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Fear of failure as a multidimensional predictor of motivational quality in team sport student-athletes

El miedo al fracaso como predictor multidimensional de la calidad de la motivación en estudiantes-atletas de deportes de equipo

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Abstract

Fear of failure is a pervasive psychological pressure in competitive sport, yet its influence on the quality of motivation among student-athletes in team sports remains insufficiently clarified. Grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT), this study examined whether fear of failure functions as an adaptive or maladaptive correlate of motivational regulation among university student-athletes engaged in team sports. A total of 421 student-athletes completed validated measures of fear of failure and sport motivation. Confirmatory factor analyses supported the multidimensional structure of fear of failure and the two-factor model of autonomous and controlled motivation. Bivariate and multiple regression analyses revealed that fear of failure was negatively associated with both autonomous and controlled motivation. Although the association with autonomous motivation was statistically significant, its practical effect was minimal. In contrast, fear of failure demonstrated a stronger negative relationship with controlled motivation. Socially evaluative fears, particularly concerns related to shame and interpersonal disappointment, emerged as the most influential predictors. These findings suggest that elevated fear of failure may operate as a broader motivational inhibitor rather than a pressure-driven catalyst within team sport contexts. The results underscore the importance of autonomy-supportive and psychologically safe environments in sustaining adaptive motivational regulation among student-athletes.

Keywords: fear of failure; sport motivation; student-athletes; team sports; self-determination theory

Resumen: El miedo al fracaso constituye una presión psicológica persistente en el deporte competitivo; sin embargo, su influencia en la calidad de la motivación entre estudiantes-atletas que participan en deportes de equipo continúa siendo insuficientemente esclarecida. Fundamentado en la Teoría de la Autodeterminación (TAD), este estudio examinó si el miedo al fracaso funciona como un correlato adaptativo o maladaptativo de la regulación motivacional en estudiantes-atletas universitarios involucrados en deportes de equipo. Un total de 421 estudiantes-atletas completaron instrumentos validados para evaluar el miedo al fracaso y la motivación deportiva. Los análisis factoriales confirmatorios respaldaron la estructura multidimensional del miedo al fracaso y el modelo bifactorial de motivación autónoma y controlada. Los análisis de correlación bivariada y regresión múltiple revelaron que el miedo al fracaso se asoció negativamente tanto con la motivación autónoma como con la motivación controlada. Aunque la asociación con la motivación autónoma fue estadísticamente significativa, su magnitud práctica fue mínima. En contraste, el miedo al fracaso mostró una relación negativa más consistente con la motivación controlada. Los miedos de carácter social, especialmente aquellos vinculados con la vergüenza y la decepción interpersonal, emergieron como los predictores más influyentes. Estos hallazgos sugieren que niveles elevados de miedo al fracaso pueden operar como un inhibidor motivacional general más que como un catalizador basado en la presión dentro de contextos deportivos de equipo. Los resultados subrayan la importancia de entornos autónomo-apoyadores y psicológicamente seguros para sostener una regulación motivacional adaptativa en estudiantes-atletas.

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Palabras clave: miedo al fracaso; motivación deportiva; estudiantes-atletas; deportes de equipo; teoría de la autodeterminación

Introduction

Motivation plays a central role in sustaining athletic effort, persistence, and performance. However, increasing evidence suggests that student-athletes in competitive team sports are experiencing fluctuations in motivational quality, often accompanied by emotional exhaustion and inconsistent engagement (Duhaylungsod et al., 2024; Caling et al., 2025; Longakit et al., 2024). While various contextual and psychological factors contribute to these patterns, fear-based pressures remain comparatively underexamined, particularly within team sport environments.

Most existing sport psychology research has addressed fear of failure across diverse sport types, frequently generalizing findings without accounting for the unique dynamics of team sports. In team contexts characterized by shared responsibility, role interdependence, and public evaluation, fear-related appraisals may operate differently than in individual sports. Despite this, limited research has specifically examined how fear of failure shapes the quality of motivation among student-athletes in team-based settings. This gap highlights the need for a sport-specific, theory-driven investigation into how fear of failure influences motivational regulation within socially evaluative team environments.

