

A GROUNDED THEORY OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF SOCCER PERFORMANCE

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Abstract: This study employed a Grounded Theory approach to synthesize the existing literature on the psychological factors that influence soccer players' performance and career development. A total of 22 review articles were considered suitable for the creation of this theory. Atlas.ti.24 software was used for qualitative analysis. A total of 146 codes were encoded and grouped into six key categories: Psychological Traits and States, Cognitive and Perceptual Skills, Emotional and Stress Management, Social and Environmental Influences, Health, Wellness, and Lifestyle, and Performance and Skill Development. The resulting Grounded Theory explains the complex interplay between these psychological dimensions and their impact on soccer performance. This study emphasizes the importance of holistic athlete development by integrating psychological skills training with physical and technical preparation. This comprehensive framework offers valuable insights for coaches, sports psychologists, and researchers by suggesting targeted interventions to optimize player performance and support long-term career success. This theory underscores the need for individualized approaches to psychological training and the integration of mental health considerations in soccer development programs. While limited by its focus on review articles and the exclusion of primary studies, this research provides a foundation for future empirical investigations and practical applications in soccer psychology. The study concluded that psychological factors are integral to soccer performance, are equal in importance to physical and tactical elements, and should be systematically incorporated into training and development strategies.

Keywords: football, psychological factors, sports psychology, athletes' development, review, qualitative research

INTRODUCTION

The prediction or explanation of performance in soccer is a complex, multifactorial question, influenced by the interaction of technical, tactical, physical, and psychological dimensions (Forsman et al., 2016; Kusuma et al., 2024; Plakias & Karakitsiou, 2024). While traditional models of performance optimization have heavily emphasized physical and technical-tactical factors, recent research increasingly recognizes the foundational role of psychological factors in shaping both immediate performance outcomes and long-term career trajectories (Plakias, 2023). Understanding and integrating psychological processes, ranging from emotional regulation to cognitive flexibility, has emerged as a critical frontier in both sports science and applied practice (Ivarsson et al., 2020; Plakias & Karakitsiou, 2024).

The exploration of psychological determinants in soccer remains a persistent challenge for researchers and practitioners alike. A growing body of evidence suggests that factors such as mental toughness, emotional stability, stress management, and self-confidence are not just peripheral elements but essential components of elite-level performance (Golding et al., 2020; McAuley et al., 2021). Furthermore, psychological stressors, including injury-related trauma, effective athlete recovery, social pressure, fear of failure, and performance anxiety, have been shown to significantly impair athletic outcomes and hinder recovery processes (Haller et al., 2022; Marqués Jiménez et al., 2017; Van Eetvelde et al., 2021).

Within this context, psychological readiness for return-to-play (Van Der Horst et al., 2017), the prevalence of mental health concerns such as depression and burnout (Golding et al., 2020), and the influence of social dynamics within teams (Hills et al., 2018) all contribute to the broader psychological ecology of soccer performance. Moreover, literature underscores the importance of embedding psychological skills training, such as goal setting, imagery,

and self-talk, within the operational frameworks of professional academies and teams (Ivarsson et al., 2020; Raya-Castellano & Uriondo, 2015).

Despite the increasing evidence and applied emphasis, most existing reviews treat psychological factors in isolation, failing to provide a comprehensive, integrative model that reflects the dynamic, interrelated nature of these variables within a competitive soccer environment. For this reason, we chose to conduct a review of existing review articles using the Grounded Theory methodology, based on the model of Onions (2006) and Wolfswinkel et al. (2013) (i.e. using already published studies as data. Regarding the combination of psychology and performance, only Holt and Dunn (2004) adopted Grounded Theory, and using interviews, presented a theory of psychosocial skills and environmental conditions related to how an adolescent can become a professional soccer player. What is absent from the existing literature is a comprehensive Grounded Theory that synthesizes a vast array of psychological factors that affect soccer players' performance and career longevity.

In response to these gaps, the purpose of this study is to construct a data-driven, integrative theory that explains the psychological foundations of soccer performance and career development. This is accomplished through a Grounded Theory analysis of international literature, aiming to explore not only what psychological factors are important but also how they interact and co-construct performance outcomes. The study addresses the following research questions: (a) What are the core psychological dimensions that influence soccer performance and career trajectories? (b) How do these dimensions interrelate to form a holistic framework of psychological readiness and resilience? (c) What implications does this framework have for athlete development, training design, and applied psychological support in soccer? In offering this theory, the study contributes a structured yet flexible model that can guide future research, inform applied practices, and support the holistic development of soccer players within increasingly demanding and psychologically complex environments.

