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Systematic review of choking under pressure in motor performance

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Introduction: Anyone can experience choking under pressure and it is especially common in sports where performance is the focus. The present literature review focuses on “choking under pressure”, which refers to a sub-optimal sporting performance that occurs under stressful conditions. This systematic review aims at examining the conditions (i.e., the moderators like as example the types of pressure) in which choking under pressure influences motor performance and the mechanisms that may explain it (i.e., mediators as for example the arousal).

Method: This systematic review was conducted following PRISMA Guidelines. We systematically searched relevant articles in PubMed, PsycINFO, PsycArticles, SPORTdiscus, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, Web of Science and Eric from inception to February 2023. We only included studies focusing on motor tasks (i.e., body movements assessed on coordination, or conditioning, or both).

Results: 642 articles were identified from the databases. Out of 368 articles (without duplicates) that were screened, 94 studies met the inclusion criteria for the first and 69 studies for the second screening review. Among the studies who examined the effect of choking under pressure on motor performance, most of them examined at least one moderators/mediators. Specifically, regarding moderators, studies mainly focused on the types of pressure (e.g., financial incentive or video recordings), on task characteristics (e.g., well-learned task or complex/simple task) and on others (e.g., emotional regulation or personality). Regarding mediators, studies mainly focused on distraction-related mechanisms (attention shifts from task-relevant to irrelevant cues), on arousal (e.g., heart rate or self-reports of arousal), on anxiety, on self-focus (e.g., self-awareness or self-consciousness).

Conclusion: Overall, our findings identified several conditions under which choking under pressure occurs, and showed that several mechanisms are involved in choking under pressure effects on motor performance.

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