

Types, Sources, and Debilitating Factors of Sport-Confidence in Elite Early Adolescent
Academy Soccer Players

1 Abstract

2 This study provided an original contribution to the literature by examining elite early
3 adolescent academy soccer players sport-confidence needs. Pre-interview booklets and
4 individual semi-structured interviews were used as multiple sources of qualitative data to
5 identify the types, sources, and debilitating factors of sport-confidence in a large sample (n =
6 28) of players within the youth development phase of the Elite Player Performance Plan (The
7 Premier League, 2011). An abductive approach to hierarchical content analysis found three
8 types of sport-confidence: Skill execution, physical factors, and psychological factors. These
9 types were generated from five sources of sport-confidence: Accomplishments, social
10 support, preparation, vicarious experience, and innate factors. Five confidence debilitating
11 factors: Lack of social support, poor performances, poor preparation, pressure and
12 expectations, and injury/illness were also identified. Practitioners are advised to widen the
13 sport-confidence types experienced by elite adolescent performers and broaden the sources of
14 sport-confidence such performers use to gain belief.

15 *Key Words:* Youth Sport, Sport Psychology, Qualitative, Hierarchical Content Analysis

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17 This study examined elite academy soccer players sport-confidence. Players were confident
18 about: Skill execution, physical and psychological factors. Players gained confidence from:
19 Accomplishments, social support, preparation, vicarious experience, and innate factors.
20 Players confidence was reduced by: A lack of social support, poor performances, poor
21 preparation, pressure and expectations, and injury/illness.

1 Types, Sources, and Debilitating Factors of Sport-Confidence in Early Adolescent Academy
2 Soccer Players

3 Confidence has been recognized as a critical psychological characteristic influencing
4 the development of elite sports performance (e.g., Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002; Gould,
5 Dieffenbach, & Moffet, 2002; Gould & Maynard, 2009) with a number of studies associating
6 high levels of confidence with a range of desirable cognitive, affective, and behavioral
7 responses (e.g., Jones & Hanton, 2001; Hays, Thomas, Maynard, & Bawden, 2009; Vealey,
8 Hayashi, Garner-Holman, & Giacobbi, 1998). To date, two main approaches have been used
9 to explore confidence related concepts in sport; Bandura's self-efficacy theory (Bandura,
10 1977, 1986, 1997; see Feltz, Short, & Sullivan 2008 for a review) and Vealey and colleagues'
11 models of sport-confidence (Vealey, 1986; Vealey et al., 1998; see Vealey & Chase, 2008 for
12 a review). Although Bandura's self-efficacy theory has been extensively studied within sport,
13 it was not originally intended for use within sports settings. Consequently, Vealey and
14 colleagues (e.g., Vealey, 1986; Vealey et al., 1998; Vealey, 2001; Vealey and Chase, 2008)
15 have offered an iteratively evolving model of sport-confidence to provide a more sport-
16 specific conceptualization of confidence.

17 The most recent iterations of this model (i.e., post 1998) shared greater similarities
18 with self-efficacy theory and focused on the source domains performers used to derive belief.
19 The revised model also more closely resembled a social-cognitive approach by recognizing
20 the influence personal, demographic, and organizational factors had on the manifestation of
21 sport-confidence (Vealey & Chase, 2008). To help identify the sources of sport-confidence,
22 Vealey et al. (1998) developed the Sources of Sport-Confidence Questionnaire (SSCQ) which
23 measured nine separate sources of sport-confidence. These sources were categorized into
24 three broad domains: Achievement (i.e., confidence derived from mastery and demonstration
25 of ability); self-regulation (i.e., confidence derived from physical/mental preparation and
26 physical self-presentation); and social climate (i.e., confidence derived from social support,

1 vicarious experience, coaches' leadership, environmental comfort, and situational
2 favorableness). A source of sport-confidence was defined as a determinant or antecedent of
3 an athlete's sport-confidence belief. Vealey et al. also noted how individual athlete
4 characteristics (e.g., gender) and the organizational culture of the sport (e.g., competitive
5 level) influenced the development and manifestation of sport-confidence. Subsequent
6 research has supported the idea that individual athlete characteristics influence sport-
7 confidence via athletes' goal orientations (Magyar & Feltz, 2003), and notably in the context
8 of the current study, their age (Wilson, Sullivan, Myers, & Feltz, 2004).

9 Building on her 1998 framework, Vealey (2001) published the integrative model of
10 sport-confidence which provided a more holistic overview of the reconceptualized model of
11 sport-confidence. Vealey (2001) tentatively proposed that sport-confidence existed as a
12 multidimensional construct and that performers possess multiple types of sport-confidence
13 that were derived from the source domains. Vealey recognized her 2001 framework was
14 exploratory and that it should act as a starting point for future sport-confidence research. In
15 response, Hays and colleagues conducted a qualitative program of research with a sample of
16 world class performers suggesting that the organizational culture of world class sport
17 influenced the development and manifestation of sport-confidence (see Hays, Maynard,
18 Thomas & Bawden 2007; Hays et al., 2009). Hays et al. (2007) supported Vealey's proposal
19 that sport-confidence was a multidimensional construct by identifying the sport-confidence
20 types and sources salient to world class athletes. Six types of sport-confidence emerged (i.e.,
21 skill execution, achievement, physical and psychological factors, superiority to opposition,
22 tactical awareness, and athlete specific factors). Hays et al. (2007) also provided conceptual
23 clarity regarding sport-confidence types and defined these as evidence-based belief systems
24 grounded within performers' sources of sport-confidence. Nine sources of sport-confidence
25 salient to world class performers were reported (i.e., preparation, performance
26 accomplishments, coaching, social support, innate factors, experience, competitive

1 advantage, trust, and self-awareness). Some sources were unique to this group, whereas
2 others overlapped with those previously reported (e.g., Bandura, 1997; Vealey et al., 1998)
3 and there was an overriding consensus that the world class performers derived their sport-
4 confidence from preparation, performance accomplishment, coaching, and social support.

