

## The Effects of Positive Self-Talk Among Winning Athletes in Martial Arts: A Mixed-Methods Study

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### Abstract

**Background and aim.** Martial arts require the integration of physical abilities and psychological readiness, particularly in challenging competitive situations. One psychological strategy widely used by athletes is positive self-talk, which plays a role in maintaining focus, self-confidence, and emotional regulation during competition. Although the benefits of self-talk have been widely discussed, research that specifically explores its role among winning martial arts athletes remains limited. Therefore, this study aims to examine the effects of positive self-talk on psychological aspects that support the performance of winning martial arts athletes.

**Methods.** This study employed a mixed-methods design. The research population consisted of collegiate-level arnis, karate, and taekwondo athletes who were actively competing at several public colleges and universities in the Philippines. The quantitative sample included 50 athletes selected using purposive sampling. Quantitative data were collected using a 15-item Likert-scale questionnaire with five response points that had been tested for feasibility and reliability. The qualitative phase involved seven national- or international-level winning athletes through semi-structured interviews. Quantitative analysis was conducted using a one-sample t-test with a test value of 3, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically.

**Results.** The quantitative results showed that all psychological variables had mean scores that were significantly higher than the midpoint of the Likert scale ( $p < 0.001$ ). Focus during competition obtained the highest score ( $M = 4.52$ ,  $SD = 0.41$ ), followed by self-confidence ( $M = 4.47$ ,  $SD = 0.36$ ), performance under pressure ( $M = 4.38$ ,  $SD = 0.48$ ), and anxiety reduction ( $M = 4.20$ ,  $SD = 0.55$ ). The qualitative findings revealed that positive self-talk helped athletes maintain mental clarity, strengthen self-belief, manage emotions, and sustain performance in high-pressure situations.

**Conclusions.** This study demonstrates that positive self-talk functions as an important psychological regulation mechanism for winning martial arts athletes. These findings imply that coaches and sport practitioners should systematically integrate positive self-talk training into mental preparation programs to support athletes' performance consistency in competition.

**Key words:** *Competitive Performance; Martial Arts; Positive Self-talk; Psychological Regulation; Winning Athletes.*

### 1. Introduction

Martial arts such as arnis, karate, and taekwondo require athletes to integrate physical abilities with strong mental readiness (Predoiu et al., 2025; Slimani & Chéour, 2016). Athletes are not only expected to execute techniques accurately, but also to maintain focus, regulate emotions, and respond to rapidly changing competitive dynamics (Hanin et al., 2016; Kelley et al., 2016). In martial arts, this often involves making quick decisions and sustaining optimal performance despite mistakes, situational pressure, or highly competitive opponents (Hooi et al., 2024). Therefore, psychological aspects become essential elements

that support the quality of athletes' performance during competition.

One psychological aspect that plays a role in maintaining performance quality is internal regulation ability, particularly in managing thoughts and emotions during competition (Gross, 2015; Kelley et al., 2016). In sport psychology, various mental strategies have been developed to help athletes maintain performance consistency. One widely used strategy is positive self-talk, defined as supportive, motivating, and task-focused internal dialogue that directs athletes' attention toward the demands they face. Positive self-talk functions as a cognitive mechanism that helps

athletes maintain focus, strengthen self-confidence, and regulate emotional responses during competition.

In the context of martial arts, positive self-talk is particularly relevant due to the nature of these sports, which require a balance between physical readiness and mental control. Research in sport psychology indicates that positive self-talk contributes to improved focus, reduced anxiety, and enhanced emotional control among athletes during competition (Amado et al., 2019; Heydari et al., 2018). These functions are directly related to athletes' performance in high-pressure situations, especially when they must remain calm, adaptive, and confident while facing dynamic competitive conditions (Kross et al., 2014; Mateos et al., 2024). Thus, positive self-talk serves not only as a form of motivation, but also as a psychological regulation tool that supports performance quality during competition.

Research on self-talk in sport psychology has been widely conducted. Numerous studies show that positive self-talk contributes to increased attentional focus, strengthened self-confidence, and improved management of emotions and anxiety across various sporting contexts (Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2014; Oliver & Jensen, 2025; Tod et al., 2011). Similar approaches have been applied across different sports, both individual and team-based, demonstrating that self-talk functions as an effective cognitive strategy for maintaining performance consistency and regulating psychological pressure during sporting activities (Galanis et al., 2016; Hardy et al., 2018; Viscosi et al., 2024). In martial arts specifically, existing research has largely examined self-talk as part of mental training programs or during preparatory phases such as training sessions and pre-competition periods, rather than during actual competitive situations (Latinjak et al., 2017, 2020, 2020; Latinjak, Hatzigeorgiadis, et al., 2019; Latinjak, Torregrossa, et al., 2019). Consequently, empirical evidence that specifically investigates the use and role of positive self-talk during competition among martial arts athletes remains limited. This gap highlights the need for research that not only measures performance outcomes, but also examines how positive self-talk operates as a psychological mechanism directly experienced by successful athletes.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the effects of positive self-talk on psychological aspects that support performance, particularly focus, self-confidence, and mental resilience, among martial arts athletes who have achieved competitive victories. This research contributes to

