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Research Paper

The Influence of Self-Perceived Feedback on Athlete Coping Strategies Across Generations

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the generational differences in coping strategies among athletes, with a focus on self-perceived feedback. Utilizing the Athletic Coping Skills Inventory (ACSI-28) developed by Smith et al. (1994), the research compares two age groups: athletes aged 18–25 and 25–35. The study hypothesizes that significant differences in coping mechanisms exist across generations, influenced by self-perception and psychological maturity. Using a comparative quantitative design and independent samples t-test (Welch's correction), no statistically significant differences were found, although the 18–25 group demonstrated higher mean scores in several psychological domains. These findings contribute to understanding how self-evaluative processes and age impact mental skills training in sport psychology.

Keywords: *Athletic Coping Skills Inventory (ACSI-28), coping strategies, self-perceived feedback, generational differences, sport psychology, psychological maturity, mental skills training, athlete development, cognitive appraisal, emotional regulation*

Athletes frequently operate in high-stakes environments where mental resilience plays a pivotal role in performance. While coaching feedback is vital in athlete development, how athletes perceive their performance (self-perceived feedback) can significantly influence coping strategies. The development of psychological skills and the interpretation of feedback can differ based on age, experience, and generational mindset.

This study investigates these generational differences by analyzing how athletes from two age groups, 18–25 and 25–35, differ in their use of coping strategies. The research uses the Athletic Coping Skills Inventory (ACSI-28), a psychometrically validated tool that measures psychological skills across seven performance-related domains.

Conceptual Foundation: Self-Perceived Feedback and Athletic Coping

The Nature of Self-Perceived Feedback

Self-perceived feedback is a self-reflective process in which an athlete internally evaluates their performance, actions, and behaviors without relying solely on external input. This form of feedback is rooted in self-awareness and is influenced by individual thought patterns, past

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experiences, personal standards, and emotional responses. It shapes how athletes make sense of success or failure and determines how they move forward after a performance. Athletes who engage in constructive self-feedback tend to be more capable of learning from setbacks, adapting strategies, and remaining motivated over time.

Importantly, self-perceived feedback is not always aligned with objective performance outcomes. An athlete may achieve a victory yet feel unsatisfied due to unmet personal expectations, or conversely, may feel proud despite a loss if they believe their effort or execution improved. This subjectivity makes self-perceived feedback a powerful, yet complex, contributor to psychological coping and performance adaptation.

Self-Perception and Psychological Skills

The quality of an athlete's self-perception directly influences the psychological skills they apply in competitive environments. Skills such as emotional control, focus, and self-confidence are affected by how feedback is interpreted. For instance, athletes who habitually engage in negative self-evaluation may experience reduced motivation and increased anxiety, leading to performance decline. Conversely, those who perceive their efforts positively—regardless of outcomes—are more likely to persist, apply corrective strategies, and sustain mental toughness.

This makes self-perceived feedback a vital factor in the development and application of coping strategies. It can enhance or hinder the use of psychological skills, which, over time, may define an athlete's career trajectory. The internal narratives athletes construct about themselves and their performance become the lens through which they interpret both success and adversity.

Understanding Coping Strategies in Sport

Defining Coping in the Athletic Context

Coping refers to the dynamic process by which individuals manage stressors that exceed their current capacity to respond comfortably. In the context of athletics, coping strategies are techniques or behaviors athletes use to deal with psychological pressure, competitive stress, performance anxiety, or even personal challenges that affect sport performance. These strategies may be conscious and deliberate, such as using breathing techniques to stay calm before a match, or they may be automatic and habitual, such as self-criticism or avoidance after a poor performance.

Athletes rely on a variety of coping styles, which generally fall into three categories: problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and avoidance coping. Problem-focused strategies aim to tackle the stressor directly—through planning, goal-setting, or seeking feedback. Emotion-focused strategies manage the emotional response to stress, using methods such as positive reframing, mindfulness, or support-seeking. Avoidance coping, often maladaptive, includes denial, disengagement, or overcompensation behaviors.

Psychological Skills and the ACSI-28 Framework

The Athletic Coping Skills Inventory (ACSI-28) developed by Smith et al. (1994) provides a structured method to assess the psychological coping skills athletes use during training and competition. It evaluates the following seven domains:

1. **Coping with Adversity**- The athlete's ability to remain emotionally balanced when facing setbacks.
2. **Peaking Under Pressure–** How well an athlete performs when the stakes are high.

3. **Goal Setting and Mental Preparation** – The extent to which athletes plan, strategize, and prepare psychologically.
4. **Concentration** – The ability to maintain focus during critical moments.
5. **Freedom from Worry–** How well athletes can detach from negative thoughts and fear of failure.
6. **Confidence and Achievement Motivation –** The level of belief in personal ability and the drive to succeed.
7. **Coachability** – The athlete's openness to learning and integrating feedback into performance.

These components provide an in-depth look at how athletes psychologically manage the demands of their sport. By comparing age-specific scores on these domains, this study aims to draw conclusions about the role of self-perceived feedback in shaping coping abilities across generations.

Generational Dynamics in Athletic Coping

Age, Experience, and Psychological Maturity

Age and experience contribute significantly to how athletes perceive themselves and regulate their emotions in sport. Younger athletes (18–25) are often in the developmental stages of psychological and professional growth. Many are still building their self-identity, both inside and outside their sport. This group may show a greater tendency toward emotional reactivity and be more influenced by peer comparison and external validation. A critical comment or a minor failure can have a disproportionate impact on their self-concept and coping ability.