Although multiple factors contribute to motivational deterioration, psychological stressors such as fear of failure have been extensively documented in sport contexts, particularly in relation to stress, burnout, and performance outcomes (Gustafsson et al., 2017; Conroy, 2001). Beyond these outcomes, growing attention has been directed toward understanding how fear-related appraisals relate to athletes' motivational processes. Emerging evidence suggests that perceptions of failure are shaped less by objective performance itself and more by the extent to which athletes' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are satisfied or frustrated (Silveira Torregrosa & Moreno Murcia, 2015). From a self-determination theory perspective, fear of failure may therefore function not merely as an emotional stress response but as a regulatory mechanism that influences the quality of motivation. When psychological

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needs are thwarted, fear-based appraisals may shift motivation toward more controlled and pressure-driven forms. Thus, while fear of failure has been examined extensively in relation to performance and anxiety, its specific role in shaping autonomous versus controlled motivation among student-athletes in team sports warrants further clarification.

Fear of Failure in Team Sport Contexts (Revised Version)

Fear of failure is widely recognized as a multidimensional construct that shapes athletes' emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses in high-pressure environments (Taylor et al., 2021; Sánchez-Romero et al., 2021). In team sports, athletes are evaluated not only by coaches and spectators but also by teammates whose outcomes are interdependent (Zuckerman et al., 2020; Trotter et al., 2021). This collective accountability may intensify fear-based appraisals, particularly during visible errors or decisive moments in competition (Wasserfurth et al., 2020). Empirical research consistently links fear of failure to avoidance tendencies, heightened anxiety, maladaptive perfectionism, and reduced motivational quality (Saraiva et al., 2024; Gómez-López et al., 2025). Athletes anticipating negative evaluation often demonstrate reduced initiative and risk-taking behaviors (González-Hernández et al., 2023; Gómez-López et al., 2020). In team settings, where mistakes may compromise collective outcomes, socially evaluative fears—such as disappointing significant others or losing relational approval—may become particularly salient (Gómez-López et al., 2024; Jordana et al., 2022).

Despite these associations, the motivational implications of fear of failure remain contested. Some studies suggest that fear may temporarily enhance effort and attentional focus (Yıldırım et al., 2023; Hu et al., 2023). However, much of this literature emphasizes performance indicators rather than examining how fear influences the quality of motivational regulation. Whether fear fosters autonomous engagement or reinforces controlled, pressure-driven motivation remains insufficiently clarified, especially within team sport environments characterized by social evaluation and shared responsibility.

Importantly, athletes' responses to fear are shaped by contextual conditions. Research indicates that the satisfaction of basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—is negatively associated with fear of failure (Hu et al., 2023; González-Hernández et al., 2023; Cen et al., 2025). Autonomy-supportive climates emphasizing personal development rather than excessive comparison have been shown to buffer fear-

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based effects (Birr et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2025). Similarly, supportive coaching behaviors contribute to psychological safety and resilience (Jin et al., 2022; López de Subijana et al., 2021). These findings suggest that fear of failure does not operate uniformly but may function as either a temporary motivational stimulant or a psychological liability depending on environmental conditions.

Fear of failure is not restricted to elite athletes. Recreational and non-elite team sport participants, who often engage for enjoyment or social affiliation, are also vulnerable to fear-based disruptions in motivation (Yang et al., 2025; Melguizo-Ibáñez et al., 2022). Without structured psychological support, such athletes may experience reduced enjoyment, disengagement, and eventual withdrawal from sport (Mesquita et al., 2024; Eliasson & Johansson, 2020). Even among student-athletes, resilience varies, and repeated setbacks without adequate support may lead to prolonged motivational decline (Popovych et al., 2022; Shang & Yang, 2021).

