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Age Differences in Perceived Psychological Stress Among Moroccan Professional Football Players

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Abstract

This study explores the relationship between age and perceived psychological stress among Moroccan professional football players. Using a descriptive-analytical approach, data were collected from 250 players in the first and second divisions of the Moroccan Professional League, divided into four age groups: under 20, 21–25, 26–30, and over 31. The results revealed a significant inverse relationship between age and stress levels. Players under 20 experienced the highest stress, with 46.43% reporting high-stress levels, while only 13.16% of players over 31 reported the same. Mid-career players (26–30 years) showed more balanced stress levels, benefiting from both experience and physical peak performance. Statistical analysis using the Chi-square test confirmed this trend (χ^2 = 19.1296, p =<0.01), indicating a significant link between age and perceived stress. These findings suggest that younger players struggle more with stress due to limited experience and coping skills, while older players benefit from greater psychological resilience. Based on this, we recommend age-specific psychological interventions to enhance stress management strategies for football players at different career stages.

Keywords: Psychological Stress, Football Players, Moroccan Football League, Coping Strategies, Sports Psychology

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Introduction

Professional football players are constantly exposed to demanding physical, psychological, and social challenges, making their careers highly stressful. These pressures stem from various factors, including performance expectations, competition intensity, and public scrutiny. Psychological stress, in particular, can negatively influence athletic performance and overall mental health. Therefore, understanding the factors that shape stress perception is critical for fostering athletes' well-being and enhancing their performance. Age is a crucial factor influencing psychological stress, as it shapes players' responses to professional demands throughout their careers. Younger athletes often lack the experience needed to cope with high-stakes situations effectively, making them more vulnerable to stress. Conversely, older athletes benefit from developed coping mechanisms and psychological resilience, which help them navigate the complexities of their professional roles. The concept of perceived stress, as described by Cohen et al. (1983), highlights the interplay between external demands and individual coping resources. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) expanded this framework, emphasizing that stress management evolves through life experiences and cognitive appraisal processes. Within the sports context, these dynamics are especially pronounced, as athletes face both intrinsic and extrinsic stressors, including competition pressure, injuries, and career transitions. This study focuses on Moroccan professional football players, a group that has received limited attention in psychological research. By analyzing the relationship between age and stress levels, the research aims to fill a significant knowledge gap. Moreover, the findings are expected to inform interventions tailored to the unique stress profiles of athletes at different career stages, thereby promoting their psychological well-being and optimizing their performance.

Despite the extensive body of research on psychological stress in sports, little attention has been given to the role of age in shaping stress responses among professional football players, particularly in the Moroccan context. Players at different stages of their careers encounter unique stressors, yet the mechanisms underlying age-related variations in stress perception remain unclear. This gap in knowledge limits the development of targeted psychological interventions to support athletes effectively.

This study seeks to address this gap by exploring the relationship between age and perceived psychological stress among Moroccan professional football players. By analyzing the variations in stress levels across age groups, the research aims to provide actionable

insights into age-specific stress management strategies that enhance athletes' mental well-being and performance.

Research Problem

Psychological stress is one of the foremost challenges faced by professional football players, as it directly affects their athletic performance and mental health. Studies indicate that this stress is closely linked to players' personal assessments of sports situations and their ability to cope with them. Among the factors influencing these assessments, age appears as a key variable that may affect the level of perceived psychological stress. While the complexity of sporting life and professional expectations increases with age, players' responses to these pressures differ across age groups. Therefore, the crucial question remains: Is there a relationship between age and the level of perceived psychological stress among football players in the Moroccan Professional League?

Hypothesis

This study is based on exploring the relationship between age and the level of perceived psychological stress, with the following hypothesis: "There is a relationship between age and the level of perceived psychological stress among football players, where increased age is associated with a lower level of perceived psychological stress."

Population and Sample

The study population consists of professional football players participating in the Moroccan Professional League. A random sample of 250 players was selected, distributed according to the following age categories: under 20, 21-25, 26-30, and over 31 years.

