

ENHANCING EMOTIONAL REGULATION OF FEMALE STUDENTS IN SPORT THROUGH SELF-TALK IN PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN DELTA STATE

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ABSTRACT

The study focused on exploring the enhancement of emotional regulation of female students engaged in sporting activities in public secondary schools in Delta State through the application of self-talk strategies. Emotional regulation is a critical factor in sports performance, especially for female student-athletes who may encounter distinct psychological and social pressures. On the other hand, self-talk is defined as the internal or overt verbalizations directed toward oneself, serving cognitive, motivational, or emotional functions. The study adopted a mixed-methods approach, utilizing a qualitative and quantitative survey with an ex-post facto design. The population for this study comprised all female secondary school students in Delta State. The sample for this study was 150 female students in selected public secondary schools in Delta State. Data collection was conducted using a self-developed instrument, the “Emotional Regulation of Female Students in Sport through Self-talk Questionnaire (ERFSSSQ).”. The reliability coefficients was determined via a pilot study using test re-test reliability technique with a coefficient index of 0.84 was used. Thematic analysis was also adopted in the study to interpret the qualitative and quantitative data collected. The study concluded that enhancing emotional regulation in female student-athletes through the technique of self-talk is a promising area of research with significant implications for sports psychology and development. Addressing the unique psychological and social challenges faced by female athletes, self-talk interventions can empower them to manage anxiety, boost confidence, and optimize performance

than mere reliance on coaching. This research underscores the necessity of developing targeted psychological interventions to support female athletes in their pursuit of success in competitive sports.

Keywords: *Emotional Regulation, Sport, Self-talk, Female Students. Nigeria*

Introduction

To achieve optimal performance in training and competition, self-talk and emotional regulations are crucial factors. Both athletes and coaches recognize that self-talk serves as an effective tool for enhancing sports performance and improving psychological states, including confidence (Fritsch and Jekauc 2020). Self-talk, the inner dialogue we engage in, significantly influences how we tackle challenges, maintain focus, and handle stress. Athletes must develop their concentration through suitable psychological techniques (Komarudin 2018 & Saputra et al. 2022). On the other hand, emotional regulation involves the ability to recognize, understand, and manage emotions in a way that does not disrupt focus and performance.

Paulana, Rejeki, and Sholichah (2021) point out that many student-athletes struggle to manage their emotions due to various pressures, including academic demands, parental expectations, environmental factors, and coaching stress. As a result, athletes often experience a range of emotions like anger, sadness, and more, which can impact their effort, attention, decision-making, and physical abilities (Adi et al. 2024). Female student-athletes, in particular, juggle academic responsibilities along with the rigors of training, creating additional challenges as they get minimal support from the Nigerian community. Like the male counterpart, females must attend classes, complete assignments, do home chores and sit for exams while maintaining their athletic commitments. One key component for achieving peak athletic performance is having talent aligned with the specific requirements of their sport (Hiskya, Kuswoyo, and Umakaapa 2023).

Furthermore, a student-athlete's psychological state plays a vital role in their overall performance (Zufri & Tyoso 2017). To fulfill their roles effectively, student-athletes benefit from self-talk, which reflects their beliefs and feelings about their abilities, shedding light on their strengths and weaknesses (Anfasa 2020). Self-talk can be categorized into two types: positive and negative (Latinjak et al. 2019). Positive self-talk encourages energy and optimism, while negative self-talk tends to be critical and counterproductive,

often leading to anxiety. While positive self-talk involves uplifting affirmations not necessarily tied to specific tasks (like "I can do this" or "I'm great") (Kirtley 2016).

Emotional regulation which comes from management of emotions encompasses the biological, psychological, and behavioral aspects of emotions. Athletes must effectively regulate their emotions during competitions to ensure they do not detract from their performance. Emotional regulation is defined as the individual's ability to modulate emotional responses to various stimuli (Campo et al., 2022). Athletic activities can elicit a vast array of positive emotions, including excitement, confidence, pride, joy, and motivation related to competition and achievement (Lazarus, 2020). Conversely, negative emotions such as anxiety, fear, frustration, and anger may arise, affecting an athlete's mental state during competitions (Krane et al., 2024). Thus, many secondary school female students who are already emotional by gender experience greater challenges in emotional regulations in sports that impact significantly on their performance and mental health.

