
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Relationship Between Sports Anxiety and Sports Performance: A Meta-Analysis

Lamia Selçuk

Independent Researcher

Corresponding Author: Lamia Selçuk, **E-mail:** lamiye933@gmail.com

| ABSTRACT

Anxiety is considered one of the most important psychological factors influencing athletes' performance during competitive processes. Although previous studies have consistently reported a negative relationship between sports anxiety and performance, the magnitude of this relationship has varied across different samples, sports disciplines, and measurement approaches. Therefore, the present study aimed to determine the overall effect size of the relationship between sports anxiety and sports performance through a meta-analytic approach. A systematic literature search was conducted using PubMed, SPORTDiscus, Scopus, and PsycInfo databases with the keywords 'sport anxiety,' 'competition anxiety,' 'sports performance,' 'athletic performance,' and 'anxiety and performance'. Studies were included if they examined athlete samples, investigated the relationship between anxiety and performance, and reported sufficient statistical data for effect size calculation. Seven studies involving a total of 1,313 athletes were included in the meta-analysis. Correlation coefficients reported in the studies were transformed into Fisher's Z values, and a random-effects model was used to calculate the overall effect size. The results revealed a statistically significant negative relationship between sports anxiety and sports performance ($Z = -5.048$, $p < 0.001$). The overall effect size was calculated as moderate-to-high and negative (Fisher's $Z = -0.589$; 95% CI = -0.734 to -0.391), indicating that increased levels of sports anxiety were associated with decreased athletic performance. Heterogeneity analysis demonstrated a high level of variability among the included studies ($Q = 111.591$, $p < 0.001$; $I^2 = 94.623\%$), suggesting that contextual and methodological factors may influence the strength of the anxiety-performance relationship. Although the magnitude of the relationship differed across studies, the direction of the association was consistent, with all studies reporting negative correlations. These findings highlight the importance of psychological preparation strategies, including anxiety regulation, relaxation techniques, mental skills training, and confidence-building interventions, to support optimal athletic performance. Future research should examine potential moderators such as sport type, competition level, gender, age, and anxiety measurement methods to better understand factors influencing the relationship between anxiety and performance.

| KEYWORDS

Sports anxiety, competitive anxiety, athletic performance, psychological factors, athletes.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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INTRODUCTION

Anxiety affects athletes in all sports, either positively or negatively, while also influencing individuals in general. In the sporting context, anxiety has a significant impact on attention, motivation, athletes' abilities, their preparation for competitions, physical condition during competitions, and decision-making skills. Moreover, it affects athletes' speed, endurance, strength, performance, tactical understanding, and technical skills that are required during competitions (Christopher, 2002). Sports psychologists agree that athletes need to manage their anxiety at an optimal level in order to achieve high performance. Neither excessive nor insufficient levels of anxiety are considered beneficial for performance. High levels of anxiety may cause athletes to become anxious and make mistakes during competitions, whereas low levels of anxiety may lead to a lack of motivation and reduced effort.

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Therefore, optimal anxiety is considered to have positive effects on achieving success. In athletes, particularly due to high levels of anxiety, it is known that anxiety intensity tends to increase as performance progresses and reaches its peak levels (Engür, 2002).

Performance refers to the behavior observed at any point during a competition or match that contributes to an athlete's success. It can also be defined as an individual's ability to overcome a challenge and maintain their strength by overcoming difficulties in repeated competitions or long-distance events (Bushman et al., 2013).

Performance is defined as a series of observable, measurable, and evaluable behaviors. In sports, all actions performed by a football player, such as attacking, defending, and shooting, are considered indicators of performance. There is a relationship between performance and success, furthermore, certain factors, such as the training methods used, may also influence both success and anxiety levels (Günay & Yüce, 2001). Athletes' psychological states have the greatest impact on their performance. In particular, the emotional states they experience are directly associated with performance. Although there is a common perception that these emotional states always have negative effects, they may also produce positive outcomes in some cases. These effects may vary depending on athletes' personal characteristics, as well as variables such as their sport discipline, years of experience. Different personal characteristics and sport branches influence not only athletes' performance but also their anxiety levels. In addition, it has been reported that the relationship between anxiety and performance varies according to similar variables (Yılmaz, 2005).