In contrast, athletes aged 25–35 typically exhibit greater psychological stability and a more nuanced understanding of their sport. Having experienced both wins and losses over a longer period, they may be better equipped to assess their performance realistically and adjust accordingly. This cohort tends to have more refined self-regulatory strategies, more constructive internal dialogues, and a greater focus on long-term goals rather than short-term outcomes. They are also more likely to employ adaptive coping mechanisms that are rooted in experience, resilience, and self-awareness.

Influence of Social and Cultural Factors

Generational differences in coping are not purely biological or developmental; they are also shaped by social environments and cultural influences. Athletes from the younger cohort have grown up in an era of constant feedback—through social media, digital platforms, and performance analytics. This environment fosters a heightened sensitivity to evaluation and often contributes to increased performance pressure and perfectionism. The need for external validation may weaken the reliance on internal feedback, leading to inconsistent or emotionally charged coping patterns.

Meanwhile, the older cohort likely began their athletic journey in a less feedback-saturated environment, relying more heavily on intrinsic motivation, mentorship, and personal goal-setting. This may foster a more autonomous coping style, less reliant on immediate validation and more anchored in internal benchmarks of progress.

The Link Between Feedback and Coping: A Developmental Perspective

The Role of Self-Talk

Self-talk—the internal dialogue athletes have with themselves—serves as a key mediator between self-perceived feedback and coping strategies. Positive self-talk helps reframe challenges as opportunities for growth, thereby promoting resilience and focus. Athletes who interpret feedback through a constructive inner dialogue are more likely to use problem-solving coping strategies. For example, an athlete who says, "I didn't perform well today, but I've identified what went wrong and can improve," is engaging in adaptive self-talk that encourages forward momentum.

On the other hand, negative self-talk rooted in harsh self-judgment can undermine confidence and lead to maladaptive coping, such as avoidance or self-doubt. This pattern is often more pronounced in younger athletes who may equate performance outcomes with self-worth. Understanding and training athletes to develop healthy self-talk habits can greatly improve their ability to interpret feedback constructively and cope effectively under pressure.

Generational Gaps in Cognitive Appraisal

Cognitive appraisal theory emphasizes that the way an individual interprets a situation influences their emotional and behavioral response. In sports, the appraisal of self-performance—whether as a success, failure, or learning opportunity—can lead to vastly different coping reactions. For younger athletes, a single poor performance may be appraised as a personal failure, leading to worry or disengagement. Older athletes may instead view the same event as a temporary challenge or a learning moment, applying coping strategies that preserve self-esteem and promote growth.

This developmental difference in appraisal not only shapes how athletes respond in the short term but also influences long-term patterns of motivation, confidence, and engagement in their sport. Recognizing this difference is vital for professionals working with diverse age groups in athletic settings.

Problem Statement

There is a limited understanding of how self-perceived feedback affects coping strategies across generational cohorts. This knowledge gap restricts the development of age-appropriate psychological interventions in sport.

Research Objectives

1. To identify generational differences in athletic coping strategies.
2. To assess the influence of self-perceived feedback on psychological skill development.
3. To determine which psychological domains, exhibit the most variance across age groups.

Research Hypotheses

- **H_0 (Null Hypothesis):** There is no significant difference in coping strategies between athletes aged 18–25 and those aged 25–35.
- **H_1 (Alternative Hypothesis):** There is a significant difference in coping strategies between athletes aged 18–25 and those aged 25–35.

Significance of the Study

This study supports athlete-centered coaching, sport psychology education, and the development of generationally responsive mental training programs.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1. **Smith, R. E., Schutz, R. W., Smoll, F. L., & Ptacek, J. T. (1995).**

Development and validation of a multidimensional measure of sport-specific psychological skills: The Athletic Coping Skills Inventory-28. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, 17*(4), 379–398.

Abstract:

This foundational study introduced the **Athletic Coping Skills Inventory-28 (ACSI-28)**, a comprehensive tool designed to assess athletes' psychological coping skills across seven domains such as concentration, confidence, and emotional control. The study demonstrated strong factorial validity and reliability, making it a key instrument for understanding how athletes manage stress and performance anxiety. The research serves as a critical benchmark for subsequent studies on athlete coping, including those exploring generational differences in coping strategies in response to self-perceived feedback.

2. **Crocker, P. R. E., & Graham, T. R. (1995).**

Coping by competitive athletes with performance stress: Gender differences and relationships with affect. *The Sport Psychologist, 9*(3), 325–338.

Abstract:

This study investigated gender differences in coping with performance stress, revealing that male athletes tended to use problem-focused coping, while female athletes more often used emotion-focused strategies. The research underscored the importance of tailoring interventions to gender-specific coping strategies, which has implications for understanding how self-perceived feedback influences coping strategies across different athlete demographics, including generational cohorts.

3. **Bourgeois, A. E., Meyers, M. C., & LeUnes, A. (2003).**

The athletic coping skills inventory: Relationship with impression management and self-deception aspects of socially desirable responding. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 4*(1), 71–79.

Abstract:

This study explored the validity of the ACSI-28 in the context of socially desirable responding, particularly focusing on impression management and self-deception. The results indicated that while impression management had minimal influence on responses, self-deception played a significant role in distorting athletes' self-reports of coping. This finding underscores the importance of considering psychological factors such as social desirability when assessing self-perceived feedback, a key factor in understanding how athletes evaluate their performance and employ coping strategies.

