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## Exploring the Psychological Skills with Demographic Characteristics of Under-19 Cricketers in Pakistan

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**Abstract:** The players of Pakistan U-19 cricket team were examined in relation to their psychological experiences and development of skill in this qualitative exploratory study along with focusing on the impact of demographic factors on performance, emotional control and resilience. Methods: The study six major themes were examined: performance and achievement, emotional and psychological functioning, coping and mental skills, development and motivation, social and relational dynamics, and physical and external constraints. It is founded on semi-structured interviews with thirty male athletes aged 15 to 19 from various geographical areas and educational backgrounds. The average age of athletes was 17.00 years (SD = 0.87). As demonstrated by the results, the mental techniques like self-talk, stress management and visualization are necessary for consistency and emotion regulation, athletes' confidence and drive are affected by both success and failure. Family involvement, early exposure and academic achievement significantly influenced goal orientation, psychological flexibility and mental toughness. Injuries, environmental stressors, and a lack of established support networks negatively impacted the performance and mental health. The value of psychological skill training and social support in assisting young cricket players, maximize their athletic potential as well as build resilience, as highlighted by the study. Implications for sport psychologists, coaches, and athletic programs are examined in terms of encouraging long-term psychological and performance progress.

**Key Words:** Psychological Skills, Under-19 Cricketers, Semi-structured Interviews, Qualitative Research, Pakistan

### Introduction

Physical practice is no longer seen as the exclusive means of achieving success and peak performance in the athletic world. On the other hand, a variety of physical and psychological elements influence athletic performance and improvement. The psychological traits (success motivation, mental skills, and emotional intelligence) are thought to have an impact on athletic performance and sport behavior. However, because each sport has its own unique set of environmental stimuli and stressors (e.g., injury experience, coach reprimands, coach criticism during a race, receiving a fine, a bad referee at competition, audience reaction during competition), it is not possible to assume that all sports are the same. Numerous factors in the sports field and competition, such as the type of sport, cause athletes to exhibit psychological behaviors. These behaviors, in turn, give rise to specific psychological phenomena that help coaches in various fields and sport psychologists identify the players' and teams' weaknesses to improve their athletes' performance. Additionally, the nature and type of sports (both group and individual) are important considerations in group sports (Kajbafnezhad et al., 2011).

Each of the sports has unique physical and technical requirements that call for athletes to possess certain abilities. Athletes' usage of competitive mental talents is influenced by these traits that set certain sports apart. The level of

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technical performance associated with a sport (fine versus gross motor skills) will influence the type of mental skills that are performed (shooting versus power lifting), for instance, and sports that require more explosiveness will differ greatly from those that require endurance (sprint running versus marathon running). Sports that require less than a minute have psychological demands that are significantly different from those that require three hours (e.g., 100-meter running versus a baseball game), and finally, sports have different requirements in terms of the type, such as light or intense (Weinberg & Gould, 2019).

A widely used approach, psychological skills training, which teaches athletes how to improve the caliber and reliability of their performance (Vealey, 2007).

Relationship of Psychological Skills and Demographic Variables in Team Sport. In the scope of team sports, psychological skill development is impacted by an athlete's educational background, family history, level of experience, and other factors. Not only does experience shape the athlete's psychological readiness, but it also shapes their ability to navigate the interpersonal complexities of a team.

### **Psychological Skills and Experience**

Mentally, an athlete's skills are developed and refined through athletic experiences, including contests, training sessions, and competitions. From novice to elite, an athlete's career goes through multiple tiers, which come with increasing competitive pressure, training, and performance expectations. That balance of training and performance pressure fosters the development of several psychological skills, including anxiety management, focus, emotional control, confidence, and motivation. (Brown & Fletcher, 2017)

More seasoned athletes demonstrate a firmer command of psychological skills in comparison to their less seasoned counterparts. This is the result of repeated exposure to high-stakes contests, requiring the athlete to deal with overwhelming stress, limited ability to recover, and an unrelenting demand to maintain information, focus, and attention. (MacNamara et al., 2010). In comparison with novice athletes, experienced athletes are better at adopting and integrating mental skills, including imagery, self-talk, and goal setting, due to their sport-specific knowledge and psychological maturity (Vealey, 2007).

