

## Exploring confidence factors in University soccer athletes in South Korea: pre-match, in game, and post-competition phases

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*Self-confidence is an important psychological factor in sports performance; yet its variations across competitive situations remain underexplored. This study investigated confidence formation in university soccer players in three game situations: pre-match, in-game, and post-match. Interviews with 20 players revealed significant antecedents to self-confidence (e.g., preparation, perceived social support, perceived competence, psychological strategy, vicarious experiences, and rituals and routines). The findings reveal that confidence is highly dynamic, with various influencing factors across competitive situations. Pre-match confidence was built upon preparation and anticipatory psychological strategies, whereas in-game confidence was determined by real-time performance, team dynamics, and reinforcement. Post-match confidence was influenced by performance reflection, feedback, and self-evaluation. These findings highlight the importance of phase-specific confidence-building strategies, providing theoretical contributions to the field of confidence development and practical implications for coaches, sport psychologists, and athlete development programs to optimize psychological interventions and thereby enhance performance in competitive soccer.*

KEY WORDS: Coping, Self-Confidence, Situational, Sport Psychology, Soccer.

In modern sports, psychological preparation is as vital as physical training and confidence in particular is a key factor determining performance (Lochbaum et al., 2022a). A recent meta-analysis confirmed the positive relationship between confidence and performance, which was found to directly affect individual performance, team performance, and team cohesion (Bar-

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bosa et al., 2023; Jekauc et al., 2023; Lochbaum et al., 2022b). This effect is particularly noticeable in team sports, such as soccer, where confidence affects not only individual performance but the performance of the entire team (Fransen et al., 2015; Holt & Michell, 2006; Lafratta et al., 2021; Rodrigo et al., 1990). As a primary factor determining performance, confidence management has recently become a key focus of psychological intervention in elite football. For example, FIFA's #ReachOut campaign (INSIDE FIFA, 2022) at the 2022 Qatar World Cup initiated a global trend of recognizing confidence as a key psychological factor affecting players' performance in sports.

Despite the recognition of its importance, research on the confidence of university soccer players is lacking. Additionally, most studies thus far have been conducted mainly on elite and professional athletes, focusing primarily on psychological difficulties such as performance anxiety or loss of motivation (Jekauc et al., 2024; Mcgreary et al., 2024). However, interest in the unique pressures experienced by university players is limited. University soccer players are required to balance intensive training schedules with academic responsibilities, while simultaneously navigating career uncertainty, which can significantly affect their confidence levels. In addition, the relationship between coaches and players, dynamics within the team, and excessive training further intensify burnout and self-doubt (Brink et al., 2012; Jiahao & Jing, 2024). These challenging contexts highlight the need for systematic exploration of the process of confidence formation among university players.

Institutional policies such as the K-League U-22 also complicate the formation of confidence among university soccer players. The policy requires K-League professional teams to include at least one U-22 player in the initial lineup and theoretically aims to provide more young players with opportunities to play. In reality, however, it has resulted in a reduction in university players' playing time. This is because teams prioritize younger prospects from elite academies over university players (Song & Park, 2023). This exclusion can negatively affect confidence by limiting opportunities for university players to be exposed to premier competitive gaming experiences and strengthening their perception of their diminished value in the path to professional football. Therefore, understanding how university soccer players shape, maintain, and strengthen their confidence is key to optimizing their psychological readiness and career development.

The antecedents of self-confidence in sports have been widely explored through various theoretical frameworks (Bandura, 1977; Harter, 1978; Feltz, 1988; Vealey, 1986). These theories commonly emphasize that personal experience, external reinforcement, and psychological conditioning play import-

ant roles in confidence formation. Studies have reported that confidence can vary depending on the phase of competition (Jekauc et al., 2023; Lochbaum et al., 2022b; Rodrigo et al., 1990), but most studies have treated it as a relatively stable construct, and dynamic environmental and psychological changes across the pre-, in-, and post-competition phases have not been sufficiently addressed. This oversight and lack of specificity in examining the correlation between competition phases and confidence levels limits the generation of targeted psychological interventions and practical applicability of confidence-enhancing strategies that can more effectively determine how different antecedent factors affect confidence at each game stage.

Some previous studies have highlighted this correlation. Pre-match confidence is mainly influenced by preparation, use of psychological strategies, and social support systems. On the other hand, confidence during a game is much more sensitive to real-time performance outcomes and external reinforcement factors (Rodrigo et al., 1990). Post-game confidence is greatly influenced by self-reflection, feedback, and performance evaluation (Jekauc et al., 2023). Despite these established differences, studies that closely analyze fluctuations in confidence levels and their regulation across competition phases are insufficient. Consequently, a research gap remains in understanding how athletes experience and regulate fluctuations in confidence in real-world competitive settings.

Therefore, this study aims to identify the key factors affecting the confidence levels of university soccer players by examining them across three competition phases: before, during, and after a game. By analyzing how confidence is formed and maintained in each phase of competition, this study endeavors to contribute to a more in-depth understanding of the dynamic mechanisms of confidence in the context of university soccer.

