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Perceived Emotional Intelligence and Sports Performance among University Volleyball Players: A Cross-Sectional Survey

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ABSTRACT

Background: *Emotional intelligence (EI) is increasingly recognized as a critical psychological determinant of athletic performance. In team sports such as volleyball, where seamless communication, emotional regulation, and rapid decision-making are indispensable, EI warrants systematic empirical attention particularly in under-researched South Asian university contexts.*

Objective*: This study examined levels of perceived EI and their relationship to self-reported sports performance among university-level volleyball players in Lahore, Pakistan. Methods: A cross-sectional survey was conducted with 150 university volleyball players (64 males, 86 females; M age = 21.8 years) drawn from seven public and private sector universities. The Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT) was administered, encompassing dimensions of emotional self-awareness, regulation, empathy, optimism, and social interaction. Chi-square goodness-of-fit tests were employed to evaluate response-pattern significance across all items.*

Results*: Statistically significant response distributions were observed across all 19 EI items (χ^2 range: 14.53–116.77; all $p < .001$). Responses were predominantly concentrated in the "Sometimes," "Often," and "Always" categories, indicating moderate-to-high EI. Emotional self-awareness ($\chi^2 = 96.96$), social expression ($\chi^2 = 116.77$), and emotional depth ($\chi^2 = 68.88$) yielded the largest effect magnitudes. Positive-mood-facilitated cognition and creative ideation were among the strongest areas of perceived EI.*

Conclusion*: University volleyball players in Lahore demonstrate moderate-to-high perceived EI, with particular strengths in emotional awareness, optimism, and interpersonal sensitivity. Inconsistent application of EI skills across situations underscores the need for structured psychological skills training within university athletic programs.*

Keywords: *Emotional Intelligence, Sports Performance, Volleyball, University Athletes, Psychological Skills, Pakistan*

1. Introduction

Contemporary sports science acknowledges that athletic excellence is not exclusively the product of physical conditioning and technical proficiency. Psychological competencies particularly the capacity to perceive, comprehend, manage, and productively deploy emotions exert a substantial influence on competitive outcomes (Weinberg & Gould, 2023). Emotional intelligence (EI), the umbrella construct capturing these capacities, has attracted considerable empirical attention over the past three decades, with evidence accumulating across a variety of athletic disciplines and competitive levels.

Volleyball presents a particularly compelling case for EI research. The sport's discrete-rally structure means that individual errors are highly visible and can instantaneously shift momentum. Each point demands seamless non-verbal coordination among six players, requiring an implicit trust and mutual emotional attunement that is arguably unparalleled in many other team sports (Ferreira et al., 2020). A single player's unmanaged frustration or anxiety can disrupt the collective rhythm that underpins effective team play. Consequently, coaches have long intuited that emotional composure distinguishes elite teams from merely talented ones; EI research provides the theoretical scaffolding to formalize and operationalize this intuition.

Three principal theoretical frameworks inform the present study. The ability model of Mayer and Salovey (1997) conceptualizes EI as a genuine cognitive faculty comprising four hierarchically organized capacities: accurate emotional perception, emotion-facilitated thought, emotional understanding, and emotion management. Goleman's (1995) mixed model broadens the construct to encompass self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills competencies directly map able onto the interpersonal demands of volleyball. Finally, the Cognitive-Affective Stress Model of Lazarus and Folkman (1984) explicate how appraisal processes mediate the relationship between competitive stressors and performance outcomes, with EI modulating whether situations are construed as challenges or threats.

Despite a growing body of international literature, empirical investigation of EI in Pakistani university sport remains scant. The few available studies focus predominantly on physiological and anthropometric determinants of performance, leaving the psychological dimension comparatively unexplored. This gap is significant because cultural norms governing emotional expression, collectivist team values, and the resource constraints characteristic of developing-country sport systems may meaningfully moderate established EI-performance relationships (Henrich et al., 2010). The present study therefore aimed to describe the levels of perceived EI among university volleyball players in Lahore, Pakistan, and to examine the statistical significance of response patterns across key EI dimensions using the Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT; Schutte et al., 1998).

