awareness, moderate somatic anxiety can improve performance. Excessive somatic anxiety, on the other hand, might impede performance by causing tense muscles and poor coordination. As athletes' performance is inversely proportional with increasing anxiety. Cosma et al., (2020) said that coping mechanisms enable athletes to control the pressure, tension, and anxiety associated with competition, which ultimately determines whether they succeed or fail in high-stakes situations. Lazarus, (2000) describes the mechanism of coping as "Constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person". Crocher et al., (1998) gave three main strategies of coping that athletes employ to control anxiety: 1. Problem-Focused Coping- it involves directly addressing the stressors (e.g., strategic planning, enhancing abilities, modifying training techniques, 2. Emotion-focused

coping: Using techniques like visualization, positive-self talk, and relaxation to manage emotional suffering instead of resolving the issue; and 3. Avoidance Coping: Physically or mentally removing oneself from stressful situations (e.g., ignoring pressure, disengaging from competition). Roth & Cohen, (1979) advised that problem-focused coping is typically more successful than avoidance techniques, which, over time, may cause performance to decline. To look into how coping mechanisms and competitive anxiety differ between genders, Ivaskevych et al., (2019) sampled a total of 35 junior handball athletes having an average age of 15.63. Participants were chosen by the Handball Federation of Ukraine, guaranteeing that each one was extremely talented and actively participating at the national level. The findings suggest that compared to males, female athletes scored significantly higher on competitive anxiety (p=0.007). Female athletes were more likely to accept responsibility as a coping mechanism (p=0.006), and High levels of self-blame (common in female athletes) correlate with higher anxiety and lower confidence. Mukherjee, (2023) assesses the gender difference in the competitive anxiety level of female and male volleyball athletes. Using convenient random selection, he selected 126 female and 55 male players from India's 47th Junior National Volleyball Championship. The study used the Sports Anxiety Scale 2 on three sub-domains: worry, concentration disruption, and somatic anxiety. The study's conclusion showed that male and female athletes' anxiety levels did not differ much. While the worry, somatic anxiety, and overall anxiety levels of female athletes were somewhat higher. Although the results did not show a statistically significant difference. However, male athletes displayed more concentration disruptions, contradicting earlier studies that claimed, compared to male athletes, female athletes experienced significantly higher levels of anxiety. Okros et al., (2020) aimed to examine how elite Hungarian Junior Handball players differ in their coping mechanisms according to their age, gender, and location on the field. 288 junior male and female players were selected with age groups ranging from 14-15 years, 16-17 years, and 18-19 years. Stratified random sampling was used to ensure diversity across different age groups. Coping skills in various age groups were assessed using the Athletic Coping Skills Inventory-28. The findings revealed: 1. Male athletes performed better in the areas of freedom from worry and coping with adversity. In contrast, female athletes performed better in the areas of coachability, goal-setting, and mental preparation. Age-based differences in coping suggest that older athletes (U19) scored highest in Freedom from worry, showing experience reduces competitive anxiety. Meanwhile, younger athletes (U15) scored highest in coachability.

Methods

Participants

The research utilized purposive sampling method to choose the participants. In particular, it consisted of selecting 30 male and 30 female students from three sports disciplines: Handball, Volleyball and Basketball, with all the selected students having not less than three years of training. This method was intended to capture a certain subset of athletes who practice actively for competition so as to hone in on issues relating to anxiety and the coping strategies such athletes employ in sports.

Instruments

To assess the anxiety level of both the male and female participants, the researcher used the Sports Anxiety Scale-2 (SAS-2) developed by (Smith et al., 2006). The questionnaire consists of 15 questions. Three sub-scales: somatic anxiety, concentration disruption, and worry are included in the 15-question survey. A 4-point Likert Scale was used to measure the responses. To evaluate the coping skills of male and female athletes, the researcher used the Athletic Coping Skills Inventory-28 (ACSI-28) developed by (Smith et al., 2016) Consisting of a 5-sub scale of coping mechanisms: Coping with Adversity, Peaking Under Pressure, Goal Setting/Mental Preparation, Concentration, and Freedom from Worry. The responses were again measured on a 4-point Likert Scale.