Sports performance can be defined as the total effort demonstrated to achieve success while performing an athletic task that is required to be accomplished (Bayraktar & Kurtoğlu, 2004). Performance may vary due to many factors, and when performance analysis is considered in field sports, the factors affecting performance may become more complex (Reilly, 2001).

Sports performance is considered one of the important indicators of athletic success. Although many factors influence athletes' performance, psychological variables also play an important role. Anxiety is considered one of the most important psychological variables affecting performance in athletes. Although there are studies in the literature examining the relationship between these two variables, while the direction of the relationship obtained in these studies is similar, the strength of the relationship varies. The fact that individual studies have limited sample sizes, use different measurement instruments, and have been conducted in different sports branches limits the generalizability of the results obtained. Therefore, it is necessary to statistically combine the existing findings in order to clearly reveal the overall magnitude of the anxiety-performance relationship. In this regard, the purpose of this study is to systematically examine empirical studies investigating the relationship between anxiety and performance in athletes through the meta-analysis method and to determine the overall effect size of this relationship. This study is expected to provide a more comprehensive and generalizable perspective on the effect of anxiety on athletic performance, as well as to offer guiding findings for coaches, sports psychologists, and researchers.

METHOD

Study Design

In this study, a meta-analysis method was used to examine the relationship between sports anxiety and sports performance. Meta-analysis is a quantitative research method that enables the statistical combination of findings from previously conducted independent studies to obtain an overall effect size. In this study, a correlational meta-analysis approach was adopted, and the correlation coefficients (r) reported in the studies were transformed into Fisher's Z values and analyzed. A random-effects model (Random Effects Model) was used to determine the overall effect size.

a) Search Strategy

A literature search was conducted to identify studies examining the relationship between sports anxiety and sports performance. The search was performed through electronic databases, including PubMed, SPORTDiscus, Scopus, and APA PsycInfo. The keywords "sport anxiety", "competition anxiety", "sports performance", "athletic performance", and "anxiety and performance" were used during the search process. The identified studies were evaluated based on their titles, abstracts, and full texts. Studies examining the relationship between sports anxiety and sports performance and reporting the necessary statistical data, such as sample size and correlation coefficients (r), were included in the meta-analysis.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

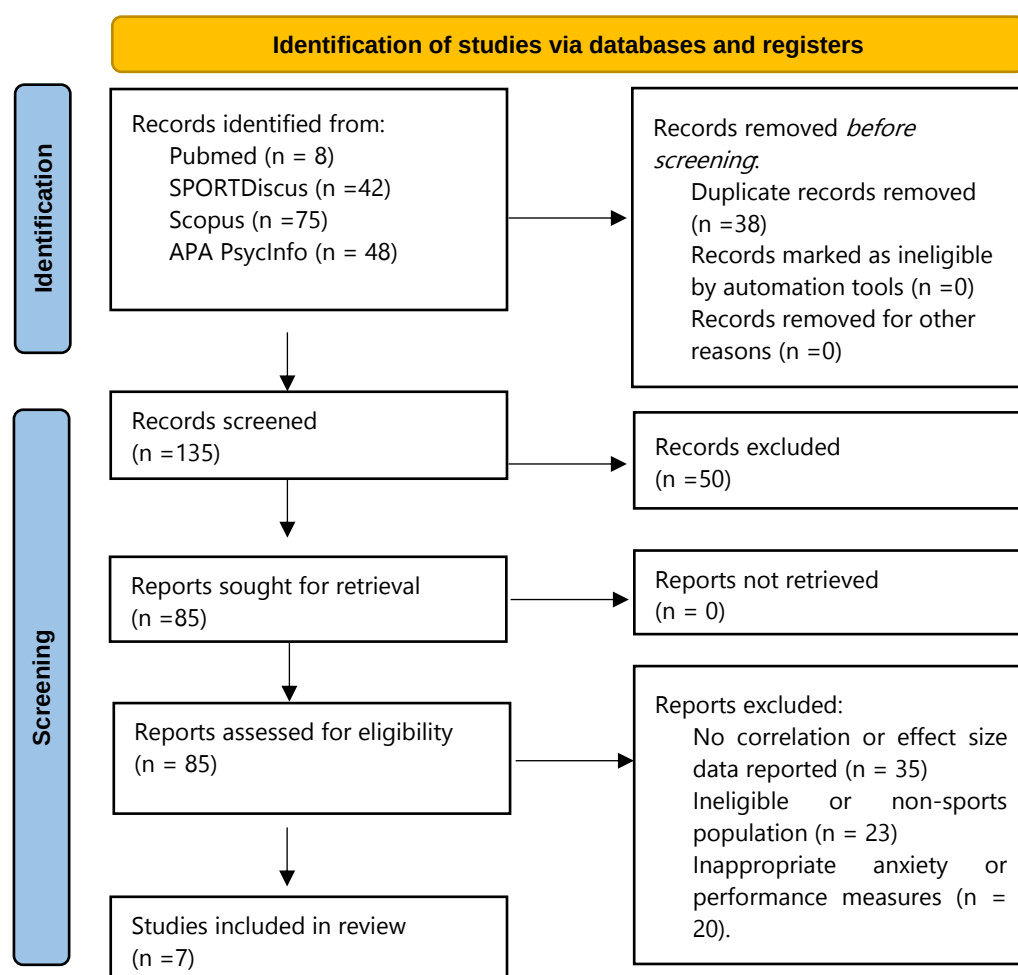
Specific criteria were considered for determining the studies to be included in the research. The inclusion criteria were defined as follows: (1) studies examining the relationship between sports anxiety and sports performance, (2) studies using a quantitative research design, (3) studies reporting correlation coefficients (r) or other statistical data suitable for meta-analysis, (4) studies with athlete samples, and (5) studies with accessible full texts.