Taken together, the literature underscores the complexity of fear of failure in team sport contexts but leaves unresolved how its distinct dimensions influence the quality of motivation among student-athletes. Conceptually, socially evaluative fears may be particularly salient in team sports due to the inherently relational and interdependent nature of performance. In contrast to individual sports, where failure primarily affects personal outcomes, team sports involve shared responsibility and collective evaluation, increasing the visibility of mistakes and their interpersonal consequences (González-Hernández et al., 2023; Jordana et al., 2022). Such contexts may intensify concerns related to shame and disappointing important others, as athletes are embedded within social systems where approval and acceptance may be perceived as performance-contingent (Gómez-López et al., 2024; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

From a Self-Determination Theory perspective, these socially evaluative fears are particularly potent because they simultaneously threaten competence through public inadequacy and relatedness through perceived conditional regard (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Deci & Ryan 2000). Consequently, socially oriented dimensions of fear of failure may exert stronger motivational implications in team settings characterized by high interdependence and public accountability.

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Sport Motivation Through the Lens of Self-Determination Theory

Fear of failure poses a significant challenge to athletes' psychological functioning and, consequently, to the quality of their motivation (Guo et al., 2022; González-Hernández et al., 2023). Within the framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci et al., 2001; Ryan & Deci, 2000), motivation quality depends on the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Fear-based appraisals may threaten these needs by fostering external pressure (undermining autonomy), intensifying self-doubt and performance anxiety (compromising competence), and generating concerns about judgment or conditional acceptance (weakening relatedness) (González-Hernández et al., 2023; Deci & Ryan 1985).

Empirical evidence suggests that athletes experiencing heightened fear of failure are more likely to shift from intrinsic or autonomous motivation toward more controlled forms of regulation driven by obligation, external validation, or avoidance of negative consequences (Schüler et al., 2023; Taylor et al., 2021). Although such regulation may sustain short-term effort, it is often associated with reduced enjoyment, emotional exhaustion, and increased vulnerability to disengagement over time.

These dynamics may be especially salient in team sport contexts, where performance is highly visible and responsibility is shared. In environments characterized by interdependence and public evaluation, athletes may be more prone to internalizing perceived failure and regulating behavior through pressure-based motives. Consequently, SDT-informed research emphasizes the importance of autonomy-supportive coaching practices, constructive feedback, and task-involving climates that nurture athletes' psychological needs and promote more self-determined forms of engagement (Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2021; Manuoglu, 2023; Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Despite growing evidence linking fear of failure to maladaptive motivational patterns, limited research has explicitly examined how its distinct dimensions relate to autonomous and controlled motivation among student-athletes in team sport settings. Clarifying these relationships is essential for determining whether fear operates primarily as a temporary energizer or as a sustained constraint on motivational quality.

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Aims and hypotheses of the study

Despite increasing recognition of fear of failure in sport psychology, limited research has examined how it relates to the quality of motivation among student-athletes in team sport contexts characterized by interdependence and social evaluation. Grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT), the present study investigates whether fear of failure is associated with autonomous and controlled motivation and whether its five dimensions differentially relate to overall motivational regulation.

Accordingly, the following hypotheses were tested:

H1: Fear of failure is significantly associated with autonomous motivation.

H2: Fear of failure is significantly associated with controlled motivation.

H3: The five dimensions of fear of failure are significantly associated with overall sport motivation.

Methods

Participants

The study involved student-athletes enrolled in higher education institutions in Iligan City, Philippines, during the 2024–2025 academic year. A snowball sampling strategy was employed to recruit participants who met the study's inclusion criteria. This non-probability approach was selected due to the absence of a centralized registry of active collegiate team sport athletes and the need to access individuals embedded within established team networks (Andrade, 2020). Initial participants were contacted through institutional sports coordinators and team representatives and were subsequently asked to refer eligible teammates.

While snowball sampling facilitated access to a defined athletic population, it may introduce selection bias, as participants are recruited through existing social and team networks. Consequently, the sample may not fully represent all student-athletes in Iligan City or in other regional or national contexts. Therefore, findings should be interpreted within the specific institutional and cultural setting of the study and should not be generalized beyond similar team sport populations.

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Participants were required to meet the following criteria: (a) current enrollment in their respective institution, (b) at least five years of continuous sport participation (including pre-collegiate experience), and (c) competition at a minimum of the regional level. These criteria were established to ensure that respondents possessed substantial competitive exposure and familiarity with performance-related pressures.

