

# Sports Media and Its Role in Shaping Psychological Pressure Among Professional Football Players: An Analytical Study on the Impact of Media Coverage on Preparations for the 2026 World Cup

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## Abstract

This article aims to examine the impact of sports media in shaping psychological pressures on professional football players, with a focus on media coverage related to the preparations of teams participating in the 2026 World Cup. The research employs a descriptive-analytical approach, relying on data collected through a questionnaire directed at a sample of professional players and sports analysts to evaluate the dimensions of media coverage across traditional and digital platforms. The study addressed the influence of traditional and digital media on players' psychological pressures and the role of sports media in both undermining and boosting players' self-confidence. The findings reveal that sports media, in its various forms, plays a critical role in shaping players' psychological states, either negatively or positively, depending on the nature of the media coverage. The article concludes with a recommendation to adopt constructive media strategies that focus on positive guidance and reduce exaggerated or misleading criticism that could lead to psychological pressures hindering athletic performance. It also emphasizes the need to raise players' awareness of how to handle media coverage and mitigate its psychological impact, alongside fostering cooperation between sports organizations and media professionals to create a supportive sports media environment.

**Keywords:** sports media, psychological pressure, 2026 World Cup, media coverage.

## 1. Introduction

The 2026 FIFA World Cup, jointly hosted by the United States, Canada, and Mexico, represents a global sporting event where the role of sports media becomes significantly prominent. Traditional and digital media coverage contributes to shaping public opinion and impacts players' psychological well-being and preparations. With the expansion of participating teams to 48, the importance of media as a medium that fosters national pride and audience unity increases. However, it simultaneously plays a dual role of motivation and

pressure. Positive media coverage enhances players' confidence and motivation, while negative criticism undermines self-esteem and raises anxiety levels.

In this context, this study explores the relationship between media coverage and psychological pressures faced by professional football players participating in the World Cup. The study adopts an analytical perspective based on concepts such as the Pygmalion effect, which suggests that performance improves with positive coverage, while negative analyses can weaken players' performance. This concept underscores the need for a deeper understanding of the media's influence on athletes' mental health.

Previous studies (Cendrowska, Leziak, Bröde, Fiala, & Konefał, 2024) indicate that sports media has significant power in shaping performance expectations, potentially leading to self-fulfilling prophecies by portraying players in either positive or negative contexts. Recent research (Ben Salem, Beyond human referees: The future of artificial intelligence in the FIFA World Cup 2026 between legitimacy and fan psychology, 2025) highlights that the pressures stemming from media coverage can exacerbate mental health challenges among professional players. With the rise of digital media, real-time interactions with audiences via social media have become an additional pressure amplifier, creating an intense environment that directly affects athletic performance.

This study focuses on analyzing media coverage through surveys directed at sports analysts and players to understand the various dimensions of media influence and identify coping strategies for the psychological pressures it generates. The study aims to provide insights that support athletes and coaches in effectively navigating the increasingly complex media environment and adopting responsible practices in media coverage.

As the 2026 FIFA World Cup approaches, fostering balanced media narratives to support athletes' mental health becomes increasingly crucial. Studies suggest that balanced coverage, emphasizing successes and positive stories, can reduce anxiety and create a supportive environment (Alhuzami, 2024)

Media can play a pivotal role in alleviating pressures by avoiding excessive criticism and highlighting positive role models. This approach could improve the experience for players and fans alike. Based on the aforementioned considerations, does sports media play a role in shaping psychological pressures among professional football players during the 2026 FIFA World Cup?

### **Study Questions**

1. Does traditional media influence increased psychological pressures on players during the 2026 FIFA World Cup?
2. Does digital media influence increased psychological pressures on players during the 2026 FIFA World Cup?
3. Does sports media play a role in undermining players' self-confidence during the 2026 FIFA World Cup?
4. Does sports media play a role in enhancing and motivating players' self-confidence during the 2026 FIFA World Cup?

### **Study Hypotheses**

1. Traditional media influences increased psychological pressures on players during the 2026 FIFA World Cup.
2. Digital media influences increased psychological pressures on players during the 2026 FIFA World Cup.
3. Sports media plays a role in undermining players' self-confidence during the 2026 FIFA World Cup.