Studies that did not meet these criteria, studies providing only theoretical information, studies conducted with non-athlete samples, studies lacking the necessary statistical data, and duplicate records were excluded from the meta-analysis.

Study Selection

The identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion processes of the studies were conducted in accordance with the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines. (Page et al., 2021). The studies obtained through the literature search were evaluated according to the predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the selection process of the studies included in the meta-analysis is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram



The study selection process was conducted according to the PRISMA guidelines. As shown in Figure 1, a total of 173 records were identified from PubMed, SPORTDiscus, Scopus, and APA PsycInfo databases. After removing 38 duplicate records, 135 records were screened. Following title and abstract screening, 50 records were excluded. Full texts of 85 articles were assessed for eligibility, and 78 articles were excluded based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Finally, 7 studies were included in the meta-analysis.

Data extraction was performed systematically from all studies included in the meta-analysis. The following information was extracted:

- Author(s) and publication year
- Sample size and participant characteristics
- Sport branch or athlete group
- Study design
- Correlation coefficient (r) between sport anxiety and sport performance
- Statistical significance values (p-values)
- Effect size data required for meta-analysis (Fisher's Z transformation and standard error values)

The extracted data were organized in a standardized table to facilitate comparison between studies.

Quality Assessment and Risk of Bias

The methodological quality of the included studies was evaluated by considering study design, sample characteristics, sample size, measurement instruments, statistical analyses, and reporting quality. Since the included studies were correlational studies examining the relationship between sport anxiety and sport performance, methodological quality assessment focused on the adequacy of the research design, the appropriateness of measurement methods, and the accuracy of reported statistical information. Methodological quality was not used as an exclusion criterion; however, potential limitations and sources of bias were considered during the interpretation of the meta-analysis results. Studies with smaller sample sizes, limited methodological information, or potential measurement limitations were considered to have a higher risk of bias.

Statistical Analysis

In this study, a meta-analysis method was used to analyze the obtained data. The correlation coefficients (r) obtained from the studies were converted into Fisher's Z values for use in meta-analysis calculations. Fisher's Z values were used as effect sizes, and standard error values were calculated for each study. A heterogeneity analysis was conducted to determine the differences among the studies, and Cochran's Q test and the I^2 statistic were used. Due to the high level of heterogeneity among the studies ($I^2 = 94.623\%$), the random-effects model (Random Effects Model) was preferred for calculating the overall effect size. The overall effect size was evaluated with a 95% confidence interval, and the statistical significance level was set at $p < 0.05$. In addition, a funnel plot was examined to assess publication bias. Meta-analysis calculations were performed using appropriate statistical software.