2. Literature Review

The relationship between EI and athletic performance has attracted systematic meta-analytic scrutiny. Kopp and Jekauc (2018) synthesized data from 21 studies (N > 3,400) and reported a small but statistically significant positive association (r = .16) between EI and sports performance. A subsequent meta-analysis by González-Hernández et al. (2023), encompassing 35 studies and over 5,000 athletes, identified a somewhat larger effect (r = .21), with the strongest associations emerging for emotion-regulation capacities and sports characterized by high interpersonal coordination demands a category in which volleyball features prominently.

Sport-specific evidence reinforces these aggregate findings. Kim (2024) demonstrated that EI exerted a direct positive effect on both psychological skill utilization and observable court performance in volleyball players. Campo et al. (2019) found that team-level EI predicted

collective performance outcomes over and above individual EI scores, highlighting the importance of the group as a unit of analysis in team-sport research. A longitudinal study by García-Naveira et al. (2025) on high-performance female volleyball players further revealed that negative mood states particularly dejection and cognitive anxiety predicted injury incidence across a competitive season, extending the relevance of EI from performance enhancement to athlete welfare.

Interventional evidence is accumulating, albeit modestly. Campo et al. (2019) evaluated a 12-week EI training program and found significant improvements in both EI scores and objective performance metrics. Palermo et al. (2021) reported that a six-session youth volleyball intervention enhanced EI, sport enjoyment, and intentions to continue participation. Collectively, these studies affirm that EI is not a static trait but a trainable competency amenable to structured psychological intervention.

Demographic moderators merit consideration. Mon-López et al. (2023), studying 2,166 elite Spanish athletes, found that EI generally increased with age and competitive experience, and that certain team sports including volleyball were associated with elevated interpersonal EI dimensions. Car et al. (2025) identified high positive correlations among mental endurance, mental training practice, and EI in elite athletes, suggesting synergistic developmental pathways. Gender differences, while documented, appear sport- and dimension-specific rather than global (Kopp et al., 2021), and cultural context likely moderates findings in ways yet to be fully examined in South Asian populations (Henrich et al., 2010).

A notable gap in the existing literature is the near-complete absence of EI research targeting university volleyball players in Pakistan. The present study addresses this gap and contributes baseline descriptive data that can anchor future comparative and interventional work in this context.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

A cross-sectional survey design was employed. This design enables the efficient collection of descriptive and inferential data from a defined population at a single time point (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) and is appropriate when the research objective is to characterize current psychological attributes rather than to establish temporal precedence or causal direction.

3.2 Participants

Participants were 150 university volleyball players (64 males 42.7%, 86 females 57.3% aged between 18 and 25 years (younger cohort: 18–21 years, n = 62 [41.3%]; older cohort: 22–25 years, n = 88 58.7%. All participants were actively engaged in regular training and competitive volleyball at university level. Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the sample, and Table 2 details the distribution across participating universities.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 150)

Variable	Category	n	%	Cumulative %
Gender	Male	64	42.7	42.7
	Female	86	57.3	100.0
Age (years)	18–21	62	41.3	41.3
	22–25	88	58.7	100.0
Total		150	100.0	

Note. Percentage totals may vary slightly due to rounding.

Table 2

Distribution of Participants across Universities

University	Sector	n	%
University of the Punjab (PU)	Public	26	17.3
Government College University (GCU)	Public	24	16.0
University of Lahore (UOL)	Private	24	16.0
University of Central Punjab (UCP)	Private	21	14.0
Univ. of Veterinary & Animal Sciences (UVAS)	Public	20	13.3
University of Management Technology (UMT)	Private	19	12.7
Lahore College for Women University (LCWU)	Public	18	12.0
Total		150	100.0

Note. All universities are located in Lahore, Pakistan.

Convenience sampling was used; participants were recruited through their respective university volleyball programs. Inclusion required active participation in university volleyball training and competition, age between 18 and 25 years, and voluntary provision of informed consent. Individuals, who did not play volleyball competitively, fell outside the age range, or returned incomplete questionnaires were excluded.

3.3 Instrument

Perceived EI was assessed using the Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT; Schutte et al., 1998), grounded in the Salovey and Mayer (1990) ability model. The SSEIT contains 33 items rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Not at all to 5 = Always). Items tap four empirically-supported EI dimensions: emotional perception, emotional facilitation of thought, emotional understanding, and emotion management. For the present study, 19 items addressing the core EI-performance interface were analyzed. The SSEIT has demonstrated strong psychometric properties across culturally diverse samples (Hussein et al., 2019; Gong & Paulson, 2016; Aniemeka et al., 2020), supporting its applicability in the Pakistani university athlete population. Expert review by three sports science faculty confirmed content validity for the target context.