4. Sports media plays a role in enhancing and motivating players' self-confidence during the 2026 FIFA World Cup.

## 2. Literature Review

Sports media encompasses various forms, including print journalism, television broadcasting, digital coverage, and interactions on social media. According to (Toufik & Aissa, Youth Interest In Creating Sports Content On Youtube As A Profitable Activity A Survey Study On A Sample Of Youtube Users, 2024), media serves as a primary channel through which sports information reaches audiences, shaping their perceptions of players and events. Positive media coverage fosters self-confidence and motivation among players, while negative media triggers stress and increases anxiety (Jasser, Patel, & Beenen, 2022).

(Deveci, et al., 2023) highlight a significant evolution in the representation of athletes, particularly female athletes, with digital platforms beginning to showcase women as skilled athletes rather than adhering to traditional stereotypes (Wachsmuth, et al., 2025).

Psychological pressure is a major challenge for athletes, especially during significant competitions like the World Cup. (Budair, et al., 2025) state that stress arises when pressures exceed an individual's coping abilities, leading to anxiety and reduced performance. The multidimensional anxiety theory suggests that moderate levels of physical anxiety can enhance performance, whereas excessive anxiety has adverse effects (Tian, Yang, & Zhang, 2023).

Social media adds another layer of psychological pressure, as athletes are expected to present an ideal image of themselves, leading to social comparisons that harm self-esteem and increase feelings of inadequacy (Maurici, 2023).

Media coverage plays a dual role, acting as a motivator when focusing on successes or as a detractor when overly critical or emphasizing mistakes. Maurici (2023) notes that digital media often amplifies anxiety due to instant interactions and direct criticism. These dynamics disproportionately affect younger or less experienced athletes who lack advanced coping strategies (Maurici, 2023).

The 2026 FIFA World Cup represents a unique sporting event co-hosted by the United States, Canada, and Mexico, with the number of participating teams expanded to 48. (Cendrowska, Leziak, Bröde, Fiala, & Konefał, 2024) suggest that this expansion will intensify media coverage, raising expectations and increasing player pressures, thus presenting a significant management challenge (Babar & Lynch, 2023).

Other studies indicate that positive coverage can boost player confidence and drive better performance, while negative portrayals elevate anxiety and hinder performance (Ben Salem, Beyond human referees: The future of artificial intelligence in the FIFA World Cup 2026 between legitimacy and fan psychology, 2025).

The relationship between sports media and psychological pressures is complex and depends on the nature of the coverage. The Pygmalion effect theory suggests that positive expectations can enhance performance and self-confidence, while negative expectations destabilize confidence and heighten anxiety (Tian, Yang, & Zhang, 2023).

Social media, in particular, amplifies psychological pressures due to the accessibility of public opinions and direct interactions. (Qian, Zhang, Wang, & Liang, 2025) note that these platforms can support players if used positively but can also be destructive when exploited for excessive criticism (Smith, et al., 2025).

The psychological effects of traditional and digital media differ significantly. (Qian, Zhang, Wang, & Liang, 2025) explain that traditional media relies on sustained narratives and thoughtful analyses, allowing players time to process criticism. Conversely, digital media's

instantaneous interactions often exacerbate pressures due to immediate feedback (Peters , Henriksen, & Ronkainen, 2025).

(Ben Salem, Beyond human referees: The future of artificial intelligence in the FIFA World Cup 2026 between legitimacy and fan psychology, 2025)notes that social media provides fans with an unprecedented platform to directly express their opinions, intensifying the psychological challenges faced by athletes ( Toufik & Aissa , Youth Interest In Creating Sports Content On Youtube As A Profitable Activitya Survey Study On A Sample Of Youtube Users, 2024).

### 3. Methodology

Based on previous studies and the descriptive nature of this research, the descriptive-analytical approach was adopted to align with the study's objectives. The study population consisted of 400 individuals, including sports journalists and professional football players active on social media platforms. A random sample of 70 participants was selected.

The study utilized a structured questionnaire as the primary data collection tool, reviewed and validated by five university professors. The questionnaire comprised 44 questions divided into four main axes addressing the role of sports media in shaping psychological pressures on professional football players, particularly in their preparation for the 2026 FIFA World Cup.