In addition, controlled research suggests that the number of years an athlete participates in competition of a given standard affects the athlete's psychological skills, which in turn develop incrementally over time (Ericsson et al., 1993).

### **Psychological Skills and Level of Play**

The division of athlete categories, from amateur to semi-professional, or professional, contributes greatly to the development of the necessary psychological skills and their application. Each successive tier of competition brings with it its own set of psychological expectations. Athletes competing at advanced stages face expectations that go far beyond technical and tactical skills due to the competition's complex structure. Athletes are also expected to have sharp mental skills alongside absolute focus and emotional control, and to show resilience when under pressure (Gould et al., 2002).

Part of the professional and elite athletes' routines includes psychological skills training (PST), which is offered, fostering the development of goal identification and formulation of specialized performance and visualization routines. The mental preparation and recovery strategies of professional and elite athletes are enhanced as they have greater access to sport psychologists and performance consultants (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012). Unlike professionals, amateur athletes have very little exposure to formal psychological coping mechanisms, which can be observed in the differences in mental toughness and cognitive control across the levels of play (Mahoney et al., 1987).

### **Psychological Skills and Education**

Active engagement in formal education systems has an impact on athletes' physical training and preparation by shaping their psychological skills and mental readiness. Enhanced levels of formal education improve mental agility, reflective thought processes, and the cultivation of complex mental maneuvers (Rindermann, 2008).

These positive outcomes of self-regulation, goal setting, and resilience in athletes can be a result of integrated psychological skills training (PST) with life skills education of self-taught courses in universities or elite sport schools.

Empirical studies show that student athletes, particularly those in higher education, demonstrate higher emotional intelligence (EI), self-efficacy (SE), and psychological wellbeing compared to their less educated counterparts (Rasmussen & Laumann, 2013).

Athletes can use mental strategies like visualization, goal-setting, and self-talk more deeply because of the cognitive demands of higher education, which foster reflective and analytical thinking. Youth athletes' motivation, stress management, and attentional focus, for instance, significantly improved when study protocols delivering customized PST in educational contexts were implemented (Harwood et al., 2015).

### **Background of Athletes**

An athlete's psychological skill set is shaped by their athletic background, which includes a variety of contextual and personal traits. Life experiences like athletic careers, familial and social influences, involvement in school, and participation in club or team structures are examples of core elements (Côté et al., 2007).

Athletes' personal histories, which include early exposure to sports, changes in competitive level, setbacks, and injury experiences, have a significant impact on how resilient and persistent they become over time. However, a lack of thorough studies examining sport biography as a factor in determining athletes' mental tendencies has been noted in the literature.

Athletes who combine athletics with learning environments, like college courses or dual-career plans, also frequently demonstrate improved self-control, drive, and mental skill competency to improve cognitive and emotional readiness. Educational settings offer organized chances to incorporate psychological skills training.

Research on a variety of athlete populations also shows that playing a variety of sports as a child, as opposed to specializing too early, promotes psychological development that is well-rounded, lowers burnout, and increases resilience to injuries. Promoting flexibility and more general coping mechanisms, these multisport experiences also help athletes develop their long-term identities (Côté et al., 2009).

Lastly, intrapersonal traits (such as self-control and conscientiousness) influenced by an athlete's personality, biography, and structural support have been linked to the capture of psychological resilience and mental toughness (Clough et al., 2002). Stronger psychological profiles may help athletes perform better under duress and sustain their performance over the course of their careers, according to studies (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012).

### **Family/ Involvement as a Coach**

An athlete's psychological underpinnings and level of participation in sports are greatly influenced by their family. Family influences can affect perseverance, motivation, confidence, and stress management from an early age. By modeling behavior, offering emotional support, and encouraging self-regulation techniques, parents and family members, especially those with previous coaching or athletic experience, help children develop psychological skills (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004).

The participation of family members as coaches makes this dynamic more complex. Along with promoting better communication and emotional intelligence, it can also cause stress and make it difficult to discriminate between personal and professional connections. When the relationship is managed correctly, higher levels of internal drive and more complex coping mechanisms are shown, as athletes with family members who coach them. (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005).