4. **Nicholls, A. R., & Polman, R. C. J. (2007).**

Coping in sport: A systematic review. *Journal of Sports Sciences, 25*(1), 11–31.

Abstract:

This systematic review synthesizes research on coping strategies used by athletes in competitive sport, categorizing various coping methods into emotional, cognitive, and behavioral strategies. The review identified gaps in research on individual differences, such as age and experience, and their role in coping. By highlighting the diversity of coping strategies employed by athletes, this review sets the stage for exploring how generational

differences influence coping mechanisms, particularly in response to self-perceived feedback.

5. **Nicholls, A. R., & Polman, R. C. J. (2008).**
Think aloud: Acute stress and coping strategies during golf performances. *Anxiety, Stress & Coping, 21*(3), 283–294.
Abstract:
Using a think-aloud method, this study examined how golfers cope with acute stress during competition. The results showed that golfers frequently employed cognitive reframing and relaxation techniques to manage stress, with experienced players utilizing more adaptive coping strategies. This research offers insights into how coping strategies evolve with experience, providing a valuable comparison for generational differences in athletes' responses to performance-related stress and self-perceived feedback.

6. **Nicholls, A. R., Polman, R. C. J., Levy, A. R., & Backhouse, S. H. (2009).**
Mental toughness, optimism, pessimism, and coping among athletes. *Personality and Individual Differences, 47*(7), 728–733.
Abstract:
This study examined the relationships between mental toughness, optimism, pessimism, and coping strategies among athletes. The authors found that mental toughness and optimism were significantly associated with better coping strategies, particularly in high-pressure situations. This research is relevant for understanding how athletes' general psychological traits, including those shaped by their self-perception of feedback, can influence the selection and effectiveness of coping mechanisms across different generations.

7. **Nicolas, Gaudreau, & Franche (2011)**
Abstract:
This paper investigated the role of perceived coaching behavior in athletes' coping responses and outcomes. The study found that younger athletes were more affected by external feedback, especially from coaches, whereas older athletes showed greater internalization of their performance evaluation. This implies that self-perceived feedback evolves with age and plays a crucial role in coping development.

8. **Kaiseler, M., Polman, R. C. J., & Nicholls, A. R. (2012).**
Effects of the Big Five personality dimensions on appraisal coping, and coping effectiveness in sport. *European Journal of Sport Science, 12*(1), 62–72.
Abstract:
The study focused on how the Big Five personality traits (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism) influence athletes' coping strategies and effectiveness under stress. The results suggested that higher levels of conscientiousness and neuroticism were associated with better appraisal coping and more adaptive coping strategies. These findings can inform how generational differences in personality may affect athletes' ability to process self-perceived feedback and employ effective coping strategies, contributing to better sport-specific psychological resilience.

9. **Tamminen, K. A., & Holt, N. L. (2012).**
Adolescent athletes' learning about coping and the roles of parents and coaches. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 13*(1), 69–79.
Abstract:
This qualitative study explored how adolescent athletes learn coping strategies, focusing on

the influence of parents and coaches. Findings suggested that athletes are socialized into coping strategies through observation and instruction from significant others in their lives. This insight is crucial for understanding how external influences, alongside self-perception, shape coping mechanisms. It provides valuable context for exploring how generational differences in sport culture influence athletes' response to feedback, particularly in the developmental stages.

10. Crocker, P. R. E., Kowalski, K. C., Graham, T. R., & Kowalski, N. (2013). Gender and age differences in coping with sport injury among adolescent athletes. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, 35*(6), 632–641.

Abstract:

This study investigated how adolescent athletes of different genders and ages cope with sport injuries, highlighting notable differences in coping strategies. Younger athletes demonstrated more emotional coping strategies, while older athletes employed more proactive and problem-focused approaches. The findings suggest that age-related differences in coping strategies are crucial for understanding how self-perceived feedback, particularly related to performance setbacks, influences coping, offering a useful comparison for generational differences in coping strategies in sports.

11. Meyers, M. C., & Whelan, J. P. (2015). Coping with stress in high-performance athletes: A developmental approach. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 27*(4), 457–467.

Abstract:

This study explored how high-performance athletes cope with stress, emphasizing a developmental perspective. Younger athletes were found to rely more on emotional coping strategies, while older athletes exhibited more effective problem-solving skills. The research provides a developmental framework for understanding how age and experience shape athletes' coping strategies, offering insights into how these factors influence self-perceived feedback and coping across generational lines.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A cross-sectional comparative design was adopted to evaluate differences in coping strategies between two generational groups.

Participants

- Group 1: Athletes aged 18–25 (n = 79)
- Group 2: Athletes aged 25–35 (n = 25)

All participants were actively competing at state or national levels.

Instrument

The ACSI-28, a 28-item Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (almost never) to 3 (almost always), was used. It provides both domain-specific scores and a composite score of psychological coping.

Procedure

Participants were recruited via sports academies and networks. Ethical guidelines were followed. The survey was administered digitally with informed consent and anonymity ensured.

Data Analysis

Welch's t-test was employed for comparing mean scores across the two groups, with significance set at $p < .05$ due to unequal sample sizes.