**Table (01):Axes of the Study and Their Statistical Indicators**

Axis	Description	Axis Questions	Correlation Coefficient	StatisticalSignificance (p)
<b>First Axis</b>	The impact of traditional media on increasing psychological stress	1–11	0.80	0.000
<b>Second Axis</b>	The impact of digital media on increasing psychological stress	12–22	0.82	0.000
<b>Third Axis</b>	The role of sports media in undermining players' self-confidence	23–33	0.89	0.000
<b>Fourth Axis</b>	The role of sports media in enhancing and motivating players' self-confidence	34–44	0.87	0.000

Questions were structured using a three-point Likert scale with the options: Never, Sometimes, and Always. The overall reliability of the questionnaire was 0.89 according to Cronbach's alpha, indicating high field reliability based on Nunnally's (1994) criterion of a minimum threshold of 0.70. The validity of the questionnaire was confirmed, with all Pearson correlation coefficients between the axes and total score showing statistical significance at the 0.05 level, ranging from 0.81 to 0.91. This reflects consistency and internal validity of the tool. The study maintained objectivity, avoiding personal bias and focusing on accurately measuring the phenomenon. Statistical methods such as percentages, Chi-square tests, Cronbach's alpha, and Pearson correlation coefficients were employed to ensure accurate and comprehensive result analysis.

The questionnaire was distributed to the study sample of 70 randomly selected participants from the study population of sports journalists and professional football players. Due to the diverse geographical nature of the sample and the challenges of direct access to participants

due to their work, the questionnaire was distributed electronically via a link shared in sports media groups on Facebook.

Over 400 individuals viewed the online questionnaire; however, many did not complete all the questions. As a result, 70 completed responses meeting validity conditions were analyzed, ensuring accurate and comprehensive data for analysis.

Responses were organized into structured tables corresponding to the four axes of the questionnaire. To facilitate data analysis, specific levels were established to assess the intensity of each axis rather than evaluating each question independently. To avoid ambiguity or variation in responses, open-ended questions were excluded, and the questions were designed in a closed-ended format suitable for quantitative analysis.

Data processing was conducted using appropriate statistical software. This systematic approach ensured organized results and analysis reflecting the study objectives, with a focus on deriving insights related to the impact of traditional and digital sports media on players' psychological pressures and their readiness for the 2026 FIFA World Cup.

#### 4. Results

**Table (02): Results of the Chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) test for the impact of traditional media on increasing psychological pressures on players during the 2026 FIFA World Cup.**

Level of Impact	Frequency	Percentage	$\chi^2$	Degrees of Freedom (df)	Significance Level ( $\alpha$ )	Significance (sig)	Statistical Significance
Low	12	17.14%	34.89	3	0.05	0.000	Significant
Medium	39	55.72%					
High	19	27.14%					
<b>Total</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>100%</b>					

The results indicate that traditional media has a significant impact on players' psychological pressures. Medium impact was reported at 55.72%, while high impact was 27.14%. The  $\chi^2$  value was 34.89 with 3 degrees of freedom and a significance level of  $\alpha = 0.05$ , demonstrating strong statistical significance (sig = 0.000).

This aligns with (Higham, Rumbold, Newman, & Stone, 2023), who noted that excessive criticism in sports television programs heightens players' anxiety by amplifying individual errors. The traditional media's focus on negative aspects while neglecting positive performance contributes to these pressures.

**Table (03): Results of the Chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) test for the impact of digital media on increasing psychological pressures on players during the 2026 FIFA World Cup.**

Level of Impact	Frequency	Percentage	$\chi^2$	Degrees of Freedom (df)	Significance Level ( $\alpha$ )	Significance (sig)	Statistical Significance
Low	2	2.85%	32.67	2	0.05	0.000	Significant
Medium	29	41.42%					
High	39	55.73%					

<b>Total</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>100%</b>
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The results suggest that digital media exerts a higher impact compared to traditional media, with a high impact level at 55.73% and a medium impact at 41.42%. The  $\chi^2$  value was 32.67 with 2 degrees of freedom and a significance level of  $\alpha = 0.05$ , showing strong statistical significance (sig = 0.000).

These findings support (Ben Salem, Beyond human referees: The future of artificial intelligence in the FIFA World Cup 2026 between legitimacy and fan psychology, 2025), who noted that negative comments and satirical videos on social media significantly increase psychological pressures on players. The immediacy of online interactions exacerbates anxiety and negatively affects players' readiness.