## **Literature Review**

### SELF-CONFIDENCE IN SPORTS

Self-confidence is widely recognized as a core psychological constituent affecting athletic performance (Lochbaum et al., 2022). Vealey (1986) defined sport confidence as an individual's belief in their ability to succeed in sports situations and distinguished between trait and state confidence. Trait confidence reflects the overall tendency toward confidence, whereas state confidence fluctuates according to specific circumstances and is affected by contextual factors. Subsequently, Vealey (2009) explained self-confidence as

a multidimensional concept and emphasized that it is influenced by various internal and external factors such as past performance, social support, and psychological strategies.

Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy provides an important basis for understanding self-confidence. This theory asserts that the belief that a particular task can be performed is formed by four main factors: mastery experience, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and physiological state. Similarly, Feltz (1988) distinguished between self-efficacy and more comprehensive self-confidence, and argued that confidence formation in sport largely depends on previous experiences and feedback from the environment. Moreover, according to Harter's (1978) competence motivation theory, self-confidence is strengthened when players successfully perform tasks, which forms a positive feedback loop that enhances beliefs in motivation and self-ability.

Self-confidence is a key psychological construction concept in sport and directly affects athletes' motivation, resilience, and performance outcomes (Jekauc et al., 2023; Lochbaum et al., 2022b). Self-confidence has been consistently related to positive performance at various competition levels, and meta-analyses have also confirmed an intermediate but significant effect size between self-confidence and performance (Jekauc et al., 2023; Lochbaum et al., 2022b; Woodman & Hardy, 2003). Jekauc et al.'s meta-analysis also pointed out that when self-confidence was measured just before a game, the effect was stronger, thus emphasizing the temporal sensitivity of the self-confidence effect. These results are consistent with those reported by Woodman and Hardy (2003), who reported that self-confidence showed a significant positive correlation with performance whereas cognitive anxiety showed a negative correlation.

The relationship between self-confidence and performance is particularly prominent in soccer because soccer requires both technical competence and psychological resilience. According to previous studies, soccer players with high self-confidence showed better performance, decision-making, tactical execution, and stress management skills during games (Hays et al., 2009; Rodrigo et al., 1990). In addition, collective confidence (i.e., team-level confidence) appears to contribute to the team's overall success, demonstrating that confidence works not only at the individual level but also at the group level (Fransen et al., 2015).

#### ANTECEDENTS OF SELF-CONFIDENCE IN SPORTS

Several theoretical frameworks have been proposed to explain the antecedents of self-trust in sports. Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy, Har-

ter's (1978) theory of competence motivation, and Feltz's (1988) confidence model posit that belief in a player's ability is formed by past experience, external reinforcement, and psychological conditioning. Vealey's (1986) sports confidence model extends these theories, suggesting that both personal and contextual factors influence self-confidence. Empirical studies have confirmed that successful performance experiences, vicarious experiences, social support, psychological strategies, and physiological and emotional states are key antecedents of self-confidence. First, successful performance (mastery experience) has repeatedly been reported to strengthen athletes' confidence, and previous experiences of success support the belief that positive results can be achieved in the future (Jekauc et al., 2023). Vicarious experience is also important. In particular, young players can increase their confidence by observing exemplary players' successes, thereby modeling their behavior and expectations (Rodrigo et al., 1990). Social support is another decisive factor. Positive reinforcement from coaches, colleagues, and family members enhances players' self-confidence by providing them with external recognition and motivation to overcome challenges (Fransen et al., 2015; Brink et al., 2012). In addition, psychological strategies (e.g., self-conversation, goal setting, and image training) have been shown to greatly improve confidence by helping control emotions and maintain confidence in one's abilities (Lochbaum et al., 2022). Finally, physiological and emotional states also affect confidence. The effect depends on how each player interprets it. For example, if tension before the game is accepted as a prepared signal, it can lead to confidence; however, if interpreted as anxiety, it can have detrimental consequences (Woodman & Hardy, 2003).

Although these antecedent factors have been sufficiently covered in the literature, studies that distinguish between their mechanisms at different moments of the competition are insufficient (Hays et al., 2009; Rodrigo et al., 1990). For example, perceived social support can play a more important role when a player requires confidence and stability before a game. However, during a game, actual performance and real-time feedback can have a greater impact on confidence formation. In addition, maintaining confidence after a game is likely to depend largely on post-game reflection, self-assessment, and the ways in which success and failure are interpreted. Recognizing differences by situation has the potential to facilitate the design of more effective confidence improvement strategies. Therefore, the development of a confidence-building strategy tailored to a specific game context is essential for an in-depth understanding of the factors preceding confidence.

To address this gap, this study explored the antecedents of confidence in university soccer players before, during, and after a game. This situational

perspective can contribute to a more in-depth understanding of the dynamics of confidence and provide practical guidance in designing psychological intervention strategies tailored to the specific game experiences of players.

## Method

This study explored confidence factors through in-depth interviews with 20 university soccer players. To this end, the topic of discussion was constructed based on responses to an open questionnaire survey conducted in advance. According to Legard (2003), in-depth interviews are an effective way to gain a deeper understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives. This qualitative approach allows researchers to explore the players' subjective emotions and actual experiences in greater depth.