MATERIAL & METHODS

Methodology

We utilized a qualitative research design employing a Grounded Theory approach to conduct the present literature review, wherein the researcher initiated exploration within a specific domain and developed theories based on the collected data (Urquhart, 2022). The Grounded Theory methodology was selected because of its intrinsic ability to provide insights, understanding, and a valuable framework for practical implications (Groom et al., 2011). The execution of this study adhered to a) the recommendations of Strauss and Corbin (1998) for Grounded Theory, and b) the proposition by Onions (2006) and Wolfswinkel et al. (2013) utilizing Grounded Theory as a method for reviewing literature". It is worth noting that the authors have experience constructing Grounded Theory using published scientific articles as data (Karakitsiou et al., 2024; Kasioura et al., 2025; Plakias et al., 2024).

Inclusion-exclusion criteria

Only review articles written in English, for which the authors could access the full text, were included. Articles related to sports other than soccer, articles related to the female sex, or soccer players who had retired from active action were not included.

Search

The search for documents to be used as data was conducted on May 15, 2024, using the Scopus and Web of Science search engines. In the first stage, the BOOLEAN expression "(psychological OR psychology) AND (soccer OR football) AND player AND performance" was used in the titles, abstracts, and keywords of the articles. The initial search yielded 1049 articles on Scopus and 249 on Web of Science. Limiting the findings to only review articles, the numbers from the two databases were 69 and 22, respectively. After removing duplicates, 69 articles remained. Nine articles were excluded because they focused on another sport, three because they were in German, four because they were in Spanish, four because they concerned female individuals, three because they concerned players who had retired, one because it was retracted, six because, although given as reviews by the search engines, they were actually research articles, and 25 because their purpose was different from the subject of our research. Therefore, 14 articles were selected in the first stage. In the second stage, which was carried out gradually, the BOOLEAN expression

(sport OR athlete OR soccer OR soccer) AND (SECTION B) was used. For SECTION B, various expressions were used (psychological factors, mental health, mental toughness, stress, anxiety, mood, etc.). Eight of the articles that met the inclusion criteria were ultimately necessary until theoretical saturation occurred. The search for the articles was conducted by the first and the last author, while in cases where there were disagreements, these were resolved in a meeting in which all the authors participated. Finally, 22 review articles were selected as data to build the theory.

Building the Grounded Theory

The 22 articles were imported into the Atlas.ti.24 software, where an independent comprehensive study of the articles and content analysis were conducted by the first two authors. The two authors separately performed initial coding (open coding) and constructed conditional and consequential matrices. The results from the previous stage were discussed in a joint meeting of all four authors, where the final extraction of key concepts, categories, subcategories, and their connections was made (open coding and axial coding). In the same session, the final conclusions for the theory construction were drawn (selective coding).

RESULTS

The authors, year of publication, and titles of the 22 review articles that were used as data for the extraction of the theory are included in Table 1. The articles were arranged in chronological order from oldest to newest.

Table 1. *The articles that were used as data*

| Authors (Year) | Title |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Raglin (2001) | Psychological Factors in Sport Performance |
| Nippert and Smith (2008) | Psychologic Stress Related to Injury and Impact on Sport Performance |
| (Slimani et al., 2016) | Do cognitive training strategies improve motor and positive psychological skills development in soccer players? Insights from a systematic review |
| Gledhill et al. (2017) | Psychosocial factors associated with talent development in soccer: A systematic review |
| Slimani et al. (2017) | Steroid hormones and psychological responses to soccer matches: Insights from a systematic review and meta-analysis |
| Rocha and Osório (2018) | Associations between competitive anxiety, athlete characteristics and sport context: evidence from a systematic review and meta-analysis |
| Heidari et al. (2019) | A practitioner's perspective on psychological issues in soccer |
| Kalinowski et al. (2019) | Motor and psychological predispositions for playing soccer |
| Liew et al. (2019) | Mental toughness in sport: Systematic review and future |
| Golding et al. (2020) | The prevalence of depressive symptoms in high-performance athletes: a systematic review |
| Ivarsson et al. (2020) | Psychological factors and future performance of soccer players: A systematic review with meta-analysis |
| Beauchamp et al. (2021) | Achieving Mental Health and Peak Performance in Elite Athletes |
| Groenewal et al. (2021) | Burnout and Motivation in Sport |
| Ong and Chua (2021) | Effects of psychological interventions on competitive anxiety in sport: A meta-analysis |
| Gonzalez-Villora et al. (2022) | The role of mental fatigue in soccer: a systematic review |
| James et al. (2022) | The use of self-compassion techniques in elite footballers: mistakes as opportunities to learn |
| van Ierssel et al. (2022) | Which psychosocial factors are associated with return to sport following concussion? A systematic review |
| Cook and Charest (2023) | Sleep and Performance in Professional Athletes |
| James et al. (2023) | Treating mental stress in elite footballers using a stigma-free psychological approach: The Power Threat Meaning Framework |
| Layton et al. (2023) | The measurement, tracking and development practices of English professional soccer academies |
| Selmi et al. (2023) | Monitoring mood state to improve performance in soccer players: A brief review |
| Andrade et al. (2024) | Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the psychological aspects and mental health of elite soccer athletes: a systematic review |

