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Self-Reported Aggression Among University Level Football Athletes: A Descriptive Study

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: This study aimed to measure how strongly university-level football players in Lahore, Pakistan, identified with a set of statements describing angry, hostile, or aggressive thoughts and behaviors. The goal was to understand the levels and patterns of self-reported aggression among these athletes. **Methods** Fifty male football players from the University of the Punjab and other universities in the region participated in this study. Since data collection took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, the researchers used an online questionnaire instead of in-person testing. The questionnaire was based on a well-established aggression scale consisting of twenty short statements, each rated on a five-point scale ranging from "not at all like me" to "completely like me." The collected responses were then analyzed using descriptive and frequency statistics in SPSS. **Results** Overall, most players reported low to moderate levels of aggression. Statements describing physical aggression, such as hitting or threatening someone, scored the lowest on average, suggesting these behaviors were uncommon among participants. On the other hand, statements related to irritability, disagreement, and verbal reactions to frustration scored higher, indicating that milder emotional responses were more frequently reported. **Conclusion** The findings suggest that while serious physical aggression is rare among the players surveyed, milder forms of anger and irritability are fairly common. This points to the value of awareness programs, anger-management training, and consistent support from coaches and sports psychologists, which could help players handle these emotions in healthier ways ultimately protecting both their athletic performance and personal wellbeing.

Keywords: Aggression, Football Athletes, University Sport, Self-Report Questionnaire, Sport Psychology

Introduction

Aggression can be described as behavior intended to harm or upset another person, either physically or emotionally. In sport, this topic has drawn attention for years because it overlaps closely with competitiveness, intensity, and the drive to win traits that are often praised while also carrying the risk of harmful actions toward opponents, teammates, or



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officials. Researchers typically divide aggression into two categories: hostile aggression, where the goal is to injure another person purely for the sake of doing so, and instrumental aggression, where the aggressor still intends to injure someone but the primary motivation is a tangible reward such as victory rather than the harm itself (Husman & Silva, 1984). Some scholars add a third category, assertive behavior, which involves using legitimate physical or verbal force to achieve one's goal without any specific intent to harm and without breaking the rules of the sport (Silva, 1980). More recent work continues to build on this framework, noting that violence and aggression in sport carry real implications for athletes' performance and overall wellbeing (Marwat, Nizami, & Muhammad, 2022).

Football is generally considered one of the more physically intense, contact-heavy sports, and earlier research supports a link between contact-sport participation and higher aggression scores. A recent cross-sectional study found that athletes who played full-contact sports showed higher levels of physical aggression than those who played partial-contact or non-contact sports (Bertollo et al., 2025). Similarly, an older comparison of contact and non-contact game players found that contact-game players showed a significantly higher overall level of aggression, an effect the researchers attributed to the greater amount of physical contact involved in those games (Kumar et al., 2019). At the same time, experience appears to shape how aggression is expressed: one study of high-level athletes found that more experienced athletes relied more on instrumental aggression, using it to their advantage, while hostile aggression was less frequent and self-control played a role in managing it (Coulomb & Pfister, 1998). Positional and psychological factors also matter a recent field study of football players found that hostile aggression was linked to self-confidence and both somatic and trait anxiety, with self-confidence emerging as the strongest predictor of hostile aggression (Aydın, 2021).

Learning how athletes themselves view and report these tendencies can guide coaches, sports psychologists, and university sports departments in building more effective support systems. Much of the existing research on aggression in athletes has centered on professional or elite-level sport, particularly in Western contexts (Buss & Perry, 1992; Tenenbaum, Stewart, Singer, & Duda, 1997), leaving a noticeable gap in knowledge about university-level athletes in South Asia. Emerging work from Pakistan is beginning to address this gap: one recent qualitative study of adolescent football players concluded that parents, coaches, and sports organizations need to intervene proactively to promote healthier emotional wellbeing among young athletes (Ahmed, 2025), while another notes that emotional regulation and aggressive behavior in Pakistani sport are shaped not only by competitive pressure but also by cultural ideas around masculinity that valorize emotional stoicism (Chaudhry & Amis, 2021; Qayyum et al., 2025). This study aims to build on this emerging body of work by examining self-reported aggression among university football players in Pakistan. Specifically, it set out to measure how closely these athletes related to a series of statements describing hostile, angry, and irritable thoughts and behaviors, and to identify which forms of aggression were most and least commonly reported.