### PARTICIPANTS

A total of 20 male university soccer players (Table I) registered with the Korea Football Association in 2024 participated in the in-depth interview for this study ( $M_{age} = 21.50$ , [ $SD = 0.89$ ]), with three freshmen, five sophomores, 10 juniors, and two seniors. Participants also consisted of one goalkeeper, four defenders, eight midfielders, and seven forwards.

Participants were targeted based on whether they could provide rich and specific insights into confidence factors, and the inclusion criterion was sufficient game experience. Specifically, all players had at least 10 years of competitive soccer experience, rendering them able to clearly reflect on the factors influencing confidence in each game situation. The exclusion criteria were injury at the time of participation in the study or inability to physically participate in team activities, so that players could provide appropriate reflection based on actual experience. Additionally, based on the snowball sampling technique, the initially recruited players were asked to recommend colleagues who met the above criteria and could present additional perspectives from the same or other university teams. All athletes had sufficient explanation about the purpose and procedure of the study before participating, and voluntarily agreed to participate.

### INSTRUMENT

In this study, semi-structured interviews with an open questionnaire were used to identify factors affecting the confidence of university soccer players based on the different competition phases. The questionnaire was designed to explore factors influencing confidence before, during, and after a game. The primary questions were as follows: 1) What is the factor that boosts your confidence before the game?; 2) What boosts your confidence during the game?; and 3) What factors help build confidence after the game?

The interview guidelines were refined and supplemented with advice from a professor of sport psychology (with experience in qualitative research) and two university soccer leaders.

When the participants mentioned specific confidence-related factors during the interview, additional follow-up questions were asked to obtain more specific insights.

TABLE I.  
*Demographic characteristics of participants*

| <b>Name</b> | <b>University</b> | <b>Year</b> | <b>Experience</b> | <b>Position</b> |
|-------------|-------------------|-------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| Player 1    | University A      | 3rd         | 12 years          | Defender        |
| Player 2    | University A      | 2nd         | 11 years          | Defender        |
| Player 3    | University A      | 2nd         | 12 years          | Midfielder      |
| Player 4    | University K      | 2nd         | 12 years          | Forward         |
| Player 5    | University K      | 1st         | 10 years          | Midfielder      |
| Player 6    | University K      | 1st         | 11 years          | Midfielder      |
| Player 7    | University K      | 1st         | 11 years          | Midfielder      |
| Player 8    | University K      | 2nd         | 11 years          | Midfielder      |
| Player 9    | University Y      | 4th         | 13 years          | Forward         |
| Player 10   | University Y      | 4th         | 15 years          | Forward         |
| Player 11   | University Y      | 3rd         | 15 years          | Midfielder      |
| Player 12   | University Y      | 3rd         | 14 years          | Forward         |
| Player 13   | University Y      | 3rd         | 12 years          | Defender        |
| Player 14   | University Y      | 3rd         | 11 years          | Midfielder      |
| Player 15   | University Y      | 3rd         | 12 years          | Goalkeeper      |
| Player 16   | University A      | 3rd         | 13 years          | Forward         |
| Player 17   | University A      | 3rd         | 12 years          | Midfielder      |
| Player 18   | University A      | 3rd         | 12 years          | Forward         |
| Player 19   | University A      | 3rd         | 11 years          | Defender        |
| Player 20   | University A      | 2nd         | 10 years          | Forward         |

## RESEARCH PROCEDURE

A systematic procedure was used to increase the validity and reliability of the study.

First, the purpose and objectives of the study were clearly explained to coaches, players, and related organizations, and voluntary consent was obtained. Subsequently, based on the confidence factors identified in previous studies, an inductive content analysis was conducted with expert advice, and interview guidelines were established. A semi-structured interview guide was prepared to induce in-depth responses and consistently deal with key topics.

Interviews were coordinated based on the team training schedule in consideration of the convenience and accessibility of the participants. The main researchers conducted face-

to- face interviews in familiar and quiet environments such as university conference rooms and team facilities. Each interview was conducted within one hour and was audio-recorded with prior consent. Consequently, approximately 160 pages of transcription data were generated.

The collected data were transcribed, analyzed, and organized into pre-match, in-game, and post-match contexts, and confidence factors related to each stage were identified.

## DATA ANALYSIS

This study employed an in-depth qualitative analysis to derive confidence factors for each stage before, during, and after a game. Following data transcription, to ensure reliability, several researchers reviewed the transcripts and performed cross-validation, and discrepancies were resolved through repeated discussions. After the initial coding was completed, the research team held a meeting to compare interpretations and identify inconsistencies. If differences of opinions were found, they were discussed until full consensus was achieved. If an agreement was not immediately reached, the transcripts were reviewed again and re-coded collaboratively. If necessary, the final coding decision was made based on the advice of a senior researcher. The interview data were systematically categorized, and confidence factors were derived through thematic analysis. Additionally, to increase the reliability and consistency of the research, consultations with sports psychology experts were conducted.

