

9-2013

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Recommended Citation

Podlog L, Lochbaum M, Kleinert J, Dimmock J, Newton M, Schulte S. The relationship between self-presentation concerns and pre-game affect among adolescent American football players. *J Sport Health Sci.* 2013;2:168-175. doi:10.1016/j.jshs.2012.06.002

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Original article

The relationship between self-presentation concerns and pre-game affect among adolescent American football players

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Received 8 March 2012; revised 13 April 2012; accepted 20 April 2012

Abstract

Background: The influence of self-presentation concerns on the adolescent sport experience has received scant empirical attention. The purpose of this investigation was to prospectively examine the relationship among self-presentational concerns and pre-game affective states among middle and high school aged football players.

Methods: American football players ($n = 112$; mean age = 15.57 years) completed a measure of self-presentational concerns (SPSQ, McGowan, et al., 2008) a week prior to the measurement of selected pre-game affective states (i.e., attentiveness, self-assurance, serenity, and fear).

Results: Regression analyses revealed that concerns about appearing athletically untalented negatively contributed to the significant prediction ($p < 0.001$) of pre-game attentiveness, $\beta = -0.43$, $R^2_{adj} = 19.5\%$ ($p < 0.001$), and self-assurance, $\beta = -0.38$, $R^2_{adj} = 11.9\%$ ($p < 0.01$).

Conclusion: These findings highlight the importance of reducing self-presentational concerns in promoting positive pre-game mental states that likely impact the quality of athletes' competitive play and experience.

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Keywords: Attentiveness; Longitudinal; Self-assurance; Self-presentation

1. Introduction

Most individuals are aware of, and concerned with, the impressions they make on others. The concern regarding how

one is perceived by others and the associated attempts to monitor, shape, and influence such perceptions is known as self-presentation or impression management.^{1,2} In the process of presenting oneself to others, individuals typically reveal or omit certain aspects of the self depending upon the social situation or interaction context.³ To do so does not imply deceit or manipulation; rather, individuals are typically aware of the necessity (and/or appropriateness) of revealing or omitting certain aspects of the self in order to make desired impressions and to avoid undesired impressions.^{2,4,5} For example, American football players, who are the focus of this investigation, may be disinclined to discuss the seriousness of an injury to the coach, for fear the coach may question their

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Peer review under responsibility of Shanghai University of Sport



commitment, willingness, and desire to realize performance goals.

Previous research has shown that athletes are often concerned with the impressions they make on others.^{6,7} Such concerns are entirely understandable given that athletes' mental toughness, drive, dedication and commitment are typically judged based on their athletic performances. During competition, athletes risk projecting images of being unskilled, incompetent, unfit, unprepared, and unable to handle pressure.² Skillful management of these impressions in positive ways is therefore entirely appropriate (and even necessary), given that judgments from coaches, teammates, fans, and the media may have relevance for important athlete outcomes such as team selection, playing time, or receipt of scholarships.²

Not surprisingly, the desire to achieve favorable self-presentational goals may exert considerable influence on athletes' cognitions, emotions and behaviors as they pursue athletic aspirations.⁷⁻⁹ Self-presentational concerns have, for instance, been associated with debilitating cognitions and emotions, namely, cognitive and somatic anxiety.^{6,8-11} For example, Mesagno et al.⁹ found that basketball players with high self-presentational concern (i.e., fear of negative evaluation) displayed a significant increase in anxiety and a significant decrease in performance across low- to high-pressure experimental conditions. Additionally, impression management motives and concerns have been associated with self-handicapping statements and behaviors such as claims of injury, personal problems, and spending less time practicing before an athletic competition.⁷ Finally, self-presentational concerns have been shown to initiate athlete risk behaviors such as playing through pain and injury to avoid being perceived as mentally weak¹² and disordered-eating behaviors aimed at maintaining an appealing body shape.¹³

Of particular relevance to this investigation is the influence of self-presentation concerns on athlete emotions. A wealth of evidence indicates that the emotions experienced prior to and during an athletic event may have substantial consequences for athletic performance and enjoyment.¹⁴⁻¹⁶ For instance, Woodman et al.¹⁵ found that hope yielded faster soccer-related reaction times in soccer players while anger was associated with greater gross muscular peak force performance. Similarly, Robazza and Bortoli¹⁴ found that Italian rugby players ($n = 197$) interpreted their anger symptoms as facilitating their sport performance.

