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ANXIETY AND SELF-ESTEEM VARIATIONS AMONG SOCCER PLAYERS: A CROSS-SECTIONAL ANALYSIS OF PLAYING POSITIONS

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Abstract:
Background: In soccer, players' roles vary by playing position, defenders, midfielders, and forwards, each with distinct physical and psychological demands. Among the critical psychological attributes influencing player performance are competition anxiety and self-esteem, which significantly affect athletes' mental readiness, decision-making, and overall performance on the field. **Statement of the Problem:** The purpose of the present study is to examine the levels of competition anxiety and self-esteem among soccer players based on their playing positions in Tripura's A-Division League. **Method & Approach:** The study investigated psychological traits among 90 A-Division soccer players from the 2024 Tripura A-Division League, comprising 30 players each from the playing positions of Defenders, Midfielders, and Forwards. A cross-sectional research design was employed to evaluate players' anxiety levels using the Sports Competition Anxiety Test (SCAT) and self-esteem using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. Data normality was examined through Q-Q plots, ensuring statistical reliability. Scores for both scales were computed based on established guidelines. To determine positional differences in anxiety and self-esteem levels, one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

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was performed for normally distributed data. At the same time, the Kruskal-Wallis test was applied for non-parametric analysis. **Results:** The study reveals that Anxiety levels were moderate across all positions. However, no significant differences in anxiety were found, since the p value 0.333 > 0.05), suggesting that players face similar competitive stressors regardless of position. In contrast, self-esteem varied noticeably by position. Defenders reported the highest levels of low self-esteem. Though the significance difference was observed as p-value for the test, 0.005 < 0.05. **Discussion:** This suggests that players experience comparable competitive stress regardless of their roles on the field. However, self-esteem scores varied significantly by position, with defenders reporting the lowest levels of self-esteem. This could be attributed to the defenders' critical role, where mistakes are often more visible and consequential. **Conclusion:** These findings highlight that players' psychological traits are shaped not only by their specific roles but also by broader factors such as coaching strategies, team dynamics, and cultural influences.

Keywords: defender, midfielder, forward, anxiety, self-esteem

1. Introduction

Soccer is one of the most popular and physically demanding team sports worldwide, requiring players to perform under intense psychological and physiological pressure (S. Farooque *et al.*, 2023). Among the critical psychological attributes influencing player performance are competition anxiety and self-esteem, which significantly affect athletes' mental readiness, decision-making, and overall performance on the field (Ford *et al.*, 2017). These psychological factors concerning players' specific roles within a team is essential for enhancing both individual and team performance.

Competition anxiety, defined as a state of heightened nervousness or apprehension before or during competitive events, is commonly experienced by athletes (Craft *et al.*, 2003). It is a multidimensional construct comprising cognitive and somatic components, with varying intensity depending on the competitive context and an athlete's psychological preparedness (Popovych *et al.*, 2024). High levels of competition anxiety can impair concentration, disrupt motor skills, and ultimately affect game outcomes (Mojtahedi *et al.*, 2023). Anxiety management techniques such as relaxation training and cognitive restructuring have proven effective in mitigating these effects (Hanton, Mellalieu, *et al.*, 2004).

Similarly, self-esteem, reflecting an individual's overall evaluation of self-worth, plays a pivotal role in sports. It influences an athlete's motivation, resilience, and response to failures and successes (Koivula *et al.*, 2002). Athletes with higher self-esteem tend to exhibit better coping mechanisms, enhanced focus, and increased performance consistency(Baumeister *et al.*, 2003a). Conversely, low self-esteem may lead to performance anxiety, withdrawal from challenges, and reduced participation in sports (Petrovska *et al.*, 2022). Enhancing self-esteem through supportive coaching, positive

reinforcement, and psychological skills training is essential for athletic development (Singh *et al.*, 2024).

In soccer, players' roles vary by playing position defenders, midfielders, and forwards, each with distinct physical and psychological demands. Defenders must remain composed under pressure, midfielders require exceptional situational awareness and adaptability, and forwards face continuous goal-scoring pressure (Ashdown *et al.*, 2024). These role-specific demands suggest that competition anxiety and self-esteem may vary by playing position, as different responsibilities impose unique psychological stresses (Endo *et al.*, 2023). Previous research highlights that midfielders often exhibit higher anxiety due to their central role and frequent involvement in critical game situations (Zhang *et al.*, 2018).