Furthermore, the data were analyzed according to the context of each stage of the game to explore how situational differences affect confidence factors. Through an iterative comparison process, common topics and unique factors for each stage were identified, and similarities and differences between the participants' responses were analyzed to derive meaningful interpretations in context. Finally, the results of the study were organized into the three categories of pre-match, in-game, and post-match factors, and the mechanisms of each factor based on players' experiences were analyzed and explained.

## RESEARCH INTEGRITY

To verify the accuracy of the research results, the participants were asked to review the results and provide feedback. According to Birt et al. (2016), participant validation involves presenting data interpretations to respondents to confirm whether their experiences are accurately reflected in the analysis. Thus, it was guaranteed that the results of this study faithfully reflected the players' perspectives. In addition, an audit trail was maintained to systematically record all processes of the study. As described by Rodgers (1993), an audit trail records methodological decisions across the research design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation stages. This enabled external reviewers to evaluate the transparency and reliability of the study.

To minimize subjective bias and increase objectivity, the process of data analysis and interpretation was discussed with colleagues and experts. The consultation provided critical feedback on the research approach and contributed to identifying and supplementing potential biases. Peer advice enhanced the validity and reliability of the study by providing an alternative perspective and strengthening the rigor of our analysis.

## Results

This study examined the formation and fluctuation of confidence among university soccer players across different competition phases (i.e., before, during, and after a match) through qualitative interviews. The findings (Table II) highlight the key antecedents of confidence, providing deeper insights into how soccer players construct, maintain, and reinforce their belief in their abilities.

TABLE II.  
*Summary of the in-depth interviews*

| Phase     | Factor                   | <i>f</i>  | Response  |
|-----------|--------------------------|---|---|
| Pre-match | Preparation              | 5   | Strong tactical/technical readiness and improved fundamentals ( <i>n</i> = 2)   |
|           |                          |   | Confidence from good season form and physical condition ( <i>n</i> = 1)         |
|           |                          |   | Sufficient individual training load ( <i>n</i> = 1)                             |
|           |                          |   | Team-wide high-intensity preparation ( <i>n</i> = 1)                            |
|           |                          |   | Perceived social support  |
|           |                          | Teammate cheers (“Fighting!”; <i>n</i> = 1)                               |   |
|           |                          | Pre-match goal-setting with agent to set clear objectives ( <i>n</i> = 1) |   |
|           | Perceived competence     | 3   | Confidence from proven skill and past success ( <i>n</i> = 1)                   |
|           |                          |   | Feeling stronger shooting power than opponents during warm-up ( <i>n</i> = 1)   |
|           |                          |   | Feeling lighter in body condition during warm-up ( <i>n</i> = 1)                |
|           | Psychological strategies | 4   | Visualization of plays and positive affirmation (“I am the best”; <i>n</i> = 2) |
|           |                          |   | Image training to overcome pressure ( <i>n</i> = 1)                             |
|           |                          |   | Self-talk to instill belief in winning ( <i>n</i> = 1)                          |
|           | Rituals and routines     | 2   | Pre-match prayer ( <i>n</i> = 1)  |
|           |                          |   | Following a personal pre-match routine ( <i>n</i> = 1)                          |
|           | Vicarious experience     | 1   | Watching highlight videos of role model players ( <i>n</i> = 1)                 |
| In-game   | Perceived social support | 4   | Praise from the coach ( <i>n</i> = 1)   |
|           |                          |   | Praise from teammates ( <i>n</i> = 1)   |
|           |                          |   | Support from the crowd ( <i>n</i> = 1)  |
|           |                          |   | Support from parents ( <i>n</i> = 1)  |
|           | Perceived competence     | 4   | Confidence when executing a good first touch ( <i>n</i> = 1)                    |

(Continued)

(Continued) - TABLE I

| Phase      | Factor                   | <i>f</i> | Response   |
|------------|--------------------------|----------|--|
|            |                          |          | Confidence when demonstrating strong in-game play ( <i>n</i> = 1)              |
|            |                          |          | Winning 1:1 duels against defenders ( <i>n</i> = 1)                            |
|            |                          |          | Blocking opponent's shots as goalkeeper ( <i>n</i> = 1)                        |
|            | Performance outcomes     | 6        | Gaining and accumulating offensive points (e.g., assists, goals; <i>n</i> = 2) |
|            |                          |          | Leading the opponent with a superior score ( <i>n</i> = 1)                     |
|            |                          |          | Scoring by our team ( <i>n</i> = 1)  |
|            |                          |          | Clean sheets ( <i>n</i> = 1)   |
|            |                          |          | Being league leader ( <i>n</i> = 1)  |
|            | Rituals and routines     | 2        | Prayer during the match ( <i>n</i> = 1)  |
|            |                          |          | Running without thinking for 5 minutes to relieve tension ( <i>n</i> = 1)      |
| Post-match | Perceived social support | 4        | Feedback from coaching staff ( <i>n</i> = 1)                                   |
|            |                          |          | Feedback from parents ( <i>n</i> = 1)  |
|            |                          |          | Receiving motivation from most trusted person ( <i>n</i> = 1)                  |
|            |                          |          | Receiving encouragement from parents ( <i>n</i> = 1)                           |
|            | Psychology strategy      | 4        | Reviewing positive plays through match footage ( <i>n</i> = 2)                 |
|            |                          |          | Feeling satisfied with personal performance ( <i>n</i> = 1)                    |
|            |                          |          | Gaining confidence that team's play style is correct ( <i>n</i> = 1)           |
|            | Performance outcomes     | 6        | Evaluating whether the team won the match ( <i>n</i> = 3)                      |
|            |                          |          | Out-preparing opponents and dominating play                                    |
|            |                          |          | Being selected as Man of the Match ( <i>n</i> = 1)                             |
|            |                          |          | Evaluating whether they played well ( <i>n</i> = 1)                            |

Note: *f* indicates Frequency.