the field of sport psychology by expanding understanding of positive self-talk as a psychological regulation mechanism that supports focus, self-confidence, and emotional management in winning athletes, rather than merely as a general motivational strategy. By focusing on athletes who have achieved success, this study highlights how positive self-talk functions within real competitive experiences and high-pressure situations.

## **2. Materials and Method**

### ***Design***

This study employed a mixed-methods design to examine the psychological effects of positive self-talk among martial arts athletes who have achieved competitive victories. The mixed-methods approach was selected to integrate quantitative data describing patterns of positive self-talk use and related psychological functions with qualitative data exploring athletes' subjective experiences in competitive situations (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Clark, 2017). The quantitative component utilized a cross-sectional survey design, while the qualitative component was conducted through semi-structured interviews with selected participants. This design was considered appropriate for obtaining a comprehensive understanding of how positive self-talk functions as a psychological regulation mechanism in the context of competitive martial arts.

### ***Participants***

The population of this study consisted of collegiate-level martial arts athletes from arnis, karate, and taekwondo who were actively competing and registered at several public colleges and universities in the Philippines. The sample comprised 50 martial arts athletes selected using purposive sampling. The inclusion criteria were: (1) aged between 18 and 35 years, (2) having a minimum of two years of competitive experience, and (3) actively participating in collegiate-level competitions or open championships. For the qualitative phase, seven winning athletes were selected. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that participants had competitive experiences relevant to the objectives of the study (Palinkas et al., 2015).

### ***Instrument***

Quantitative data were collected using a researcher-developed questionnaire consisting of 15 items. The questionnaire was designed to measure the use of positive self-talk and its impact on psychological aspects that support athletic performance, including focus during competition, self-confidence,

emotional regulation, and performance under pressure. Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), as commonly applied in sport psychology research and the measurement of psychological constructs (Joshi et al., 2015). Prior to its use in the study, the questionnaire underwent an instrument feasibility assessment. The results indicated that all items met the criteria for adequacy and reliability, confirming that the instrument was valid and suitable for data collection. For qualitative data collection, a semi-structured interview guide was developed to explore athletes' experiences in using positive self-talk during training and competition, as well as their perceptions of the role of self-talk in maintaining focus, self-confidence, and emotional regulation during matches.

**Data Analysis**

Quantitative data were analyzed using a one-sample t-test. This test was employed to examine whether the mean scores of each psychological aspect were higher than the midpoint of the Likert scale. All quantitative analyses were conducted using SPSS software. Qualitative data obtained from the interviews were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. Interview transcripts were coded inductively to identify key themes related to self-talk practices, psychological regulation, and athletes' experiences during competition.

**3. Results and Discussion**

**Results**

The results of the study are presented in two main sections. The first section reports the quantitative findings regarding athletes' perceptions of the psychological effects of positive self-talk during competition. The second section presents the qualitative findings that describe the subjective experiences of winning athletes in using positive self-talk in competitive situations.

**3.1 Quantitative Result**

Quantitative analysis was conducted to describe athletes' perceptions of the use of positive self-talk and its functions in supporting psychological aspects that underpin performance during competition. Statistical analysis was performed using a one-sample t-test to compare the mean scores of each variable with the theoretical midpoint of the Likert scale (test value = 3), which represents a neutral response.

The results indicated that all measured psychological aspects had mean scores that were significantly higher than the scale midpoint. These findings suggest that athletes perceive positive self-

talk as an effective psychological strategy within the competitive context. Specifically, the variable of focus during competition obtained the highest mean score, followed by self-confidence, performance under pressure, and anxiety reduction. All test results showed statistically significant differences ( $p < 0.001$ ), indicating that positive self-talk is perceived to make a strong contribution to athletes' psychological regulation during competition.

**Table 1.** Results of One-Sample t-Test on Psychological Effects of Positive Self-Talk

Variable	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
Focus during competition	4.52	0.41	8.23	0.0011
Confidence	4.47	0.36	7.89	0.0012
Performance under pressure	4.38	0.48	6.95	0.0008
Anxiety reduction	4.20	0.55	5.80	0.0003

The results presented in Table 1 show that all measured psychological variables had mean scores above the midpoint of the Likert scale, namely 3. The variable focus during competition obtained the highest mean score ( $M = 4.52$ ,  $SD = 0.41$ ), followed by confidence ( $M = 4.47$ ,  $SD = 0.36$ ), performance under pressure ( $M = 4.38$ ,  $SD = 0.48$ ), and anxiety reduction ( $M = 4.20$ ,  $SD = 0.55$ ). The results of the one-sample t-test indicated that all variables differed significantly from the test value ( $p < 0.001$ ). These findings suggest that athletes consistently reported high levels of focus, self-confidence, performance under pressure, and anxiety reduction associated with the use of positive self-talk during competition.