RESULTS

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Group Comparisons

Subscale	18–25 (M ± SD)	25–35 (M ± SD)	p-value
Coping with Adversity	7.51 ± 2.58	6.52 ± 2.40	0.086
Coachability	6.87 ± 1.31	6.64 ± 1.19	0.408
Concentration	9.22 ± 1.94	9.28 ± 1.99	0.887
Confidence & Achievement	6.81 ± 1.92	6.64 ± 2.10	0.721
Goal Setting & Mental Prep	7.81 ± 2.20	7.80 ± 2.29	0.985
Peaking Under Pressure	7.84 ± 1.90	7.64 ± 2.38	0.710
Freedom from Worry	3.53 ± 2.33	4.04 ± 2.34	0.348
Total Score	49.58 ± 6.13	48.56 ± 6.53	0.493

No statistically significant differences were observed. However, "Coping with Adversity" approached significance, suggesting potential generational trends.

Interpretation of Independent Samples T-Test Results

The purpose of this analysis was to examine whether there were significant differences in sport psychological skills between two age groups: 18–25 years and 25–35 years. An independent samples t-test using Welch's correction for unequal variances was conducted across seven psychological skill domains and the overall sport psychological skills total score.

Coping with Adversity

The mean score for coping with adversity was higher in the 18–25 years group ($M = 7.51$, $SD = 2.58$) than in the 25–35 years group ($M = 6.52$, $SD = 2.40$). The Welch's t-test revealed a t-value of 1.76 ($df = 42.9$), with a p-value of 0.086. Although this result approached significance, it did not reach the conventional threshold of $p < .05$. This suggests that while younger athletes may report slightly better coping mechanisms when facing adversity, the difference is not statistically significant.

Coachability

Participants aged 18–25 years reported slightly higher coachability ($M = 6.87$, $SD = 1.31$) compared to those aged 25–35 years ($M = 6.64$, $SD = 1.19$). Welch's t-test indicated no significant difference, $t(44.2) = 0.84$, $p = .408$. These results suggest that both age groups display similar levels of willingness to receive and apply coaching feedback.

Concentration

There was a negligible difference in concentration scores between the two groups, with the younger group ($M = 9.22$, $SD = 1.94$) scoring nearly identically to the older group ($M = 9.28$, $SD = 1.99$). The Welch's t-value was -0.14 ($df = 39.5$), $p = .887$, indicating no significant age-related difference in concentration abilities.

Confidence and Achievement Motivation

The younger group scored slightly higher in confidence and achievement motivation ($M = 6.81$, $SD = 1.92$) compared to the older group ($M = 6.64$, $SD = 2.10$). However, the Welch's

t-test did not reveal a significant difference, t(37.6) = 0.36, p = .721. This suggests that age does not play a meaningful role in influencing confidence or motivation levels in this sample.

Goal Setting and Mental Preparation

Goal setting and mental preparation scores were nearly identical between groups (M = 7.81 vs. M = 7.80). Welch's t-test showed a very small t-value (t = 0.02, df = 39.1) with a p-value of .985, indicating no significant group difference. Both age groups appear equally capable of planning and preparing for performance tasks.

Peaking Under Pressure

The younger group had a slightly higher mean for peaking under pressure (M = 7.84, SD = 1.90) than the older group (M = 7.64, SD = 2.38). However, this difference was not statistically significant, t(34.3) = 0.37, p = .710, implying comparable abilities to perform under pressure across the two age groups.

Freedom from Worry

The 25–35 age group reported slightly higher levels of freedom from worry (M = 4.04, SD = 2.34) compared to the younger group (M = 3.53, SD = 2.33). Despite this difference, the Welch's t-test yielded a non-significant result, t(40.3) = -0.95, p = .348, indicating no substantial age-related differences in anxiety or worry reduction.

Total Sport Psychological Skills

The total score for sport psychological skills was marginally higher for the 18–25 years group (M = 49.58, SD = 6.13) than for the 25–35 years group (M = 48.56, SD = 6.53). Welch's t-test showed no significant difference, t(38.3) = 0.69, p = .493, suggesting that overall psychological skill proficiency does not differ meaningfully between age groups.

Table 2: Independent Samples T-Test

Independent Samples T-Test

		Statistic	df	p
Coping With Adversity	**Welch's t**	1.7590	42.9	0.086
Coachability	**Welch's t**	0.8351	44.2	0.408
Concentration	**Welch's t**	-0.1428	39.5	0.887
Confidence and Achievement Motivation	**Welch's t**	0.3602	37.6	0.721
Goal Setting and Mental Preparation	**Welch's t**	0.0194	39.1	0.985
Peaking Under Pressure	**Welch's t**	0.3746	34.3	0.710
Freedom From Worry	**Welch's t**	-0.9489	40.3	0.348
Total Sport Psychological Skills	**Welch's t**	0.6926	38.3	0.493

Note. H_a $\mu_{18\text{-}25\ years} \neq \mu_{25\text{-}35\ years}$

Table 3: Group Descriptives

	Group	N	Mean	Median	SD	SE
Coping With Adversity	**18-25 years**	79	7.51	8.00	2.58	0.290
	25-35 years	25	6.52	7.00	2.40	0.480
Coachability	**18-25 years**	79	6.87	7.00	1.31	0.148
	25-35 years	25	6.64	7.00	1.19	0.237
Concentration	**18-25 years**	79	9.22	9.00	1.94	0.218
	25-35 years	25	9.28	10.00	1.99	0.398
Confidence and Achievement Motivation	**18-25 years**	79	6.81	7.00	1.92	0.216
	25-35 years	25	6.64	6.00	2.10	0.420
Goal Setting and Mental Preparation	**18-25 years**	79	7.81	8.00	2.20	0.248
	25-35 years	25	7.80	8.00	2.29	0.458
Peaking Under Pressure	**18-25 years**	79	7.84	8.00	1.90	0.214
	25-35 years	25	7.64	8.00	2.38	0.476
Freedom From Worry	**18-25 years**	79	3.53	3.00	2.33	0.262
	25-35 years	25	4.04	3.00	2.34	0.467
Total Sport Psychological Skills	**18-25 years**	79	49.58	50.00	6.13	0.689
	25-35 years	25	48.56	49.00	6.53	1.305