Of the 22 articles, 146 codes were encoded and grouped into six categories: 1) Psychological Traits and States; 2) Cognitive and Perceptual Skills; 3) Emotional and Stress Management; 4) Social and Environmental Influences; 5) Health, Wellness, and Lifestyle; and 6) Performance and Skill Development. The first category was divided into three subcategories (emotional and psychological states, self-rated traits and dispositions, and motivational and resilience factors). All codes, along with the categories and subcategories to which they belong, are listed in Table 2.

Table 2. Codes, along with categories and subcategories

| Categories | Codes |
|--|--|
| 1. Psychological Traits and States | Emotional and Psychological States: Adaptive perfectionism, Anger, Anxiety, Competitive anxiety, Confidence, Confusion, Depressive symptoms, Emotional exhaustion, Emotional resilience, Emotional stability, Fear of deselection, Fear of failure, Fear, Mental fatigue, Mood disturbances, Perceived stress, Psychological distress, Psychological disturbance, Stress, Tension, Vigor |
| | Self-Related Traits and Dispositions: Self-acceptance, Self-awareness, Self-compassion, Self-confidence, Self-control, Self-criticism, Self-efficacy, Self-esteem, Self-motivation, Self-regulation, Low levels of neuroticism, Low trait anxiety, High psychic vigor |
| | Motivational and Resilience Factors: Ability to quickly adapt, Attention, Autonomy, Focus, Grit, Mental toughness, Motivation, Pain tolerance, Perceived competence, Psychological resilience, Psychological strength, Psychological wellbeing |
| 2. Cognitive and Perceptual Skills | Anticipatory skills, Cognitive demands, Cognitive effort, Cognitive load, Cognitive restructuring, Cognitive standpoint, Cognitive strategies, Decision-making skills, Developing self-control, Mental challenges, Mental imagery, Mindfulness, Mindset, Non-verbal intelligence, Perceptual abilities, Perceptual-cognitive functions, Reflective skills |
| 3. Emotional and Stress Management | Coping skills, Coping strategies, Coping with anxiety, Enhancing coping skills, Goal orientation, Goal setting, Imagery, Maintaining focus, Maximization of action, Mindfulness techniques, Positive self-talk, Pre-competition anxiety, Pre-competition stress, Pre-performance routines, Relaxation, Relaxation techniques, Task-oriented coping strategies |
| 4. Social and Environmental Influences | Accessibility to rehabilitation, Coach influence, Competitive environments, Complex social environments, Criticism from fans, Criticism from social media, Demographic Sport ethic/philosophy, Environmental factors, Family dynamics, Financial troubles, Organizational environments, Organizational issues, Parents, Peers, Player-coach-parent triads, Rehabilitation environment, Relatedness, Relationship, Social aspects, Social parameters, Social perception, Social support, Sports medicine team influence, Stakeholders, Team dynamics, Teammate influence, Psychosocial wellbeing |
| 5. Health, Wellness, and Lifestyle | Disordered eating, Healthy sleep habits, Injury concerns, Psychological interventions, Psychological preparation, Psychological readiness, Quality of life, Rehabilitation environment, Sleep disturbances, Stressful situations |
| 6. Performance and Skill Development | Attribution theory, Burnout, Choking under pressure, Commitment therapy, Competence, Competitiveness, Concentration, Control under pressure, Delaying gratification, Development/training of psychological skills, Discipline, Enjoyment, Fostering gratitude, Individual Differences, Intrinsic motivation, Motor activity, Motivation strategies for prevention and treatment, Motivational orientation, Personal issues, Personality traits, Pressure, Psychological barriers, Psychological characteristics, Psychological development, Psychological impacts of the COVID-19, Psychological interventions, Psychological Skill Training (PST) programs, Psychological skills, Reducing perfectionism, Resilience to the rigors of long-term |