FINDINGS

Table 1. Characteristics of the Studies Included in the Meta-Analysis and Correlation Findings

Author and Year	Sample Size (n)	Correlation Coefficient (r)	p
Bukhari, Fahd, Tahira & Yaseen (2021)	110	-0.331	<0.001
Muhammad, Khan & Khan (2020)	126	-0.56	0.002
Atarodi, Lotfi, Mottaghi, Daemi & Rohani (2011)	600	-0.81	0.01
Judge, Urbina, Hoover, Craig, Judge, Leitzelar, Pearson, Holtzclaw & Bellar (2016)	36	-0.397	0.020
Singh, Prakash, Punia & Kulandaivelan (2017)	273	-0.554	0.01
Fahim & Saharan (2020)	123	-0.49	<0.001
Cerit, Gümüşdağ, Evli, Şahin & Bastık (2013)	45	-0.077	>0.05

Table 1 presents the sample sizes, correlation coefficients, and significance levels of the studies included in the meta-analysis. The correlation coefficients were found to be negative in all studies. This finding indicates an inverse relationship between sport anxiety and sport performance. In other words, as sport anxiety increases, sport performance tends to decrease. When the correlation values of the studies were examined, the strongest negative relationship was observed in the study by Atarodi, Lotfi, Mottaghi, Daemi & Rohani (2011) ($r = -0.810$), whereas the weakest negative relationship was found in the study by Cerit, Gümüşdağ, Evli, Şahin & Bastık (2013) ($r = -0.077$). The sample sizes of the studies ranged from 36 to 600, and the relationship was statistically significant in most of the studies. These findings indicate that the relationship between sport anxiety and sport performance appears in a consistent direction across different samples.

Table 2. Fisher's Z Transformations and Standard Error Values of the Studies

Study	Sample (N)	Correlation (r)	Fisher's Z	S.E (Fisher's Z)
Bukhari, Fahd, Tahira & Yaseen (2021)	110	-0.331	-0.344	0.097
Muhammad, Khan & Khan (2020)	126	-0.560	-0.633	0.090
Atarodi, Lotfi, Mottaghi, Daemi & Rohani (2011)	600	-0.810	-1.127	0.041
Judge, Urbina, Hoover, Craig, Judge, Leitzelar, Pearson, Holtzclaw & Bellar (2016)	36	-0.397	-0.420	0.174
Singh, Prakash, Punia & Kulandaivelan (2017)	273	-0.554	-0.624	0.061
Fahim & Saharan (2020)	123	-0.490	-0.536	0.091
Cerit, Gümüşdağ, Evli, Şahin & Bastık (2013)	45	-0.077	-0.077	0.154

Table 2 presents the Fisher's Z transformations of the correlation coefficients and the standard error values of the studies included in the meta-analysis. All Fisher's Z values were found to be negative across the studies. This indicates that the direction of the relationship between sport anxiety and sport performance was consistent in all studies. The strongest negative relationship was observed in the study by Atarodi, Lotfi, Mottaghi, Daemi & Rohani (2011) (Fisher's Z = -1.127), whereas the weakest negative relationship was found in the study by Cerit, Gümüşdağ, Evli, Şahin & Bastık (2013) (Fisher's Z = -0.077). When the standard error values were examined, it was observed that standard error values decreased as sample size increased. Studies with larger sample sizes had lower standard error values, indicating that their effect size estimates were more reliable. The Fisher's Z transformation enabled the correlation values obtained from different studies to be combined on a common scale and made them suitable for meta-analysis calculations.

Table 3. Results of the Heterogeneity Test in the Meta-Analysis

Number of Studies (k)	7
Cochran's Q	111.591
Degrees of Freedom (df)	6.000
p value	<0.001
I ² (%)	94.623
Tau ² (τ ²)	0.114