**Table (04): Results of the Chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) test for the role of sports media in undermining players' self-confidence during the 2026 FIFA World Cup.**

Level of Impact	Frequency	Percentage	$\chi^2$	Degrees of Freedom (df)	Significance Level ( $\alpha$ )	Significance (sig)	Statistical Significance
Low	1	1.42%	33.94	4	0.05	0.000	Significant
Medium	17	24.28%					
High	52	74.30%					
<b>Total</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>100%</b>					

The results highlight the role of sports media in undermining players' self-confidence, with high impact at 74.30%. The  $\chi^2$  value was 33.94 with 4 degrees of freedom and a significance level of  $\alpha = 0.05$ , demonstrating strong statistical significance (sig = 0.000).

These findings align with (Budair, et al., 2025), who found that repeated criticism in sports media reduces players' self-confidence, particularly when errors are excessively emphasized or when constant comparisons are made between players or generations.

**Table (05): Results of the Chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) test for the role of sports media in enhancing and motivating players' self-confidence during the 2026 FIFA World Cup.**

Level of Impact	Frequency	Percentage	$\chi^2$	Degrees of Freedom (df)	Significance Level ( $\alpha$ )	Significance (sig)	Statistical Significance
Low	9	12.85%	31.73	2	0.05	0.000	Significant
Medium	40	57.15%					
High	21	30.00%					
<b>Total</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>100%</b>					

Despite its negative aspects, sports media can positively impact players' self-confidence, with medium impact at 57.15% and high impact at 30.00%. The  $\chi^2$  value was 31.73 with 2 degrees

of freedom and a significance level of  $\alpha = 0.05$ , indicating strong statistical significance (sig = 0.000).

These findings support (Alhuzami, 2024) , who noted that positive media coverage highlighting players' achievements and success stories boosts morale and motivates players to perform at their best.

## 5. Discussion

Evidence from recent studies highlights the significant impact of sports media on the psychological well-being of football players, particularly during major competitions such as the FIFA World Cup. This impact is evident in both traditional and digital media, each playing a dual role in influencing players negatively and positively (Simpson, Didymus, & Williams, 2023).

Traditional media, such as television and newspapers, remains one of the primary sources of psychological pressure. This type of media often emphasizes mistakes and negative aspects (Ben Salem, Khalfaoui, & Mazari, Algorithms on commercial editorial standards and sports audience rights in psychological content, 2025), increasing anxiety and fear of failure among players. Repeated criticism and exaggerated analysis create an unsupportive environment that undermines self-confidence. Studies show that such media coverage directly affects on-field performance, as players struggle to focus under mounting pressure (Budair, et al., 2025).

On the other hand, digital media adds a new dimension to these pressures due to its immediacy. Negative comments on social media, along with fake news and satirical content, exacerbate anxiety and fear of criticism (Greyser, Cortsen, & Fernández, 2020) . Research indicates that a significant portion of young players are psychologically affected by direct online interactions, leading to long-term psychological effects such as isolation and weakened social interaction within the team (Mutawa, Kumar, K, & Murugappan, 2025) This direct engagement makes digital media more impactful than traditional media, as the audience can interact directly with players, intensifying their sense of pressure and stress (Holden, Wagstaff , Wadey , & Brown, 2025).

Moreover, continuous media comparisons between players or sports generations diminish morale. Recent studies have shown that such comparisons affect psychological and social cohesion among players (Hruzewicz, Boski, & Kroszka, 2022), making them feel undervalued and less capable of teamwork, which negatively impacts overall team performance (Ben Salem, Beyond human referees: The future of artificial intelligence in the FIFA World Cup 2026 between legitimacy and fan psychology, 2025).

Despite these negative effects, media can play a positive role if it focuses on achievements and motivation. Media coverage that highlights success stories and praises individual and team efforts contributes to enhancing self-confidence and boosting morale (Li, Jiang, & Zhou, 2024) . Research has shown that players receiving positive media support exhibit greater resilience to pressure and perform (Toufik, Some Basic Psychological Traits For Amateur Algerian Football Players, 2023) better, as this type of coverage helps stabilize their psychological and social well-being (Wachsmuth, et al., 2025).