A total of 421 student-athletes participated in the study, consisting of 255 males (60.57%) and 166 females (39.43%), with a mean age of 21.43 years (SD = 2.34). All participants were actively engaged in organized team sports. Detailed socio-demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Sociodemographics of participants

Variables		N(%)	M ± SD	Range
Sex				
	Male	255 (60.57%)		
	Female	166 (39.43%)		
Age			21.43 ± 2.34	18-25 years
Type of Sports				
	Basketball	86 (20.43%)		
	Volleyball	89 (21.14%)		
	Sepak Takraw	51 (12.11%)		
	Football	74 (17.58%)		
	Track and field	61 (14.49%)		
	Baseball	60 (14.25%)		

Instrument

Fear of failure was assessed using the Performance Failure Appraisal Inventory (PFAI; Conroy et al., 2002), in its translated and culturally adapted version by Correia et al. (2016). The PFAI is designed to capture individuals' threat-based interpretations of failure by evaluating the extent to which athletes believe that negative consequences are likely to occur following unsuccessful performance. The instrument consists of 14 items across five subscales: fear of experiencing shame and embarrassment (e.g., "When I am failing, I am ashamed"), fear of devaluing one's self-esteem (e.g., "When I am failing, it means I am not smart"), fear of an uncertain future (e.g., "When I am failing, my future seems uncertain"), fear of important others losing interest (e.g., "When I am failing, it

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upsets important people in my life"), and fear of upsetting others. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (do not believe at all) to 5 (truly believe), with higher scores indicating greater fear of failure. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to evaluate the factorial validity of the five-factor structure of the Fear of Failure scale.

The model demonstrated an acceptable overall fit to the data, $\chi^2(25) = 94.18$, $p < .001$. Although the chi-square statistic was significant—an outcome commonly observed in large samples—and the χ^2/df ratio (3.77) was slightly above the more conservative threshold of 3.00, it remained within the broader range considered acceptable for complex psychological models. Importantly, multiple alternative fit indices indicated strong model adequacy. Incremental fit indices exceeded recommended standards (CFI = .98, TLI = .96, NFI = .97, IFI = .98, RNI = .98), all surpassing the conventional ≥ .95 criterion for good fit. Absolute fit indices likewise supported model adequacy, with SRMR = .020 well below the .08 threshold and RMSEA = .081 (90% CI [.064, .099]), reflecting acceptable approximation error given model complexity. All standardized factor loadings were statistically significant ($p < .001$) and substantial in magnitude, supporting convergent validity. Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values ranged from .63 to .88, exceeding the recommended .50 criterion, and internal consistency estimates were strong across subscales (α = .78–.94). The overall scale reliability was also high (α = .927). Collectively, these results provide robust evidence of factorial validity, convergent validity, and internal consistency, supporting the appropriateness of the five-factor PFAI structure for subsequent analyses.

Sport motivation was assessed using the Sport Motivation Scale (SMS), grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Although the original instrument measures multiple regulatory styles along the self-determination continuum, the present study adopted SDT's higher-order structure (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Slemp et al., 2020) by modeling motivation as two overarching dimensions: autonomous motivation (intrinsic and identified regulation) and controlled motivation (introjected and external regulation). This approach is consistent with SDT's emphasis on motivational quality and is appropriate when examining broad distinctions between self-determined and pressure-driven regulation (Deci & Ryan 2014).

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This 18-item instrument measures three primary constructs: autonomous motivation and controlled motivation. Responses are rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("Does not correspond at all") to 7 ("Corresponds exactly") with a higher scores indicating high level of motivation. The SMS has demonstrated satisfactory reliability across diverse cultural and athletic settings (Pereira et al., 2024; Smohai et al., 2021). A second CFA was conducted to assess the two-factor structure of motivation, representing autonomous motivation and controlled motivation. The model demonstrated an excellent fit to the data, $\chi^2(8) = 20.20$, $p < .001$, with a chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio of 5.05. Incremental fit indices exceeded recommended cut-off values (CFI = .99, TLI = .98, NFI = .99, IFI = .99, RNI = .99), indicating very strong comparative fit. Although the RMSEA value was slightly elevated (RMSEA = .098, 90% CI [.058, .142]), this index should be interpreted cautiously. RMSEA is known to be sensitive to models with low degrees of freedom and relatively simple factor structures, where values may be inflated despite acceptable overall fit.