Despite these advancements, Tripura's football ecosystem remains in its formative stage, with gameplay maturity still developing. Psychological preparedness among players is often limited, reflecting gaps in mental conditioning programs(S. M. Farooque & Roy, 2022). A lack of structured psychological training could hinder players' performance under high-pressure situations, emphasizing the need for targeted mental skills interventions (Reinebo *et al.*, 2024). Hence, the present study aims to examine the levels of competition anxiety and self-esteem among soccer players based on their playing positions in Tripura's A-Division League. By assessing these psychological traits, the study seeks to explore potential differences linked to positional roles, contributing to a better understanding of the psychological dynamics in competitive soccer.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

The present study involved 90 A-Division soccer players who competed in the 2024 season of the Tripura A-Division League. The participants were selected through a systematic process after obtaining informed consent based on their playing positions. The sample comprised 30 players from each playing position, namely Defenders, Midfielders, and Forwards. Formal approval for conducting the study was granted by the Tripura Football Association (TFA).

2.2 Procedure of Data Collection

Data collection followed a cross-sectional research design. To measure anxiety levels, the Sports Competition Anxiety Test (SCAT) developed by Martens (1977) was administered. This instrument consists of 15 statements evaluated on a three-point Likert scale: Rarely-1, Sometimes-2, and Often-3. Additionally, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, constructed by Morris Rosenberg, was used to assess players' self-esteem. This scale includes 10 statements rated on a four-point Likert scale: Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree.

2.3 Statistical Analysis

Rigorous procedures were followed throughout the data collection process to ensure the accuracy and reliability of responses, minimizing potential biases or misinterpretations. The normality of the data was assessed using Q-Q plots. Anxiety levels were classified according to the established guidelines specified in the SCAT manual. Furthermore, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to determine significant differences in anxiety levels among players based on their respective playing positions, whereas the Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis test was used for self-esteem comparison as the data could not be assumed to follow a normal distribution.

3. Results

Table 1: Percentage of Players Falling on the Different Level of Anxiety Based on the Playing Position

Level	Defender (%)	Midfielder (%)	Forward (%)
Low	10	3.33	20
Average	70	86.67	56.67
High Level	20	10	23.33

The above Table 1 illustrates the distribution of players' anxiety levels categorized by their playing positions: defenders, midfielders, and forwards. The anxiety levels are classified as low, average, and high. As the maximum players irrespective of their position fall in average anxiety level shows, the psychological demands of different playing positions, with midfielders experiencing the highest average anxiety, while forwards and defenders exhibit more varied anxiety levels.

Figure 1: Q-Q Plot to Normality of across the Data of Competition Anxiety of Soccer Players

Figure 1 illustrates the normal distribution of competition anxiety data among soccer players. The points are closely aligned with the 45-degree reference line, indicating that the competition anxiety scale data follows a normal distribution.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of Competition Anxiety Scores among the Defender, Midfielder and Forward Soccer Players of Tripura

Descriptive Statistics				
Groups	**Count**	**Sum**	**Average**	**Variance**
Defender	30.00	579.00	19.30	11.73
Midfielder	30.00	586.00	19.53	6.12
Forward	30.00	582.00	19.40	19.08

The above Table 2 depicts that the average competition anxiety score for defenders is 19.30, suggesting a moderate level of anxiety among this group. The variance of 11.73 indicates that the competition anxiety scores of defenders are somewhat spread out, with a relatively higher variation in anxiety levels compared to other groups. Some defenders may experience lower anxiety, while others may experience more significant anxiety.

The average score for midfielders is 19.53, which is slightly higher than the defenders' average (19.30). This suggests that midfielders, on average, experience a marginally higher level of competition anxiety. The variance of 6.12 is the smallest among the groups, indicating that the anxiety levels among midfielders are more consistent, with less variation in the responses compared to defenders and forwards.

The average score for forwards is 19.40, which is slightly higher than that of defenders (19.30) and slightly lower than midfielders (19.53). This suggests that forwards, on average, experience a similar but slightly less pronounced level of anxiety compared to midfielders. The variance for forwards (19.08) is the highest among the groups, indicating considerable variability in anxiety levels within the forward group. Some forwards may experience much higher competition anxiety, while others may report lower anxiety levels. Midfielders have the highest average anxiety score, followed by forwards, and defenders have the lowest. However, the differences are small, indicating that the competition anxiety is fairly similar across the groups.

Table 3: Comparison of Competition Anxiety Among the Defender, Midfielder and Forward Soccer Players of Tripura

ANOVA						
Source of Variation	**SS**	**df**	**MS**	**F**	**P-value**	**F crit**
Between Groups	0.82	2.00	0.41	0.03	0.97	3.10
Within Groups	1070.97	87.00	12.31			
Total	1071.79	89.00				

*Significance level: 0.05

Table 3 compares the mean scores across the groups to determine if there is a significant difference. Since the F-value (0.033) is much lower than the critical F-value (3.101), and the P-value (0.967) exceeds the standard significance level of 0.05. This indicates that there

is no statistically significant difference between the group means. The observed variation in the data is likely due to random chance, rather than reflecting any meaningful difference among the groups.