Table 1: Sample Distribution

Age Group	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Under 20	28	11.2
21–25	106	42.4
26–30	78	31.2
Over 31	38	15.2
Total	**250**	**100.0**

The chart of the sample population underscores the dominance of younger players in the Moroccan Professional League, with 53.6% falling under the age of 25. This demographic trend is reflective of the league's emphasis on nurturing emerging talent. However, it also

reveals a critical need for targeted interventions to support this age group, as younger players are more likely to experience high stress levels, as seen in the results. The smaller representation of players aged over 31 (15.2%) highlights the potential challenges of career longevity in professional sports, where physical demands and competition intensity may limit prolonged participation. This distribution allows for a nuanced understanding of how stress management strategies can be tailored to each age group.

Methodology of the Study

This study employed a descriptive-analytical design to examine the relationship between age and perceived psychological stress among Moroccan professional football players. This design was guided by the need to explore relationships within a defined population and provide quantifiable insights. Data were collected using the Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen et al., 1983), a validated tool widely used in psychological research. The scale was adapted to suit the sports context, ensuring its relevance to professional athletes, and the data was analyzed using appropriate statistical methods, such as the Chi-square (khi2) test, to examine the significance of the relationship between age and stress.

Results

1. Descriptive analysis results

Table 2: Distribution of Perceived Stress Scores by Age Categories

	Low stress		**Medium stress**		**High stress**		**Total**	
Age cat.	**Freq.**	**%**	**Freq.**	**%**	**Freq.**	**%**	**Freq.**	**%**
Under 20	5	17.86	10	35.71	13	46.43	28	100%
21-25	32	30.19	37	34.91	37	34.91	106	100%
26-30	35	44.87	23	29.49	20	25.64	78	100%
Over 31	23	60.53	10	26.32	5	13.16	38	100%

The table (2) illustrates the different levels of perceived stress exhibited by individuals based on age categories. For the "Under 20 years" age group, 17.86% reported a low stress level, 35.71% showed a medium stress level, and 46.43% exhibited a high stress level. For the "21–25 years" age group, 30.19% demonstrated a low stress level, 34.91% reported a medium stress level, and 34.91% exhibited a high stress level.

Regarding the "26–30 years" age group, 44.87% showed a low stress level, 29.49% reported a medium stress level, while 25.64% exhibited a high stress level. For the "Over 31 years"

age group, 60.53% showed a low stress level, 26.32% reported a medium stress level, and only 13.16% exhibited a high stress level.

2. Testing the Study Hypothesis

We will attempt to test the study hypothesis, which states: "There is a relationship between age and perceived stress levels among football players, with perceived stress decreasing as age increases." As is well known, this study aims to examine whether age significantly influences how players perceive the psychological pressures they face during sports, which is crucial for understanding how players handle stress and tension associated with sports.

To test this hypothesis, the Chi-square test (Khi2) was used, which is a statistical test employed to study the relationship between two categorical variables. The test was applied to data related to the perceived stress levels in the study sample, categorized into four age groups, to determine whether there is a statistically significant relationship between age and perceived stress levels among football players in the Moroccan professional football league, including both the first and second divisions.

Two statistical hypotheses were set in relation to the Chi-square test to prove or disprove the relationship between the two studied variables:

- Null Hypothesis (H0): There is no statistically significant relationship between age and perceived stress levels in the studied sample.
- Alternative Hypothesis (H1): There is a statistically significant relationship between age and perceived stress levels in the studied sample.

We will now review the Chi-square results to test these statistical hypotheses and determine whether there is a statistically significant relationship between the two studied variables.

Table 3: Results of the Chi-Square Test between Age and Perceived Stress

Sample Size	Chi-Square Value	p-Value	Significance Level
250	19.1296	0.00395	0.01

The results in the table (3) indicate that the chi-square value is 19.1296, with a p-value of 0.00395, reflecting a statistically significant relationship between the age variable, represented by four age categories, and the level of psychological stress.

Since the p-value is less than 0.01, which is the significance level adopted in the study, the null hypothesis (H0) stating the absence of a relationship between the two variables can be

rejected. Consequently, the alternative hypothesis (H1) is accepted, affirming a statistically significant relationship between the studied variables.