## FACTORS INFLUENCING CONFIDENCE BEFORE A MATCH

Before a match, athletes experience heightened anticipation and mental preparation, rendering the development of confidence a critical aspect of their performance readiness. This study identified six primary factors that contribute to pre-match confidence: preparation, perceived social support, perceived competence, psychological strategies, rituals and routines, and vicarious experience.

Preparation emerged as one of the most crucial determinants of self-confidence before a match. Physical conditioning, tactical training, and technical mastery played significant roles in determining players' confidence levels when entering a game:

*First of all, I need to be confident that my physical condition is good in order to feel that I can perform well during the game. As a team, if we prepare our tactics well through training, we gain confidence that we can handle any situation we face.* (Player 2)

*Training extensively on areas where I previously lacked proficiency, like crosses and dribbling, significantly boosts my confidence. I know I am improving, and that gives me assurance before the match.* (Player 6)

Beyond general physical readiness, players emphasized on current season form, sufficient personal training load, and collective team training volume as specific drivers of confidence:

*Across the whole season, when my performances are good and my physical condition is trending up, confidence comes naturally... If I felt sharp in the last match or in training, I go into the game thinking, "I can do it again today."* (Player 13)

*What matters most is how well I've prepared myself. When I've put in enough extra work, shooting on my own, supplemental fitness, I feel calm and confident because I know I've done everything I can.* (Player 14)

Perceived social support was another commonly mentioned source of self-confidence before the match, as players valued encouragement from their coaches, teammates, and peers. Two participants highlighted that verbal reinforcement and specific coaching feedback helped them feel reassured about their strengths and prepare for competition. One player expressed how a simple pre-match cheer from teammates could immediately boost confidence:

*When my coach tells me, "You have a great shot, take your chances," I focus on my strengths, which boosts my confidence.* (Player 4)

*When my teammates shout "fighting!" before the match, I feel energized. That simple cheer helps me focus and builds my confidence.* (Player 1)

Perceived social support extended beyond coaches and teammates to include pre-match goal-setting with an agent, which helped focus attention and translate support into clear performance intentions:

*I always spend a moment with my agent to set concrete goals like "track back X times" or "create a scoring chance." That short conversation pulls me into the game and naturally boosts my confidence.* (Player 16)

Players also attributed their confidence to their perceived competence, which was often reinforced through past successful experiences and social

comparisons. Players who consistently performed well in training or had displayed strong performances in previous matches reported greater confidence before games. This suggests that confidence is closely tied to athletes' self-perception of competence, which is often shaped by past experience and skill levels. As Player 3 stated:

*In the end, sports are all about producing results, and to achieve those results, a certain level of ability is required. ... Having the necessary skills builds confidence, and that confidence leads to good results, which in turn serves as strong motivation for me.* (Player 3)

Our study also found that perceived competence was sharpened by warm-up cues. Players reported immediate confidence lifts when their bodies felt especially light or when their shot power compared favorably to that of their opponents, signaling readiness and competitive edge:

*When my body feels light in the warm-up (feet quick, reactions sharp) I get that sense of "today it's on." That's a key signal before the match.* (Player 17)

*If, during shooting, my strikes feel stronger than the opponent's, it tells me I've prepared better and my confidence spikes before kickoff.* (Player 18)

Psychological strategies were commonly employed to boost confidence before a match. Many players reported engaging in positive affirmations or imagery exercises to reinforce their belief in their abilities. Similarly, self-affirmation strategies helped players maintain a strong mental state before competition:

*On the way to the match, I visualize my movements, and that mental rehearsal reassures me.* (Player 4)

*I keep telling myself, 'I'm the best,' so that I go into the match with confidence.* (Player 3)

*I deliberately feed myself the mindset that we can win "You can do this; you prepared well." When I reinforce that tone, my nerves settle and confidence rises.* (Player 20)

Rituals and routines refer to a broad category that includes environmental factors, luck, and participation in rituals, all of which were found to contribute to the development of pre-match confidence. For example, some players engaged in pre-game prayers, drawing confidence from their faith. Additionally, several players described following a personal pre-match routine such as repeating a warm-up ritual or wearing gear in a specific order which gave them a sense of stability and control:

*I feel calmer and more confident when I pray before the game, just like my favorite player does.* (Player 5)

Finally, vicarious experience refers to observing others' performance and was identified as an important factor in the development of pre-match confi-

dence. Some participants indicated that the primary source of their vicarious experience was watching videos of players whom they considered role models:

*Watching Pau Torres' highlights before a game reminds me how to position myself and gives me confidence. (Player 8)*