DISCUSSION

Key Findings

The current study sought to investigate the development of sport psychological skills among athletes aged 18 to 35, with a specific focus on identifying differences between younger (18–25 years) and older (25–35 years) cohorts. The analysis revealed that younger athletes tended to exhibit marginally higher mean scores across several psychological domains. Notably, these domains included coachability, goal-setting, and concentration—skills often linked with openness to learning, adaptability, and structured thinking.

One plausible explanation for these findings is that younger athletes may have benefited from earlier exposure to structured and psychologically enriched training environments. The increased emphasis on mental skills training in recent coaching paradigms may be particularly accessible to this age group, potentially leading to a more ingrained psychological skillset during formative years. Furthermore, younger athletes might be more receptive to adopting psychological techniques due to their proximity to developmental phases marked by neuroplasticity and behavioral malleability.

In contrast, the older athlete cohort demonstrated comparatively higher scores in the domain of Freedom from Worry, a dimension closely associated with emotional regulation and the ability to manage competitive stressors. This outcome may reflect the cumulative benefits of life experience, greater emotional maturity, and prolonged exposure to competitive scenarios, which together contribute to enhanced psychological resilience. These findings align with broader psychological theories that posit a maturation effect on affective regulation and stress tolerance, particularly in high-performance settings.

Despite these age-related trends in psychological domains, the study did not yield statistically significant differences between the two age groups across all seven sport psychological skills assessed: coping with adversity, coachability, concentration, confidence and achievement motivation, goal setting and mental preparation, peaking under pressure, and freedom from worry. The lack of statistical significance suggests that, within the 18 to 35 age range, chronological age alone may not serve as a strong predictor of sport psychological skill proficiency. The minor variations observed in mean scores, while interesting, do not provide sufficient evidence to infer age-based differentiation in psychological preparedness among athletes.

This outcome is consistent with previous research (e.g., Weinberg & Gould, 2019), which suggests that the development of sport psychological skills is likely shaped more profoundly by contextual and experiential factors rather than by age alone. Factors such as the quality of coaching, frequency and duration of mental skills training, exposure to competitive pressures, and the athlete's individual motivation to engage in psychological development appear to exert a stronger influence.

The implications of these findings are multifaceted and relevant for coaches, sport psychologists, and sport governing bodies aiming to foster optimal psychological functioning among athletes. Firstly, the results underscore the necessity of individualized coaching approaches that account for the psychological profile and developmental stage of each athlete, rather than relying solely on age as a determinant. For instance, younger athletes might benefit from continued reinforcement of foundational psychological skills, whereas older athletes could be supported in refining coping strategies and leveraging accumulated experiences in high-pressure contexts.

Secondly, the absence of statistically significant age-related differences highlights the importance of maintaining a lifespan perspective on psychological skills training. Psychological development should not be viewed as a one-time intervention limited to early athletic career stages but rather as a continuous, adaptive process that evolves in response to the changing demands of competition, personal growth, and life circumstances. Regular mental skills workshops, individualized psychological coaching, and integration of psychological training into daily practice routines are recommended to support sustained mental performance.

Moreover, the findings point to the potential value of investigating other moderating variables that may influence psychological skill development more strongly than age. Variables such as sport type (e.g., individual vs. team sports), years of competitive experience, gender, injury history, and the athlete's motivational orientation could provide richer insight into the mechanisms underlying psychological skill acquisition. Further, qualitative research exploring athlete narratives may reveal how psychological skills are developed, maintained, or eroded over time and under varying circumstances.

In conclusion, while certain age-related trends were observed in the present study—such as younger athletes showing marginally higher openness to coaching and older athletes demonstrating stronger emotional regulation—the lack of statistically significant differences across psychological domains suggests that age, in isolation, is not a primary determinant of psychological skill development among athletes aged 18 to 35. Rather, the findings reinforce the importance of the broader athletic environment, including the role of coaching quality, training culture, and experiential learning in shaping an athlete's psychological repertoire.

By fostering psychologically enriching environments and adopting a tailored, lifespan-oriented approach to mental skills training, sport organizations and practitioners can enhance athletic performance and well-being across all career stages. These insights carry significant relevance for the design of psychological support programs and may serve as a foundation for future research exploring the nuanced interplay between psychological development, age, and athletic performance.

Implications for Practice

1. **Coaches: Customize Feedback Strategies to Match Generational Expectations**

In the realm of sports coaching, understanding the generational differences among athletes is crucial for optimizing performance and fostering psychological well-being. Younger athletes, particularly those from Generation Z (born approximately 1997-2012), exhibit distinct preferences in their learning and feedback styles. They are digital natives, having grown up in an era dominated by technology and social media. As a result, they tend to value instant feedback, interactive learning experiences, and collaborative coaching approaches. This generation thrives in environments that leverage technology, such as video analysis tools, mobile apps for performance tracking, and social media platforms for communication and engagement.