5 Beyond the identification of sport-confidence types and sources, Hays et al. (2009)
6 examined the role of sport-confidence in relation to the cognitive, affective, and behavioral
7 responses it elicits, and identified the factors responsible for debilitating sport-confidence
8 within the subculture of world class sport. The resulting confidence debilitating factors were
9 categorized into six categories representing poor performances, injury/illness, poor
10 preparation, coaching, pressure and expectations, and psychological factors. The authors
11 noted that these confidence debilitating factors appeared to be directly related to the sport-
12 confidence sources identified in Hays et al.'s (2007) study. This coherency highlighted a need
13 for researchers and practitioners to consider confidence debilitating factors alongside sources
14 and types when attempting to gain a holistic understanding of an athlete's sport-confidence.

15 Collectively, Hays and colleagues' work (2007; 2009) contributed towards achieving
16 a more in-depth theoretical understanding of sport-confidence within a high-performance
17 elite sport culture. Specifically, it was established that demographic and personality
18 characteristics (e.g., gender and competitive orientation), as well as organizational culture
19 (e.g., competitive level) influenced the types of sport-confidence athletes possessed and the
20 sources upon which such beliefs were based (Vealey & Chase, 2008). However, the majority
21 of this understanding emerged from athletes who have already achieved elite or world class
22 status (e.g., Hays et al., 2007; 2009) and cannot be easily generalized beyond these
23 organizational sub-cultures. For this reason, research is required to examine sport-confidence
24 in athletes who are yet to reach elite or world class status. For example, Hays, Thomas, Butt,
25 and Maynard (2010) suggested that future research should be more proactive and explore the

1 confidence needs of elite junior athletes to ensure they are using the sources and types of
2 confidence necessary to develop a broad and holistic foundational belief system.

3 Although existing sport-confidence research has acknowledged that demographic,
4 personality and organizational factors influence the sources of sport-confidence used by
5 collegiate, world class, and masters athletes (e.g., Hays et al., 2007; Vealey et al., 1998;
6 Wilson et al., 2004), the sport-confidence needs of competitive junior athletes are yet to be
7 explored. This is despite self-efficacy research in academic settings indicating children and
8 adolescents often primarily base their efficacy expectations on a relatively narrow source
9 base. For example, in their systematic review of 30 years of self-efficacy research in schools,
10 Usher and Pajares (2008) noted that not only do mastery experiences consistently emerge as
11 the most powerful influencing source of self-efficacy for children and adolescents, they are
12 the most salient source of efficacy identified by these groups. Similar findings can be found
13 in some self-efficacy research in sport and/or physical education settings. For example, Chase
14 (1998) reported adolescent non elite athletes relied upon performance accomplishments
15 (mastery) and feedback from significant others to source their belief; with no support being
16 evident for two of Bandura's (1977) sources of self-efficacy in such participant groups (i.e.,
17 imaginal experiences and physical states). Other self and collective efficacy research in
18 adolescent non elite sport contexts (e.g., Chase, Feltz and Lirgg; 2003) and with respect to
19 relation-inferred self-efficacy (e.g., Saville et al., 2014) provided some support for the idea
20 that younger performers may rely on fewer sources of efficacy than their adult counterparts to
21 shape their efficacy expectations. Although such findings are important, they have limited
22 practical application to junior elite sport and do not contribute directly to furthering
23 understanding within a sport-confidence conceptualization to belief. Consequently, there
24 remains a need to examine sport-confidence in junior athletes participating in the subculture
25 of elite sport. At a conceptual level, such research will help clarify how some organizational
26 factors influence the manifestation of sport-confidence, broaden our understanding of the

1 multidimensional nature of sport-confidence and provide certainty around the sport-
2 confidence sources adolescent performers use to gain belief. Furthermore, this would help
3 provide evidence-based guidelines for practitioners regarding how to develop and maintain
4 sport-confidence with young athletes (see Vealey, Chase, & Cooley, 2017). Therefore, the
5 purpose of this study was to identify the types, sources, and debilitating factors of sport-
6 confidence in early adolescent elite academy soccer players. The rationale for exploring
7 sport-confidence within soccer was twofold. First, within professional soccer academies in
8 the UK, a player's development pathway is underpinned by the 'Elite Player Performance
9 Plan' (EPPP; The Premier League, 2011). This allows aspects of junior athletes' sport-
10 confidence to be explored within a clearly defined organizational subculture and pathway
11 emended within elite adolescent sport. Second, following the adoption of EPPP, integration
12 of sport psychology services has been more prevalent in soccer academies leading calls for
13 further systematic enquiry on the psychological development of, and environment
14 surrounding, elite junior soccer players (Mills, Butt, Maynard, & Harwood, 2012).

15 **Method**

16 The study was conducted from a post-positivistic philosophical position which
17 recognises that some aspects of the social world cannot be directly measured, but seeks to
18 retain an objective approach that is free from bias (Weed, 2009). In essence, post-positivists
19 loosen the strict positivistic belief in value-free inquiry, yet still embrace traditional
20 evaluation criteria and often quantify their data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Krane & Baird,
21 2005). The following sections outline how decisions made throughout the study are
22 consistent with the assumptions that underpin post-positivism.