Despite the evident influence of emotions on sport performance as well as the pervasive influence of self-presentational concerns, much of the self-presentational research has examined the influence of such concerns among adult athletes.¹⁷ Comparatively fewer studies have investigated self-presentational concerns among adolescents,^{10,18,19} with the majority of studies focusing almost exclusively on social physique anxiety (i.e., concerns about negative physical appearance evaluations; Niven et al.²⁰). For example, among early adolescent girls, Niven et al.²⁰ examined the influence of maturation on social physique anxiety and the relationship between social physique anxiety and current and future physical activity levels. A

number of other self-presentational concerns, such as worries about appearing incompetent or lacking in composure, may be particularly salient among adolescents.

Adolescence is a time in which self-perceptions, emotions, motivations, and self-regulation skills are continually evolving and in flux.²¹ During adolescence, the impetus to present desired images of oneself may be prominent as youth attempt to ingratiate themselves with peers, to develop their identity, and to demonstrate personal competencies.²² Within the sport context, youth may be particularly concerned about projecting desirable impressions for others as they seek out positive evaluations from coaches, parents, and mentors.^{23,24} Understanding the influence of self-presentational concerns on the adolescent sport experience is relevant for coaches, managers, and parents who are concerned with diminishing youth concerns, facilitating positive sport-related mental states, improving performance, and enhancing the overall athletic experience.

Given that self-presentational concerns impact athletes' cognitions, emotions and behaviors, and the abundance of research highlighting the influence of emotions on athletic performance,¹⁵ understanding the influence of self-presentational concerns on adolescent athlete affective states is of practical and theoretical value. In particular, examining the influence of self-presentational concerns on athlete emotions prior to the initiation of a competitive performance is important because pre-game emotions likely influence actual performance.^{14,15} Therefore, the purpose of this investigation was to examine the relationship between self-presentational concerns and pre-game mental states among middle and high school aged football players. Specifically, the aim of this study was to examine whether self-presentation concerns based on perceived mental composure inadequacies, fatigue/lacking energy, physical appearance, and appearing athletically untalented, were associated with the following pre-game psychological states: attentiveness, self-assurance, serenity, and fear.

Attentiveness refers to the notion of being alert, concentrated or focused, and is important in contact sports like football because players must be attentive to a variety of stimuli that have implications for their performance and physical safety.^{25,26} Inattention or a focus on irrelevant cues may increase the risk of football injury.²⁵ Self-assurance encompasses the idea of being proud, confident, bold, and fearless and is essential for football performance, considering the necessity of not being intimidated by opponents and the need to execute game plans and strategies under time constraints.²⁷ Confidence in one's physical strengths and abilities is also essential for competitive success in football. Serenity is reflected in feelings of calmness, relaxation and being at ease which are required to effectively make decisions in an aggressive football environment.²⁸ Finally, fear relates to the notion of being afraid or frightened and has been shown to manifest itself among football players.²⁹ Given previous research highlighting the relevance of these four psychological states in football (or contact sport more generally), and previous research indicating the experience of such states

during adolescent sport involvement,^{30–32} it is appropriate to examine their pre-game occurrence.

It is hypothesized that higher levels of self-presentational concerns will be predictive of decreased attentiveness, self-assurance, and serenity and increased fear. Whereas previous research examining the influence of self-presentational concerns has been largely cross-sectional,¹⁷ a prospective design was adopted in the present study. Such a design was important as it enabled a linear examination of the influence of pre-existing concerns on mental states immediately prior to the initiation of a competitive contest.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

A total of 112 male adolescent football players competing at the middle and high school level (i.e., grades 7–12) participated in this study. Participants ranged from 12 to 18 years of age (15.57 ± 2.90 years; mean \pm SD), had been competing in football for 9.5 ± 4.6 years, and self-reported an average of 15 h/week spent in training. Participants were from a single school district in the West Texas area. From a contextual standpoint, it is important to note that football in West Texas is a highly valued activity and that many people in the community from which the school samples were drawn were avid supporters of the sport.