Table 4: Percentage of Players Falling on the Different Levels of Self-Esteem Based on the Playing Position

Level	Defender (%)	Midfielder (%)	Forward (%)
Low	53.33	33.33	26.67
Average	23.33	50.00	63.33
High Level	23.33	16.67	10.00

Table 4 presents the distribution of self-esteem levels among players based on their playing positions. The data indicate significant variations in self-esteem levels across these positions. For defenders, 53.33% of players exhibit a low level of self-esteem, which is notably higher compared to midfielders (33.33%) and forwards (26.67%). Conversely, only 23.33% of defenders report high self-esteem, similar to midfielders (16.67%) and forwards (10%). Midfielders, however, demonstrate a more balanced distribution, with 50% classified as having an average self-esteem level.

A considerable proportion of forwards (63.33%) fall into the average category, indicating a stronger self-perception relative to defenders and midfielders. These findings suggest that defenders may face more challenges in maintaining high self-esteem compared to their counterparts, while forwards seem to exhibit the most pronounced self-esteem in the average range. Such patterns could reflect the different psychological demands and pressures associated with the specific roles and responsibilities within a soccer team.

Table 5: Descriptive statistics of Self-Esteem Scores among The Defender, Midfielder and Forward Soccer Players of Tripura

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	Minimum	Maximum
Defender	30	28.03	3.09	0.56423	24.00	35.00
Midfielder	30	25.76	3.03	0.55436	21.00	35.00
Forward	30	27.80	3.41	0.62404	17.00	35.00

Table 5 presents the descriptive statistics of self-esteem scores among defender, midfielder, and forward soccer players from Tripura. Defenders (N = 30) have a mean self-esteem score of 28.03, with a standard deviation of ±3.09, indicating a relatively low spread of scores around the mean. Midfielders (N = 30) report a mean score of 25.76, slightly lower than defenders. The standard deviation for midfielders is ±3.03, also indicating a moderate variation in self-esteem scores. Forwards (N = 30) have a mean self-esteem score of 27.80, which is higher than the midfielders but lower than the defenders. The standard deviation for forwards is ±3.41, the highest among the three groups, indicating a relatively wider spread in their self-esteem scores.

Figure 2: Q-Q Plot for Normality of across the Data of Self-Esteem of Soccer Players