#### FACTORS INFLUENCING CONFIDENCE DURING A MATCH

Once a match begins, players experience fluctuating confidence levels based on their in-game performance, external feedback, and situational factors. This study identified four primary factors affecting confidence during competition: perceived social support, perceived competence, performance outcomes, and rituals and routines. As with pre-match confidence, verbal reinforcement from coaches, teammates, and the crowd played a significant role in maintaining confidence during the match. Additionally, the players felt an extra boost when they received praise from their coaches during the game:

*If my coach shouts encouragement from the sideline, it reassures me that I'm doing well. Also, hearing teammates say "good job" or "nice pass" makes a huge difference in my confidence. (Player 12)*

*When the crowd cheers for us or supports us, we gain energy and gradually build confidence. (Player 2)*

Several players also highlighted parents' cheering as especially motivating:

*When my parents are in the stands and I hear their voices, I feel a real lift even if we're behind, it helps me refocus and push on. (Player 13)*

Executing successful plays during the match reinforced confidence. Players emphasized that performing key skills such as a clean first touch or a well-timed pass helped them feel in control:

*A good first touch sets the tone for my confidence. If I control the ball well, I feel in rhythm. (Player 8)*

*When I execute a good play, I gain confidence because I feel like I am in control and maintaining a good rhythm. (Player 11)*

Players added that winning a 1v1 duel sparked immediate assurance:

*Beating a defender one-on-one gives me the sense the game will go my way (Player 14)*

Additionally, athletes' confidence was closely tied to their in-game performance. Players who scored, assisted, or made crucial defensive plays reported increased confidence levels:

*During the match, I feel a lot of confidence when we have a lead over the opposing team, but I feel even more confident when we are outperforming them in terms of gameplay. (Player 9)*

*My confidence suddenly rises when I get an offensive point or make a significant impact during the match. (Player 4)*

While some external factors were beyond the players' control, they still influenced their confidence during a game. For example, certain athletes relied on religious or psychological rituals to maintain composure:

*I talk to God throughout the game. It helps me stay calm and confident. (Player 9)*

Others described a five-minute "clear-the-head" run prior to the game:

*I empty my head and just run hard for five minutes; after that, my touch and focus come back and confidence rises. (Player 20)*

#### FACTORS INFLUENCING POST-MATCH CONFIDENCE

Post-match reflections played a vital role in shaping players' retrospective confidence. Three primary factors emerged for this phase: perceived social support, psychological strategies, and performance outcomes.

Feedback from coaches, teammates, and family members was crucial for reinforcing post-match confidence, regardless of game outcome:

*After the game, I gain a lot of confidence from the feedback and encouragement I receive from the coaching staff, agents, and my parents regarding my performance. (Player 1)*

*Regardless of the match result, I feel confident when the coaches tell us we played well and that we prepared everything properly. (Player 4)*

In addition to coaches' and parents' feedback, several players emphasized the role of a trusted mentor whose encouragement reset their mindset after unpleasant results:

*I always debrief with the person I trust most, my mentor. Even a simple "you're doing well" gives me the push to prepare for the next match. After talking, I feel "let's go again," and my confidence returns. (Player 13)*

*Hearing my parents' support, at the stadium or by message, makes me feel grounded.*

*Knowing someone recognizes my effort becomes the biggest source of confidence for the next game. (Player 14)*

Many players reported reviewing match footage as a method of maintaining confidence.

Viewing the positive moments helped them focus on their strengths and prepare for the next game:

*When I review my game footage, I see many positive moments and feel like I executed my plays well. That reinforces my confidence. (Player 1)*

*I rewatch my own highlights, focusing on good moments to remind myself of my strengths.* (Player 8)

Deliberate post-match analysis helped players transform their outcomes, good or bad, into actionable confidence. Two recurrent patterns emerged: using the recorded film/feedback to identify concrete improvements and using a review to confirm that the team's game model is on the right track:

*When I analyze film and pinpoint what to fix or what I can do better next time, my confidence actually increases, there's a clear plan I can act on.* (Player 15)

*If post-match review shows our tactical approach is right, even if the score was close, it gives me strong confidence to stay the course into the next match.* (Player 16)

The players' post-match confidence was also influenced by how well they believed they had performed. Strong personal or team performance significantly boosted confidence regarding future matches:

*Ultimately, it's all about results. My confidence and even my mood depend on whether I played well and whether my team won or lost.* (Player 3)

*Getting good results or performing well in a match is important for me. It helps me carry that confidence into the next game.* (Player 7)

*Being named Man of the Match gives me clear confirmation that my play is being recognized. It turns into motivation and belief for the next game.* (Player 19)

*When my post-match stats (e.g., pass completion, work rate, interceptions) exceed expectations, it confirms my preparation and boosts my confidence for the next match.* (Player 20)

## Discussion

This study explored the formation and fluctuation of confidence in university soccer players across three competition phases: pre-match, in-game, and post-match. The results revealed that self-confidence emerged as a dynamic psychological process and varied based on context, with important variations in other factors based on the phase of the game. In all three phases, perceived social support was identified as a common key factor; however, the roles of the other factors differed depending on the situation. This shows that confidence is not a fixed attribute but has a fluid characteristic that varies depending on the context of the game and the requirements of each phase.