**3.2 Qualitative Result**

Qualitative analysis was conducted to explore the subjective experiences of winning athletes in using positive self-talk during training and competition. Based on thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with seven winning athletes from arnis, karate, and taekwondo, several main themes emerged that illustrate the functions of positive self-talk in supporting athletes' psychological regulation during competitive situations. These themes reflect how positive self-talk is consciously used by athletes to maintain focus, enhance self-confidence, manage emotions, and sustain performance under pressure.

*Enhanced Mental Clarity and Focus*

Most athletes reported that positive self-talk played an important role in helping them maintain focus and mental clarity during competition, particularly in high-intensity and high-pressure situations. Self-talk was perceived as an internal reminder that redirected athletes' attention back to technique, strategy, and the task at hand, thereby reducing irrelevant and distracting thoughts.

Athletes explained that the use of self-talk helped them interrupt negative thought patterns and increase awareness of the present competitive moment.

One karate athlete described how self-talk helped maintain focus when facing a critical situation during a match: “During a national championship match, I started doubting myself before executing a difficult technique. I kept telling myself to stay calm and trust my training. That inner voice helped me focus, and everything felt clearer after that.” Similar experiences were also reported by arnis athletes, who emphasized that self-talk helped accelerate decision-making and maintain concentration in situations requiring rapid reactions. These findings indicate that positive self-talk functions as a cognitive tool that helps athletes sustain mental clarity and functional focus during competition.

#### *Strengthening Confidence and Self-Belief*

The second theme that emerged was the role of positive self-talk in strengthening self-confidence and belief in one’s own abilities. Athletes explained that positive affirmations helped them build a more stable sense of confidence, particularly when facing opponents with higher reputations or competing in important matches. Self-talk was used to affirm personal readiness and to remind athletes of their training processes and previous competitive experiences.

A taekwondo athlete stated: “I used to doubt myself even after winning a few matches. When I started using affirmations like ‘I am prepared’ and ‘I can do this,’ my confidence gradually improved, especially before stepping onto the mat.” Several athletes also mentioned that positive self-talk helped shift their attention away from fear of failure toward focusing on the execution of techniques and strategies. These findings indicate that positive self-talk plays a role in fostering adaptive and sustainable self-belief within competitive contexts.

#### *Emotional Regulation During Competition*

Emotional regulation emerged as another important theme that appeared consistently across the interviews. Athletes reported that positive self-talk helped them manage negative emotions such as anxiety, frustration, and tension that often arise during competition. Self-talk was used as an internal strategy to calm themselves and restore emotional control after making mistakes or experiencing pressure from opponents.

An arnis athlete explained: “When I was hit early in a match, fear started to creep in. I told myself to stay grounded and focus on my defense. That self-talk helped me calm down and regain control.” These findings indicate that positive self-talk functions as an internal coping mechanism that

helps athletes maintain emotional stability and prevents the escalation of negative emotions during competition.

#### *Supporting Performance Under Pressure*

The final theme relates to the role of positive self-talk in helping athletes maintain performance under situational pressure. Athletes stated that self-talk enabled them to remain consistent in executing techniques and making appropriate decisions even in situations that determined the outcome of a match. Self-talk was used to shift focus away from the score or competitive consequences toward the technical tasks that needed to be performed.

A taekwondo athlete shared: “During a crucial match when I was behind on points, I reminded myself to focus on the next move, not the score. That helped me perform better and eventually turn the match around.” These findings indicate that positive self-talk not only influences athletes’ internal psychological states but also supports their readiness to cope with competitive pressure and maintain performance quality during competition.

#### *Discussion*

The findings of this study indicate that positive self-talk is strongly perceived by martial arts athletes as a psychological strategy that supports various aspects underpinning performance during competition. The quantitative results show that all measured variables, namely focus during competition, self-confidence, performance under pressure, and anxiety reduction, had mean scores that were significantly higher than the midpoint of the scale. This suggests that athletes consistently perceive positive self-talk as an effective psychological regulation mechanism within the context of competitive martial arts. The high scores obtained for the focus during competition variable indicate that self-talk plays a crucial role in helping athletes maintain attention on tasks, strategies, and techniques, which are essential elements in sports that require rapid responses and high precision.