DISCUSSION

Psychological Traits and States

As illuminated by various studies, the complex combination of Emotional and Psychological States, such as adaptive perfectionism, emotional resilience, and stress management; self-rated traits such as self-control, self-efficacy, and self-regulation; and Motivational and Resilience Factors including focus, grit, and psychological well-being,

merge to define the psychological basis of elite athletes (Andrade et al., 2024; Heidari et al., 2019; Slimani et al., 2016).

An athlete's ability to quickly adapt, coupled with high psychological vigor and mental toughness, is considered essential for sporting excellence. Players who can endure through the emotional upheaval of competitive anxiety and depressive symptoms with confidence and concentration are often the ones who achieve the best performances (Kalinowski et al., 2019; Selmi et al., 2023). However, the interplay of mental fatigue, mood disturbances, and perceived stress determines the boundaries between success and burnout (Gledhill et al., 2017; Ivarsson et al., 2020).

The science of sports psychology has evolved to help a better understanding of these psychological domains, acknowledging their role in not only strengthening athletes' intrinsic motivation and attention but also in managing pain tolerance and perceived competence (Cook & Charest, 2023; Slimani et al., 2017). As such, the development of psychological skills is now seen as an indispensable part of an athlete's training process, shaping their response to the rigorous demands of professional sports and decreasing the impact of the fear of failure or deselection (Golding et al., 2020; Layton et al., 2023).

Integrating these psychological aspects into coaching and training practices demands joint effort, aligning with contemporary research that underscores the significance of psychological readiness, emotional stability, and autonomy in optimizing athletic performance (Gonzalez-Villora et al., 2022; James et al., 2022). The constant search for balance in a soccer player's psychological profile suggests a shift towards employing psychological resilience and well-being as key drivers of career longevity and success (Beauchamp et al., 2021; Rocha & Osório, 2018).

In sum, the profound influence of "Psychological Traits and States" on a soccer player's performance trajectory is evident, as it combines with their skill development, reflecting a complex interplay of internal fortitude and external prowess that move them towards achieving their professional zenith (Bédard Thom et al., 2021; Groenewal et al., 2021; Ong & Chua, 2021).

Cognitive and Perceptual Skills

Cognitive and perceptual skills play a critical role in the demanding game of soccer, where split-second decisions can determine the outcome of a match. Players' cognitive load and perceptual abilities are as essential as their physical properties. Anticipatory skills, decision-making abilities, and perceptual-cognitive functions enable players to succeed in the complex and dynamic environment of the field, where rapid information processing and swift responses are required (Heidari et al., 2019; Slimani et al., 2016). Such cognitive demands necessitate robust mental imagery and cognitive strategies that align with the game's unpredictability. Reflective skills, alongside a mindset achieved through cognitive restructuring and mindfulness, reinforce players' capacity to adapt and excel (Andrade et al., 2024).

Moreover, cognitive effort is not just about in-the-moment reactions, but also involves the development of self-control and a disciplined approach to the mental challenges of the sport. Mental fatigue can decrease attention and general performance; hence, there is a need for interventions that enhance mental resilience (Gonzalez-Villora et al., 2022). Soccer players benefit from training that incorporates psychological interventions adapted to cognitive and perceptual demands, thus optimizing their competitive performance and laying the basis for prolonged career success (James et al., 2022). Nonverbal intelligence, another crucial cognitive aspect, equips players with the ability to read the game and their opponents, further influencing their on-field efficacy (Gledhill et al., 2017). Thus, the intersection of cognitive and perceptual skills with athletic performance underscores the importance of an integrated training approach that combines the physical, technical, and cognitive dimensions of player development (Ivarsson et al., 2020; Kalinowski et al., 2019).

