

## The Influence of Self-Talk on Athletes' Performance in National Youth Games Competitions

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### **Article History:**

Received: 27 May 2021

Accepted: 25 September 2021

Published: 1 October 2021

### **Keywords:**

Belief in Self-Talk;  
Performance; National Youth  
Games; Athletes

### **Abstract**

The application of psychological principles of human performance to help people consistently perform in competitive games is an aspect of interest in sport psychology. Self-talk is one of the cognitive factors believed to contribute to athletes' performance which are lacking in majority of the athlete's attitude based on some factors. This study was to assess athletes' belief in self-talk relative to their performance in competitive games. The study was a survey conducted in North-Central Nigeria. Participants (N=100) were sampled from contingents who represented twenty-two states that participated in the third edition of the National Youth Games (NYG) held in the University of Ilorin, Nigeria. To guide this study, three research questions were raised and one hypothesis was formulated. An instrument; Belief in Self-Talk Questionnaire (BSQ), was used for data collection. Descriptive statistics and t-test were used to analyze the data collected. Results of this study revealed that belief in use of self-talk during competition significantly improved performance of athletes. Participants reported that positive thoughts make them relax enough to perform well on tasks. Finding also showed that belief in negative thoughts mar performance of athletes. Finally, investigation of this study revealed that use of self-talk by individual sport athletes and team sport athletes differ significantly; the former reported more frequent use of self-talk than the latter.

### **How To Cite:**

Olisola, D. R. & Olaitan, J. R. (2021). The Influence of Self-Talk on Athletes' Performance in National Youth Games Competitions. *Indonesian Journal of Sport Management*, 1(2), 82-89.  
<https://doi.org/10.31949/ijsm.v1i2.1106>

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## INTRODUCTION

Previous studies have demonstrated that specific cognitive strategies influence the intensity and duration of someone's performance (Scott, Scott, Bedic, & Dowd, 1999; Tammen, 1996). One of the most commonly used strategies is self-talk (Gould, Finch, & Jackson, 1993; Madigan, Frey, & Matlock, 1992). Self-talk includes the thoughts of athletes with themselves that are made silently or out loud, either during the execution of an activity, or a sport skill, either before or after its execution. This process of thoughts happens usually unconsciously and affects the feelings and, consequently, the acts of the athletes (Zetou, E.; Nikolaos, V. & Evaggelos, B., 2014). Anderson (1997) suggested that self-talk refers to what athletes say to themselves in an attempt to think both more appropriately about their performance and to direct their actions in such a way to reach the desired outcome.

Hardy, Gammage, and Hall, (2001) defines self-talking as the internal dialogue in which the individual interprets his lived perceptions, changes his evaluations and beliefs and gives himself instructions and reinforcements. Also, Hardy (2006), describes self-talk as: 1) expressions or statements that address ourselves, 2) being multidimensional from its nature, 3) having explanatory points that coincide with the content of the statements.

Landin and Hebert (1999) suggested that athletes use self-talk in both practice and competition as the result of, or to bring about, a specific outcome. Hardy, Gammage et al. (2001) examined reasons why athletes talk to themselves and identified two main functions of self-talk, instructional and motivational. Instructional self-talk was further divided into: cognitive-specific self-talk that assists the athlete in learning and executing individual skills and cognitive-general self-talk that helps the athlete to focus on overall performance and carry out strategies. Motivational self-talk was subdivided into three: motivational mastery, arousal and drive. Motivational mastery self-talk is composed of four themes: mental readiness, focus, self-confidence and coping with difficulties, all required if athletes are to successfully master their circumstances (Hardy et al., 2009). Motivational arousal self-talk helps athletes in controlling their arousal-levels, psyching themselves up and for relaxation purposes. Motivational drive self-talk is associated with maintaining or increasing drive and effort levels and keeping on track in achieving the desired goals (Hardy, Gammage et al., 2001).

Zinsser and his colleagues (2001) mention that positive self-talk is separated into two big categories, positive motivational self-talk and positive instructional self-talk. Instructional self-talk refers to statements relevant to technical instructions, tactical choices and kinesthesia, while motivational self-talk refers to statements which are relevant to the increase of self-confidence, of effort and the creation of positive mood.

The content of individual self-talk tends to be positive, negative, or neutral, although the specific type used may be task-specific (Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2004, Moran, 1996). In descriptive research Hardy, Hall and Hardy (2005) reported that content of athletes' self-talk is generally positive, abbreviated, and expressed covertly. Furthermore, Hardy, Hall and Hardy (2005) found that male athletes used significantly more negative, less covert and more overt self-talk than female athlete counterparts.

The popularity of self-talk would seem to support the belief that it is related to sport performance. It has been suggested that self-talk interventions are some of the most widely applied and effective strategies used by athletes (Park, 2000; Weinberg, Grove, & Jackson, 1992). According to Lepadatu (2011), self-talk is an important tool for the learning process. Hardy, Jones, and Gould (1996) also suggested that positive self-talk may enhance performance through increases in confidence and anxiety control.