Sports media thus wields a dual influence on players, capable of either enhancing their capabilities or undermining their confidence (Newman, Warburton, & Russell , 2021) , depending on the nature of its coverage, especially during the 2026 FIFA World Cup. To achieve a positive balance (Samra & Dryer, 2024) , media outlets must provide balanced coverage that supports and encourages players rather than amplifying pressures. Adhering to an ethical role is essential not only to improve players' psychological well-being but also to

foster a healthy sports environment that inspires fans and promotes fair recognition of efforts (Voelker, Visek, Fairhurst, & Learner, 2024).

## 6. Recommendations

To improve the impact of media on the mental health of athletes and enhance their performance, it is essential to adopt constructive media strategies that focus on positive guidance while minimizing exaggerated or misleading criticism that may cause psychological stress and hinder performance. Media strategies should aim to balance coverage, highlighting athletes' achievements and good performances, while objectively addressing areas needing improvement without exaggeration. It is crucial for media to avoid overanalyzing mistakes or seeking sensationalism at the cost of athletes' mental well-being.

Additionally, sports organizations should organize workshops and training sessions to teach athletes how to manage media coverage, especially with the increasing influence of digital media and direct interaction with audiences via social media. These sessions could focus on managing the psychological pressures arising from negative criticism or non-constructive comments. Psychological counselors should also be available to help athletes develop coping strategies for media challenges and enhance their psychological and social stability.

On the other hand, sports journalists must take on their ethical responsibilities to provide coverage that supports and motivates athletes rather than undermines their self-confidence. Training courses should raise awareness among journalists about the importance of their role in enhancing athletes' mental health, emphasizing balanced coverage that highlights positive aspects and minimizes excessive criticism.

Furthermore, sports organizations should strengthen cooperation with journalists to ensure responsible coverage, organizing joint workshops to ensure accurate and truthful information that fosters a healthy and supportive sporting environment. Official spokespeople should be designated to handle media relations, ensuring fair and accurate representation of athletes and developing crisis management plans to mitigate the negative effects media may have on athletes' reputations or teams.

In terms of international cooperation, sports organizations worldwide should collaborate and exchange expertise on minimizing the negative effects of media on athletes. They should also launch global awareness campaigns aimed at promoting a positive sports culture that supports athletes and motivates them to perform at their best. These campaigns would be part of ongoing efforts to establish a media environment that respects and supports athletes throughout their careers.

Finally, it is important to promote future research studying the psychological effects of media on athletes and how it influences different cultures and sporting environments. These studies can contribute to the development of new strategies and tools for measuring media impact on athletes, helping to provide effective solutions for reducing the psychological stress they may experience.

By adopting these strategies, media can become a key partner in supporting athletes and motivating them to perform at their highest level, contributing to a balanced sports environment that encourages fair recognition of efforts and promotes sporting excellence.

## 7. Conclusion

Media plays a critical role in shaping the psychological pressures experienced by players, especially during major events like the FIFA World Cup. Through both traditional and digital platforms, media influences public perceptions of sports teams and, consequently, directly impacts players' morale. Traditional media narratives can improve team psychology when

they focus on positives, while negative coverage can undermine self-confidence and destabilize players psychologically.

Conversely, digital media introduces a new and complex layer to these effects. Social media platforms offer direct interaction with audiences, providing immediate support but also exposing players to negative comments and constant scrutiny, which can harm self-esteem and morale. The high speed of digital platforms can trigger sudden emotional shifts, significantly affecting individual and team performance.

These dynamics emphasize the importance of understanding the influence of media, in all its forms, on the mental health and confidence of players. This understanding calls for flexible and well-considered strategies by sports organizations and media outlets to create a supportive psychological environment that helps players cope with media challenges, enhances their performance, and minimizes negative effects.

For future research, it is recommended to expand studies on the relationship between media coverage, athletes' self-confidence, and performance, focusing on psychological factors such as emotional regulation, decision-making, and the impact of media narratives on team cohesion. Investigating cultural differences in players' responses to media coverage could also provide valuable insights for improving psychological interventions and enhancing the resilience of players from diverse backgrounds.

Furthermore, adopting mixed research methodologies is essential to fully understand the dimensions of traditional and digital media's influence. This integrated approach will help develop strategies that leverage the positive aspects of media while mitigating its negative effects, enabling sports teams to tackle media challenges effectively and achieve exceptional performance on the global stage.

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