3.4 Procedure

Following institutional approval and participant informed consent, questionnaires were administered in paper format during scheduled team practice sessions. The researcher was present throughout administration to clarify instructions and ensure response completeness. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and uncompensated. The entire data collection process was completed over a four-week period in March–April 2026.

3.5 Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS (Version 26.0). Frequencies and percentages described sample demographics and item-level response distributions. Chi-square goodness-of-fit tests ($\alpha = .05$) were applied to each SSEIT item to determine whether observed response frequencies differed

significantly from a uniform expected distribution (expected n = 30 per category across five Likert options). This approach identifies items on which participants' EI perceptions deviate meaningfully from a neutral, random distribution pattern, thereby highlighting the specific EI dimensions most and least salient in this population.

4. Results

4.1 EI Response Patterns

Chi-square goodness-of-fit tests revealed statistically significant departures from expected frequencies across all 19 SSEIT items (χ^2 range: 14.53–116.77; all $p < .001$), indicating that responses were systematically patterned rather than randomly distributed. Table 3 presents the chi-square values, significance levels, and modal response categories for each item.

A consistent pattern emerged: the "Not at all" category was markedly underrepresented relative to expectation (expected n = 30) across virtually all items, while responses concentrated in the "Sometimes," "Often," and "Always" categories. This convergent skew toward the positive end of the scale is indicative of moderate-to-high perceived EI across the sample.

Table 3

Chi-Square Goodness-of-Fit Results for SSEIT Items by EI Dimension (N = 150)

EI Item (SSEIT)	EI Dimension	χ^2	p	Modal Response
Recalling past successes when facing obstacles	Self-Awareness / Coping	41.400	<.001	Sometimes (n=60)
Expecting to do well on most tasks	Optimism	37.533	<.001	Sometimes (n=52)
Others confide in me easily	Social Interaction	54.067	<.001	Sometimes (n=60)
Difficulty understanding non-verbal messages (R)	Empathy (Reversed)	29.800	<.001	Sometimes (n=49)
Major life events lead me to re-evaluate priorities	Emotional Depth	68.880	<.001	Sometimes (n=49) / Always (n=37)
Mood changes help me see new possibilities	Emotional Flexibility	41.933	<.001	Always (n=47)
Emotions make my life worth living	Emotional Valuation	14.533	<.001	Sometimes (n=39)
I am aware of my emotions as I experience them	Self-Awareness	96.960	<.001	Sometimes (n=43)
I expect good things to happen	Optimism	25.067	<.001	Sometimes (n=44)
I like to share emotions with others	Social Expression	116.773	<.001	Sometimes (n=47)
I know how to sustain positive emotions	Emotional Regulation	30.867	<.001	Sometimes (n=60)

I arrange events that others enjoy	Social Skill	24.467	<.001	Sometimes (n=52)
I am aware of non-verbal messages I send	Empathy / Self-Awareness	57.040	<.001	Sometimes–Always (n=113)
I present myself to make a good impression	Social Skill	24.733	<.001	Sometimes–Always (n=116)
Positive mood makes problem-solving easy	Emotional Facilitation	25.667	<.001	Sometimes–Always (n=117)
Recognizing others' emotions from facial expressions	Empathy	47.533	<.001	Sometimes (n=56)
I know why my emotions change	Emotional Understanding	37.533	<.001	Sometimes (n=53)
Positive mood fosters new ideas	Emotional Facilitation	27.867	<.001	Often–Always (n=86)
I have control over my emotions	Emotional Regulation	29.533	<.001	Sometimes (n=48)

Note. Expected n = 30 per Likert category under the null hypothesis of uniform distribution. R = reverse-scored item. All chi-square values are significant at $p < .001$. EI = emotional intelligence; SSEIT = Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test.