### **Objectives**

1. To study the psychological experiences of Pakistan U-19 cricket players with performance, success, and failures.
2. To study how people deal with performance pressure with the help of psychological resilience, emotional control, and mental preparation.

3. To explore how developmental background, such as early exposure, family support, and coaching, affects the development of psychological skills.
4. To see how U-19 cricket players use mental skills and coping mechanisms to deal with stress, failure, and injury.
5. To study and understand how motivation, confidence, and goal orientation affect psychological functioning and performance outcomes.
6. To assess how external constraints (injuries, environmental factors, lifestyle) interact with athletes' psychological wellbeing and sporting identity.

### Research Questions

1. What psychological challenges and achievements do U-19 cricketers experience during their early cricketing careers?
2. How do these cricketers mentally prepare for competitions, and how do they regulate emotions during performance highs and lows?
3. In what ways do family involvement and coaching influence psychological development in these players?
4. What coping mechanisms and mental strategies are employed to deal with failure, anxiety, pressure, and injuries?
5. How do self-confidence, goal setting, and motivation shape the players' performance and psychological responses?
6. What are the perceived effects of physical injuries, health disruptions, and environmental stressors on players' psychological resilience and identity?

### Methods

#### Research Design

The current study implies an exploratory research design where initially a qualitative approach through semi-structured interviews is followed by quantitative responses of the participants.

#### Tools

A complete interview guide in Urdu and English was produced ahead of time, considering the suggestions of subject matter specialists. The interview guide's relevance and importance were confirmed by consultation with an expert group. Experts in the field tried to include items for review. A panel of qualified specialists was given a draft of the interview guide to study and provide input on. The Subject matter experts committee was made up of three members: a language specialist, the head of the psychiatry department at the DHQ hospital in Multan, and a senior psychologist at the same facility. Expert confirmation was acquired for each question's relevance to the study issue, as well as ideas for improvement.

Semi-structured interviews were performed in Urdu so that participants could easily communicate and react. With the participants' permission, the interviews were audio recorded and then thoroughly transcribed.

Participants were interviewed in depth, and their perspectives on psychological skills were acquired using an interview guide. Participants' data were gathered using purposive and snowball sampling strategies. Participants were given the option to withdraw at any time during the study if they felt uncomfortable or unable to proceed.

Furthermore, the method proposed by Braun and Clarke (2019) was used to conduct a Thematic Analysis after which themes and subordinates themes were developed subsequently.

Furthermore, the study's primary purpose was to conduct a complete and in-depth investigation into the relationship of psychological skills and demographic variables in team sport, which was done through a thorough literature analysis.

The interview methodology included a total of 60 questions, however additional questions were asked based on the participants' answers. To assess the validity of the questions, pilot research with one person was conducted. The interview was conducted in Urdu, and all ethical considerations were examined. The interview lasted approximately 15

minutes. Further revisions were made to the final interview protocol. The interview guide was completed in two languages: English and Urdu.

### Sample and Sampling Technique

Given that it specifically targeted young cricket players who participated in competitive sports, the purposeful sampling technique was inferred. These strategies assured access to individuals with pertinent experience and expanded reach through peer networks. Data collection continued until thematic saturation, which was attained after 25 interviews—five additional respondents were added to ensure stability—and the responses began to become redundant, which was defined as the lack of new codes or topics. Thirty male volunteers who were given pseudonyms to protect their privacy made up the final sample. Member checking, peer debriefing, and reflexivity techniques improved credibility, but the lack of triangulation is recognized as a shortcoming of this exploratory design.

### Inclusion Criteria

For this study, the sample consisted of 30 individuals, males with an age range of 15 to 19 years. Participants either had some experience of sports and participated in regional and international sport events and belonged to different socioeconomic backgrounds. The data was collected from the individuals of Multan, Bahawalpur, Lahore, Sialkot, Karachi, FATA, Abbottabad, Hyderabad, Rawalpindi, Faisalabad, and Peshawar.