2.2. Instruments

2.2.1. Adapted self-presentation in sport questionnaire (SPSQ)

An adapted version of McGowan et al.³³ 21-item scale was used to assess football players' dispositional self-presentational concerns. The scale includes four subscales: concerns about appearing athletically untalented (AAU, 6 items; $\alpha = 0.90$); physical appearance (PA, 5 items; $\alpha = 0.87$); appearing fatigued/lacking energy (FLE, 4 items; $\alpha = 0.86$); and mental composure inadequacies (MCI, 6 items; $\alpha = 0.87$). All items were measured on a 5-point continuous scale with anchor statements ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). A statement stem "While playing football, I worry that other people such as my coaches, parents, and teammates will perceive me as appearing..." prefaced items from each subscale.

To ascertain adolescent athletes' level of self-presentational concern (as opposed to adult athletes), several word substitutions and item amendments were made to ensure adolescent comprehension of the adult validated scale.³³ These changes are highlighted in Table 1 (see comment in the note). Given the item amendments and the fact that the self-presentation in sport questionnaire was being used for the first time with adolescent athletes, further validation efforts were undertaken using principal component factor analytic procedures.^{34,35} Principal component factor analysis with direct oblimin rotation revealed four interpretable factors with an eigenvalue greater than one. In the first exploratory factor analysis (EFA),

however, one athletically untalented item cross-loaded on the MCI factor (i.e., exhibited a loading of 0.35 or higher on both factors; Tabachnick and Fidell³⁶); one MCI item cross-loaded on the FLE factor; and one MCI item scale cross-loaded on the FLE factor. In addition, one PA item did not have a minimal factor loading requirement of 0.32 on any factor. Consequently, the four items were eliminated and a second EFA was conducted. In the second EFA, a single PA item cross-loaded on the MCI factor. Thus, a third and final EFA was conducted. As indicated in Table 1, this final EFA revealed four distinct and interpretable factors with an eigenvalue greater than one. These factors were consistent with the four dimensions in the adult validated version by McGowan et al.³³ (i.e., appearing athletically untalented, fatigue/lacking in energy, physical appearance and mental composure inadequacies) and accounted altogether for 70.2% of the total variance. On factor one, the five athletically untalented items accounted for 44.5% of the variance. On factor two, the four fatigue/lacking energy items accounted for 10.6% of the variance. On the third factor, the three physical appearance items accounted for 7.8% of the variance. And finally, the four mental composure inadequacy items on factor four accounted for 7.3% of the variance. As shown in Table 1, Cronbach's α coefficients for the revised subscales indicated acceptable levels of internal consistency.

2.2.2. The positive and negative affective schedule (PANAS-X)³⁷

PANAS-X is a 60-item measure of general positive and negative affect as well as the following 11 specific affects that are scored based on combinations of the 60 items: fear, sadness, guilt, hostility, shyness, fatigue, surprise, joviality, self-assurance, attentiveness, and serenity. For the present investigation, fear (afraid, scared, frightened, nervous, jittery, shaky; $\alpha = 0.73$); self-assurance (proud, strong, confident, bold, daring, fearless; $\alpha = 0.72$); serenity (calm, relaxed, at ease; $\alpha = 0.72$); and attentiveness (alert, attentive, concentrating, determined; $\alpha = 0.63$) were measured. As indicated, these affective mental states were selected on the basis of previous research highlighting their importance in contact sport and their demonstrated relevance among youth athletes. Items were measured on a 5-point continuous scale with anchor statements ranging from 1 (*very slightly or not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). The statement stem "please circle your 'right now' feelings about today's game" prefaced the items. Previous sport research using the PANAS-X with an adolescent sample demonstrated good psychometric properties.³⁸

2.3. Procedures

After approval of the study from the Institutional Review Board, coaches from the two participating schools were sent a copy of the adolescent and parental consent form as well as an information sheet outlining the study purposes and details of their involvement. The coaches asked willing participants to have their parents complete the parental consent form so that questionnaire administration could be completed during the initial face-to-face meeting between participants and the

Table 1
Pattern matrix and α coefficients of the final solution of the 4-factor direct oblimin rotation of the self-presentation in sport questionnaire (SPSQ).