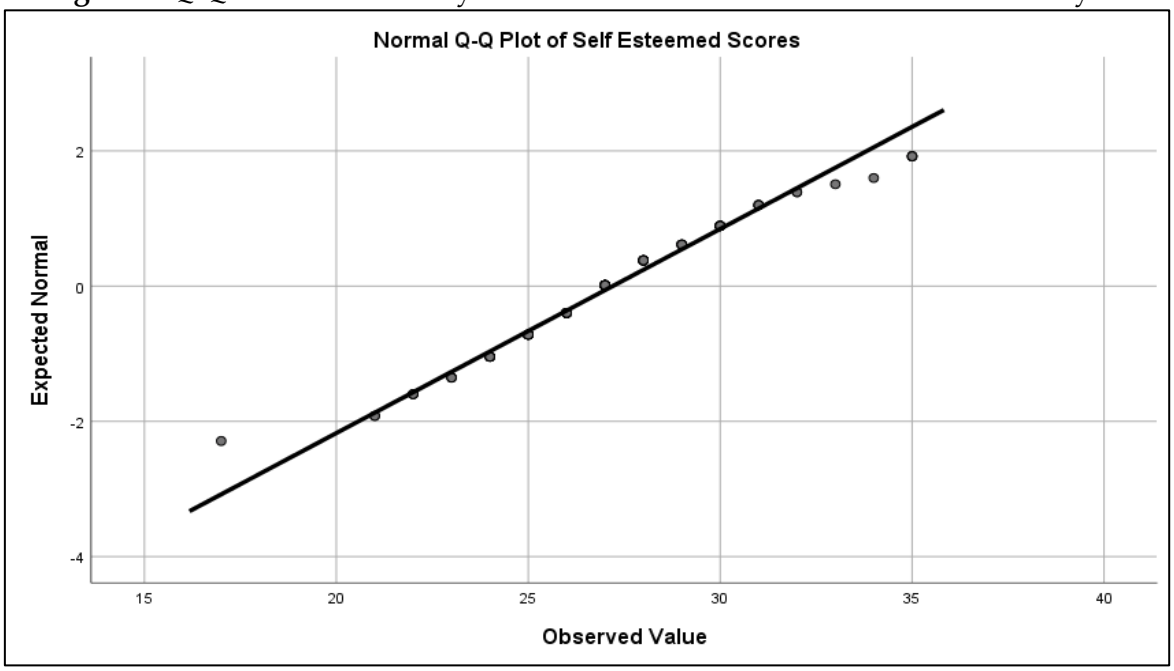

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of self-esteem data among soccer players. The points deviate both upward and downward at the extremes of the plot in relation to the 45-degree reference line, indicating that the self-esteem scale data does not follow a normal distribution.

Table 6: Comparison of Self-Esteem among the Defender, Midfielder and Forward Soccer Players of Tripura

Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test Summary	
Total N	90
Test Statistic	10.799[a]
Degree of Freedom	2
Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test)	0.005

*Significance level: 0.05

As the data did not meet the normality assumption, the Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test was employed. The results, as shown in Table 6, indicate that the test statistic value was 10.799, with 2 degrees of freedom (df). The p-value for the test was 0.005 (asymptotic significance, two-sided test). Since the p-value is less than the commonly used significance level of 0.05, there is no significant difference in self-esteem among the three groups (defenders, midfielders, and forwards). This suggests that there are statistically significant differences in self-esteem levels between the player positions.

Table 7: Pairwise Comparison among the Different Playing Positions of Soccer Players

Pairwise Comparisons of Position					
Sample 1 - Sample 2	**Test Statistic**	**Std. Error**	**Std. Test Statistic**	**Sig.**	**Adj. Sig.[a]**
Midfielder - Defender	18.250	6.702	2.723	0.006	0.019
Midfielder - Forward	-19.800	6.702	-2.955	0.003	0.009
Defender - Forward	-1.550	6.702	-0.231	0.817	1.000

The pairwise comparison of self-esteem among different playing positions in soccer players is presented in Table 7. The following results were observed:

- **Midfielder vs. Defender:** The test statistic value was 18.250, with a standard error of 6.702. The standardized test statistic was 2.723, and the p-value was 0.006. The adjusted significance value (using post-hoc correction) was 0.019. Since both the p-value and adjusted significance are below the threshold of 0.05, there is a statistically significant difference in self-esteem between midfielders and defenders.
- **Midfielder vs. Forward:** The test statistic value was -19.800, with a standard error of 6.702. The standardized test statistic was -2.955, and the p-value was 0.003. The adjusted significance value was 0.009. Both the p-value and adjusted significance are below 0.05, indicating a statistically significant difference in self-esteem between midfielders and forwards.
- **Defender vs. Forward:** The test statistic value was -1.550, with a standard error of 6.702. The standardized test statistic was -0.231, and the p-value was 0.817. The adjusted significance value was 1.000. Since both the p-value and adjusted significance exceed 0.05, there is no statistically significant difference in self-esteem between defenders and forwards. Significant differences in self-esteem were observed between midfielders and defenders, as well as between midfielders and forwards, while no significant difference was found between defenders and forwards.

4. Discussion

The objective of the present study was twofold: first, to assess the levels of anxiety and self-esteem among soccer players playing in various positions, and on the other hand, to compare whether there were any significant differences in these psychological attributes among soccer players of the Tripura A-Division League. The statistical analysis revealed varied levels of competitive anxiety and self-esteem among the players, indicating that their psychological profiles differed based on their playing positions.

The findings of this study in competition anxiety indicate that the majority of players, regardless of their positions, exhibit average anxiety levels, reflecting the psychological demands associated with competitive soccer. Midfielders experienced the highest average anxiety, possibly due to their dual role in both defensive and offensive plays, requiring continuous decision-making and physical endurance(Bortnik *et al.*, 2024). In contrast, forwards and defenders displayed more varied anxiety levels, which

could be attributed to the specialized nature of their roles. Forwards may experience performance pressure due to scoring expectations, while defenders may face anxiety stemming from preventing opponents' goals (Gabrys & Wontorczyk, 2023). These results align with existing literature emphasizing the role-specific psychological demands in team sports. Research by Martín-Rodríguez *et al.* (2024) suggests that anxiety levels in sports are influenced by role clarity, task importance, and situational stressors. Therefore, proper psychological training focusing on stress management and role-specific strategies could be beneficial for soccer players.