In the present model, other fit indicators demonstrated strong adequacy. Incremental fit indices exceeded recommended thresholds (CFI = .99, TLI = .98, NFI = .99, IFI = .99, RNI = .99), and the SRMR (.016) indicated excellent residual fit, well below the .08 criterion. All standardized factor loadings were statistically significant ($p < .001$) and substantial, supporting convergent validity. Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values were .88 for autonomous motivation and .74 for controlled motivation, both exceeding the .50 threshold. Internal consistency estimates were also high ($\alpha = .93–.90$). Overall, the CFA results support the two-factor structure of motivation, indicating that autonomous and controlled motivation are empirically distinct yet strongly related constructs with adequate psychometric properties.

Data-gathering procedure

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki to ensure the protection of participants' rights, dignity, and welfare. Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout all phases of the research process.

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Participants were initially approached through institutional sports coordinators and officially recognized team representatives to identify eligible student-athletes. Consistent with the snowball sampling strategy, initial participants were invited to share the study invitation with teammates who met the inclusion criteria. To prevent potential peer pressure or coercion, the invitation clearly stated that participation was entirely voluntary, that refusal would not affect academic standing, team membership, or coach evaluation, and that coaches and team officials would not have access to individual responses. Interested participants contacted the research team independently to confirm their willingness to participate.

Prior to participation, all respondents received an informed consent form detailing the study's purpose, procedures, confidentiality safeguards, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. No incentives were provided. Participants were also informed that they could skip any question they found uncomfortable.

Data collection was facilitated by trained research assistants who underwent structured orientation prior to administration. Training included standardized instructions, confidentiality procedures, neutral communication practices, and guidelines for responding to participant questions. A written administration protocol was used to ensure consistency across sessions, and the principal investigator monitored adherence to these procedures to minimize inter-administrator variability.

All responses were collected anonymously. No personally identifiable information was recorded, and data were securely stored in password-protected electronic files accessible only to the research team. The data were used solely for the purposes of the present study.

Data Analysis

All statistical analyses were conducted using JASP (Version 0.18), with confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) performed via the Structural Equation Modeling module (lavaan-based implementation) and multiple regression conducted using the linear regression module. Prior to regression, assumptions were examined: residual normality ($|skew| < 2$; $|kurtosis| < 7$), linearity and homoscedasticity (via residual plots), and multicollinearity ($VIF < 5$), all of which indicated no serious violations. PFAI subscale and total scores were computed by summing items, whereas autonomous and

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controlled motivation scores from the SMS were calculated by averaging their respective subscales. CFA supported the factorial validity of both instruments. Although the RMSEA for the SMS two-factor model was slightly elevated (RMSEA = .098), incremental fit indices exceeded recommended thresholds and SRMR indicated excellent residual fit, supporting overall model adequacy. Convergent validity was confirmed (AVE > .50), and discriminant validity was established using the Fornell–Larcker criterion (Hair et al., 2012).. Bivariate correlations were examined prior to regression; predictor inclusion was theory-driven, and demographic variables were excluded as controls due to non-significant associations. Missing data were minimal (< 2%) and handled via listwise deletion. An a priori power analysis ($\alpha = .05$, power = .80, $f^2 = .15$) indicated a minimum required sample of 92, and the final sample (N = 421) provided adequate statistical power.

Results

As presented in Table 2, bivariate correlations were conducted to examine associations among fear of failure dimensions and motivational regulation. Results indicated that overall fear of failure and its subdimensions were negatively associated with both autonomous and controlled motivation. The associations with autonomous motivation were weak and largely nonsignificant (rs = −.04 to −.09), suggesting minimal practical relevance. These findings indicate that fear of failure does not meaningfully predict autonomous engagement in this sample.