Response item	Factor			
	1	2	3	4
While playing football, I worry that other people such as my coaches, parents, and teammates will perceive me as appearing...				
1 Appearing athletically untalented (5 items)				
Underskilled	0.86	0.04	0.04	0.01
Unable to perform or execute perfectly (not to perform or execute perfectly)	0.86	0.03	-0.12	0.00
To lack ability	0.80	0.13	0.01	-0.05
Athletically incapable (athletically incompetent)	0.74	-0.08	0.04	0.06
Unqualified	0.63	-0.13	0.26	0.28
2 Fatigue/lacking energy (4 items)				
Exhausted	-0.07	0.88	0.05	0.01
Tired	-0.04	0.86	-0.06	0.16
Worn out (fatigued)	0.16	0.72	0.23	-0.08
To lack energy	0.28	0.67	0.01	0.08
3 Physical appearance (3 items)				
Ugly or unpleasant in my uniform	0.04	-0.13	0.87	0.04
Flabby	-0.12	0.11	0.76	0.13
To lack in strength (untoned)	0.16	0.23	0.63	-0.17
4 Mental composure inadequacies (4 items)				
Nervous under pressure	0.02	-0.14	0.05	0.80
To lack necessary focus	0.08	0.22	-0.11	0.77
Unfocussed	0.01	0.19	0.06	0.67
Worried (distressed)	0.24	0.12	0.25	0.44
α coefficient	0.88	0.88	0.72	0.79
Item-total correlation range	0.44-0.72	0.63-0.67	0.42-0.52	0.36-0.59

Note: Figures in boldface indicate a pattern-matrix loading greater than 0.32. Items appearing in parentheses are the original items from the SPSQ.³³ All other items remain unchanged.

first and the second authors. During this initial meeting, participants were given a verbal account of the study purposes (i.e., “to examine your sport concerns and pre-game mental states”) and were assured that all responses would be kept confidential. They were also provided with a standardized set of instructions regarding questionnaire completion and asked to complete a demographic questionnaire as well as the SPSQ. These questionnaires were administered by the first and second authors at the two schools’ training facilities. The PANAS-X was subsequently administered a week later, at a team meeting 1 h prior to the commencement of a game against an intra-conference rival. The questionnaires were administered at different time points in order to gain a time sensitive perspective in determining the predictive value of self-presentation concerns on pre-game mental states.

2.4. Analyses

Data analysis involved descriptive, bivariate correlational, and multiple regression examination of the study variables. In these analyses, an item average score for each self-presentation concern subscale—appearing athletically untalented, physical appearance, mental composure inadequacies, and fatigue/lacking in energy—was created. The SPSQ subscales were then correlated with the four emotion subscales (i.e., attentiveness, self-assurance, serenity, and fear). These correlations provided an indication of the strength and direction of

the relationships between self-presentational concerns and pre-game mental states. Finally, standard multiple regression analyses were employed to evaluate the unique contributions of each self-presentational concern in predicting specific pre-game mental states. SPSS version 19 (SPSS, Inc., Chicago, IL, USA) was used to analyze the data. Significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations

Descriptive statistics and correlations for all study variables are presented in Table 2.

Mean scores for the four self-presentational concerns were all below the mid-point on the 5-points continuous scale. More adolescent football players were concerned about appearing athletically untalented and being mentally composed the less attentive and self assured they were directly prior to competing. The other self-presentational concerns were unrelated to affect.

3.2. Multiple regression analyses

Standard multiple regressions with the pre-game affective states as the dependent variables and self-presentation concerns as independent variables were conducted. Stevens³⁹

Table 2
Correlations among and descriptive statistics of self-presentation concerns and pre-game mental states.

Study variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Self-presentation subscales								
1 Appearing athletically untalented	—							
2 Physical appearance	0.50**	—						
3 Mental composure inadequacies	0.61**	0.46**	—					
4 Fatigue/Lacking in energy	0.51**	0.50**	0.53**	—				
Mental states								
5 Attentiveness	-0.45**	-0.18	-0.35**	-0.16	—			
6 Self-assurance	-0.36**	-0.13	-0.27**	-0.11	0.69**	—		
7 Serenity	-0.04	0.04	-0.08	-0.01	0.32**	0.45**	—	
8 Fear	0.13	0.07	0.12	0.17	-0.24**	-0.20*	-0.43**	—
Mean (<i>n</i> = 112)	1.98	1.61	1.96	2.07	3.89	3.79	3.31	1.67
SD	0.78	0.67	0.71	0.75	0.72	0.77	0.98	0.62
Range	1.0–4.6	1.0–4.0	1.0–4.0	1.0–4.0	1.0–5.0	1.0–5.0	1.0–5.0	1.0–3.7