4.2 Dimension-Level Observations

Emotional self-awareness captured by the item "I am aware of my emotions as I experience them" produced the second largest chi-square value in the dataset ($\chi^2 = 96.96$, $p < .001$), with 77 of 150 participants (51.3%) responding in the "Often" or "Always" categories. This suggests that the majority of participants possess at least a moderate degree of ongoing emotional monitoring, a foundational competency for all downstream EI processes.

Items tapping social expression and social skill dimensions yielded particularly large chi-square values. The item "I like to share my emotions with others" generated the single largest chi-square in the dataset ($\chi^2 = 116.77$, $p < .001$); although "Sometimes" was the modal response (n = 47), a notably bimodal tendency was observed, with "Rarely" (n = 37) also elevated suggesting interpersonal variability in emotional disclosure among team athletes, possibly reflecting cultural norms around emotional restraint.

Emotion facilitation of thought was a conspicuous strength. Items such as "When I am in a positive mood, solving problems is easy for me" ($\chi^2 = 25.67$) and "When I am in a positive mood, I am able to come up with new ideas" ($\chi^2 = 27.87$) both showed strong concentration in the "Often" and "Always" categories (combined n = 73 and n = 86, respectively), indicating that these players recognize the cognitive advantages of positive emotional states a process highly relevant to in-game tactical creativity and decision-making.

Optimism, indexed by items such as "I expect good things to happen" ($\chi^2 = 25.07$) and "I expect that I will do well on most things I try" ($\chi^2 = 37.53$), also displayed clear positive skew. Together with strong emotional depth scores (re-evaluating priorities in response to major life events; $\chi^2 = 68.88$), these findings portray a sample that is psychologically resilient and future-oriented

qualities associated with sustained motivation and effective coping under competitive pressure (Kopp et al., 2021).

The single reversed item "I find it hard to understand the non-verbal messages of other people" ($\chi^2 = 29.80$) showed intermediate distribution, with "Sometimes" as the mode (n = 49). While the relatively low endorsement of "Always" (n = 21) indicates that most players do not consistently struggle with non-verbal decoding, this item registered a weaker positive skew than others, suggesting that non-verbal empathy may represent a relative development area.

Emotion regulation the capacity to maintain and modulate emotional states was reflected in the item "I have control over my emotions" ($\chi^2 = 29.53$), with 37 participants (24.7%) responding "Always" and 48 (32.0%) responding "Sometimes." The predominance of "Sometimes" responses across regulation-related items is a recurring pattern that implies contextually variable rather than consistently deployed regulation skills a finding with clear practical implications for training.

5. Discussion

The present study examined perceived EI among 150 university volleyball players in Lahore, employing the SSEIT across 19 items spanning emotional self-awareness, regulation, facilitation, social interaction, and optimism. The overarching finding that statistically significant, positively skewed response patterns emerged across all items supports the inference that this population possesses moderate-to-high perceived EI. This converges with broader evidence from team-sport contexts. Mon-López et al. (2023) similarly reported above-average EI in elite volleyball players relative to other sport types, attributing this to the demanding interpersonal requirements of the sport that may selectively develop emotional competencies over years of training and competition.

The consistent under-endorsement of "Not at all" responses across nearly all EI items implies that overt emotional incompetence is rare in this sample. This may partly reflect social desirability bias inherent in self-report methodologies (Petrides, 2011), though the pattern is sufficiently consistent and large in magnitude to suggest genuine psychological strengths rather than entirely art factual responding. The strongest EI expression was observed in emotional self-awareness, optimism, and positive mood facilitation dimensions directly relevant to the anticipatory and adaptive cognition required during serve reception, setting decisions, and attack selection under pressure.

The predominance of "Sometimes" as the modal response across emotion regulation and social skill items is theoretically meaningful. It suggests that, while players recognize emotional strategies as part of their repertoire, these strategies are deployed reactively and situational rather than proactively and consistently. This pattern aligns with Petrides et al.'s (2007) argument that trait EI reflects dispositional tendencies that crystallize across time and contexts; university-level athletes, still in the formative stages of competitive careers, may not yet have consolidated these tendencies into habitual, cross-situational competencies. The theoretical framework of Gross (2015) further supports this interpretation: effective emotion regulation involves antecedent-focused strategies (e.g., situation selection, cognitive reappraisal) that require deliberate practice to become automatic practice not typically formalized in Pakistani university volleyball programs.