### Exclusion Criteria

The sample excluded any populations who were physically, emotionally, or psychologically susceptible. Anyone under the age of 15 and over the age of 19 were excluded from the survey to gather the opinions and perspectives. The cricketers from college, universities or pathway programs were excluded.

### Results

The study comprised 30 male cricket players aged 15 to 19 years (mean = 17.00, SD = 0.87) from various locations of Pakistan. Participants had between two and ten years of playing experience and were engaged in a variety of educational programs, ranging from middle school to college studies. The regions covered were Lahore, Karachi, Sialkot, FATA, Abbottabad, Multan, Faisalabad, Rawalpindi, Peshawar, Hyderabad, and Bahawalpur.

Karachi had the second-highest participation rate (16.7%), after Lahore (20%). Multan, Faisalabad, Peshawar, and Rawalpindi contributed 6.7% each, while Sialkot, FATA, and Abbottabad contributed 10%. The lowest percentages were seen in Hyderabad and Bahawalpur (3.3% each). The majority of participants (26.7%) completed matriculation or the eighth grade. A smaller portion pursued advanced courses such as university-level engineering, BTEC, or A levels. The early to middle-secondary educational level that is typical among teenagers between the ages of 15 and 19 falls within this range. (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Demographics of the participants (N= 30)*

Pseudonyms	Age	Experience	Region	Education
AHB	18	10 Above	Lahore	A level
GH	16	5 to 7	Sialkot	1 <sup>st</sup> Year Pre-Eng
MTA	18	10 Above	Sialkot	1 <sup>st</sup> Year Pre-Eng
HA	17	10 Above	Karachi	Matric
UK	17	10 Above	FATA	9 <sup>th</sup>
AW	17	5 to 7	Abbottabad	Matric
YS	18	10 Above	Hyderabad	Civil Eng 2 <sup>nd</sup> Semester
MFYK	17	10 Above	Lahore	9 <sup>th</sup>
RAM	18	10 Above	Multan	9 <sup>th</sup>
MA	16	5 to 7	Rawalpindi	8 <sup>th</sup>
HZ	18	10 Above	Lahore	7 <sup>th</sup>

Pseudonyms	Age	Experience	Region	Education
MAA	17	5 to 7	FATA	Matric
SM	18	10 Above	Multan	A levels
MQ	19	10 Above	Faisalabad	Matric
MH	16	5 to 7	Bahawalpur	6 <sup>th</sup>
SS	17	10 Above	Karachi	1 <sup>st</sup> Year Pre Eng
AH	18	10 Above	Peshawar	Matric
NS	15	2 to 5	Karachi	9 <sup>th</sup>
HK	17	5 to 7	Rawalpindi	8 <sup>th</sup>
MT	18	10 Above	FATA	Matric
IA	17	5 to 7	Lahore	BTEC Business
AS	17	10 Above	Sialkot	1 <sup>st</sup> Year Pre Medical
HA	17	5 to 7	Lahore	8 <sup>th</sup>
RU	16	5 to 7	Karachi	8 <sup>th</sup>
UZ	16	5 to 7	Abbottabad	Matric
AU	16	5 to 7	Karachi	Matric
AK	17	10 Above	Lahore	8 <sup>th</sup>
HK	16	5 to 7	Peshawar	8 <sup>th</sup>
SA	17	10 Above	Abbottabad	FSC Pre Eng
DAK	18	10 Above	Faisalabad	1 <sup>st</sup> Year I Com

The study comprised 30 male cricket players aged 15 to 19 years (mean = 17.00, SD = 0.87) from various locations of Pakistan. Participants had 2 to over 10 years of playing experience and were engaged in educational programs ranging from middle school to university studies. The sample comprised Multan, Faisalabad, Rawalpindi, Abbottabad, Bahawalpur, Hyderabad, and Peshawar.

Lahore had the highest percentage of participation (20%), followed by Karachi (16.7%). Sialkot, FATA, and Abbottabad each provided 10%, with Multan, Faisalabad, Peshawar, and Rawalpindi contributing 6.7% apiece. Hyderabad and Bahawalpur had the smallest representations (3.3% each). The majority of players (26.7%) completed either matriculation or the eighth grade. A lower proportion pursued advanced courses like undergraduate engineering, BTEC, or A levels. The early to middle-secondary educational level that is typical among teenagers between the ages of 15 and 19 falls within this range (see Table 1).