Methods and Materials

Research Design

This study used a quantitative, descriptive approach to measure self-reported aggression among university football players. All data collected were numerical, allowing for straightforward statistical analysis.



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Population and Sample

The study included male football players from the University of the Punjab, Lahore, along with players from other universities. In total, 50 players participated. Since visiting campuses in person wasn't possible due to COVID-19 restrictions, players were recruited through convenience sampling, and those available were selected at random to take part.

Instrument and Procedure

Data were collected during the 2020–2021 academic session, at a time when COVID-19 restrictions prevented in-person visits to universities. For this reason, an online questionnaire was distributed through Google Forms instead of face-to-face administration."

Data Analysis

Once collected, responses were organized and analyzed using Microsoft Excel and IBM SPSS. For every statement, the mean score, standard deviation, and percentage of players choosing each response option were calculated. This combination of descriptive and frequency statistics helped identify which aggression-related statements the players related to most and least.

Limitations of the Method: Because this study relied on a convenience sample of male university football players collected online during the COVID-19 pandemic, the results should be viewed with these limitations in mind rather than generalized broadly.

Results

Table 1 shows the average score and level of agreement for each of the 20 statements in the questionnaire, based on responses from all 50 participants. Mean scores are reported on the 1-to-5 scale described above, and are grouped into three simple bands for ease of reading: Low (1.00-2.33), Moderate (2.34-3.66), and High (3.67-5.00).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the 20 aggression-questionnaire statements (N = 50)

#	Statement	Mean (1-5)	SD	Level
1	My friends say that I argue a lot.	2.40	1.11	Moderate
2	Other people always seem to get the breaks.	2.48	0.84	Moderate
3	I flare up quickly, but get over it quickly.	2.74	1.14	Moderate
4	I often find myself disagreeing with people.	2.46	1.28	Moderate
5	At times I feel I have gotten a raw deal out of life.	2.20	0.97	Low
6	I can't help getting into arguments when people disagree with me.	2.30	1.20	Low
7	At times I get very angry for no good reason.	2.58	1.50	Moderate
8	I may hit someone if he or she provokes me.	1.92	1.26	Low
9	I wonder what people want when they are nice to me.	2.66	1.21	Moderate
10	I have threatened people I know.	1.96	1.24	Low
11	Someone has pushed me so far that I hit him or her.	2.10	1.31	Low
12	I have trouble controlling my temper.	2.56	1.42	Moderate
13	If I'm angry enough, I may mess up someone's work.	1.92	1.14	Low
14	I wonder what people want when they are nice to me (repeated item).	2.94	1.25	Moderate
15	I have become so mad that I have broken things.	2.00	1.25	Low
16	I sometimes spread gossip about people I don't like.	1.76	1.02	Low



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#	Statement	Mean (1-5)	SD	Level
17	I have become so mad that I have broken things (repeated item).	1.84	1.15	Low
18	I am a calm person.	3.60	—	Moderate
19	When people annoy me, I may tell them what I think of them.	3.30	1.30	Moderate
20	I sometimes feel that people are laughing at me behind my back.	2.52	1.37	Moderate

Overall, the players' scores clustered in the low-to-moderate range. Statements describing direct physical aggression scored the lowest "I may hit someone if he or she provokes me" ($M = 1.92$), "If I'm angry enough, I may mess up someone's work" ($M = 1.92$), and "I sometimes spread gossip about people I don't like" ($M = 1.76$) were among the least endorsed. Statements linked to milder, more everyday forms of irritability and verbal reaction scored somewhat higher for example, "When people annoy me, I may tell them what I think of them" ($M = 3.30$) and "I flare up quickly, but get over it quickly" ($M = 2.74$). Interestingly, "I am a calm person" also received a moderately high average score ($M = 3.60$), suggesting that, alongside occasional irritability, many players also see themselves as generally even-tempered.