Statistical Analysis: The researcher analysed the data using the software IBM SPSS-27 Version. First, the researcher computed the descriptive statistics. Then, the normality of the data of both the SAS-2 and ACSI-28 questionnaires was checked by the use of the Shapiro-Wilk test, which was under a 5% significance level. Based on the Normality of the data, the Independent Sample t-test was used to compare the female and male participants on sub-scales of SAS-2, Total Anxiety, and Coping Skills. The relationship between the male and female athletes' coping skills and sports anxiety was then determined using the Pearson Correlation test.

Result

The test of normality of data by the Shapiro-Wilk test in Table No. 1 showed that the scores of Total Anxiety, Coping Skills, and sub-scales of Sports Anxiety Scale-2 of both genders are normally distributed. The significance level of the Shapiro-Wilk test was set to 5% Level of Significance.

Table 1 Normality of the data of Male and Female Athletes gathered by SAS-2 and ACSI-28

Variables	Gender	Statistics	df.	Sig.
Somatic Anxiety	Males	.936	30	.072
	Females	.965	30	.423
Concentration Disruption	Males	.958	30	.268
	Females	.926	30	.037
Worry	Males	.967	30	.454
	Females	.969	30	.502
Totally Anxiety	Males	.964	30	.380
	Females	.962	30	.347
Coping Skills	Males	.980	30	.817
	Females	.960	30	.304

Since the scores of Coping Skills, Total Anxiety, and the sub-scales of Sports Anxiety Scale-2 athletes of both the genders are distributed normally. An independent sample t-test was computed to identify the difference of Gender on three sub-scales of SAS-2 and Total Anxiety of athletes. The Significance Levels of the Independent Sample t-test were set to 5% Level of significance.

Table 2 Normality of the data of Male and Female Athletes on the Athletic Coping Skill Inventory-2

Variables	Gender	Statistics	df.	Sig.
Coping with Adversity	Male	.940	30	.091
	Female	.939	30	.087
Peaking with Pressure	Male	.910	30	.015
	Female	.963	30	.378
Goal Setting	Male	.978	30	.781
	Female	.955	30	.224
Concentration	Male	.943	30	.109
	Female	.947	30	.137
Freedom from Worry	Male	.928	30	.045
	Female	.968	30	.490
Confidence and Achievement Motivation	Male	.940	30	.092
	Female	.950	30	.170
Coachability	Male	.939	30	.084
	Female	.889	30	.005
Coping Skill	Male	.980	30	.817
	Female	.960	30	.304

Table 3 Independent Sample t-test of both Genders on different Sub-scale of SAS-2 and Coping Skills

Anxiety-Subdomains	Male		Female		t-value	df	Sig.
	M	SD	M	SD			
Somatic Anxiety	2.40	0.47	2.58	0.46	-1.430	58	.158
Concentration Disruption	2.36	0.41	2.56	0.56	-1.513	58	.136
Worry	2.47	0.52	2.45	0.55	0.143	58	.886
Total Anxiety	2.41	0.28	2.53	0.25	-1.643	58	.106
Coping Skills	1.47	0.25	1.46	0.26	0.123	58	.903

As Table 3 indicates, there is no significant difference between Coping Skills, Anxiety experienced by male and female athletes during the competitive phase, and the Sub-domains of Anxiety. Somehow, the mean score of female athletes on Somatic Anxiety, Concentration Disruption, and Anxiety experienced were quite high as compared to the male athletes, though not statistically significant. To determine how anxiety and coping mechanism are related between male and female athletes. The statistical test Pearson Correlation was used for both genders.