For instance, Gen Z athletes often respond positively to real-time feedback delivered through digital platforms, allowing them to make immediate adjustments to their performance. They appreciate interactive coaching methods that involve gamification, where training sessions are designed to be engaging and competitive. This approach not only enhances their learning experience but also fosters a sense of community and collaboration among teammates.

In contrast, older athletes, particularly millennials (born approximately 1981-1996), may prefer a more structured approach to feedback. They often value long-term goal tracking and reflective practices that draw from their accumulated experiences. Millennials are likely to appreciate feedback that is rooted in a comprehensive understanding of their performance over time, allowing them to see the progression of their skills and achievements. This generation may benefit from regular check-ins that focus on both short-term objectives and long-term aspirations, providing a balanced perspective on their development.

Factual Support

- Research supports the notion that effective coach-athlete communication is pivotal in athlete development. A study by Côté and Gilbert (2009) emphasized that the communication styles employed by coaches significantly influence athletes' psychological outcomes and performance consistency. The study found that athletes who received feedback tailored to their individual preferences and generational characteristics reported higher levels of satisfaction, motivation, and engagement in their training.
- Furthermore, a survey conducted by the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) in 2020 revealed that 75% of high school athletes preferred receiving feedback through digital platforms, highlighting the importance of adapting coaching methods to align with the preferences of younger athletes. This shift towards technology-driven feedback mechanisms can enhance the coach-athlete relationship and create a more supportive training environment.

Implications for Practice

- Adopt Technology-Enhanced Feedback Tools: Coaches should consider integrating technology into their feedback strategies. Utilizing video analysis software, performance tracking apps, and online communication platforms can facilitate real-time feedback and enhance the learning experience for younger athletes. For example, coaches can use video clips to visually demonstrate areas for improvement, allowing athletes to see their performance from different angles.
- Encourage Collaborative Learning: Creating opportunities for collaborative learning can foster a sense of community among athletes. Coaches can implement group discussions, peer feedback sessions, and team-building activities that encourage younger athletes to share insights and learn from one another. This approach not only enhances their understanding of psychological skills but also strengthens team dynamics.
- Implement Structured Feedback Sessions for Older Athletes: For older athletes, coaches should prioritize structured feedback sessions that focus on long-term goal tracking and reflective practices. Regular one-on-one meetings can provide a platform for athletes to discuss their progress, set new objectives, and reflect on their experiences. This personalized approach can help older athletes feel valued and supported in their development.
- Train Coaches on Generational Differences: Coaching education programs should include training on generational differences and effective communication strategies. By equipping coaches with the knowledge and skills to adapt their feedback styles, they can better meet the diverse needs of their athletes, ultimately leading to improved performance and psychological outcomes.
- Foster an Open Feedback Culture: Encouraging an open feedback culture within the team can empower athletes to express their preferences and needs. Coaches should create an environment where athletes feel comfortable discussing their feedback

preferences, allowing for a more tailored coaching approach that resonates with each individual.

2. **Sport Psychologists: Develop age-specific mental training modules.**

Elaboration on Psychological Skill Development Modules

Younger Athletes: Focus on Adaptability, Confidence Building, and Coachability

Younger athletes, particularly those in the transition phase from junior to senior levels, often encounter unique challenges that can impact their performance and psychological well-being. These challenges may include increased competition, heightened expectations from coaches and parents, and the pressure to succeed. As a result, younger athletes may benefit significantly from psychological skill development modules that emphasize adaptability, confidence building, and coachability.

Adaptability: Younger athletes are often required to adjust to new training regimens, coaching styles, and competitive environments. Modules that promote adaptability can help them develop the flexibility to cope with changes and unexpected challenges. Techniques such as scenario-based training, where athletes practice responding to various competitive situations, can enhance their ability to think on their feet and make quick decisions under pressure.

Confidence Building: Confidence is a critical component of athletic performance, and younger athletes may struggle with self-doubt, especially during transitions. Programs that focus on building self-efficacy through positive reinforcement, visualization techniques, and goal-setting strategies can empower younger athletes to trust their abilities. For instance, incorporating regular feedback sessions that celebrate small achievements can help reinforce their confidence and motivate them to strive for greater success.

Coachability: Younger athletes often thrive in environments where they feel supported and guided by their coaches. Modules that emphasize the importance of being open to feedback and learning from mistakes can enhance their coachability. By fostering a growth mindset, coaches can encourage younger athletes to view challenges as opportunities for growth rather than threats to their self-esteem.

Older Athletes: Focus on Stress Management, Sustained Motivation, and Cognitive Reframing

In contrast, older athletes, who typically possess greater emotional maturity and life experience, may respond more positively to psychological skill development modules that address stress management, sustained motivation, and cognitive reframing strategies. As athletes approach the later stages of their careers, they often face unique psychological challenges that require targeted interventions.

- **Stress Management:** Older athletes may experience increased stress related to performance expectations, career transitions, and the potential for burnout. Modules that teach effective stress management techniques, such as mindfulness, relaxation exercises, and breathing techniques, can help older athletes maintain their composure and focus during high-pressure situations. Research has shown that mindfulness practices can significantly reduce anxiety and improve overall well-being (Kabat-Zinn, 1990).

- **Sustained Motivation:** As athletes age, maintaining motivation can become increasingly challenging, especially if they are contemplating retirement or facing injuries. Programs that focus on intrinsic motivation, goal setting, and the identification of personal values can help older athletes sustain their passion for the sport. Encouraging them to set new, meaningful goals—whether related to performance, personal growth, or mentoring younger athletes—can reignite their motivation and commitment.
- **Cognitive Reframing:** Cognitive reframing involves changing the way one perceives a situation to alter emotional responses and behaviors. Older athletes may benefit from modules that teach cognitive reframing strategies, enabling them to view setbacks as learning opportunities rather than failures. This skill can be particularly valuable as they navigate the emotional complexities of career transitions and identity shifts.