Zinsser, Bunker, and Williams (1998) stated that self-talk influences performance in a number of ways including the acquisition of skills, the development of the self-regulation of habits and the self-confidence. Self-talk strategies have been examined in a wide variety of sports and tasks including golf (Harvey, Van Raalte, & Brewer, 2002), ice hockey (Rogerson & Hrycaiko, 2002), cricket (Holt, 2003; Slogrove, Potgieter, & Foxcroft, 2003), swimming (Wang, Huddleston, & Peng, 2003), soccer (Papaioannou, Ballon, Theodorakis, & Auwelle, 2004), tennis (Mamassis & Doganis, 2004), and water polo (Hatzigeorgiadis, Theodorakis, & Zourbanos, 2004).

Some studies have reported that positive self-talk is associated with enhanced performance in a number of sports, including figure skating (Ming & Martin, 1996), golf (Kirschenbaum, Owens, & O'Connor, 1998; Thomas & Fogarty, 1997), soccer (Papaioannou et al., 2004), and tennis (Mamassis & Doganis, 2004; McPherson, 2000; Defrancesco & Burke, 1997). Dagrou, Gauvin, and Halliwell (1992) reported that positive self-talk was associated with superior performance, as did Schill, Monroe, Evans, and Ramanaiah (1978). Theodorakis, Weinberg, Natsis, Douma, and Kazakas (2000) examine the influence of instructional versus motivational self-talk on various motor skills. They found both self-talk strategies to be effective at improving performance. However, instructional self-talk was found to be more effective than motivational self-talk for fine motor skills, with both motivational and instructional self-talk being equally effective for motor skills requiring strength and endurance. Cotterill, Sanders and Collins (2010) found that self-talk was the second of the cognitive techniques used by golf champions during pregame routines. In another perspective, Van Raalte, Brewer, Rivera, and Petitpas (1994b), observed a series of games of young tennis athletes, found that the winners used less negative dialogue than those that lost out in the game.

The purpose of this study is to examine the influence of positive and negative self-talk on performance of athletes who participated in the second edition of the National Youth Sports Festival held in Ilorin, Kwara state, Nigeria. Specifically, the study was geared towards finding out: 1) Whether belief in positive self-talk make athletes relax enough to perform a task well, 2) Whether belief in negative self-talk mar athletes' performance of a task, 3) Whether individual sport athletes and team sport athletes differ significantly in their use of self-talk.

## **METHOD**

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The study was carried out in Ilorin, Kwara state, Nigeria, the venue of the third edition of the National Youth Games. The population for the study comprised all the athletes which made up the contingents from the states that participated in the event. A proportionate sampling technique was adopted to select 100 athletes that participated in the

study. The instrument used for data collection was a questionnaire, Belief in Self-Talk Questionnaire (BSQ), adopted from Athletic Insight™, which was developed by K. Araki; J. K. Mintah; M. G. Mack; S. Huddleston; L. Larson; and K. Jacobs (2006).

The BSQ is a self-report inventory with 8 items. Four of the items asked respondents to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with statements regarding belief in positive self-talk to enhance performance and four items examined belief in negative self-talk to harm performance (see Appendix A). Participants rated the items on a scale with anchors of strongly disagreed (0) to strongly agreed (5). Based on the recommendation of Embree (1996), a single total belief score was calculated for each participant, with a possible range from 0 to 40. A total of 100 copies of the questionnaires were administered by the researchers to the respondents and all were retrieved. Mean score was used to answer the research questions. A criterion mean of 2.5 (0 +1 +2 +3 +4+5= 15/6) was used to reach a decision. An item with mean score of 2.5 and above is accepted, while item with mean score below 2.5 was rejected. t-test was used to test the hypothesis at 0.05 level of significance.

**RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

The results of the data analysis in relation to the research questions and hypothesis are presented as follow:

Table 1. Mean Ranking of Responses with respect to Athletes' Belief in Positive Thoughts

S/ N	Statement	Frequency						N	$\bar{X}$	Decision
		SD (0)	MD (1)	DS (2)	AS (3)	MA (4)	SA (5)			
1	I believe that my positive thoughts really help me to concentrate on a task	2	2	2	4	13	77	100	4.55	Accept
2	I believe that my positive thoughts can lead to a good performance	3	0	1	7	13	76	100	4.55	Accept
3	I believe that my positive thoughts will relax me enough to perform well.	3	1	4	6	22	64	100	4.35	Accept
4	My belief in my ability to do a task will help to improve my performance	4	2	3	11	16	64	100	4.25	Accept
Weighted Mean									4.43	

As shown in Table 1, the mean of each item responded to is above 2.5 and the weighted mean (4.43) is also above 2.5. This means that athletes' responses indicated that belief in positive thoughts make them relax enough to perform better on a task.