Thus, the findings suggest a negative correlation between age and the level of psychological stress among players. In other words, as age increases, the level of psychological stress decreases. This could be attributed to older players' greater experience, enabling them to better cope with psychological pressures compared to younger players. Over time, players acquire skills in managing stress and adapting to various changes that may occur during matches or training sessions.

These results support the idea that aging can help players reduce the impact of psychological stress, highlighting the influence of experience and adaptation in sports practice. The findings directly address the study's research problem, confirming the hypothesis that "there is a relationship between age and perceived psychological stress levels among football players, such that as age increases, perceived psychological stress decreases."

Discussion

The findings of this study underscore distinct stress patterns among football players across different career stages, highlighting the critical role of age in shaping psychological resilience. Younger players, particularly those under 20, demonstrated the highest levels of psychological stress, which can be largely attributed to their lack of professional exposure and underdeveloped coping mechanisms. These players often face intense pressures to perform, coupled with limited psychological tools to navigate high-stakes scenarios effectively. These findings align with Tod et al. (2023), who emphasized the challenges faced by younger athletes in adapting to competitive environments and acquiring the psychological maturity required for elite performance.

Mid-career players, aged 26-30, exhibited balanced stress levels. This phase of a player's career reflects a transition where physical performance often peaks, and psychological skills are progressively honed through accumulated experience. The ability of players in this group to maintain a balance between high and low stress levels illustrates the interplay between physical prime and the gradual development of resilience. These results are consistent with Orlick's (2015) exploration of achieving excellence, which highlights the synergy between psychological and physical readiness as pivotal during this stage.

Veteran players, those aged 31 and above, displayed the lowest levels of stress, demonstrating the significant advantages of psychological maturity and advanced coping strategies. Their ability to draw upon extensive experience enables them to manage the demands of professional football with greater ease and confidence. These findings resonate with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) stress appraisal framework, which suggests that effective coping strategies evolve through accumulated experiences, allowing individuals to appraise and address stressors more efficiently.

This study reinforces the importance of tailoring psychological interventions to the unique needs of players at different stages of their careers. Younger players require foundational support in stress recognition and coping strategies, while mid-career athletes benefit from programs that enhance their adaptability to varying demands. Veteran players, on the other hand, should be provided with resources to sustain their psychological resilience and facilitate career transitions. The nuanced stress patterns identified in this study also underscore the broader implications for sports psychology, particularly in designing interventions that align with the developmental trajectories of athletes. By addressing these age-specific needs, the mental well-being and performance of players can be effectively optimized throughout their careers.

Conclusion

This study offers significant insights into the inverse relationship between age and psychological stress among Moroccan professional football players, emphasizing the critical role of experience and psychological maturity in mitigating stress. Younger players, particularly those under 20, face heightened levels of stress due to their limited professional exposure and underdeveloped coping mechanisms. Conversely, older players demonstrate greater resilience, highlighting the profound impact of accumulated experience and adaptive strategies.

The findings underscore the importance of tailored interventions designed to address the specific needs of athletes at varying career stages. For younger players, the focus should be on foundational support in stress management and coping skill development, integrated within training programs and sports academies. Mid-career athletes require more dynamic approaches that enhance their adaptability to varying professional demands, combining both physical and psychological readiness. Veteran players, meanwhile, would benefit from

sustained psychological resilience programs that also facilitate career transitions and mentorship opportunities, allowing them to contribute to the development of younger teammates.

This research also contributes to the broader field of sports psychology by reinforcing the importance of age-specific considerations in stress management. By aligning interventions with the developmental trajectories of athletes, this study provides actionable frameworks that can improve both mental well-being and performance across all stages of a player's career. Moreover, these findings open avenues for future research to explore the long-term impact of psychological interventions and the evolving nature of stress as players transition through different phases of their professional lives. In doing so, this study not only addresses an underexplored area in sports psychology but also lays the groundwork for enhancing the overall athletic experience.

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