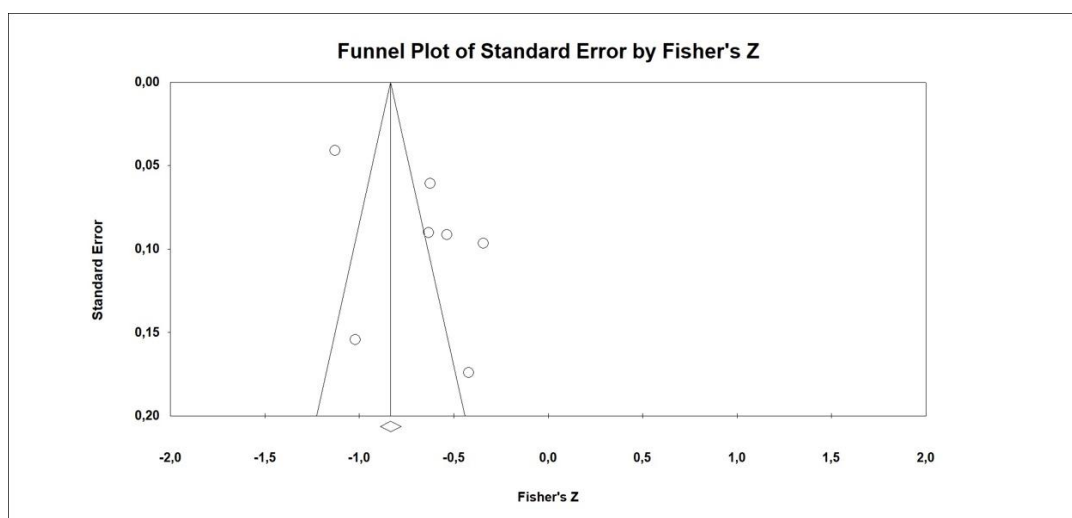
The heterogeneity analysis revealed a statistically significant level of heterogeneity among the studies (Cochran's Q = 111.591, df = 6, $p < 0.001$). The I² value of 94.623% indicates a very high level of heterogeneity among the examined studies. This finding suggests that the effect sizes of the studies differed substantially from each other. However, the fact that all studies reported negative correlation coefficients indicates that the direction of the relationship between sport anxiety and sport performance was consistent, although the strength of the relationship varied across studies.

Table 4. Results of the Overall Effect Size Between Sport Anxiety and Sport Performance

Model	Number of Studies (k)	Mean Effect Size	95% Confidence Interval	Z	p
Random Effects Model	7	-0.589	(-0.734) – (-0.391)	-5.048	<.001

The results of the random-effects model showed that the overall effect size between sport anxiety and sport performance was negative and statistically significant ($Z = -5.048$, $p < 0.001$). The mean effect size was calculated as -0.589 . The fact that the 95% confidence interval (-0.734 to -0.391) did not include zero indicates that the relationship was statistically significant. These findings demonstrate that sport performance tends to decrease as sport anxiety increases. Considering the effect size value, there was a moderate-to-high negative relationship between sport anxiety and sport performance.

Figure 2. Funnel Plot of Effect Sizes Between Sport Anxiety and Sport Performance



The funnel plot was examined to evaluate publication bias. The distribution of the studies around the effect sizes was assessed in the plot. The studies generally showed a symmetrical distribution, and no evident asymmetry was observed. This finding suggests that the likelihood of substantial publication bias in the meta-analysis results is low. However, the evaluation of publication bias should be interpreted cautiously due to the limited number of studies included in the analysis ($k = 7$).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of the seven studies examined within the scope of this meta-analysis indicate an overall negative relationship between anxiety and performance among athletes. The obtained correlation coefficients ranged from -0.077 to -0.81 , suggesting high consistency among the studies in terms of the direction of the relationship, while revealing considerable heterogeneity regarding the strength of the association.

Bukhari, Fahd, Tahira, and Yaseen (2021) investigated the effect of sports anxiety on sports performance among athletes. The sample consisted of 110 sports players (68 males and 42 females) from Bahawalpur and Multan cities in the Punjab Province of Pakistan. The participants were between 18 and 35 years of age, and the study was conducted using a cross-sectional research design. Data were collected using the Sport Competition Anxiety Test (SCAT) to assess sports anxiety and the Athlete's Subjective Performance Scale (ASPS) to evaluate sports performance. The findings revealed a significant negative relationship between sports anxiety and sports performance ($r = -0.33$). The results indicated that increased levels of sports anxiety were associated with decreased sports performance, and sports anxiety was a significant predictor of athletes' performance. Additionally, no significant gender differences were found in terms of sports anxiety and sports performance.