Table 2. Mean Ranking of Responses in respect with Athletes' Belief in Negative Thoughts

S/ N	Statement	Frequency						N	$\bar{X}$	Decision
		SD (1)	MD (2)	DS (3)	AS (4)	MA (5)	SA (6)			
1.	I believe that my negative thoughts can directly hurt my performance	3	3	6	18	12	58	100	4.07	Accept
2.	I believe that my negative thoughts can break my concentration	3	5	10	14	11	57	100	3.96	Accept
3.	I believe that my negative thoughts can increase my anxiety about performance.	7	9	7	23	23	31	100	3.39	Accept
4.	I believe that doubting my ability to do a task hurts my performance.	10	3	8	11	15	53	100	3.77	Accept
Weighted Mean								3.79		

As shown in Table 2, the mean of each item responded to is above 2.5 and the weighted mean (3.79) is also above 2.5. This is to say that athletes' responses indicate that belief in negative thoughts hurt their performance on a task.

Table 3. t-test Analysis of Difference between Male and Female Athletes' Belief in Self-Talk Scores

Gender	No	Mean	Std	Df	Cal.t	Sig.(2-tailed)	Decision
Male	70	33.01	6.76	98	.29	0.31	H <sub>0</sub> 1
Female	30	32.57	7.78				Not Rejected

P > 0.05

From Table 3, result showd that the t-value = 0.29 and the p-value= 0.31 > 0.05 alpha level. Therefore, the hypothesis is not rejected, which implies that there was not a statistically significant difference in the belief in self-talk scores for male and female athletes.

## Discussion

The study aimed to examine the influence of positive and negative self-talk on performance of athletes with emphasis on participants at the third edition of National Youth Games held in the University of Ilorin, Kwara state, Nigeria. The first finding showed that athletes' belief in positive self-talk make them relax enough to perform well on tasks (See table 1). This finding supports those of Araki, Mintah, Mack, Huddleston, Larson, and Jacobs (2006) who maintained that the type of self-talk an individual engages in (positive or negative) was more important than his or her belief in self-talk. Participants engaging in positive self-talk performed better on the balance task than those expressing negative/mixed self-talk, the researchers

noted. Hatzigeorgiadis, Zourbanos and Theodorakis (2007) have also characterized self-talk as an effective cognitive strategy for increasing athlete's performance.

However, this finding contradicts those of Van Raalte, Brewer, Rivera, and Petitpas (1994) who found and reported that in accord with self-report research, positive self-talk was not associated with better performance. This lack of a relationship between positive self-talk and performance may indicate that positive self-talk is ineffective, as observed by the researchers. The inconsistency between the finding of the present study and those of Van Raalte, Brewer, Rivera, and Petitpas (1994) may relate to the type of the tasks and skill level of participants. Chroni, Perkos and Theodorakis (2007), contended that task complexity significantly affects the efficacy of self-talk in skill acquisition and improved performance.

The second finding of this study suggested that belief in negative thoughts hurt athletes' performance on a task (see Table 2). This finding was in accord with the finding of Van Raalte et al. (1994) who found that negative self-talk was associated with worse performances among tennis players. Contrarily, Goodhart (1986) found that subjects who used negative self-talk were motivated to avoid a negative outcome and tried harder on an anagram task than subjects who were asked to use positive self-talk. Horn and Lox (1993) suggested that performers who receive criticism, which presumably includes negative self-talk, actually perceive themselves as more competent than performers who receive neutral responses to failure.

Lastly, the finding of this study suggested that belief in self-talk scores of male and female athletes are not significantly different (see Table 3). Hardy, Hall and Hardy (2004) reported that skilled athletes (male and female) believed that self-talk affected their performance. This report is a support for the present study in which the participants all reported to believe that what they said to themselves affected their performance in a way.

BSQ was not able to adequately differentiate between those individuals strongly believing in self-talk and those who did not. One of the limitations of this study was relatively lack of information regarding the validity of the BSQ. However, results did reveal a 25-point range out of 40 possible, adequate pilot test-retest reliability, and acceptable internal consistency. Thus, while initial supportive evidence has been provided, it is recommended that future research continue to examine methods by which belief in self-talk is assessed. Thus, it would appear that the broader classifications of positive and negative self-talk need to be delineated in future research.

## **CONCLUSION**

Self-talk assist athletes in using appropriate keywords in order to control and organize their thoughts, to focus or get motivated for greater execution of an event or task especially during a competition. Thus, scholars considered self-talk as an indispensable part of psychological programs in practice and many coaches should integrate self-talk in their programs. More specifically, motivational self-talk can be used to propel athletes' performance. It can help novice athletes develop self-confidence of executing a task during competitions. At the same time, motivational self-talk can help even the most advanced and experienced athletes in task execution

and to increase the cognitive mechanisms and psychological skills such as self-confidence, focus attention, automaticity, emotion and cognitive control and effort.

This process of self-talk strategy is continuous, either at practice or at competitions. The results of this particular study come to the conclusion that the athletes that participated in the third edition of the National Youth Games believe and used motivational self-talk to improve their performance. In similar studies in the future, it would be interesting to investigate the degree to which male and female athletes differ in their belief in self-talk. It may be useful, also, to explore the relationship between both positive and negative internal self-talk and performance.

It is recommended that athletes' trainers, during practice, teach them to use instructional self-talk if the goal is to improve the teaching of skills, and to inculcate in them the essence of using motivational self-talk to stir self-confidence and boost their performance during competitions.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

This study was not receive any support. There is no conflict of interest in this study.

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Indonesian Journal of Sport Management

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