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

recommends a nominal number of 15 cases per predictor for multiple regression analyses. Thus, our sample size of 112 participants was deemed sufficient. To test for multicollinearity, the collinearity diagnostics of variance inflation factor (VIF) and tolerance were examined.⁴⁰ Based on Myers⁴¹ and Menard⁴² suggested values for VIF or tolerance, neither the VIF (range 0.54–0.65) nor the tolerance statistic (range 1.52–1.84) indicated the potential for multicollinearity to affect the results. Regression analyses revealed that concerns about appearing athletically untalented negatively contributed to the significant prediction of pre-game attentiveness ($\beta = -0.43$, $t = -3.66$, $R^2_{\text{adj}} = 19.5\%$ ($p < 0.001$)), and self-assurance ($\beta = -0.38$, $t = -3.09$, $R^2_{\text{adj}} = 11.9\%$ ($p < 0.01$)). The results for the regression analyses for the serenity and fear dependent variables failed to reveal any significant predictors.

4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine whether self-presentational concerns were predictive of various pre-game psychological states among adolescent football players. In contrast with previous research,²⁰ football players reported low levels of self-presentational concerns across each of the four self-presentation dimensions. Niven et al.²⁰ reported mean self-presentation scores above the mid-point on the 5-point likert scale with scores increasing from early to late adolescence. One possible explanation for our contradictory finding is that Niven et al.²⁰ examined social physique anxiety among adolescent females. Self-presentation concerns in the form of social physique anxiety may be a preoccupation of increasing salience as females move from early to late adolescence and become more aware of social pressures to appear thin and petite. Conversely, adolescent males may not give similar consideration to self-presentation concerns such as how their actions are perceived by others. Developmental research indicates that adolescent males are typically egocentric and self-centered.⁴³ As self-presentational concerns are cognitively developed concerns that increase as brain

development occurs, it is understandable that males in the present study reported low levels of self-presentational concern. Alternatively, low self-presentational scores may have been in evidence, given social desirability concerns about reporting concerns of a self-presentational nature. Despite reassurances that responses were completely confidential, it seems reasonable that adolescent male athletes might not wish to appear “weak” or concerned about how they appear in the eyes of others. Future research should include social desirability measures when conducting self-presentational research. Along these lines, it may be that the culture of American football, particularly in a smaller community where “football is king”, precludes the possibility of expressing concerns that run contrary to a performance ethos emphasizing toughness, invincibility, and dominance over one’s competitors.

In relation to our hypothesis that higher levels of self-presentational concerns would be predictive of decreased attentiveness, self-assurance, and serenity and increased fear, support was found. In particular, worries about appearing athletically untalented and mental composure inadequacies were associated with diminished pre-game attentiveness. These findings are consistent with those of Lorimer⁶ who found that self-presentational concerns about performance/composure inadequacy were the largest predictor of competitive anxiety, including concentration disruption. Given the recognized importance of attentiveness to athletic performance,^{44–46} reducing self-presentation concerns seems important for coaches and others to comprehend. From a practical standpoint, the alleviation of concerns about appearing athletically incompetent or lacking in mental composure could be addressed in a number of ways. For example, imagery and goal-setting techniques focusing on task-related skills during training or match situations might be implemented to help reduce such concerns. Moreover, meeting with athletes and discussing the intrinsic reasons for their sport involvement (e.g., love of the game, camaraderie of team involvement) may help diminish a focus on self-presentational concerns.⁴⁷

Further research examining the effectiveness of these and other strategies in minimizing impression management worries among adolescent athletes is needed.

Results from this investigation also revealed that concerns about appearing athletically untalented and lacking in mental composure were associated with decreased self-assurance (i.e., self-confidence). This finding is consistent with previous investigations highlighting the association between self-presentation concerns and potentially damaging consequences such as self-handicapping,^{7,48} unhealthy risk behaviors,^{49,50} and competitive anxiety.^{6,8–11,51} Understanding the factors associated with adolescent athlete self-assurance is particularly important because, like attentiveness, self-assurance is one of the most consistent predictors of athletic performance and sport enjoyment.^{16,52–55} Factors shown to be negatively associated with athletes' self-assurance are therefore likely to negatively impact upon athletes' on-field performance and satisfaction. This study adds to the youth sport literature by revealing that concerns about looking incompetent may be of particular relevance in diminishing adolescents' pre-competitive self-assurance levels. Further research using different athlete populations (e.g., females, non-contact sports, non-western samples) and larger sample sizes are needed to confirm these findings.