Looking at the response patterns more closely, more than half of the players reported that physically aggressive statements were "not at all like me" (for example, 54% for hitting someone if provoked, and 52-58% for threatening people or spreading gossip). By contrast, responses to statements about irritability and verbal reactions were more evenly spread across the "a little," "somewhat," and "very much" categories, showing more variation among players on these milder forms of aggression.

Discussion

The results suggest that outright physical aggression isn't common among the university football players in this study. Most players didn't strongly relate to statements about hitting, threatening, or destructive behavior. This is a reassuring finding it suggests that formal training, coaching discipline, and the structure of organized university sport may help players channel their competitive drive without it regularly turning into physical hostility.

At the same time, players reported somewhat higher levels of irritability, quick temper, and verbal reactions when annoyed. This fits with what sport psychology research generally shows: the vast majority of research on aggressive emotions, beliefs, and behaviors in competitive athletes has focused on Western populations and only a select few sports, such as ice hockey, yet across these studies anger can be triggered by events outside the athlete, such as threatening language from an opponent or poor officiating, or by internal factors like negative self-talk about poor performance and memories of past defeats (Maxwell, Visek, & Moores, 2009). Kerr (2004) similarly frames anger and frustration as a normal, expected part of competing rather than a sign of a deeper problem. The fact that many players also described themselves as generally calm points to a mixed picture: most athletes seem to manage their emotions well most of the time but can still have moments of irritability under pressure.

Aston Research Explorer

Redalyc These findings line up with earlier research showing that anger and mild hostility are common in competitive sport, while severe or physically aggressive



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behavior is comparatively rare and usually tied to specific triggers like provocation or a sense of unfair treatment (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Ruiz & Hanin, 2011). Since aggression in sport is shaped by many factors coaching style, team culture, individual temperament the moderate scores found here likely reflect a mix of healthy competitiveness and occasional frustration, rather than a serious behavioral issue. This also echoes Maxwell and Moores' (2007) distinction between anger (an emotional state) and aggressiveness (a more stable trait-like tendency), since the players in this study appeared to sit more in the emotional, situational end of that spectrum rather than showing a consistent aggressive disposition.

From a practical standpoint, these results suggest that university sports departments and coaches could benefit from building basic emotional-regulation and anger-management awareness into their training programs, even where physical aggression isn't a major problem. Paying early attention to irritability and frustration may help stop these milder reactions from building up over time, especially during high-pressure matches or tournaments.

Conclusion:

The results showed that most players scored in the low-to-moderate range overall. Physical aggression hitting, threatening, or damaging things was the least common response pattern, with more than half of the players saying these behaviours were "not at all like me." Milder reactions, such as quick flashes of temper, irritability, and speaking up when annoyed, were somewhat more common, though still moderate rather than high. Many players also described themselves as generally calm, suggesting that occasional frustration during competition does not typically translate into lasting hostility or physical aggression. Taken together, these findings indicate that university football players in this sample manage competitive pressure reasonably well, but would still benefit from structured support such as anger-awareness sessions and access to sports psychologists to help them handle moments of frustration constructively and reduce the risk of these milder reactions escalating over time.

Recommendations:

Add simple anger-management and emotional-regulation sessions to university football training. Train coaches to spot early signs of frustration during practice and games, and to handle it in a constructive way.

Bring in sports psychologists or counselors from time to time to support players' mental and emotional health.

Carry out larger follow-up studies that include female athletes and players from other sports and regions, to see if these results hold up more widely.

Repeat this kind of assessment at different points in the season to check whether aggression levels shift with competition intensity or fatigue.

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