Statement of the Problem

Emotional regulation is critical for optimizing performance and well-being in sports. However, female student-athletes often face unique challenges that can complicate their emotional regulation capabilities, such as societal pressure, gender stereotypes and heightened emotional sensitivity which can impede their ability to manage emotions effectively during training and competitions. These challenges may manifest as anxiety, self-doubt or difficulty coping with setbacks, ultimately affecting performance and mental health. Self-talk, a cognitive strategy involving the use of verbal cues or phrases to direct thoughts and emotions has shown to enhance emotional regulation across various populations. However, this technique has not been exposed to athletes to guide their thoughts and emotions effectively, providing a valuable tool to mitigate the negative repercussions of the unique stressors faced by female athletes in competitive environments.

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised to guide the study:

1. How does self-talk influence the emotional regulation of female students in sports in public secondary schools in Delta State?
2. What types of self-talk can enhance the emotional regulation of female students in sports in public secondary schools in Delta State?

3. How does individual differences influence the effectiveness of self-talk intervention of female students in sports in public secondary schools in Delta State?

Review

Theoretical Framework

The study is hinged theoretically on the Cognitive-Behavioral Theory propounded by Ellis (1976). It emphasizes the role of cognitive process in shaping emotions and behaviours, It posits that our beliefs about events than the events themselves determine our emotional and behavioural responses(Butler et. Al., 2006). Cognitive distortions or biases often hinder proper emotional regulation. Hence the need for a healthier thinking pattern through self-talk. Self-talk is rooted in the principle that thoughts influence emotions and behaviors. By modifying negative or maladaptive self-talk, athletes can alter their emotional responses and improve performance. For example, replacing “I’m going to fail” with “I’m prepared and ready” can reduce anxiety and enhance confidence. Cognitive Behavioral Theory posits that thought, emotions, body sensations and behaviors are interconnected. It suggests that our thoughts and actions influence how we feel and vice versa. The theory emphasizes the role of cognitive processes in shaping psychological distress and suggests that changing dysfunctional thought pattern can lead to emotional and behavioral functioning.

Self-talk and Emotional Regulation

Self-talk is the internal or external dialogue that individuals engage in to communicate with themselves, including thoughts, statements, or conversations that can be positive, negative, instructive, or motivational (Hardy, 2021). It functions as a cognitive tool to help process experiences, direct behavior, and manage emotions. Recently, self-talk has garnered attention as a useful and easily accessible method for emotional regulation, especially in areas like stress management, anxiety relief, and performance improvement. Emotional regulation refers to the methods by which individuals determine their emotional experiences, timing, and expression (Gross, 2018).

Mastering emotional regulation is vital for maintaining mental health, social interaction, and resilience. In sports, effective emotional regulation is particularly important for female student-athletes who often encounter specific psychological and social pressures. These pressures may arise from societal expectations, gender stereotypes, and the competitive nature of sports. Self-talk, as a psychological approach involving internal or verbal communication to affect

thoughts, emotions, and actions, has proven to be a beneficial strategy for improving emotional regulation and, in turn, athletic performance (Lazarus, 2020).

Emotional regulation encompasses the methods individuals use to influence their emotional states, including starting, suppressing, or adjusting their feelings to meet personal goals (Gross, 2018). In sports, strong emotional regulation is crucial for maintaining concentration, controlling anxiety, and keeping motivation high under pressure. Athletes frequently face intense emotions—like anxiety, frustration, or excitement—that can either enhance or hinder their performance based on how these feelings are managed (Lazarus, 2020). For female athletes, the task of regulating emotions can be especially difficult due to extra sources of stress, such as societal perceptions of femininity, concerns about body image, and the demands of balancing sports with academic responsibilities (Krane et al., 2024).

Research shows that emotions in athletic contexts are influenced by both personal and social factors. Campo et al. (2022) noted that the emotions of athletes in team sports are shaped by social interactions, including support from teammates and feedback from coaches, alongside individual evaluations of performance events. Female athletes may experience increased anxiety in competitive situations, particularly in sports deemed "masculine" or "aesthetic," where societal expectations heighten scrutiny over physical appearance and performance (Krane, 2021). Therefore, strategies that help female student-athletes effectively regulate their emotions are essential for their psychological health and athletic achievements.

Studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of self-talk in improving emotional regulation among athletes. For instance, Hardy et al. (2021) found strong links between self-talk and emotional states, where positive self-talk was linked to lower anxiety levels and high motivation. Interestingly, some athletes mentioned that negative self-talk could also serve as motivation, indicating that the impact of self-talk (whether positive or negative) may be influenced by individual circumstances and context.

Types of Self-talk in Enhancing Emotional Regulation

Self-talk interventions can be classified by their content, purpose, or method of delivery. It refers to the internal or vocal thoughts directed at oneself, fulfilling cognitive, motivational, or emotional roles (Hardy, 2022). Self-talk is a

fundamental aspect of psychological skills training in sports, alongside practices like mental imagery and goal-setting. There are various types of self-talk, including instructional, motivational, and affirmative self-talk. Instructional self-talk focuses on the technical or strategic elements of performance (e.g., "Keep your eyes on the ball"), while motivational self-talk seeks to enhance confidence, effort, or determination (e.g., "You've got this!"). Affective self-talk helps manage emotions, such as calming anxiety or encouraging positive feelings (e.g., "Stay calm and breathe").

Positive self-talk consists of affirming and supportive statements (e.g., "I can handle this") and has been shown to decrease anxiety and improve self-efficacy, leading to positive emotional responses (Hardy, 2022). Athletes practicing positive self-talk often report experiencing lower stress and better emotional regulation during tense competitions. Conversely, negative self-talk features self-critical or pessimistic remarks (e.g., "I always mess up") and is linked to heightened anxiety, depression, and emotional instability (Latinjak et al., 2019). Interventions typically focus on minimizing negative self-talk to enhance emotional outcomes.

Instructional self-talk offers specific behavioral guidance (e.g., "Focus on your breathing") and proves effective in stressful situations by helping individuals concentrate on actionable tasks, thereby alleviating emotional overwhelm (Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2021). Motivational self-talk promotes effort and perseverance (e.g., "Keep going, you've got this") and fosters emotional resilience by instilling control and optimism in difficult situations (Hardy et al., 2021). Neutral or reflective self-talk consists of objective or analytical comments (e.g., "What's happening here?") and aids emotional regulation by encouraging mindfulness and lessening reactive emotional responses (Kross et al., 2024).

The benefits of self-talk in sports are well-established. Research by Hatzigeorgiadis et al. (2021) demonstrated that motivational self-talk boosts self-confidence and reduces cognitive anxiety, resulting in better performance. Similarly, Theodorakis et al. (2018) recognized that self-talk fulfills various roles, such as improving focus, managing effort, and regulating emotional responses. These insights indicate that self-talk can be customized to meet specific psychological needs, making it a versatile tool for emotional regulation. Spontaneous (organic) self-talk is unplanned and automatic, occurring during performance (e.g., "Come on!" or "Why did I do that?"). According to Latinjak et al. (2019), while spontaneous self-talk can sometimes be beneficial (e.g.,

expressing frustration), it is generally less effective than structured approaches. Thus, interventions often seek to replace maladaptive spontaneous self-talk with positive or instructional cues.

Individual Differences and Effectiveness of Self-talk Intervention

Personality traits such as self-esteem and neuroticism significantly affect the outcomes of self-talk. Individuals with high self-esteem tend to respond more favorably to positive self-talk, whereas those with high neuroticism often find it challenging to transition from negative to positive self-talk (Wood et al., 2019). More so, personal factors like personality and athletic experience play a crucial role in the effectiveness of self-talk interventions by influencing how people perceive, interpret, and use these strategies. Personality traits, often assessed through models like the Big Five (Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism), impact engagement with self-talk. Extraverts, who thrive on external stimulation, may benefit more from motivational self-talk (e.g., "I can do this!") because it resonates with their need for external validation and emotional expression. In contrast, introverts, who tend to be more reflective, might find instructional self-talk (e.g., "Focus on your technique") more helpful for fostering internal concentration and self-regulation (Krane, 2021).