23 **Participants**

24 A purposeful sample of 28 early adolescent elite academy soccer players (12-15
25 years; $M = 14.28$, $SD = 1.22$) participated in the study. This developmental stage was chosen
26 as it represented the adolescent phase of development, aligned with the final years of the

1 soccer players academy developmental period (Lidor & Ziv, 2012). All four main player
2 positions were represented: Goalkeepers ($n = 2$), defenders ($n = 10$), midfielders ($n = 12$), and
3 forwards ($n = 4$). Participants had playing experience of between 6 and 10 years ($M = 8.1$, SD
4 $= 1.4$) and had been part of an academy for between 0.3 and 6 years ($M = 3.4$, $SD = 1.6$). All
5 28 players were signed to a professional club operating at least a category two status academy
6 within the EPPP (The Premier League, 2011). The ethics board of the lead author's
7 University provided ethical approval for the study. Initial voluntary informed written consent
8 was provided by all gatekeepers (e.g., clubs and parents) before speaking with potential
9 participants. Potential participants were told about the research project and were given the
10 opportunity to speak with their parents or guardian and the researchers in order to gain a full
11 understanding of the study. Voluntary informed written consent was then provided by
12 participants before the research was conducted.

13 **Data Collection**

14 **Pre-interview booklet.** Drawing upon the notion of 'elicitation tools' (see Smith &
15 Sparkes, 2016), the pre-interview booklet was designed for three reasons: First, it encouraged
16 participants to reflect upon their experiences in relation to their sport-confidence. Second, it
17 allowed the participants to familiarize themselves with the type of questions which were to be
18 asked during the interview. Third, it instructed participants to think about and write down
19 answers in relation to their general sport-confidence, career periods of high and low sport-
20 confidence, sources and types of sport-confidence, and confidence debilitating factors. The
21 pre interview booklet was designed in line with Hays et al.'s (2010) confidence profiling
22 technique, an appropriate approach when seeking ideographic detail on athletes sport-
23 confidence needs (see supplementary file 1 for a copy of the pre interview booklet). The
24 written notes from each participant's pre-interview booklet were used to tailor each
25 individual interview guide and were integrated into the data analysis process.

1 **Interview guide.** Given the exploratory nature of this research, a semi-structured
2 interview guide was designed to allow probing of further views and opinions, generate in-
3 depth answers, and create a consistent level of depth across the interviews (Patton, 2002).
4 The questions were developed based on those used by Hays and colleagues (2007; 2009) and
5 the structure of the guide was based upon Hays et al.'s (2010) confidence profiling technique
6 (see supplementary file 1 for a copy of the interview guide). This ensured participants' types,
7 sources, and confidence debilitating factors were explored in detail at an ideographic level.
8 The guide consisted of six sections. Sections one and two introduced the broad purpose of the
9 study, how data would be used, outlined confidentiality, and asked general introductory
10 questions. Section three explored participants views on general sport-confidence (e.g., In
11 your pre interview booklet you used [soccer player's name] as an example of a confident
12 player, can you describe what you think he/she is confident about?). Section four sought
13 detail on the participants specific types and sources of sport-confidence that they identified in
14 their pre-interview booklet (e.g., Why is [type of sport-confidence] an important thing for you
15 to be confident about? Where does your confidence in [type of sport-confidence] come
16 from?). Following this, participants were asked about their types and sources of confidence
17 during a career period of high sport-confidence (e.g., You wrote in your pre-interview
18 booklet/we explored in the interview that your most confident career period was [career
19 period], can you think of a specific match during that period and describe anything that
20 happened during the match that made your confidence increase?). The penultimate section
21 explored confidence debilitating factors by asking about a career period of low confidence to
22 help facilitate this process. The final section reviewed the interview and enabled any
23 important information that might have been overlooked during the process.

24 **Procedure**

25 Following parental/guardian consent and participant consent, 28 academy players
26 from two different academies completed both the pre-interview booklet and an individual

1 interview (i.e., data triangulation across multiple sources of information). All interviews were
2 conducted face-to-face at the participant's club academy training center, were recorded in
3 their entirety, and lasted between 45-67 minutes. One week after their interview participants
4 were provided with their transcript and results and confirmed that they represented an
5 accurate reflection of their views on their sport-confidence (i.e., member checks). Following
6 this, participants were provided with a workbook titled: 'Developing Sport-Confidence
7 through Preparation, Achievement, Self-Awareness and Mental Skills' based on the findings
8 from the current study.

9 **Data Analysis**

10 Consistent with post-positivistic assumptions, qualitative data was analyzed using an
11 abductive (i.e., inductive and deductive) approach to hierarchical content analysis. It is the
12 procedures used in hierarchical content analysis which align with the post-positivistic
13 commitment to reliability, objectivity, trustworthiness and a psychological reality which can
14 be found and known independently of the researcher (Smith & Sparkes, 2012). Following the
15 step-by-step procedures for conducting a hierarchical content analysis outlined by Sparkes
16 and Smith (2013), interviews were firstly transcribed verbatim yielding 353 pages of single-
17 spaced text. Pre-interview booklets and transcripts were then independently studied in detail
18 by the second and fourth authors for content familiarity. Following this, transcripts were
19 independently analyzed by the same authors and themes representing confidence type(s),
20 source(s), or debilitating factor(s) were identified and labelled. Specifically, raw data
21 responses were organized into more meaningful sub-themes (e.g., confidence derived from
22 the use of mental skills), themes (e.g., confidence derived from psychological preparation),
23 and categories (e.g., confidence derived from preparation; Hays et al., 2007). It is important
24 to note that although the raw data themes were generated inductively, deductive analysis was
25 used to promote consistency regarding terminology within the conceptual area and previously
26 published literature (e.g., Vealey et al., 1998; Hays et al., 2007; Hays et al., 2009). Data was

1 then re-examined to verify that all themes and categories were represented, before the first
2 and third author reviewed, agreed and confirmed the analysis during a face-to-face discussion
3 between the authors. Finally, tables and figures were generated to display the hierarchical
4 nature of the themes. Themes with higher frequency represent sources, types, or confidence
5 debilitating factors that elite early adolescent academy soccer players have in common.