Muhammad, Khan and Khan investigated the effect of anxiety on sports performance among elite athletes. The sample consisted of 126 athletes (86 males and 40 females) aged 18–27 years who participated in the 31st National Games held in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Anxiety levels were assessed using the Competitive State Anxiety Inventory-2 (CSAI-2), and athletes' sports performance was evaluated after the competition. The findings revealed a negative relationship between trait anxiety and sports performance ($r = -0.56$), indicating that higher levels of trait anxiety were associated with lower sports performance.

Atarodi, Lotfi, Mottaghi, Daemi, and Rohani (2011) conducted a study involving 600 players selected through a census method from 60 futsal teams in Gonabad, Iran. Anxiety was assessed using the 15-item Sport Competition Anxiety Test (SCAT) developed by Martens, while performance was evaluated using an athletic performance checklist. The findings revealed the strongest negative relationship between anxiety and performance among the studies examined ($r = -0.81$, $p = 0.01$).

Judge et al. (2016) investigated the impact of competitive trait anxiety on powerlifting performance. The sample consisted of 36 collegiate powerlifters from club teams of three universities (26 males and 10 females), with a mean age of 19.9 ± 1.5 years. Competitive trait anxiety was assessed using the Sport Competition Anxiety Test (SCAT). Athletes' performance was evaluated based on the percentage of their best total achieved during the competition. The findings revealed a significant negative relationship between competitive trait anxiety and sports performance ($r = -0.397$, $p = 0.02$). The results indicated that higher SCAT scores, reflecting greater competitive trait anxiety, were associated with lower powerlifting performance.

Singh, Prakash, Punia, and Kulandaivelan (2017) investigated the relationship between pre-competition anxiety and performance levels among inter-university women football players. The sample consisted of 273 female football players who participated in an inter-university football tournament in India. A total of 16 teams were included in the study, which used a cross-sectional correlational design. Pre-competition anxiety levels were assessed using the Sport Competition Anxiety Test (SCAT), while team performance was evaluated according to tournament rankings. The findings revealed a moderate negative relationship between pre-competition anxiety and sports performance ($r = -0.554$), indicating that higher levels of anxiety were associated with lower performance levels among athletes.

The study included 123 young wrestlers (105 males and 18 females) who participated in the 7th All India Chandgiram Gold Cup Wrestling Tournament held in March 2018. The participants were aged 18–25 years and were selected using a convenience sampling method. Competition anxiety was measured using the Sport Competition Anxiety Test (SCAT) developed by Martens (1977). The SCAT consists of 15 items, including 10 scored anxiety-related items and 5 unscored items used to reduce response bias. Wrestling performance was evaluated based on tournament outcomes (win/loss results). A significant negative relationship was found between competition anxiety and performance ($r = -0.49$, $p < 0.001$). Regression analysis also showed that competition anxiety significantly predicted performance ($R^2 = 0.244$, $F(1,121) = 39.059$, $p < 0.001$). In conclusion, the study demonstrated that increased competition anxiety was associated with decreased performance among young wrestlers.

The study included a total of 45 elite female basketball players competing in the Turkish Women's Basketball 2nd League Final Four matches. To determine the athletes' pre-competition anxiety levels, the Competitive State Anxiety Inventory-2 (CSAI-2) developed by Martens, Burton, Vealey, Bump, and Smith (1990) and the Sport Competition Anxiety Test (SCAT) were used. The CSAI-2 consists of three subdimensions: cognitive anxiety, somatic anxiety, and self-confidence. The athletes' performances were evaluated using the performance assessment formula developed by Sonstroem and Bernardo (1982) and data obtained from the match observation forms of the Turkish Basketball Federation. As a result, a significant relationship was found between pre-competition anxiety levels and performance, indicating that anxiety may affect athletes' competition performance. The study demonstrated the importance of psychological preparation strategies aimed at controlling pre-competition anxiety levels to enhance athletes' performance.