### Themes and Sub-Themes

The main themes and sub-themes as founded in the qualitative data via thematic analysis are mentioned below (Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Main Themes and Sub-Themes*

Main Theme	Sub-Themes
Performance and Achievement	Milestones, exposure, overconfidence, positive achievement, and emotional response
Performance Challenges	Distraction, insecurity, pressure, and confidence collapse
Mental Preparation	Focus, aspirations, anxiety and goal orientation
Emotional and Psychological Functioning	Anger, regulation, emotional distress and resilience
Confidence and Self-Belief	Self-confidence, self-doubt, motivation
Coping and Mental Skills	Visualization, reframing, stress management
Insight and Personal Growth	Turning points, self-reflection, development
Social and Relational Dynamics	Leadership, mentorship, family support
Physical and External Constraints	Health, injury and lifestyle disruption

## Discussion

The themes performance and achievement, emotional functioning, coping mechanisms, development and motivation, social dynamics, and external constraints interconnected were discovered to represent the psychological landscape in this investigation of Pakistani teenage cricket players. These areas work together to affect mental preparedness, motivation, and resilience, providing insights exploring the difficulties young competitive cricket players face in their growth.

### Performance and Achievement

Positive achievements like winning games and getting prizes boosted motivation and self-esteem, but occasionally overconfidence led to apathy. The outcomes were adversely affected by distractions, fear and self-doubt. The goal-setting and attentional control have become vital instruments for consistency according to attributional performance theories. This highlights how essential thorough mental preparation is to sustaining excellence.

### Emotional and Psychological Functioning

Resilience and emotional control were essential for overcoming setbacks. The brittleness of confidence was revealed by mood fluctuations, self-doubt, and pressure to succeed. Long-term goal-maintaining athletes demonstrated greater resilience, which is in line with research showing resilience training enhances optimism and stress management. Thus, emotional healing and control complement physical readiness.

### Coping and Mental Skills

Stress reduction involves the application of coping strategies such as self-talk, imagery and cognitive reframing. Athletes who lacked these skills were more prone to dwell on everything and perform poorly. Coping was developmental, self-reflection and failure-based learning encouraged development. Although avoidance behaviors heightened discomfort, proactive problem-solving techniques were associated to resilience. Consequently, coping is a taught, adaptable skill set that improves productivity and emotional well-being.

### Development and Motivation

Future ambitions and resilience were influenced by early career constraints. Discipline and goal focus set those who continued separately from those who withdrew. Motivation was dynamic, and as athletes received autonomy, self-determined forms improved. This shows how necessary autonomy-supportive coaching is to support constant dedication.

### Social and Relational Dynamics

Interpersonal relationships have a substantial impact on psychological well-being. While family, mentors and friends presented emotional support, leadership positions bring up accountability and self-assurance. Coaches who established genuine leadership, the prosocial behavior and mental health were enhanced by them. Therefore, social environments raise drive and resilience, laying the groundwork for the development of athletes through relationship dynamics.

### Physical and External Constraints

Performance and confidence were inadequate by injuries and environmental issues. While poor facilities or unpredictable schedules interfered with focus, injuries put athletes' identities and team duties in trouble. Long-term mental health may suffer as a result of rehabilitation's frequent emphasis on physical recovery over psychological results. Thus, comprehensive support systems that contain both physical and psychological rehabilitation are mandatory.

## Conclusion

The six themes linking psychological settings of cricket players were established in this study. It shows how important psychological training is for young sportsmen, particularly cricket players. It will take time for athletes' psychological

training to become a required component. To address a variety of psychological concerns, it is imperative that all young athletes collaborate with sports psychologists.

## **Declarations**

### **Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate**

The ethical approval of the study was taken from the Ethical Committee of the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB), vide letter no. NCA-R-01. Moreover, informed written consent was obtained from all the study participants. In case of subjects under 16, the informed written consent was obtained from their parents/ legally authorized representatives. All the research protocols were carried

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