6 **Quality Criteria**

7 In line with our post-positivistic approach, a ‘criteriological’ approach to evaluating
8 qualitative work can be used to judge the current study (Sparkes & Smith, 2009; Smith &
9 Sparkes, 2012). Although some have criticized this approach (see Smith & McGannon,
10 2018), Smith and Sparkes (2012) noted, hierarchical content analysis is positioned within a
11 criteriological standpoint. This criteriological standpoint, and the specific techniques
12 employed in relation to each criterion (see below), were used as a way to remain objective
13 rather than to claim that objectivity has been definitively achieved (see Krane & Baird, 2005,
14 p.90). Specifically, the current study can be judged using Tracy’s (2010) universal criteria
15 which was synthesized from others’ work on the markers of quality in qualitative research,
16 and includes: (a) worthy topic (i.e., relevant, timely, significant, interesting); (b) rich rigor
17 (i.e., appropriate sample, appropriate procedures, sufficient data derived from multiple
18 sources of data [pre-interview booklets and interviews] to support claims), (c) sincerity (e.g.,
19 researcher transparency), (d) credibility (e.g., data triangulation, multivocality, member
20 checks), (e) resonance (e.g., transferability), (f) significant contribution (e.g., heuristic and/or
21 practically significant research), (g) ethics (e.g., procedural ethics, existing ethics / sharing of
22 results), and (h) meaningful coherence (e.g., meaningfully interconnects literature, research
23 questions, findings, and interpretations with each other).

24 **Results**

25 The results are presented in three separate sections. First, the types (i.e., what players
26 were confident about) of sport-confidence are presented. Second, the sources of sport-

1 confidence from which these beliefs were derived are detailed. The final section outlines the
2 factors responsible for debilitating players' sport-confidence. Each section includes
3 supportive evidence via direct quotations from the transcripts and a figure representing the
4 raw data themes, sub-themes, themes, and categories.

5 **Types of Sport-Confidence**

6 The types of sport-confidence identified were categorized into three categories: Skill
7 execution, physical factors, and psychological factors (see Figure 1).

8 **Skill execution.** Skill execution was identified by all 28 participants as a type of
9 sport-confidence (see Table 1). Skill execution referred to the soccer players' beliefs in their
10 ability to successfully execute the physical/technical and tactical skills required to fulfill the
11 demands of their sport. All 28 players spoke about the confidence they possessed in their
12 ability to execute physical/technical skills. For example, participant two stated: "I'm
13 confident about passing over different ranges, distances, 10 yards, 20 yards, then ranges up to
14 40, 50 yards". Similarly, another participant explained: "I'm confident that I'll score when I
15 go 1v1 with a defender and that I can beat him and then go through on goal" (Player 13). In
16 addition, 21 players were also confident about their tactical skill execution such as awareness
17 of others, space, and positioning, reading the game, and versatility for a range of positions or
18 formations. The following quote captures these points:

19 Since I have been at [Football Club] I have played every position across defense
20 and midfield and I think I have had to adapt to different positions and I have had
21 to adapt a lot...like different positioning, if I am asked to play a different
22 position I know what I am doing, I am confident about that (Player 28).

23 **Physical factors.** Seventeen out of the 28 players identified physical factors such as
24 physical work rate, speed and agility, and height and build to be effective as types of
25 confidence. As one player explained: "Most academy players have something unique about
26 them that they are confident about...some people have speed, some people have

1 dribbling...but what I have is strength” (Player 20). Six participants highlighted physical
2 work rate as a type of confidence: “...because I’m not naturally as good as other players in
3 my team, my work rate, so how hard I work makes up for it I think... that physical ability I
4 have is something I’m confident about” (Player 10).

5 **Psychological factors.** Psychological factors were identified as a type of confidence by
6 13 of the 28 participants. This type of confidence referred to the players’ confidence about
7 their ability to handle pressure and communicate. For example, one player stated: “I’m
8 confident about my communication because that’s one thing that I have always been strong
9 at...I never stop talking throughout the game” (Player 18). Leadership skills were also a type
10 of confidence for seven of the players. This point is captured in the following quote from
11 player 14: “I’m a confident leader on and off the pitch, I motivate others, get them to
12 persevere...I think I’m very good in certain situations on the pitch, for example if we’re not
13 playing well, I know to weather the storm so to speak and get through”.

14 **Sources of Sport-Confidence**

15 Five sources of sport-confidence were identified in the current study. These included:
16 Accomplishments, social support, preparation, vicarious experience, and innate ability (See
17 Figure 2). However, as Table 2 shows, the players mostly gained their confidence from
18 sources associated with accomplishments and social support.

19 **Accomplishments.** Accomplishments were identified as a source of sport-confidence
20 by all participants. This source related to competition accomplishments, training
21 accomplishments, demonstration of ability, recognition, and selection. All but two players
22 gained confidence from competition accomplishments, with players noting competition
23 performance related accomplishments ($n = 26$) rather than competition outcomes ($n = 7$) as
24 the key source domain. The importance of competition performance related accomplishments
25 is captured within the following quote: “Once I’m passing well I normally play well...when
26 I’ve put 3,4,5 in a row together that’s when I start to grow in confidence...that’s like the

1 heartbeat of my confidence passing” (Player 26). Alongside competition accomplishments,
2 training accomplishments were a source of confidence for 27 of the 28 the players. For
3 example, one player described the importance of improving from training:

4 We were working on it [transition from defense to attack] in training and that gave me
5 confidence to play as a left back, and I took that into the game, and it worked well, so
6 we played out from the back, got forward a lot... lots of underlaps and overlaps which
7 came from what we practiced in training (Player 7).

8 Twenty-one participants also gained confidence from demonstrating ability over opponents or
9 their own team-mates. The following quote illustrates how demonstrating superiority over
10 team mates ($n = 10$) was considered vital in the process of being retained by the academy:

11 I knew those next two years were vitally important for my football career and also
12 because quite a few people didn’t get the contract and got released, so it made me feel
13 confident and privileged to be one of those players who did get a contract (Player 14).