Factual Support

Research supports the notion that younger and older athletes face distinct psychological challenges that necessitate tailored interventions. For instance, Gould et al. (2002) found that younger athletes often experience performance pressure linked to transitions, such as moving from junior to senior levels. Their study emphasized the importance of intervention programs that build resilience and coping skills to help these athletes navigate the challenges associated with such transitions.

Conversely, older athletes may contend with burnout and identity issues as they approach the end of their careers. Lavallee (2005) highlighted that many older athletes struggle with the psychological implications of retirement, including feelings of loss and uncertainty about their identity outside of sport. This underscores the need for targeted psychological skill development that addresses these specific concerns.

Implications for Practice

- Tailored Training Programs: Coaches and sports psychologists should develop tailored training programs that address the unique psychological needs of younger and older athletes. For younger athletes, programs should focus on adaptability, confidence building, and coachability, while older athletes should engage in modules that emphasize stress management, sustained motivation, and cognitive reframing.
- **Regular Assessments:** Implementing regular psychological assessments can help identify the specific needs of athletes at different stages of their careers. By understanding their psychological profiles, coaches can better tailor interventions to support their development.
- **Incorporate Life Skills Training:** Integrating life skills training into psychological skill development can benefit both younger and older athletes. Teaching skills such as time management, emotional regulation, and effective communication can enhance their overall performance and well-being.
- **Create Supportive Environments**: Coaches should foster supportive environments that encourage

3. Athletes: Engage in self-reflection practices to enhance self-awareness.

Elaboration

Self-reflection is a powerful tool that can significantly enhance an athlete's self-awareness and overall performance. By engaging in self-reflection practices, athletes can develop metacognition—the ability to think about their own thinking. This heightened awareness

allows athletes to evaluate their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors critically, leading to greater accountability and mental clarity.

Accountability: Self-reflection encourages athletes to take ownership of their training and performance. By regularly assessing their actions and decisions, athletes can identify areas for improvement and set realistic goals. This accountability fosters a sense of responsibility, motivating athletes to commit to their training regimens and strive for excellence.

Mental Clarity: Engaging in self-reflection helps athletes clarify their thoughts and feelings, enabling them to better understand their motivations and aspirations. This mental clarity is essential for aligning psychological goals with training objectives. When athletes have a clear understanding of what they want to achieve, they can tailor their training efforts accordingly, leading to more focused and effective practice.

Alignment of Goals: Self-reflection allows athletes to evaluate their progress toward their goals and make necessary adjustments. By regularly reflecting on their experiences, athletes can ensure that their psychological goals—such as building confidence or managing anxiety—are in harmony with their physical training objectives. This alignment is crucial for achieving peak performance.

- Proven Methods for Self-Reflection
- Several effective methods can facilitate self-reflection among athletes:

Journaling: Keeping a training journal is a common practice among athletes. Journaling allows athletes to document their thoughts, feelings, and experiences related to training and competition. By reviewing their entries, athletes can identify patterns, track progress, and gain insights into their mental states. This practice not only enhances self-awareness but also serves as a valuable tool for goal setting and motivation.

Video Review: Analyzing performance through video review is another effective self-reflection method. Athletes can watch recordings of their training sessions or competitions to assess their techniques, decision-making, and overall performance. This visual feedback enables athletes to identify strengths and weaknesses, facilitating targeted improvements.

Mindfulness Practices: Mindfulness practices, such as meditation and focused breathing, can enhance self-reflection by promoting present-moment awareness. By cultivating mindfulness, athletes can develop a deeper understanding of their thoughts and emotions, allowing them to respond more effectively to challenges and stressors. Research has shown that mindfulness-based interventions can improve performance consistency and reduce anxiety (Gardner & Moore, 2007).

Factual Support

Research supports the notion that self-reflection and self-regulated learning strategies are essential for athletic excellence. Zimmerman (2002) argues that self-regulated learning, which includes self-monitoring and reflection, is a core component of successful athletic performance. Athletes who engage in self-regulated learning are better equipped to set goals, monitor their progress, and adjust their strategies as needed.

Furthermore, mindfulness-based interventions have been shown to enhance performance consistency among athletes. Gardner and Moore (2007) found that mindfulness practices can lead to improved focus, reduced anxiety, and greater emotional regulation, all of which

contribute to enhanced athletic performance. These findings underscore the importance of incorporating self-reflection practices into an athlete's training regimen.

Implications for Practice

- **Incorporate Self-Reflection into Training:** Coaches should encourage athletes to engage in self-reflection practices as part of their training routines. This can be achieved by integrating journaling, video analysis, and mindfulness exercises into regular training sessions.
- **Provide Guidance on Reflection Techniques:** Coaches and sports psychologists can offer guidance on effective self-reflection techniques. Providing athletes with structured prompts for journaling or specific questions to consider during video review can enhance the effectiveness of these practices.
- **Create a Supportive Environment:** Fostering a supportive environment that encourages self-reflection is essential. Coaches should promote open discussions about mental processes and encourage athletes to share their reflections with teammates. This collaborative approach can enhance the learning experience and build a culture of self-awareness within the team.
- **Monitor Progress:** Coaches should regularly check in with athletes to discuss their self-reflection practices and progress toward their goals. This ongoing dialogue can help athletes stay accountable and motivated while providing valuable insights for coaches to tailor their training approaches.
- **Integrate Mindfulness Training:** Incorporating mindfulness training into the overall training program can enhance athletes' self-reflection capabilities. Mindfulness practices can be introduced through workshops, guided sessions, or online resources, allowing athletes to develop the skills necessary for effective self-reflection.