Taken together, the findings of the seven studies examined within the scope of this meta-analysis provide consistent evidence that anxiety is negatively associated with athletic performance, regardless of the sport discipline, competition level, or cultural context in which the research was conducted. Individual and team sports, elite and sub-elite competitors, male and female athletes, and studies conducted across different countries (Pakistan, Iran, the United States, India, and Turkey) all converged on the same directional finding: as anxiety increases, performance tends to decrease. This pattern held true whether anxiety was conceptualized as competitive trait anxiety (SCAT), state anxiety (CSAI-2), or a combination of both, suggesting that the debilitating effect of anxiety on performance is not merely an artifact of a particular measurement approach but a relatively robust phenomenon across instruments. At the same time, the magnitude of this relationship varied considerably, ranging from a very weak and statistically non-significant association (Cerit et al., 2013, among elite basketball players) to a very strong association (Atarodi et al., 2011, among futsal players). This heterogeneity indicates that although the direction of the anxiety-performance relationship is stable, its strength is likely moderated by contextual and methodological factors. Several possible explanations can be proposed for this variability: First, competition level and athlete expertise may play a moderating role. Elite athletes, such as the basketball players

in Cerit et al.'s (2013) study, may have developed more effective coping and emotion-regulation strategies through years of high-level competitive exposure, which could buffer the negative impact of anxiety on performance and explain the near-zero correlation observed in that sample. In contrast, less experienced or younger athletes, such as the powerlifters in Judge et al. (2016) or the wrestlers in the tournament sample, may be more vulnerable to the disruptive effects of anxiety. Second, sample size and statistical power differed substantially across studies (ranging from $n = 36$ to $n = 600$), which likely contributed to the observed variability in effect sizes; smaller samples are more prone to unstable correlation estimates and wider confidence intervals. Third, differences in performance measurement may partially account for the inconsistency in effect magnitude. Some studies relied on subjective, self-reported performance measures (e.g., Bukhari et al., 2021, using the Athlete's Subjective Performance Scale), while others used objective outcome indicators such as win/loss records, tournament rankings, or percentage of best total achieved. Subjective performance measures may be more susceptible to shared-method variance with self-reported anxiety measures, potentially inflating the observed correlations relative to studies using objective performance criteria. Fourth, sport type (individual versus team sport) may also be a relevant moderator, as individual sports such as powerlifting and wrestling place the entire burden of competitive outcome on a single athlete, whereas team sports such as futsal, football, and basketball distribute performance responsibility among multiple players, which may dilute the direct impact of any one athlete's anxiety on the team-level performance outcome.

The findings of this meta-analysis indicate that anxiety has a consistent negative association with athletes' performance across different sports disciplines, competitive levels, and populations. All seven studies included in the analysis reported negative correlation coefficients, ranging from $r = -0.077$ to $r = -0.81$, demonstrating that increased levels of competitive anxiety are generally associated with decreased athletic performance. Although the magnitude of the relationship varied among studies, the overall direction of the findings supports the assumption that anxiety can act as a performance-inhibiting factor in competitive sports. Overall, the results of this meta-analysis demonstrate that competitive anxiety is an important psychological factor associated with athletic performance. The consistent negative relationship identified across studies highlights the importance of psychological skills training, including anxiety regulation strategies, relaxation techniques, mental imagery, and confidence-building interventions. Coaches, sport psychologists, and athletes should consider psychological preparation as an essential component of performance enhancement programs to minimize the negative effects of excessive competition anxiety and support optimal athletic performance.

LIMITATIONS

A limitation of the present meta-analysis concerns the variability in anxiety measurement instruments across studies. Although most studies used validated tools such as SCAT and CSAI-2, these instruments assess different aspects of anxiety, including trait and state anxiety. This methodological difference may have contributed to the observed heterogeneity among effect sizes. Future studies should consider analyzing anxiety dimensions separately to better clarify their specific associations with athletic performance.

SUGGESTIONS

Based on the findings of this meta-analysis, the following suggestions are proposed for practitioners, athletes, and future researchers:

- Coaches should be trained to recognize early signs of debilitating anxiety in athletes and to differentiate these from optimal, facilitative levels of arousal, since not all anxiety is detrimental to performance.
- Individualized psychological preparation programs should be considered, given that the strength of the anxiety-performance relationship appears to vary according to athlete experience level, sport type, and competition context; a one-size-fits-all approach to anxiety management may not be equally effective across all athletes.
- Sport federations and clubs should consider integrating sport psychology support staff into their coaching teams, particularly at developmental levels, to address competitive anxiety proactively rather than reactively.
- Future meta-analytic work should aim to include a larger number of studies in order to conduct formal moderator analyses examining the effects of variables such as sport type (individual vs. team), competition level (amateur vs. elite), gender, age group, and the specific anxiety instrument used.

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