14 Finally, recognition (e.g., being recognized as a leader; $n = 18$) and selection (i.e., selected for
15 international squads; $n = 14$) were also noted by several players as being important
16 accomplishment related sources of confidence (see Figure 2).

17 **Social support.** All 28 participants gained confidence from social support.
18 Specifically, esteem, informational, emotional, and tangible support were all identified as
19 sources of sport-confidence (see Figure 2 and Table 2). Coaches, team-mates, and family
20 and friends, were consistently noted as key providers of esteem support ($n = 28$). The
21 following quote illustrates how a player gained confidence from the esteem-based support
22 he received from his coach: “Mainly a pat on the back from my coach or my manager,
23 because that shows you’ve done well and that’s what every player wants, their coach to
24 acknowledge what you’ve done, so that is the main thing for my confidence” (Player 15).

25 Twenty-one players also noted the importance of receiving informational support;
26 coaches, family and friends, and team-mates were again identified as key providers of

1 this support. For example, player seven explained how informational support from the
2 coaches during a review session was a source of confidence:

3 You have a 6-week sort of plan with [club's name], and after that you get a review
4 from the coaches and they tell you what you need to work on, and how you can
5 improve and what players to look at to improve which helps my confidence.

6 Another academy player explained how receiving informational support during a match from
7 a coach improved both his confidence and performance:

8 At [Premier League Team] I wasn't playing that well and most managers, with me being
9 captain, would have left me on but he took me off, sat me down, and told me why he took
10 me off and what he felt I could and should have done, that gave me confidence, and when
11 he put me back on I felt I played better because he told me exactly what he wanted me to
12 do and that gave me confidence to do well when he put me back on (Player 24).

13 Emotional support ($n = 11$) (e.g., support from teammates after a mistake) and tangible support
14 ($n = 5$) were less frequently cited sources of confidence (see Figure 2).

15 **Preparation.** Preparation was identified as a source of confidence by 23 of the 28
16 participants. Twenty-one participants gained confidence from physical and technical
17 preparation including good physical/technical training, team preparation, identifying and
18 rectifying weaknesses, nutrition, and skill repetition. One player explained the importance of
19 team preparation:

20 On the Friday we'll train for an hour and then we'll come in for the last hour or half
21 hour and they'll [coaches] speak to us about triggers and when we need to press, when
22 we need to drop off so that gives us confidence (Player 13).

23 Players also highlighted the importance of a good warm up prior to matches: "We do a
24 running warm up first, and then we go into a passing drill and then into a possession drill, so
25 if that warm up is a good tempo I feel confident, I take that into the game" (Player 11). In
26 contrast to physical and technical preparation, only 14 players gained confidence from

1 psychological preparation and just four players engaged in holistic preparation (e.g., a
2 combination of preparation related to sleep, video analysis, tactical analysis). Despite this, the
3 following quote from a player describes how important holistic preparation was as a source of
4 confidence:

5 It's important to get a good breakfast, knowing that I've done everything in the right
6 order knowing that I haven't missed anything out that normally makes me feel
7 confident...I get up and do exercises just to liven myself up, then I have my
8 breakfast, then I do a few more exercises then I picture myself in the game, make
9 sure everything is ready to go, and then I will do it all again in the changing room
10 (Player 26).

11 **Vicarious experience.** Vicarious experience was identified as a source of confidence
12 for 18 out of the 28 participants. Specifically, participants gained confidence from watching
13 teammates executing a skill successfully. The following quote from player 28 captures this
14 point: "If I see someone else make a good touch I think I can do that...like I'm confident that
15 if I can get into position like that I can make a touch like that". In addition to this, 15 players
16 gained confidence from modelling aspects of their game on professional soccer players or
17 specific role models. One of these participants explained how this impacted his confidence:
18 "Observing better players and learning from what they do gives you confidence when you go
19 away and do what they do, maybe not to the same level but you can take parts of their game
20 and put it into yours" (Player 8).

21 **Innate factors.** Eight of the 28 participants identified innate factors as a source of
22 confidence. These players believed that they were born with either a natural ability to play
23 soccer or innate factors which gave them an advantage or edge within soccer (i.e., speed,
24 natural understanding of the game, or competitiveness). One participant explained the
25 foundations of this belief:

1 I guess that it has always been one of my strong points since I was three, playing
2 football (soccer) has just been one of the things that came naturally to me so that gives
3 me confidence...obviously I have to try hard at it now but it's one of those things that I
4 was naturally good at (Player 17).

5 Similarly, another player added: "I've always been a good passer even when I wasn't here (at
6 the academy), I've become a better passer now but I've always had it, its natural" (Player 9).

7 **Confidence Debilitating Factors**

8 As Figure 3 shows the confidence debilitating factors identified by the participants
9 were classified into five categories: Lack of social support, poor performances, poor
10 preparation, pressure and expectations, and injury/illness. Poor performances and a lack of
11 social support were the most frequently cited confidence debilitating factors (see Table 3).

12 **Lack of social support.** All players highlighted how a lack of social support reduced
13 their confidence. This lack of social support centered predominantly on insufficient provision
14 of esteem and informational support. Twenty-six players indicated a lack of esteem support
15 from coaches, team-mates, family and friends, and significant others as factors responsible
16 for debilitating their sport-confidence. The following quote highlights how a lack of esteem
17 support from team-mates debilitated confidence: "Once I lose the ball, and if I lose it again I
18 would hear a team-mate moaning and getting angry, so that makes me lose my confidence
19 and just not want to play because I don't want to get worse" (Player 23). Another player
20 highlighted how this impacted on his confidence when he moved up an age group:

21 There is more pressure when you are playing up (an age group) because you have to
22 impress the others ...When I last played up a few boys kept putting me down and if I
23 didn't make a good pass they would shout at me which put my confidence down
24 (Player 27).