Interestingly, fear of failure demonstrated moderate negative correlations with controlled motivation (rs = −.30 to −.41). Although controlled motivation is theoretically characterized by pressure-driven regulation, these findings suggest that elevated fear of failure may not necessarily intensify controlled motivation but may instead reflect broader motivational undermining. In highly evaluative team sport contexts, excessive fear may exceed adaptive pressure and instead contribute to psychological withdrawal, diminished perceived competence, and reduced regulatory energy. Rather than energizing pressure-based striving, heightened fear may disrupt both self-determined and controlled forms of engagement, resulting in overall motivational attenuation. This interpretation

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aligns with research suggesting that when threat appraisals become overwhelming, they may impair rather than stimulate regulatory functioning.

Autonomous and controlled motivation were moderately positively correlated (r = .57), consistent with prior SDT research demonstrating that these constructs, while theoretically distinct, can coexist within individuals. Variance inflation diagnostics conducted in subsequent regression analyses indicated that multicollinearity was not problematic, supporting the empirical distinction between the constructs despite their moderate association.

Table 2

Intercorrelation among constructs

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. FoF-Shame							
2. FoF-Self Estimate	.65***						
3. FoF-Uncertain	.58***	.73***					
4. FoF-Interest	.53***	.60***	.56***				
5. FoF-Upset	.54***	.60***	.66***	.69***			
6. Autonomy	-.24***	-.13**	-.09	-.04	-.06		
7. Controlled	-.32***	-.36**	-.30**	-.33	-.41***	.57***	
M	2.926	3.150	3.411	3.244	3.324	5.344	5.204
SD	1.054	1.103	1.217	1.050	1.087	1.221	1.140

Note: FoF – Fear of Failure Correlations are significant at the * p <.05, **p<.001, ***<.001 level

As presented in Table 3, multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine whether overall fear of failure predicted autonomous and controlled motivation. For autonomous motivation, fear of failure emerged as a statistically significant negative predictor, $\beta = -.14$, $p < .01$. However, the model accounted for only 1.9% of the variance ($R^2 = .019$), indicating a very small effect size ($f^2 = .02$). Although statistically significant, the practical impact of fear of failure on autonomous motivation appears limited. This finding suggests that fear-based appraisals are only weakly associated with reductions in self-determined engagement among student-athletes.

In contrast, fear of failure demonstrated a stronger negative association with controlled motivation, $\beta = -.41$, $p < .001$, explaining 16.8% of the variance ($R^2 = .168$; $f^2 = .20$, moderate effect). Contrary to traditional assumptions within Self-Determination Theory (SDT) that fear may intensify pressure-driven regulation, the present findings indicate that elevated fear of failure was associated with *lower* levels of controlled

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motivation. This pattern suggests that excessive fear may function as a broader motivational inhibitor rather than amplifying externally regulated striving. In highly evaluative team sport contexts, intense fear may undermine perceived competence and regulatory energy, thereby diminishing both autonomous and controlled forms of motivation. Given the cross-sectional design, these findings should be interpreted as associative rather than causal.

Table 3

Multiple Regression Predicting Sport Motivation

Predictor	B	SE	t	95% CI	p	f^2
Model 1 : Autonomous Motivation						
Fear of Failure (Total)	−.14	.05	−2.81	[−.24, −.05]	p < .01	.02
R^2 = .019						
VIF = 1.00						
Model 2: Controlled Motivation						
Fear of Failure (Total)	−.41	.04	−9.87	[−.49, −.33]	p < .001	.20
R^2 = .168						
VIF = 1.00						

Table 4 presents the regression analyses examining the predictive effects of the five fear of failure subdimensions on motivation. All five dimensions significantly and negatively predicted motivation (all ps < .001), indicating that higher levels of fear-related appraisals were consistently associated with lower motivational regulation.

Among the predictors, fear of shame and embarrassment emerged as the strongest negative predictor (β = −.34), followed by fear of devaluing self-estimate (β = −.33) and fear of upsetting important others (β = −.31). Fear of an uncertain future (β = −.27) and fear of important others losing interest (β = −.26) demonstrated comparatively smaller, yet still significant, effects. These findings indicate that socially evaluative fears—particularly those involving shame and interpersonal disappointment—exert the most substantial influence on motivational regulation within team sport environments.