These findings are consistent with theoretical frameworks in sport psychology that conceptualize self-talk as a cognitive strategy for directing attention and enhancing mental control in high-pressure situations (Corcoran & Steele, 2024; Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2014). The quantitative results showing high levels of self-confidence and performance under pressure further support the view that positive self-talk functions not only as a motivational affirmation but also as a tool for maintaining athletes’ psychological readiness when facing competitive demands. In martial arts, where small mistakes can have significant consequences for match outcomes, the ability to remain confident and perform consistently under pressure is a critical

determinant of performance quality (Niering et al., 2023). Therefore, positive self-talk can be understood as part of a self-regulation process that helps athletes maintain performance consistency in competitive conditions.

The qualitative findings provide deeper insight into the quantitative results by revealing how positive self-talk is directly experienced by winning athletes during competition. Athletes described self-talk as a form of internal dialogue that helps create mental clarity and reduce distractions, particularly during critical moments of a match. These experiences indicate that self-talk functions as an internal mechanism for directing focus toward the process rather than external pressures such as scores, opponents, or outcome expectations. This supports the quantitative findings that identified focus as the highest-scoring aspect and illustrates how this function is manifested in real competitive experiences.

In addition to focus, the qualitative results also emphasize the role of positive self-talk in strengthening athletes' self-confidence. Athletes reported that the use of affirmations helped reduce self-doubt and shift attention away from fear of failure toward confidence in their preparation and abilities. These findings reinforce the quantitative results showing high levels of self-confidence associated with the use of positive self-talk. In the context of winning athletes, self-confidence is not only related to belief in technical ability but also to mental readiness to face competitive situations that are often unpredictable. Thus, positive self-talk plays a role in maintaining the adaptive mindset required to sustain performance at high levels of competition.

Emotional regulation emerged as a key aspect linking the quantitative and qualitative findings of this study. Quantitatively, anxiety reduction showed a significant score, while qualitatively, athletes described self-talk as a tool for calming themselves when experiencing emotional pressure such as tension, frustration, or fear. These experiences suggest that positive self-talk functions as an internal coping mechanism that helps athletes manage negative emotions without disrupting focus and technical execution. In martial arts, the ability to regulate emotions is crucial, as unstable emotional states can directly affect decision-making quality and motor responses (Ruiz et al., 2017). Overall, the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrates that positive self-talk serves as a complex and multifunctional psychological regulation mechanism within the context of martial arts. Self-talk not only supports cognitive aspects such as focus and self-confidence but also contributes to emotional management and athletes' readiness to cope with situational pressure. These findings extend understanding of the role of positive self-talk among winning

athletes by emphasizing that success in competition is supported not only by physical and technical abilities but also by psychological strategies that help athletes maintain mental stability and performance consistency in challenging competitive situations.

The results of this study suggest that positive self-talk can be systematically integrated as part of athletes' psychological training programs, particularly to enhance focus, self-confidence, and emotional regulation during competition (Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2014; Latinjak et al., 2020). For coaches and sport practitioners, positive self-talk can be developed as a structured mental skill, not merely as a spontaneous strategy, but as part of pre-competition preparation and post-competition evaluation routines. Furthermore, these findings reinforce the view that positive self-talk functions as a complex psychological regulation mechanism that supports athletes' mental readiness in coping with competitive pressure, particularly among athletes competing at higher levels. Despite the meaningful contributions of this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. The quantitative findings are based on athletes' subjective perceptions and therefore do not fully represent causal relationships with objective performance outcomes. In addition, the limited number of participants in the qualitative phase and the focus on winning athletes restrict the generalizability of the findings.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This study concludes that positive self-talk plays an important role as a psychological regulation mechanism that supports the performance of winning martial arts athletes in competitive contexts. Positive self-talk is perceived to strengthen focus during competition, enhance self-confidence, facilitate emotional regulation, and maintain performance under pressure, thereby supporting athletes' mental stability in challenging competitive situations. These findings indicate that positive self-talk functions not only as a motivational strategy but also as an integrated cognitive and emotional tool within athletes' competitive experiences. Therefore, positive self-talk can be considered an important component of mental training for martial arts athletes. Future research is recommended to employ longitudinal designs or intervention-based experiments to more thoroughly examine the causal relationship between positive self-talk and objective performance outcomes, as well as to involve more diverse samples to enhance the generalizability of the findings.

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## 6. Author Contributions

ALM was responsible for the research design, instrument development, data collection and analysis, and drafting the initial manuscript. JCM contributed to the development of the conceptual framework, interpretation of findings, refinement of the analysis, and critical revision of the manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

## 7. Conflict of Interest

The authors state that this study was conducted in an objective and independent manner. There were no financial incentives, institutional pressures, or personal interests that could have influenced the research process, including participant recruitment, data analysis, interpretation of results, or reporting of findings.

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