As noted by Krane et al. (2024), individuals high in conscientiousness, marked by discipline and a focus on goals, are likely to reliably and methodically utilize self-talk interventions, which increases their effectiveness. They may find structured self-talk plans beneficial as they align with their organized approach. Conversely, individuals with high neuroticism, who may experience anxiety and emotional instability, might find self-talk less effective if negative thoughts dominate (e.g., "I'm going to fail"). However, customized interventions that encourage the replacement of negative with positive or neutral self-talk can significantly help regulate their emotions. In contrast, those with low neuroticism are often more adept at using self-talk effectively, as they are less burdened by self-doubt. People high in openness, who are creative and receptive to new ideas, may be more inclined to explore various self-talk techniques (e.g., imagery-based or mindfulness-focused), enhancing their adaptability and effectiveness.

Research by Gross (2018) also indicated that athletic experience—including expertise level, training duration, and familiarity with psychological skills affects self-talk efficiency. Beginners might struggle with self-talk or may not

fully understand how to implement it due to limited sport-specific knowledge; they tend to benefit from straightforward, guided self-talk interventions (e.g., preset phrases like "Stay calm, focus") to minimize cognitive strain. However, their lack of experience might restrict the depth of self-talk's impact until they develop more skills. In contrast, experienced athletes often use self-talk intuitively and can enhance it with advanced techniques. They might employ instructional self-talk to improve technical skills (e.g., "Keep your elbow up") or motivational self-talk to overcome fatigue. Their familiarity with high-pressure situations makes self-talk a powerful mechanism for sustaining focus and resilience.

Athletes with considerable experience in a given sport are typically better at customizing self-talk to meet their sport's specific requirements. For instance, a gymnast might use precise instructional self-talk for routines ("Point toes, extend arms"), while a marathon runner might depend on motivational self-talk for stamina ("Keep pushing, you're strong"). Those with diverse athletic backgrounds may find it easier to adapt self-talk strategies to various contexts, as they draw on a wider range of experiences (Gross, 2018).

Method

The study is a survey employing ex-post facto design. The population for this study comprised all female secondary school students in Delta State. The sample for this study was 150 female students in selected public secondary schools in Delta State. A self-developed questionnaire titled "Emotional Regulation of Female Students in Sport through Self-talk Questionnaire (ERFSSSQ)" were used to collect data for the study. The reliability coefficients were determined via a pilot study using test re-test reliability technique with a coefficient index of 0.84 was used. Thematic analysis was adopted for interpretation of responses.

Table 1: Thematic Analysis of Emotional regulation of Female Students through Self-talk

Themes	Sub-themes	Responses
Emotional regulation of female students through self - talk	1. Self-talk habit 2. Emotional regulation 3. Self-talk effectiveness	1. I often speak to myself during sporting activities 2. I use words like 'I can do this' during competitions. 3. Talking to oneself is effective in managing emotions during sports. 4. Self-talk helps me manage stress and anxiety during competition 5. I often speak to myself that I can achieve it.

From table above shows the thematic analysis of self-talk and emotional regulation of female students in sports in public secondary schools in Delta State. 78 participants agreed that they often speak to themselves during sport activities while 72 participants disagreed. Also, 123 participants agreed that they use affirmative words that I can do this during competitions while 27 participants disagreed. More so, 84 participants agreed that taking to oneself is effective in managing emotions during sports while 66 participants disagreed. Also, 92 participants agreed that they often speak to themselves that they can achieve success while 58 participants disagreed.

Table 2: Thematic Analysis of the Types of Self-Talk in Enhancing Emotional Regulation of Female Students

Themes	Sub-themes	Responses
Types of self-talk in enhancing emotional regulation of female students	1. Positive self-talk 2. Instructional self-talk 3. Motivational self-talk	1. I use positive affirmation to boost my confidence during sports (I can do this) 2. I encourage myself with kind and supportive words. 3. I give myself instructions on how to perform specific skills. 4. I use self -talk to remind myself of my game plan and strategy. 5. I use self -talk to motivate myself to push through challenges.

From table above shows the thematic analysis of the types of self-talk in enhancing the emotional regulation of female students in sports in public secondary schools in Delta State. 88 participants agreed that they use positive affirmation to boost their confidence during sports while 62 participants disagreed. Also, 67 participants agreed that they encourage themselves with kind and supportive words while 83 participants disagreed. More so, 55 participants agreed that they give themselves instructions on how to perform specific skills while 95 participants disagreed. Also, 79 participants agreed that they use self-talk to remind themselves of their game plan and strategy while 71 participants disagreed. In the same vein, 82 participants agreed that they use self-talk to motivate themselves to push through challenges while 68 participants disagreed.