Emotional and Stress Management

Emotional regulation and stress management are pivotal for soccer players' performance, as they affect their ability to engage in games with focus and determination. The capacity to employ coping strategies such as goal setting and positive self-talk significantly enhances players' ability to handle pre-competition stress and anxiety, leading to better performance under pressure (Heidari et al., 2019; Rocha & Osório, 2018). Furthermore, incorporating relaxation techniques and imagery can facilitate players to achieve a state of mindfulness, enabling them to maintain focus and maximize their actions in the field (Slimani et al., 2016). A soccer player's skill in managing pre-performance

routines and utilizing task-oriented coping strategies often differentiates those who can consistently perform at their peak from those who are beaten by the pressure (Gledhill et al., 2017).

Effective stress management not only prepares players for the psychological demands of competition, but also supports their long-term well-being and career development. Goal orientation and consistent application of mental toughness strategies ensure that players approach each game with resilience and a mindset equipped to handle the difficulties of professional sports. Additionally, emotional stability contributes to an athlete's success, highlighting the importance of psychological well-being in sustained high-level performance (Raglin, 2001). In essence, the ability to cope with anxiety and manage stress through well-established psychological interventions plays a crucial role in the overall athletic performance, recovery from difficulties, and long-term success of soccer players (Bédard Thom et al., 2021; van Ierssel et al., 2022).

Social and Environmental Influences

The social and environmental contexts within which soccer players operate influence their performance and career trajectory. The complex social environments of clubs, characterized by player-coach-parent triads, can create an environment of stress that must be managed to protect players' performance capabilities (Heidari et al., 2019). Additionally, the role of coaches, as indicated by Ivarsson et al. (2020), extends beyond technical and tactical guidance because their influence can shape an athlete's resilience and adaptation to competitive environments. Furthermore, the dynamics within the team and the support or criticism from fans and social media can shape a player's social perception, impacting their mental health, and consequently, their performance in the field (James et al., 2022).

Moreover, accessibility to a supportive rehabilitation environment, inclusive of a sports medicine team adapted to the athlete's psychosocial well-being, significantly affects recovery outcomes and return-to-sport success (van Ierssel et al., 2022). The support felt by an athlete within their team, combined with social support from family and peers, creates a protective mechanism against competition pressure, fostering a psychological state that is helpful for optimal performance. This relationship between environmental factors and performance underscores the importance of holistic sports medicine approaches that integrate social support structures to address and enhance athletic well-being (Nippert & Smith, 2008; Raglin, 2001). Essentially, the interaction of social parameters, team dynamics, and organizational issues forms a combination of factors that can lead to the maximization of a soccer player's potential and career longevity.

Health, Wellness, and Lifestyle

The concepts of health, wellness, and lifestyle encompass many factors that significantly influence soccer players' performance. The psychological preparation of athletes, which includes the management of stress and establishment of healthy sleep habits, is crucial for maintaining a high level of performance and ensuring psychological readiness for the demands of competition (Cook & Charest, 2023). Injuries are a significant threat not only to physical capabilities, but also to psychological well-being, with concerns such as disordered eating and sleep disturbances that often arise during the rehabilitation process. Thus, the role of a rehabilitation environment is key to supporting an athlete's return to sports (van Ierssel et al., 2022).

Moreover, the quality of life outside the field directly affects on-field performance. Psychological interventions aimed at promoting a balanced lifestyle can help players manage stressful situations, such as criticism from fans or social media, and maintain their focus on games. The implementation of specific psychological strategies, such as goal setting and positive self-talk, can help manage pre-competition anxiety and ensure that athletes are mentally and physically prepared for their performance (Heidari et al., 2019; Ong & Chua, 2021). Overall, health, wellness, and lifestyle are linked to the holistic development of soccer players, which demands a comprehensive approach to optimize performance and career longevity.

Performance and Skill Development

In the search for exceptional soccer performance, more than just physical training is required. This is a result of psychological skills and development. Effective psychological interventions, based on attribution theory and commitment therapy, play a pivotal role in the athlete's journey, enhancing intrinsic motivation and helping overcome psychological barriers that can lead to phenomena such as "choking under pressure" (Heidari et al., 2019). As players

try for competence and success in their sport, commitment to discipline, enjoyment of the process, and the characteristic of not being easily satisfied become integral elements of their psychological profile. The implementation of Psychological Skill Training programs is recommended to improve focus, manage pressure, and foster resilience to the demands of long-term training, which are essential for both emerging talents and seasoned professionals (Beauchamp et al., 2021).