The distribution of self-esteem levels among soccer players based on their playing positions reveals important psychological dynamics inherent in team roles. Defenders demonstrate the highest proportion of low self-esteem. This finding aligns with research suggesting that defenders experience greater performance-related pressure due to their responsibility for preventing goals, often leading to more intense scrutiny (Mellalieu *et al.*, 2004). The low self-esteem reported by defenders may be attributed to the critical nature of their role, where mistakes are easily noticed and harshly judged (Reilly *et al.*, 2000). The limited presence of high self-esteem among players across all positions could be related to the competitive and evaluative environment of sports, where continuous performance assessments affect athletes' self-perception (Gustafsson *et al.*, 2018).

Midfielders exhibit a more balanced distribution, with 50% classified as having an average self-esteem level. This balance might stem from the dual role midfielders play, involving both offensive and defensive tasks, which could foster a more stable self-concept through diverse on-field experiences (Williams & Reilly, 2000). Their involvement in multiple game phases likely provides consistent opportunities for positive reinforcement and feedback.

Forwards display the highest percentage of average self-esteem (63.33%), possibly due to their frequent goal-scoring opportunities, which can enhance self-worth through public recognition and team reliance (Baumeister *et al.*, 2003b). However, the relatively low percentage of forwards with high self-esteem (10%) may indicate that their role's outcome-oriented nature creates performance pressure that limits higher self-esteem development (Orth & Robins, 2022). Overall, these findings show the psychological variability across playing positions, shaped by distinct role expectations and evaluative pressures. Coaches and sports psychologists should consider these dynamics when designing mental training programs, emphasizing confidence-building strategies personalized to each position's unique psychological demands (Beaumont *et al.*, 2015).

According to (Hanton, Thomas, *et al.*, 2004), competition anxiety is a psychological state influenced by personal factors such as self-confidence, coping mechanisms, and previous experiences rather than specific playing positions. Soccer players across positions may experience similar stressors, including performance expectations, fear of failure, and external pressure, which could equalize their levels of competition anxiety. Research by Trandafirescu *et al.* (2024) indicates that team sports like soccer involve collective goals, reducing the likelihood that position-specific roles alone determine competition anxiety. Role ambiguity and unclear task assignments, however, may

contribute to anxiety in individual players, regardless of position. In developing sports regions, limited sports psychology resources and uniform training methods could minimize differences in psychological preparation.

The observation that significant differences in self-esteem exist between midfielders and defenders, as well as between midfielders and forwards, but not between defenders and forwards, can be discussed through the psychological and tactical demands of soccer playing positions. Midfielders typically experience higher self-esteem due to their critical role in both offensive and defensive plays. They control the game tempo, orchestrate attacks, and often receive more recognition, contributing to positive self-evaluations. Success in these responsibilities can boost self-esteem through enhanced competence and role importance (Park *et al.*, 2020). Whereas defenders focus on preventing goals and receive limited acknowledgement unless they perform exceptional defensive actions. Similarly, forwards face immense pressure to score goals and may experience fluctuating self-esteem based on goal-scoring success or failure (Powell *et al.*, 2016). The psychological impact of these roles might equalize their self-esteem levels due to performance pressure and less consistent external validation.

In addition, social recognition and coach feedback also play crucial roles in self-esteem development. Midfielders often receive more positive feedback due to their visible contributions, enhancing their self-worth (Mouratidis *et al.*, 2008). In contrast, defenders and forwards may receive feedback only in specific game-changing situations, limiting opportunities for continuous self-esteem reinforcement. Moreover, defenders and forwards operate under high-pressure, outcome-driven conditions, where errors are often highlighted. Midfielders, having more diverse roles, might face balanced stress and support, reducing negative psychological outcomes. Therefore, coaches and sports psychologists should adopt role-specific psychological training. Defenders and forwards could benefit from mental skills development such as resilience training, while midfielders should be supported in managing stress due to their multi-tasking roles.

5. Conclusion

This study examined competition anxiety and self-esteem among soccer players in Tripura's A-Division League, focusing on positional differences. Anxiety levels were moderate across positions, with midfielders experiencing slightly higher anxiety due to their critical role in managing offensive and defensive plays. However, no statistically significant differences in anxiety emerged, indicating shared competitive stressors across positions.

In contrast, self-esteem showed notable positional variations. Defenders reported the highest proportion of low self-esteem, likely linked to the pressures of goal-prevention. Midfielders exhibited balanced self-esteem, benefiting from diverse experiences and positive reinforcement, while forwards showed average self-esteem, shaped by goal-scoring recognition and outcome-driven pressures. The findings suggest that players' psychological attributes are influenced not just by their roles but also by

systemic factors like coaching, team dynamics, and cultural attitudes. Future research could delve into these aspects for a deeper understanding of athletes' psychological profiles.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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