Table 3: Thematic Analysis of Individual differences and the Effectiveness of Self-talk Intervention of Female Students

Themes	Sub-themes	Responses
Individual differences influence the effectiveness of self-talk intervention of female students	1. Personality traits 2. Novice 3. Professional	1. I am naturally an optimistic person. 2. Taking to myself helps to be less anxious or stressed in competitive situations. 3. Self-talk helps me to be confident in managing my emotions. 4. Speaking to myself helps me to stay focused under pressure. 5. As a novice, I find self - talk more effective in certain situations.

From table above shows the thematic analysis of individual differences and the effectiveness of self-talk intervention of female students in sports in public secondary schools in Delta State. 76 participants agreed that they are naturally optimistic persons while 74 participants disagreed. Also, 80 participants agreed that taking to themselves help to reduce anxiety or stress in competitive situations while 70 participants disagreed. More so, 83 participants agreed that self-talk help to build confidence to manage their emotions while 67 participants disagreed. Also, 73 participants agreed that speaking to themselves help them as professionals to stay focused under pressure while 77 participants disagreed. More so, 90 participants agreed that as a novice, they find self-talk more effective in certain situations.

Discussion of Findings

The result of the analysis revealed the importance of self-talk and emotional regulation of female students in sports in public secondary schools in Delta State. The study showed that these female students often speak to themselves during sporting activities, they utilize affirmative words that is possible to stay focused and achieve success by self-talk. Although they were not taught that it was a useful technique. This is in collaboration with Hardy et al. (2021) who found significant correlations between self-talk and affective states, with positive self-talk associated with reduced anxiety and increased motivation. Notably, some athletes reported that negative self-talk could be motivational, suggesting that the

valence of self-talk (positive or negative) may depend on individual and contextual factors.

The study also revealed the types of self-talk in enhancing the emotional regulation of female students in sport in public secondary schools in Delta State. It showed students using positive affirmation to boost confidence during sport, encouraging themselves with kind and supportive words and finding self-talk as instructive on how to perform specific skills. This is in support of Hardy (2022) who asserted that self-talk interventions are categorized based on content, purpose, or delivery method. Self-talk can be categorized into several types, including instructional self-talk, motivational self-talk and affirmative self-talk. Instructional self-talk focused on technical or strategic aspects of performance. Motivational self-talk aimed at boosting confidence, effort, or persistence. Affective self-talk is used to regulate emotions, such as calming anxiety or fostering positive affect.

The study also revealed individual differences and the effectiveness of self-talk intervention of female students in sports in public secondary schools in Delta State. It showed that self-talk help to reduce anxiety or stress in competitive situations, build confidence in managing emotions, and staying focused under pressure, or more effective in certain situations. This is in line with Krane (2021) individual differences like personality and athletic experience significantly influence the effectiveness of self-talk interventions, as they shape how individuals perceive, process, and apply self-talk strategies. Personality traits, often measured using frameworks like the Big Five (Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism), affect how individuals engage with self-talk interventions. Extraverts, who are outgoing and energized by external stimuli, may respond better to motivational self-talk as it aligns with their tendency to seek external reinforcement and express emotions outwardly. Introverts, who are more introspective, may prefer instructional self-talk that supports internal focus and self-regulation.

Conclusion

The study concluded that enhancing the emotional regulation in female student-athletes through self-talk is a promising area of research with significant implications for sports psychology. The students need to be taught the importance of self-talk particularly during competitive sporting activities. The unique psychological and social challenges faced by female athletes, self-talk interventions can empower them to manage anxiety, boost confidence, and optimize performance if well harnessed. Coaching is not the same as self-talk.

Self-talk should be given more prominence as a psychological technique for performance and mental health care. Although, self-talk can be positive or negative, it is more oriented to positivity than negativity. Since females do more self-taking than their male counterpart, the technique should be explored.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made in study:

1. Incorporate self-talk training into sport programs in schools.
2. Foster a supportive environment promoting positive affirmations by coaches.
3. Demonstrate positive self-talk behaviour
4. Help students to develop self-awareness and optimism through self-talk.

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