Table 4 Independent Sample t-test of both Genders on different sub-scales of ACSI-28

Coping-Subdomains	Male		Female		t-value	df.	Sig.
	M	SD	M	SD			
Coping with Adversity	5.56	2.40	5.46	2.40	0.161	58	.873
Peaking with Pressure	5.06	2.44	6.26	2.43	-1.904	58	.062
Goal-Setting	6.40	2.42	5.30	2.26	1.815	58	.075
Concentration	6.23	2.31	5.83	2.26	0.677	58	.501
Freedom from Worry	5.73	2.21	6.10	2.42	-0.612	58	.543
Confidence and Achievement Motivation	5.96	1.97	6.03	2.18	-0.124	58	.902
Coachability	6.23	2.47	5.96	2.78	0.392	58	.696
Overall Coping Skill	1.47	0.25	1.46	2.68	0.123	58	.903

The independent sample t-test shows that there isn't many gender-based differences in athletes' coping strategies, according to the mean score and p-value shown in Table 4. Although the difference came close to but fell short of statistically significant (p=.062), female athletes reported a higher mean score (M=6.26) in the subdomain Peaking with Pressure than male athletes (M=5.06), indicating that they might perform better under competitive stress. Similarly, male athletes scored higher on the goal-setting scale (M=6.40) than women (M=5.30), suggesting that men have a stronger goal-setting inclination. However, this difference was not statistically significant (p-value=.075). For all other subdomains- Coping with Adversity, Concentration, Freedom from worry, Confidence and Achievement Motivation, Coachability, and Overall Coping Skill, the mean score between genders is quite similar, and the p-value (ranging from .501 to .903) confirmed no significant difference. These findings suggest that while a slight trend exists in specific areas, overall coping skills of male and female athletes are largely comparable.

Table 5 Results of Pearson Correlation between male and female athletes coping skills and sports anxiety

Variables	Male Participants (r)	Male Participants Sig.	Female Participants (r)	Female Participants Sig.
Sports Anxiety and Coping Skills	-0.113	.551	-0.227	.228

There is no statistically significant correlation between male and female athletes coping skills and sports anxiety, according to the Pearson Correlation Coefficient (r). The

Significance level of the Pearson Correlation of both gender is more than the 5% Level of Significance. However, a weak negative correlation exists between anxiety experienced by athletes and their Coping mechanisms of both Genders, though not statistically significant, suggesting that as Coping Skills increase, Anxiety tends to decrease, but the relationship is weak. Female athletes (r = -0.227) are better in managing Anxiety with proper Coping Strategies as compared to Male athletes (r = -0.113).