Players' pre-match confidence was mainly anticipatory. Specifically, the main sources of confidence during this phase were preparation, perceived social support, perceived competence, psychological strategies, vicarious experiences, and rituals or routines. Preparation process including physical and tactical training played a key role in shaping confidence before the game.

Players who intensively trained in certain skills such as dribbling the ball or crossing, reported greater confidence that they could successfully perform these skills during competition. In addition, the experience of practicing tactical strategies thoroughly reinforced players' confidence by providing the perception that they could prepare for unexpected game situations. This is consistent with Feltz's (1988) self-efficacy model, which considers previous successful performance experiences to be a major source of confidence. Furthermore, preparation was not limited to technical and tactical readiness; players also emphasized seasonal form, extra individual training, and collective team intensity as confidence drivers, underscoring the value of both individual and team preparation.

Social support from teammates and coaches was also an important factor in enhancing pre-game confidence. The players reported that verbal encouragement and personalized feedback had a significant influence. This is in line with Fransen et al. (2015), who found that pre-competition team-level support strengthens individual and group confidence simultaneously. For example, simple slogans such as "Fighting!" before a game inspired fellowship and a sense of belonging and provided psychological readiness to the players. In addition, the individualized feedback provided by the coaches helped the players focus on their strengths, which reinforced their belief in their abilities (Geukes et al., 2017).

Perceived competence was also identified as an important factor in players' pre-match confidence. They stressed that their belief in their skill level was a key factor in determining their confidence. This confidence was reinforced through previous successful performance experiences, social comparisons, and self-perceptions of ability. This supports Harter's (1978) theory of competence and motivation, which argues that belief in one's capacity to succeed promotes motivation and performance expectations. Social support extended beyond teammates and coaches, with some players relying on agents to set clear goals before matches, reinforcing focus and motivation. Perceived competence was also sharpened by warm-up cues such as feeling physically light or demonstrating stronger shot power than opponents, which acted as embodied signals of readiness.

Psychological strategies were commonly used by players to increase their confidence. Some athletes strengthened their belief in their abilities by using positive self-affirmation such as "I'm the best" or by visualizing successful performances. This is consistent with the results of Lochbaum et al. (2023), who reported that pre-match visualization increases confidence and relieves competitive anxiety. Additionally, players used win-focused self-talk which helped them settle nerves and approach matches with belief.

Interestingly, rituals, routines, and vicarious experiences also contributed to pre-match confidence. Some players gained confidence by praying before the game or imitating the routines of their revered players. This is in line with Geukes et al. (2017), who noted that pre-match rituals can provide a sense of psychological control, even when pre-game consciousness is uncertain. In addition, watching highlight videos of professional players served as a vicarious learning strategy, supporting Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy, which emphasizes that observational learning plays an important role in the formation of self-confidence.

In sharp contrast, confidence during matches was reported to be immediate and highly responsive. Unlike in the pre-match stage, in-game confidence fluctuated according to real-time performance outcomes, interactions, and feedback. In this phase, confidence was greatly influenced by social support, perceived competence, performance results, and rituals and routines. If the pre-game stage was a process of building confidence through preparation and expectations, confidence during the game was maintained or fluctuated based on the feedback provided and state of the game at every moment.

Social support remained an important source of confidence, but its role shifted from preparatory encouragement to real-time reinforcement. The players reported experiencing an immediate boost in confidence when praised by their coaches, colleagues, and parents during the game. This is consistent with a study by Geukes et al. (2017), which showed that verbal reinforcement during a match improves decision-making in situations of pressure. In other words, if pre-game social support focused on mental preparation, confidence during the game was directly linked to the immediate confirmation and recognition of actual performance.

Perceived competence played a key role in maintaining confidence during a match. The players stressed that confidence was strengthened when basic skills such as first touch or an accurate pass were successfully performed. Similarly, confidence was also influenced by success in 1 vs 1 duels and key goalkeeper saves. This is consistent with Harter's (1978) competence motivation theory, which argues that task mastery improves self-belief and motivation. It also supports Vealey's (1986) sport confidence model, which suggests that technical mastery is a major factor in determining situational confidence. Performance further substantially enhanced in-game confidence. Visible performance accomplishments such as scoring and assisting dramatically boosted confidence during the game. This shows that confidence during a game depends on specific success experiences, unlike pre-game confidence, which is based on preparation and perceived ability. Some players described themselves as "unstoppable beings" when they directly contributed to the

team's success, which is also consistent with the findings of Nicholls et al. (2019) that repeated success experiences strengthen players' confidence. Performance outcomes extended beyond scoring or assisting to include maintaining a clean sheet and drawing strength from the team's league-leading status. Rituals included not only prayer or in-game self-talk but also a short, all-out five-minute run used by some players to reset focus and restore confidence mid-game.