Moreover, individual differences in psychological characteristics, such as motivation strategies for the prevention and treatment of burnout, can influence the development and improvement of motor skills and competitive performance (Gledhill et al., 2017; Groenewal et al., 2021). Personal issues, including the psychological impacts of situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have shown the necessity of comprehensive support systems that address not only the physical but also the psychological aspects of recovery and well-being (Andrade et al., 2024). Techniques for reducing perfectionism, fostering gratitude, and nurturing psychological development are part of a holistic approach that aligns an athlete's lifestyle with their professional ambitions, ensuring a balance between mental health and peak performance (James et al., 2022; James et al., 2023).

GROUNDED THEORY

These six concepts are interconnected through a dynamic network of interdependencies (Figure 1). For example, physical health (5) affects cognitive and perceptual skills (2), which, in turn, influences performance and skill development (6). This sequence is supported by Kalinowski et al. (2019), who discussed the importance of physical and mental preparation in soccer, and Slimani et al. (2016), who emphasized the benefits of cognitive training strategies. Emotional management (3) can improve the handling of social and environmental influences (4), helping the soccer player remain focused and effective on the field, a point that Cook and Charest (2023) also emphasized regarding sleep's role in mental health and performance. In turn, a positive social environment can improve the psychological state (1), enhancing self-confidence and resilience, as Gledhill et al. (2017) showed in the context of psychosocial factors in talent development.

The interconnection of these six concepts can form the basis for a Grounded Theory explaining how psychology affects performance and a soccer player's career. For example, soccer players with excellent cognitive skills (2) can improve their performance (6) through enhancing psychological characteristics (1), such as self-confidence and concentration, while simultaneously managing anxiety (3) in a way that allows them to remain effective under pressure (Andrade et al., 2024). Further, Rocha and Osório (2018) explored how competitive anxiety varies and impacts athletes' performance, emphasizing the importance of interventions tailored to manage such anxiety.

Additionally, the goal of continuous development and improvement (6) presupposes a balanced approach to health and well-being (5), as well as a positive environment that encourages development (4). The studies of Kalinowski et al. (2019) and Cook and Charest (2023) provide insights into how physical fitness, mental preparation, and sleep health are crucial for maintaining performance at the highest level. Awareness of how external and internal influences interact and contribute to performance can help soccer players identify strategies and techniques that lead to improved performance and success. For example, incorporating pre-game routines that include relaxation or concentration techniques can help manage anxiety (3) and enhance performance under pressure, reinforcing the findings of Slimani et al. (2017) on the effects of steroid hormones and psychological responses on soccer players' performance.

By developing a strategy for self-improvement that includes continuous evaluation and improvement of cognitive and perceptual skills (2), soccer players can develop their ability to make quick and effective decisions on the field. Empathy and communication skills, developed through engaging with social and environmental influences (4), can improve team collaboration and social support. The research by Gledhill et al. (2017) underlines the importance of psychosocial factors in talent development and the significant role of social support in fostering psychological characteristics like resilience and commitment.

An approach to health and well-being (5) means that caring for physical health, a balanced diet, adequate sleep, and stress management are fundamental for maintaining performance at the highest possible level. This holistic care contributes to injury prevention and accelerates recovery, allowing greater consistency in performance and skill development (6). Golding et al. (2020) discussed the prevalence of depressive symptoms among high-performance athletes, emphasizing the need for tailored interventions to support mental well-being.

Continuous improvement and skill development require soccer players to be open to new training methods, seek

regular feedback from their coaches, and be willing to experiment with new tactics and strategies during the game. Development is not limited to physical or technical skills but also extends to understanding the significance of psychological readiness and a growth mindset. Ivarsson et al. (2020) highlights the association between psychological factors and future soccer performance, emphasizing the importance of psychological preparation and resilience in athlete development.

This theory of soccer player development, which combines the six basic concepts (psychological characteristics and states, cognitive and perceptual skills, emotional management and anxiety, social and environmental influences, health, well-being, and lifestyle, performance, and skill development), offers a dynamic framework for optimizing performance and professional development in sports. Through the application of this theory, soccer players can recognize and utilize available resources, skills, and opportunities for development to achieve the highest possible performance and advance their professional careers. Continuous self-discovery, self-assessment, and the development of personal goals in combination with strategic training and support from coaches and team, make the realization of these goals possible.

Therefore, this holistic perception of soccer player development underscores the critical balance between physical and mental health, ongoing personal and professional growth, and the resilience needed to overcome challenges. Through understanding and applying the principles contained in the six basic concepts, soccer players can form a stable foundation for achieving success, both on and off the field.