The uniformly negative regression coefficients reinforce the interpretation that fear of failure operates as a maladaptive motivational correlate in this sample. Rather than strengthening controlled motivation through pressure-based striving, higher fear levels were associated with reduced motivational regulation overall. This pattern may reflect motivational attenuation when fear becomes overwhelming, consistent with SDT's

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assertion that psychological need frustration undermines both intrinsic and extrinsic regulatory processes.

Table 4

Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Motivation from Fear of Failure Subdimensions

Regression weights	*B*	R^2	*t*-value	*p*-value	95% CI LL - UL
FoF-Shame → M	-.344	.118	-7.494	<.001	-.467 - -.273
FoF-Self Estimate → M	-.329	.108	-7.129	<.001	-.430 - -.244
FoF-Uncertain → M	-.272	.074	-5.785	<.001	-.349 - -.172
FoF-Interest → M	-.256	.065	-5.417	<.001	-.365 - -.171
FoF-Upset → M	-.309	.095	-6.647	<.001	-.421 - -.229

Note: FoF – Fear of Failure; M – Motivation

Discussions

This study examined how fear of failure relates to motivational regulation among student-athletes in team sports within the framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT). The findings suggest that fear of failure is more closely associated with motivational attenuation than motivational intensification. Rather than shifting athletes toward pressure-driven striving, heightened fear appeared to correspond with reduced overall motivational regulation. This pattern challenges the common assumption that fear necessarily energizes externally regulated engagement.

Within SDT, motivation quality depends on the satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Fear of failure, particularly when rooted in socially evaluative concerns, may threaten these needs simultaneously. In team sport contexts where performance is highly visible and outcomes are interdependent (Zuckerman et al., 2020; Trotter et al., 2021), fear of public inadequacy may intensify concerns about relational standing and perceived competence. When athletes anticipate embarrassment or interpersonal disappointment, their regulatory focus may shift from growth and mastery toward threat management. However, rather than consistently strengthening controlled regulation, excessive fear may disrupt motivational stability altogether.

Importantly, the findings do not suggest that fear uniformly eliminates autonomous motivation. Internalized motives such as enjoyment, commitment, or

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personal values may remain relatively resilient in the presence of evaluative pressure. Prior research indicates that autonomous motivation can coexist with stressors when athletes perceive some degree of psychological support (González-Hernández et al., 2021; Cen et al., 2025;). Thus, fear of failure may not automatically dismantle self-determined engagement, but its influence appears more disruptive when it becomes pervasive or socially threatening.

Among the dimensions of fear of failure, socially evaluative fears—particularly concerns about shame and embarrassment—emerged as especially salient. These fears directly implicate competence and relatedness needs (Gómez-López et al., 2020; Valero-valenzuela et al., 2024). In team sports, where mistakes affect collective outcomes, the interpersonal visibility of failure may amplify such concerns. This aligns with research linking shame-proneness and perfectionistic self-evaluation to emotional strain and burnout (Olsson et al., 2021; Kang & Gong, 2024). Similarly, fears involving disappointing significant others reflect conditional regard dynamics that have been shown to undermine psychological security (Jowett et al., 2017; Low et al., 2022; Melguizo-Ibáñez et al., 2022).

At the same time, it is important to recognize that fear of failure may not be inherently maladaptive. Some studies suggest that under certain conditions, fear may heighten attentional focus or effort (Yıldırım et al., 2023; Hu et al., 2023). The present findings do not negate this possibility but indicate that, in this team sport context, fear was more closely aligned with diminished rather than enhanced motivational regulation. This suggests that the effects of fear are likely conditional—shaped by intensity, context, individual differences, and environmental climate. Fear may function adaptively when moderate and contained within supportive systems but maladaptively when excessive and socially threatening. Cultural context may also influence how fear of failure is experienced. In collectivist settings such as the Philippines, relational expectations and social harmony are often emphasized. Consequently, fears related to disappointing others or losing social approval may carry amplified psychological weight. Future cross-cultural comparisons would be valuable in clarifying whether socially evaluative fears exert stronger motivational implications in relationally oriented cultures.