In contrast with our hypotheses, none of the self-presentational concerns were predictive of decreased serenity or heightened fear. One possible explanation for the non-significant findings for serenity is that athletes may experience self-presentational concerns yet still feel a sense of calm or ease given perceptions of control over salient performance issues. For example, it seems reasonable that an American football player may experience concerns about appearing fatigued or lacking in energy yet still feel efficacious with respect to his ability to make clear and calm decisions under pressure. Indeed, this explanation is plausible given the relatively high levels of pre-game self-assurance reported by participants in this sample. Further research examining the possibility of experiencing facilitative pre-game mental states despite the existence of self-presentational concerns would be a valuable area for future inquiry.

With regard to the lack of association between self-presentation concerns and fear, it is possible that the experience of pre-game fear was grounded in concerns of a non self-presentational nature not measured in the current study. For example, recent research has shown fear to be a multidimensional construct comprised of a number of different elements not assessed in the present investigation, including fear of performance failure, fear of injury or physical danger, fear of the unknown, and fear of negative evaluation.^{9,29,56} Although Dunn and Syrotuik²⁹ found that concerns about negative social evaluation were apparent among Canadian adolescent football players, the strongest predictor of state anxiety was fear of the unknown. Hence, findings from the present investigation and those of Dunn and Syrotuik,²⁹ suggest that self-presentational worries may be less salient in the generation of adolescent pre-competitive fear and anxiety than other types of concerns. Further research

examining the correlates of fear emotions among youth football players is warranted.

This study adds to the self-presentational and youth sport literature by prospectively demonstrating the detrimental consequences of self-presentational concerns on adolescent pre-game attentiveness and self-assurance—two critical psychological factors influencing athletic performance and sport enjoyment.^{16,44,45,52} Despite this advancement of the literature, a number of limitations and areas for future research, in addition to those mentioned, exist. First, this investigation examined the relationship between self-presentational concerns and pre-game mental states. We did not, however, examine the influence of pre-game mental states on actual performance outcomes. Given the abundance of research indicating a relationship between psychological mind states and objective/subjective performance measures,^{16,53–55} it would be interesting to determine whether mental states (such as those examined in this study) mediate the relationship between self-presentational concerns and various performance outcomes. To this end, researchers are encouraged to pursue prospective investigations spanning the course of athletes' competitive season. Second, given the male sample used in this study, it remains unclear whether the findings are generalizable to a female adolescent population. Examining the influence of self-presentational concerns on athlete mental states using male and female populations, a variety of sports, and various competition levels, remains a fruitful area for further research. Along these lines, investigations exploring whether gender moderates the strength of the self-presentation/pre-game mental state relationship would further knowledge in this area. Third, given that self-presentation concerns were negatively associated with positive pre-game mind sets (i.e., attentiveness and self-assurance) and positively (although not significantly) associated with fear, researchers are encouraged to pursue experimental investigations examining the influence of psychological skill training interventions in diminishing self-presentational concerns. As indicated above, imagery and goal setting training focusing on mastery and task performance might be beneficial in reducing adolescent self-presentation concerns and enhancing facilitative pre-game mind sets. Fourth, although we have pointed to a number of detrimental consequences of self-presentation concerns, it seems possible that a certain degree of self-presentational concern may be beneficial for athlete performance. For example, having some concern regarding how one is perceived by relevant others (e.g., coaches) may enhance motivation to continue practicing and improving skills. Further research examining potential positive consequences of self-presentational motives would be beneficial.

5. Conclusion

In summary, this study examined the relationship between self-presentational concerns and pre-game mental states. Results of this investigation provided some support for the contention that self-presentational concerns would predict pre-game affective states. In particular, concerns about

appearing athletically untalented and mental composure inadequacies were negatively associated with attentiveness and self-assurance. Results give credence to the suggestion that coaches, managers and those in mentoring roles should aim to reduce self-presentational concerns in an attempt to foster positive pre-game mind-sets. The findings also suggest that further investigations examining the influence of self-presentation concerns on the adolescent sport experience is warranted.

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