Post-match confidence was converted to a reflective state, mainly influenced by performance evaluation, external feedback, and post-match psychological strategies. Unlike the anticipatory confidence of pre-match preparation or fluctuating confidence during the game, post-match confidence focused on the process of introspection and learning from the experience. Perceived social support remained an important confidence factor even after the game. Players reported that feedback from coaches, colleagues, mentors, and family members was key to interpreting game performance. Regardless of the game outcome, the players felt great psychological stability when the coach emphasized the preparation process and effort itself rather than focusing solely on the results. This is consistent with a study by Lochbaum et al. (2023), which showed that positive reinforcement after a game helps players maintain confidence until the next game. In addition, psychological strategies, especially performance review techniques, were also widely used to strengthen confidence. Many players focused on successful play by reviewing the game video, and thereby maintain confidence despite unfavorable game outcomes. This supports Feltz's (1988) self-efficacy model, which suggests that reflection on achievement experiences strengthens future confidence.

Performance outcomes remained a dominant factor in post-game confidence. The players reported that if they felt that they did well, their confidence would lead to the next game, and by contrast, if they perceived their performance to be poor, their confidence would decline. Performance outcomes further reinforced confidence when players were recognized through formal awards (e.g., Man of the Match) or objective indicators such as positive match statistics, which provided tangible validation of preparation and performance. These results are consistent with those of Nicholls et al. (2019), who emphasized that confidence is cumulative and influenced by players' perceptions of previous performance.

The differences in the factors affecting confidence at each stage of the game can be attributed to changes in the psychological demands and environmental conditions that players face at each phase. Pre-match confidence is anticipatory and based on preparation, social reinforcement, and perceived competence because players have no direct control over the outcomes in this

phase. Confidence during a match is performance-driven and fluctuates according to real-time skill execution, interactions with opponents, and feedback from coaches and colleagues. Post-match confidence has reflective characteristics and is formed through self-evaluation, external feedback, and reflection on past performance. These results suggest that confidence is not a single, static concept but a dynamic psychological process that evolves in response to situational demands. The transition from anticipatory (pre-match) to reactive (in-game) to reflective (post-match) confidence highlights the need for contextualized, phase-specific confidence-building strategies, rather than a uniform approach.

#### THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study have several theoretical implications for sport psychology and player development. First, we found that confidence is a multidimensional phenomenon affected by both internal (e.g., preparation, perceived competence, psychological strategies) and external factors (e.g., perceived social support, rituals and routines, and vicarious experience). This suggests that confidence-enhancing interventions should include both physical and psychological training elements for optimal performance.

In addition, this study emphasizes the importance of classifying antecedent factors of confidence according to competition phase. Existing studies have tended to treat confidence as a general trait or state and have not fully considered how it fluctuates before, during, and after a game. This study laid the foundation for a more rigorous understanding of confidence by identifying the factors influencing it at each phase of the game, suggesting the need for customized interventions for each of the phases. For example, mental preparation through self-conversation, visualization, and structured training may be emphasized before a game, whereas a strategy centered on real-time feedback and situational adaptability may be more effective during the game.

#### PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

For coaches and sports psychologists, the results of this study emphasize the need for customized interventions to strengthen confidence at each phase of competition. Before a match, coaches can provide strength-oriented feedback based on previous season and pre-season results, conduct structured visualization training with players, and maximize confidence by developing team-level routines and consciousness. During a match, real-time encourage-

ment and reinforcement can be provided by their teammates and leaders to help players maintain confidence and game flow. Post-match confidence can be built through video viewing and identification of micro-successes through performance evaluation, and thereby maintain their confidence until the next game through critical self-reflection.

Beyond team-level applications, these findings have broad implications for psychological intervention strategies in sports. By identifying the key psychological mechanisms underlying confidence development, this study contributes to the development of customized psychological training programs for university soccer players. These insights provide practical guidance for sports psychology professionals, trainers, and performance coaches to design more effective interventions, thereby optimizing individual and team success in a competitive soccer environment.

### **Limitations and future research directions**

This study has the following limitations that future studies may address. First, because this study is based on a qualitative research design, the generalizability of the results is limited. Future studies could apply quantitative or mixed methods to validate and extend the scope of these qualitative results. Second, as this study was conducted only on university soccer players, the applicability of the results to players of other ages and sports remains to be examined. Because each sport requires different technical, tactical, and psychological characteristics, future studies should explore whether and how confidence determinants differ across sports contexts.

Third, because this study applied a cross-sectional research design, insights into how confidence is formed and how it fluctuates over time are limited. Future research could examine the temporal dynamics of confidence development more comprehensively by exploring how the trajectory of players' confidence fluctuates across seasons or competition cycles, using a longitudinal research design.

Finally, although this study identified confidence factors through inductive content analysis, future studies should develop structured psychological intervention programs based on these findings. Developing and implementing confidence improvement training programs applicable to the sports field and conducting intervention-based research is essential for identifying the causal relationships among confidence factors and game performance, to inform the relevant stakeholders.

Despite these limitations, our findings contribute to the broader under-

standing of confidence dynamics in sports and highlight the importance of tailoring confidence-building interventions to different competitive situations. Research should continue to explore the interplay between psychological and environmental factors in confidence regulation, with a particular focus on how athletes sustain confidence throughout a competitive event.

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