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Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design precludes conclusions regarding directionality; it remains possible that lower motivational regulation heightens sensitivity to fear-based appraisals rather than the reverse. Second, the reliance on self-report measures may introduce common method variance and social desirability bias, particularly in competitive athletic settings where perceptions of confidence and commitment are socially valued. Third, the sample was drawn from higher education institutions within a single Philippine city, which may limit generalizability to other cultural, institutional, or competitive contexts. Additionally, although validated measurement models were used, composite mean scores may not fully capture dynamic fluctuations in fear and motivation across competitive phases. Future studies employing longitudinal tracking, multi-source assessments (e.g., coach reports), or experience-sampling methods would strengthen causal inference and ecological validity.

From a practical standpoint, the findings highlight the importance of addressing socially evaluative pressures within team sport settings. Coaching strategies that minimize public humiliation, normalize mistakes as part of learning, and emphasize collective support may reduce shame-based appraisals. Autonomy-supportive communication (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Cen et al., 2025) may help preserve motivational quality by reinforcing volitional engagement rather than obligation. Because fears related to embarrassment and interpersonal disappointment appear especially salient, interventions targeting self-compassion and cognitive reappraisal (Robazza et al., 2023) may be particularly beneficial.

However, recommendations should remain proportionate to the evidence. While autonomy-supportive climates are theoretically grounded, causal conclusions cannot be drawn from the present findings alone. Intervention-based and longitudinal research is necessary to determine whether reducing fear of failure leads to improvements in motivational regulation over time. Future research should prioritize longitudinal designs to examine how fear and motivation co-evolve across competitive seasons. Mixed-method approaches may be especially useful for exploring how athletes interpret socially evaluative fears within team environments. Qualitative inquiry could provide deeper insight into how shame, relational expectations, and collective responsibility shape

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motivational experiences. Combining longitudinal tracking with targeted intervention studies would offer the most rigorous test of the conditional role of fear in sport motivation.

Thus, the present findings suggest that within team sport contexts, fear of failure is more closely associated with motivational vulnerability than motivational activation. Its effects appear multidimensional and context-dependent rather than uniformly maladaptive or adaptive. Clarifying when fear functions as a constructive challenge versus a psychological burden remains an important direction for advancing both theory and applied practice in sport psychology.

Conclusion

This study examined the associations between fear of failure and motivational regulation among student-athletes in team sports. The findings indicate that fear of failure was associated with lower levels of both autonomous and controlled motivation. Notably, the association with autonomous motivation was minimal in magnitude, whereas the relationship with controlled motivation was comparatively stronger. Contrary to common assumptions within Self-Determination Theory, fear of failure did not correspond with heightened pressure-driven regulation in this sample. Instead, elevated fear appeared to relate to broader motivational attenuation rather than motivational intensification.

The results contribute to the literature by clarifying that fear of failure in team sport contexts may operate in a multidimensional and conditional manner. Socially evaluative fears—particularly those involving shame and concerns about disappointing important others—emerged as the most salient correlates of reduced motivational regulation. These findings extend SDT-informed research by suggesting that in highly interdependent team environments, visible performance errors and relational expectations may shape how fear is experienced. However, given the cross-sectional design, single-city sample, and reliance on self-report measures, the findings should be interpreted as associative rather than causal.

From an applied perspective, the results underscore the importance of reducing shame-based and socially evaluative pressures within team sport settings. Coaching

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practices that normalize mistakes, emphasize collective learning, and minimize public humiliation may help buffer fear-related motivational vulnerability. Interventions targeting self-compassion and constructive feedback may be particularly relevant for athletes who experience strong embarrassment or relational concerns. Future longitudinal and intervention-based research is needed to determine whether modifying fear-related appraisals leads to sustained improvements in motivational quality. Ultimately, understanding when fear of failure constrains rather than challenges athletes may be essential for fostering sustainable and psychologically healthy engagement in team sports.

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