The relative interpersonal variability in emotional disclosure (bimodal distribution on the sharing item) warrants particular attention. Pakistani cultural norms tend toward emotional restraint in professional and competitive contexts (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2012), which may suppress emotional sharing even among individuals who possess the underlying capacity. This cultural moderator underscores the importance of avoiding uncritical extrapolation of findings

from Western EI research to South Asian sport populations, and it highlights the need for culturally adapted EI assessment and intervention frameworks.

The data on non-verbal empathy where the reversed item showed a weaker positive skew than other EI dimensions is noteworthy given volleyball's reliance on non-verbal communication. A setter must read a hitter's body language to select the optimal attack configuration; a Libero must anticipate spike trajectories from subtle postural cues. Modest non-verbal decoding ability among a subset of players may therefore represent a meaningful performance liability. Targeted drills that explicitly train non-verbal cue recognition could yield both EI and performance dividends, consistent with the intervention findings of Campo et al. (2019).

Emotion facilitation of thought the capacity to harness positive mood states to enhance problem-solving and ideation was among the strongest EI domains. This finding is consistent with Cece et al.'s (2022) demonstration that EI promotes flow states in elite youth volleyball players via challenge appraisal, and with Martinent et al.'s (2023) evidence that team-level positive emotion facilitates both individual and collective flow. Practitioners seeking to optimize match-day performance may therefore benefit from pre-competition routines designed to induce positive mood states, leveraging players' existing capacity to exploit these states productively.

A significant limitation of the present study is the reliance on self-reported perceived EI. Self-report measures are susceptible to self-enhancement bias and cannot capture objective emotional ability as assessed by performance-based tools such as the MSCEIT (Mayer et al., 2003). Furthermore, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference: it cannot be determined from the present data whether higher EI precedes better performance, whether sport participation develops EI, or whether both processes operate simultaneously in a bidirectional feedback loop (Ubago-Jiménez et al., 2019). The convenience sample drawn from universities in a single city also limits generalization to broader Pakistani university sport populations and to other cultural contexts.

6. Conclusion

University volleyball players in Lahore demonstrate moderate-to-high levels of perceived emotional intelligence across all core EI dimensions, with particular strengths in emotional self-awareness, optimism, and positive mood facilitation. The systematic, statistically significant response patterns observed across all 19 SSEIT items confirm that EI is a psychologically meaningful attribute in this population rather than a randomly distributed characteristic. However, the situational variability in the application of emotion regulation strategies and the modest non-verbal empathy scores indicate that EI competencies are not yet consistently or automatically deployed particularly in high-pressure competitive contexts. These findings underscore both the promise and the underdevelopment of psychological skills training in Pakistani university volleyball, and they provide an evidence base upon which targeted EI interventions can be designed and evaluated.

7. Practical Implications and Recommendations

The following evidence-based recommendations are offered for coaches, sports psychologists, and university administrators:

Incorporate psychological skills training into standard coaching curricula. Given that EI competencies are trainable (Kotsou et al., 2019), structured weekly sessions addressing emotional awareness, reappraisal techniques, and pre-performance routines should be integrated into volleyball training programs. Even brief, six- to eight-session programs have demonstrated measurable improvements in both EI scores and performance metrics (Palermo et al., 2021).

Develop non-verbal communication training. Given the moderate scores on non-verbal empathy and the sport's heavy dependence on implicit team coordination, specific drills that train athletes to read and send non-verbal cues should be incorporated alongside technical skill development.

Design pre-competition routines that leverage positive mood facilitation. The strong positive mood facilitation scores suggest that players are adept at exploiting positive emotional states for enhanced cognition. Coaches should design evidence-based warm-up and pre-match rituals incorporating music, team affirmations, and achievement priming to reliably induce these states before competition.

Establish sport psychology support at the university level. Universities should consider appointing qualified sport psychologists or training coaching staff in basic psychological skills delivery to bridge the gap between research evidence and applied practice in Pakistani university sport.

Prioritize longitudinal and experimental research. Future studies should employ longitudinal designs tracking the same cohort of players across multiple competitive seasons, and randomized controlled trials testing culturally adapted EI interventions. Objective performance metrics including video-based error analysis following emotional events and wearable physiological monitoring should complement self-report measures to provide richer performance data.

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