25 Similarly, 18 of the players highlighted how a lack of esteem support from coaches (e.g.,
26 negative feedback, lack of trust) debilitated their confidence. For example, one player stated:

1 “There’s been times where I haven’t done things very well and they’ve said look you need to
2 do this better, so that would knock my confidence a little” (Player 11). A lack of esteem
3 support from family and friends (e.g., family arguments, being left out of friendship groups)
4 was also detrimental to players confidence. One player explained how negative feedback
5 from his father had an adverse impact on his confidence: “So if I’ve had like a bad game, or a
6 bad training session then they’ll [parents] say like that wasn’t good enough and are we
7 wasting our time” (Player 12). Furthermore, six players indicated a lack of informational
8 support from coaches ($n = 5$) and/or the support team ($n = 1$) debilitated their confidence. The
9 following quote captures the way in which this impacted on players’ confidence: “It was
10 when I got moved position, to a position I wasn’t familiar with, and I didn’t get much
11 information to know what I had to do, so I sort of got on with it, but my confidence went
12 down and down” (Player 1).

13 **Poor performances.** All players identified poor performances such as: Poor skill
14 execution, poor form and selection worries, inferiority to the opposition, and poor outcomes
15 as confidence debilitating factors. One participant explained how poor skill execution
16 debilitated his confidence:

17 At center half if I get the ball and lose it, like numerous times, I will lose
18 confidence and I just won’t want the ball at all because I will think to myself if I
19 get it I will just lose the ball again...like playing out (from defense) I won’t
20 want the ball I will just tell the goalkeeper or whoever has got it to miss me out
21 or I won’t call for the ball and I will gradually fade out of the game (Player 24).

22 In addition to poor skill execution, 17 players cited poor form and selection worries such as
23 being out of form, playing out of position, and not starting games as debilitating their
24 confidence. The following quote from player 9 captures these points: “I was playing in a
25 position I didn’t want to play in, so they moved me to center back then I wasn’t starting
26 anymore, so it knocked my confidence”. Finally, 14 players identified a sense of inferiority to

1 the opposition could debilitate their confidence: “If the striker got the better of you, like if he
2 managed to pick the ball up, turn and get past you and go and score a goal, if he was
3 dominating me that would make me low on confidence” (Player 11).

4 **Poor preparation.** Poor preparation was identified as a confidence debilitating factor
5 by 19 of the 28 participants. Poor preparation included poor physical/technical,
6 organizational, and psychological preparation. Player 8 described how poor
7 physical/technical preparation could debilitate his confidence:

8 I didn't prepare the same way I usually do, like practicing properly in the warm-up. I
9 missed out my passing drills, 5-10 minutes of passing, so I kept giving the ball away in the
10 game, my [passing] accuracy was off, so I felt less confident”.

11 Player 27 also explained how a combination of poor nutritional, organizational, and physical
12 preparation was detrimental to his confidence:

13 If I don't eat the right stuff I can worry...every Friday I have a pizza, it worries
14 me if I'm going to play good or bad and then if I don't do my homework or I
15 forget sometimes, or don't have time I do worry, and then just in the warm up if
16 I do badly that makes me worry and reduces my confidence for the match.

17 **Pressure and expectations.** Nineteen of the 28 participants identified pressure and
18 expectation as a confidence debilitating factor. Specifically, participants cited placing internal
19 pressure and expectation on themselves, having self-doubts about their ability, and fear of
20 being released as confidence debilitating factors. In addition, external pressure and
21 expectation from coaches, parents, or academy managers were also cited by some players (n
22 = 5) as confidence debilitating factors. For instance, one of the players recalled a match in
23 which parental pressure debilitated his confidence:

24 My dad kept putting me under a lot of pressure like on the journey there he kept
25 talking to me about not messing up because it's a big club...At first I was
26 feeling confident because I played them (Premier League team) the year before

1 and scored but then as it got closer and closer to getting there my dad was
2 putting me under a lot more pressure then I was nervous and I played awful
3 (Player 23).

4 **Injury/Illness.** Sixteen out of the 28 participants identified injury/illness as a
5 confidence debilitating factor. Eleven players referred to specific types of age related (e.g.,
6 Sever's disease, osteomyelitis) or general injuries (e.g., groin injury) as confidence
7 debilitating factors. For example, one player described the impact that being injured had on
8 his confidence: "I lose my confidence when I'm injured for a long time and I don't believe in
9 my strengths as a player because I haven't been playing for some time" (Player 12). In
10 addition to this, 11 players described how the consequences of injuries (e.g., falling behind,
11 deselection, lack of fitness) acted as a confidence debilitating factor when returning to play:
12 I got back into it as the games went on, my performance slowly got back, but I
13 was a bit worried about doing it [injury] again so my performance and fitness
14 wasn't as good as normal so that didn't help my confidence at all (Player 11).

15 Discussion

16 Using multiple sources of data (i.e., pre-interview booklets and interviews) this study
17 identified the types, sources, and confidence debilitating factors of early adolescent elite
18 academy soccer players. Three types of sport-confidence, five sources of sport-confidence,
19 and five confidence debilitating factors were identified. With respect to types of sport-
20 confidence, and consistent with those reported by world class athletes (e.g., Hays et al., 2007;
21 2009), our findings indicated academy players were confident about: their ability to execute
22 skills (i.e., physical, technical, and tactical skills); some physical factors; and some
23 psychological factors. However, in comparison to the world class athletes used in Hays and
24 colleagues' work, elite adolescent soccer players did not identify 'achievement' and
25 'superiority to the opposition' as sport-confidence types. This is perhaps unsurprising given
26 the age and developmental stage of the players in our study, and the fact they are yet to reach

1 a professional level. Despite this, the findings provided support for the multi-dimensional
2 nature of sport-confidence (Hays et al., 2007; Hwang, Machida, & Choi, 2017; Machida,
3 Otten, Magyar, Vealey, & Marie Ward, 2016) and endorse the notion that athletes' evidence-
4 based belief systems (i.e., types) are grounded within their sources (Vealey & Chase, 2008).