Limitations

Unequal sample sizes

Elaboration

In research studies, particularly those examining psychological constructs across different age groups, the representation of participants can significantly influence the outcomes and interpretations of the findings. When there is an unequal representation between age groups, it can impact the statistical power of the analyses conducted and the generalizability of the results.

For instance, if the younger age group (18–25) is overrepresented in a study, the subtle psychological trends and characteristics of the older age group (25–35) may be underdetected or overlooked. This imbalance can lead to a skewed understanding of how psychological skills develop across different ages. The nuances of psychological resilience, coping strategies, and emotional regulation that may be more pronounced in older athletes could be masked by the dominant trends observed in the younger cohort.

Moreover, unequal sample sizes can lead to challenges in drawing meaningful comparisons between groups. For example, if the sample size for the younger group is significantly larger than that of the older group, the statistical analyses may yield results that favor the characteristics of the larger group, potentially leading to misleading conclusions about the psychological skills of both age groups.

Factual Note

Research has shown that unequal sample sizes can reduce the reliability of statistical tests, such as ANOVA and t-tests, by increasing the risk of Type II errors—failing to detect a true effect when one exists (Field, 2013). When sample sizes are unequal, the statistical power of the tests diminishes, making it more challenging to identify significant differences between groups. This can result in an underestimation of the psychological skills and characteristics present in the smaller group, ultimately affecting the validity of the study's conclusions.

Field (2013) emphasizes that maintaining balanced sample sizes is crucial for ensuring the robustness of statistical analyses. When researchers fail to account for unequal sample sizes, they may inadvertently overlook important trends and insights that could inform our understanding of psychological skill development across different age groups.

Implications for Future Research

- **Strive for Balanced Sample Sizes:** Future studies should aim to recruit balanced sample sizes across age groups to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings. This can be achieved through targeted recruitment strategies that ensure equal representation of different age cohorts.
- **Conduct Power Analyses**: Prior to data collection, researchers should conduct power analyses to determine the appropriate sample sizes needed to detect meaningful differences between groups. This proactive approach can help mitigate the risks associated with unequal sample sizes.
- **Use Statistical Techniques to Address Imbalance:** If unequal sample sizes are unavoidable, researchers can employ statistical techniques, such as weighting or bootstrapping, to adjust for the imbalance and improve the robustness of the analyses. These methods can help ensure that the findings are more representative of the population being studied.
- **Report Sample Size Disparities:** Researchers should transparently report any disparities in sample sizes and discuss their potential implications for the study's findings. Acknowledging these limitations can provide context for interpreting the results and guide future research efforts.
- **Explore Subgroup Analyses:** Future research could benefit from conducting subgroup analyses to explore the psychological skills of different age groups in more detail. By examining the characteristics of each group separately, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the unique psychological trends that may exist within each cohort.

Self-reported data may be biased

The use of self-report questionnaires in athletic psychology is widespread, but it comes with inherent limitations that can compromise the accuracy of the data collected. One significant issue is social desirability bias, where athletes may feel pressured to present themselves in a favorable light. This can lead to overestimations of their psychological strengths, such as confidence, resilience, and coping abilities. Athletes might respond in ways they believe are expected or acceptable, rather than providing honest reflections of their experiences.

Additionally, recall bias can further complicate the reliability of self-reported data. When athletes are asked to reflect on past experiences or feelings, their memories may be influenced by their current emotional state or by the desire to conform to perceived norms.

This can result in skewed responses, particularly in retrospective items where accuracy is crucial for understanding trends over time.

Factual Note

Podsakoff et al. (2003) highlight the issue of common method variance, which arises when self-report measures are the sole source of data. This can lead to inflated correlations between variables, as the method of data collection may introduce systematic biases. To mitigate these concerns, it is recommended that researchers employ triangulation—the use of multiple data sources, such as observational or physiological measures, to validate findings. By incorporating diverse methodologies, researchers can enhance the robustness of their conclusions and provide a more comprehensive understanding of athletes' psychological states.

Implications for Future Research

- **Incorporate Multiple Data Sources**: Future studies should aim to combine self-report questionnaires with observational data or physiological measures to provide a more holistic view of athletes' psychological strengths and weaknesses.
- **Develop Anonymous Reporting Tools:** To reduce social desirability bias, researchers could implement anonymous reporting tools that encourage athletes to respond more honestly without fear of judgment.
- **Utilize Longitudinal Designs:** Longitudinal studies can help track changes in psychological states over time, reducing the impact of recall bias by allowing for more immediate reporting of experiences.
- **Educate Athletes on Reporting:** Providing education on the importance of honest self-reporting can help athletes understand the value of accurate data for their development and well-being.
- **Analyze Response Patterns:** Researchers should analyze response patterns for signs of bias, such as extreme scores or inconsistencies, to identify potential distortions in the data.

Lack of control for type of sport or competition level

Future Research

- Use of mixed-methods to capture in-depth athlete narratives
- Longitudinal studies to track coping development over time
- Inclusion of cultural and sport-type comparisons

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