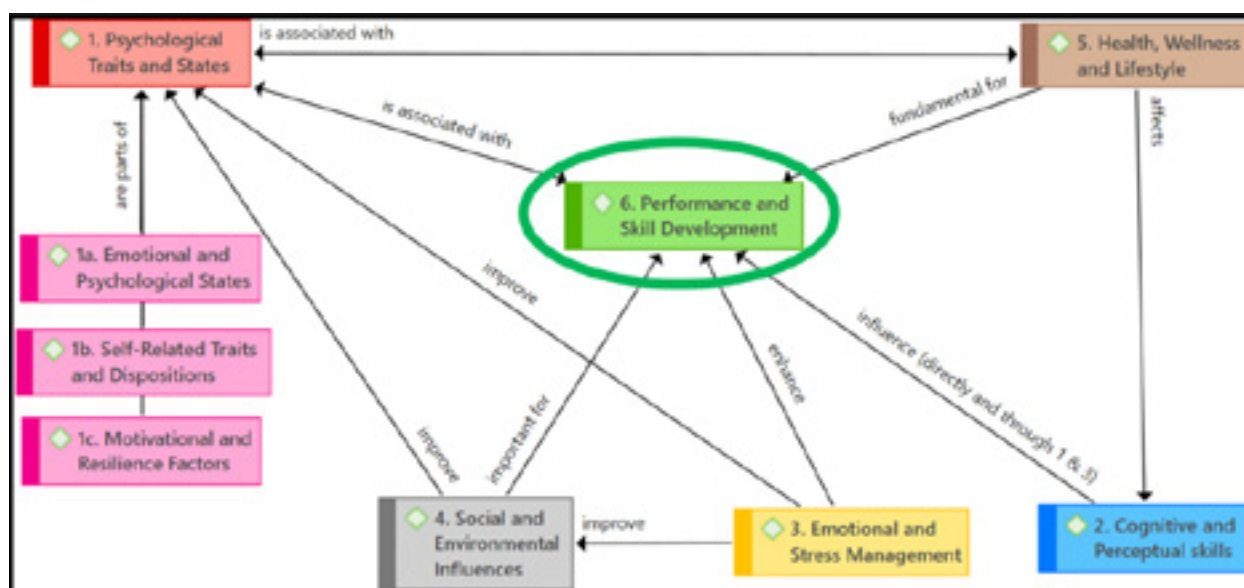


Figure 1. Grounded Theory on the impact of psychological factors on the performance and career of a soccer player

LIMITATIONS

The exclusive use of review articles as primary data sources means that the conclusions drawn depend on the quality and focus of the included reviews. Moreover, in the present research, only articles written in the English language were used that were found in only two searching engines. The exclusion of studies on female athletes and retired soccer players indicates a gap in the representation that future research could aim to fill. Finally, the Grounded Theory approach, while insightful, includes the subjective judgment of the researcher as opposed to the objectivity of quantitative research. Future research is suggested to incorporate a greater variety of sources, including primary research articles, articles written in languages other than English, more search engines as well as interviews with current professional players, which could provide direct insights into the psychological aspects of soccer performance. An expansion of the study to include female athletes and athletes from varying levels of play would offer a broader understanding of the psychological factors at play.

CONCLUSIONS

This study synthesized 22 studies to construct a Grounded Theory elucidating the impact of psychological factors on soccer players' performance and career development. Central to this framework is the recognition of psychology as an integral component of soccer, combined with physical, technical, and tactical elements. The findings highlighted the role of cognitive and perceptual skills in decision-making, the importance of emotional and stress management in resilience, and the influence of social and environmental factors on athletes' mental health and performance. This study's contribution to the international literature lies in its comprehensive integration of psychological factors into a holistic framework. A simple listing of the factors was not done, but the connections between them and the way they interact with the final result of improving the performance of soccer players were detected.

For coaching staff and sports psychologists, the practical applications of this study lie in the development of specific psychological skill training programs that consider individual athlete's needs. Implementing strategies to manage stress, build resilience, and enhance cognitive and perceptual skills should be integrated into routine training sessions. The advancement of psychological knowledge within the soccer context can potentially revolutionize training methodologies, enhance athlete care, and improve performance outcomes. Therefore, the incorporation of psychological factors into training and rehabilitation programs could be decisive in establishing psychology as a basis for athlete development equivalent to physical conditioning and technical-tactical training.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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