5 Turning towards sources of sport-confidence, and consistent with previous studies
6 (Hays et al., 2007; Vealey et al., 1998; Wilson et al., 2004), the most frequently cited sources
7 of sport-confidence identified were: Accomplishments; social support; and preparation.
8 However, closer inspection of the lower order themes provides new knowledge on how
9 organizational culture (i.e., age, level, and motivational climate) influenced how elite *junior*
10 players constructed their sources of sport-confidence. Specifically, although performance
11 accomplishments were a source of confidence for all players in our study, competition
12 performances rather than competition outcomes were used most to gain belief. This contrasts
13 the accomplishment sources used by the world class male athletes in previous research (e.g.,
14 Hays et al., 2007, 2009). Players also gained confidence from selection accomplishments,
15 receiving recognition, and superiority to the opposition or their own teammates, supporting
16 the notion that the general motivational climate of a sport team includes perceptions of the
17 values, attitudes, and behaviors of a variety of social agents, and effort, improvement, and
18 social comparison might be equally emphasized (Harwood, Spray, & Keegan, 2008). This
19 appears reflective of the organizational culture in elite soccer academies, which may focus on
20 individual progress and improvement, but at the same time players are competing with each
21 other for professional contracts (Mills et al., 2012).

22 Beyond accomplishments, social support was identified as a critical source of sport-
23 confidence used by elite academy soccer players to gain belief. This sample appeared more
24 reliant on social support from coaches, peers, and family members as a source of confidence
25 than world class athletes (Hays et al., 2007; 2009). Findings that are congruent with studies
26 that have identified social support as a highly influential source of confidence for adolescents

1 participating in sport (Vealey et al., 1998) and physical education (Chase, 1998). The reliance
2 on gaining confidence from coach and peer support is perhaps not surprising given the
3 developmental stage of the players used in this study (see Wylleman & Lavellee, 2004), the
4 uncertainty surrounding their futures within elite academies, and the continual prospect of
5 being released from their contracts.

6 Preparation was the third most frequently cited source of sport-confidence; however,
7 players mostly relied on physical preparation to source this belief with few players using
8 psychological or holistic preparation-based sources (Hays et al., 2007). Such findings suggest
9 that elite academy soccer players may not have acquired the necessary knowledge,
10 experience, or skills to employ preparation strategies that are multi-faceted in nature. This
11 may surprise those engaged in the delivery of the EPPP programme within UK soccer
12 academies given the visibility of psychological provision within those organizational cultures
13 (The Premier League, 2011). However, consistent with Reeves, Nicholls, and McKenna's
14 (2009) suggestion, although support systems may exist it does not mean they are valued or
15 used by those who have access to them. Such findings highlight the need for greater attention
16 to be paid to the way in which young athletes prepare for competition from a psychological
17 perspective, particularly given the controllable nature of this source (Vealey & Chase, 2008).

18 The remaining sport-confidence sources of innate factors and vicarious experience
19 identified in this study have been less prominent within other sport-confidence studies. For
20 example, some participants believed they possessed innate factors that facilitated their
21 sporting success. Considering innate factors have only been previously identified by world
22 class athletes (Hays et al., 2007), it is possible that this may be a source of sport-confidence
23 specific to elite performers. Similarly, the importance placed on vicarious experience by elite
24 adolescents is perhaps reflective of their specific developmental stage. Hays et al. (2007)
25 found that world class senior athletes did not source sport-confidence from observing other
26 athletes performing successfully. Our findings suggest that observing and comparing oneself

1 with others is a particularly relevant source of sport-confidence for athletes who are learning
2 new skills or undertaking new challenges. Considering the aims and objectives of elite
3 academies, providing players with models to facilitate both their skill development and sport-
4 confidence should be a focus of attention for practitioners.

5 In this study, no support was found for several of the sport-confidence sources
6 outlined in previous research. For example, elite adolescent soccer players did not source
7 confidence from environmental comfort, situational favourableness, or physical self-
8 presentation as described in Vealey et al.'s (1998) research. Further, no evidence emerged for
9 the sport-confidence sources of competitive advantage, coaching, self-awareness, experience,
10 and trust as identified by Hays et al. (2007). These findings suggest elite academy soccer
11 players may base their confidence on a relatively narrow set of source beliefs in comparison
12 with more senior athletes (Hays et al., 2007; Vealey et al., 1998; Wilson et al., 2004). This
13 suggestion is supported by self-efficacy research that has indicated younger individuals base
14 their efficacy expectations on a narrower set of efficacy sources (e.g., Chase, 1998; Chase et
15 al., 2003; Saville et al., 2014; Usher & Pajares, 2008). Thomas, Lane and Kingston (2011)
16 suggested that basing sport-confidence on a narrow set of beliefs may make athletes more
17 susceptible to fluctuations in their levels of confidence and that in order to develop robust
18 sport-confidence, athletes must derive their beliefs from multiple source domains. Our
19 findings extend these suggestions to adolescent performers and indicate practitioners working
20 with such groups must ensure confidence is based on a wide range of controllable sources.
21 The results also suggest practitioners should pay particular attention to the way in which
22 young athletes construct their sources of sport-confidence (i.e., gaining confidence from
23 performance rather than outcome related accomplishments).