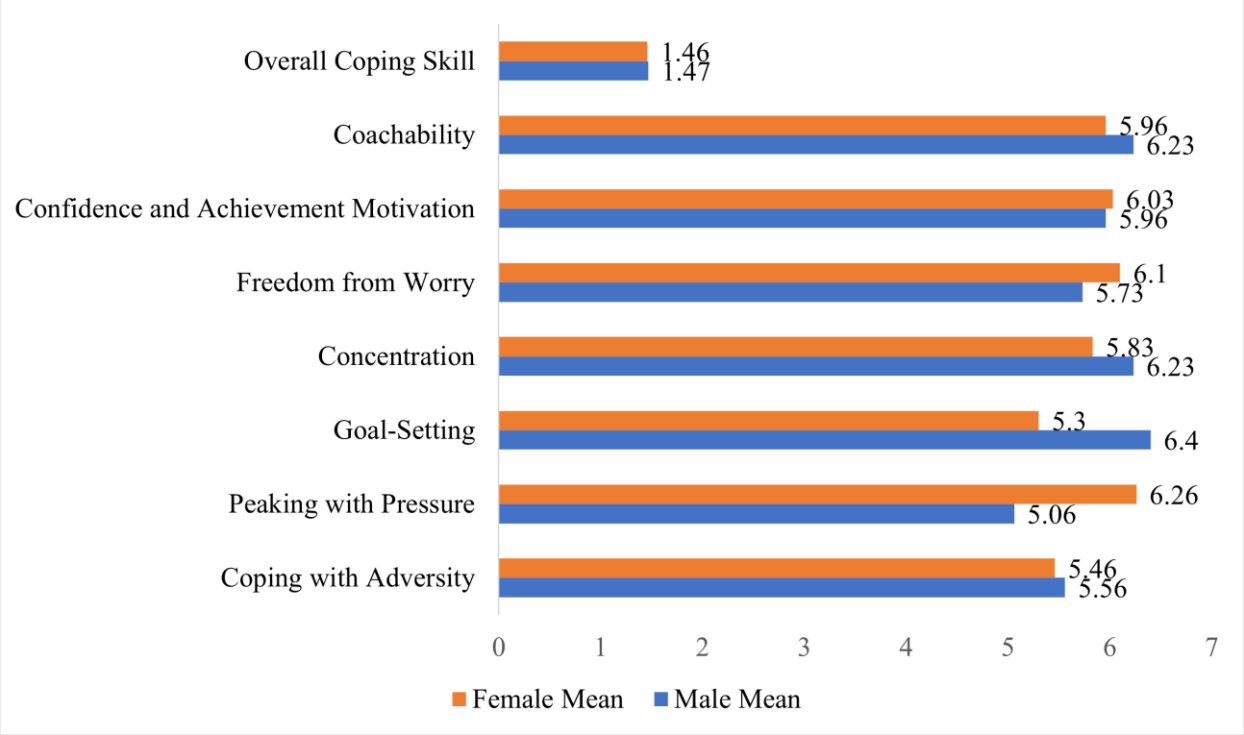

Figure 2 Graphical presentation of mean score of overall coping Skills and sub scale of ACSI-28

Discussion

The current study looked at how competitive athletes' coping mechanisms and sports anxiety varied by gender. The findings of the study showed no statistically significant differences presents between both the genders in any of the anxiety subdomains, including Somatic Anxiety (p = 0.158), Worry (p = 0.886), Concentration Disruption (p = 0.136), and Total Anxiety (p = 0.106), according to the result of the independent sample t-test. Similarly, there was no notable variation in Coping Skills between the two genders (p = 0.903). The statistical results imply that male and female athletes use similar Coping strategies and have similar degrees of anxiety related to sports. The negative but insignificant relationship between coping mechanisms and sports anxiety in both male (r =-0.113, p = .551) and female (r = -0.227, p =.228) participants indicates that high Coping skills may be associated with lower Anxiety levels, though the relationship is not statically significant. Previous research indicates that gender-based disparities in anxiety and coping may be sports-specific or impacted by training experiences and psychological resilience (Nicholls et al., 2015; Ntoumanis & Biddle, 2000). The current study's lack of substantial gender differences is consistent with earlier research findings that indicate that individual psychological characteristics, rather than just biological sex, influence anxiety and coping behavior (Weinberg & Gould, 2023). The complex association between gender, sports anxiety, and coping strategies may become clear with the use of a large sample size in future studies.

Conclusion

As per the study's findings, competitive athletes' coping mechanisms and sports anxiety do not significantly differ by gender. Although somatic anxiety and concentration disruption were marginally higher in female athletes, these differences were not statistically significant. Likewise, there was a weak negative relationship between anxiety and coping strategies in both groups, and coping abilities were similar for male and female athletes. These findings suggest that psychological characteristics and training experiences may influence anxiety and coping mechanisms more significantly than gender alone. Further studies with bigger sample sizes and a focus on a particular activity may shed more light on the complex connection between anxiety and coping mechanisms, which could ultimately help create a specialized mental training plan for athletes.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, it is recommended that psychological training programs for young athletes integrate gender-sensitive strategies that address both anxiety and coping mechanisms. Coaches and sports psychologists should tailor interventions to enhance emotional resilience in female athletes and strengthen goal-setting and concentration skills in males. Future studies with larger, more diverse samples are also encouraged to validate these findings and develop targeted mental training modules that support sustained performance and mental well-being in competitive sports environments.

Conflict of Interest: No complicit of interest declared among authors

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