24 In order to gain a more complete understanding of sport-confidence, our study also
25 examined the factors responsible for debilitating sport-confidence. The confidence
26 debilitating factors identified by elite academy soccer players included a lack of social

1 support, poor performance factors, poor preparation, pressure and expectations, and
2 injury/illness. Consistent with Hays et al.'s (2009) findings, these confidence debilitating
3 factors appeared to be directly associated with the sources of sport-confidence identified by
4 this sample. For example, responses pertaining to verbal feedback from the coaches were
5 highlighted as a means of both gaining sport-confidence but also a factor responsible for
6 debilitating a player's sport-confidence. As such, the players' perception of the feedback
7 provided appears to be critical to the interpretation of whether the mechanism was a source
8 of, or debilitating factor for, confidence at that moment in time. In addition to this, the
9 confidence debilitating factors reported also appeared to be closely related to early adolescent
10 academy soccer players' sources of stress (see Reeves et al., 2009). Although it went beyond
11 the scope of the current study to examine the relationship between sport-confidence and the
12 transactional stress process, it may be that in order to develop or maintain robust levels of
13 sport-confidence, young athletes may need to learn how to effectively cope with the
14 competitive and organizational demands they experience (see Tamminen & Holt, 2012).
15 However, young athletes' capacity to use coping strategies may not fully emerge until late
16 adolescence (Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007).

17 In summary, our study provided a number of important conceptual and practical
18 implications that extend current thinking and contribute new knowledge to the extant
19 literature. Conceptually, the identification of a range of types and sources of sport-confidence
20 evidence the multidimensional nature of sport-confidence (e.g., Hay et al., 2007, 2009;
21 Machida et al., 2016). The emphasis elite adolescent performers placed on certain types and
22 sources of sport-confidence when compared to those noted in previous research with elite
23 senior athletes (e.g., Hays et al., 2007) supports the inclusion of demographic and personality
24 characteristics within Vealey's model of sport-confidence. The critical role social-support
25 played as an adaptive factor from which elite adolescents sourced belief, versus the
26 maladaptive impact a lack of social-support had on debilitating elite adolescents sport-

1 confidence was an important contribution. Furthermore, this study provides new knowledge
2 on how social support is conceptualized within sport-confidence research. Previous sport-
3 confidence research has classified social support as a source category (i.e., global dimension)
4 and subtheme within the coaching source of sport-confidence (e.g., Hays et al., 2007; Vealey
5 et al., 1998). The rigorous data analysis process used in our study identified specific
6 dimensions of social support (e.g., esteem, informational, emotional and tangible support)
7 that players used to source their belief and also identified how a lack of esteem support and
8 informational support debilitated sport-confidence. Our findings aligned with the dimension
9 based conceptualizations of social support (e.g., Freeman & Rees, 2009; Rees & Hardy,
10 2000), and has provided conceptual clarity regarding the positioning of social support within
11 sport-confidence research. Collectively, these results also provide evidence for Feltz et al.'s
12 (2008) suggestion that the unique nature of sport emphasises social support as an important
13 source of belief for athletes beyond what Bandura (1997) represented within the verbal
14 persuasion source of self-efficacy. Our results corroborated findings from self-efficacy
15 research and extended them to the sport-confidence literature by evidencing elite adolescent
16 performers utilize a narrower set of sources of sport-confidence to underpin their belief
17 system (cf. Usher & Pajares, 2008). The results also identified the confidence debilitating
18 factors experienced by elite adolescent performers. At an applied level, our findings indicated
19 coaches, parents, practitioners, and players should work on fostering a strong and broad set
20 sport-confidence sources to underpin an elite adolescent's belief system. The role these
21 individuals play in providing appropriate social support has emerged as a critical factor for
22 such groups. The bias towards the elite adolescent academy players in our study using
23 performance related accomplishments rather than outcome related accomplishments to source
24 belief sits closely with design of the EPPP pathway and is an important consideration for
25 those designing and administering such programmes.

1 The findings and implications should be considered in light of several limitations.
2 First, although member checks were used as a strategy to remain objective and enhance the
3 credibility of the data (Tracy, 2010), at a practical level there is no way to guarantee that
4 power relations did not influence participant confirmation or that each participant truly
5 engaged with this process (see Smith & McGannon, 2018). Second, the types, sources, and
6 confidence debilitating factors identified are unique to the context of elite academy soccer
7 within the UK. Although many elite junior team sport athletes may have very similar sport-
8 confidence needs to those identified in this study, we advise caution when generalizing these
9 findings beyond this context. Research is needed to establish which sources, types, or
10 debilitating factors are most salient within sport specific contexts (i.e., individual vs. team
11 sports) across levels (i.e., elite vs. non-elite), and developmental stages (i.e., sampling,
12 specializing, investment years; Côté, 1999). Thirdly, another limitation was that we did not
13 assess levels of confidence. Future research is needed to examine the interaction between
14 academy players' confidence levels and their sources, types, and confidence debilitating
15 factors over time (e.g., throughout a season). Such insights are crucial to help practitioners
16 design interventions which help young athletes to develop robust sport-confidence. Building
17 on these points, future research is also needed to examine the conceptual links between
18 athletes' source of sport-confidence and their confidence debilitating factors.

19 In conclusion, this study was the first to examine the types, sources, and confidence
20 debilitating factors of athletes within a single empirical study. Using multiple sources of data,
21 this study provided an in-depth insight into what elite junior soccer players are confident
22 about, where they gain confidence from, and what serves to debilitate their confidence. It also
23 provided new knowledge on the role of social support within an elite adolescent's belief
24 system. Such insights are vital in terms of affirming the role organizational culture plays on
25 the manifestation of sport-confidence, and for assisting the development of interventions
26 aimed at fostering robust sport-confidence within elite junior performers.

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- 18

Table 1.

Types of Sport-Confidence Identified by Elite Academy Soccer Players (n =28)

Type of Confidence	Number of athletes citing type	Total percentage of participants
Skill Execution	28	100%
Physical Factors	17	61%
Psychological Factors	13	46%

Table 2.

Sources of Sport-Confidence Identified by Elite Academy Soccer Players (n = 28)

Sources of Confidence	Number of athletes citing source	Total percentage of participants
Accomplishment	28	100%
Training accomplishment	27	96%
Competition accomplishment	26	93%
Demonstration of ability	21	75%
Recognition	18	64%
Selection	14	50%
Social Support	28	100%
Esteem support	28	100%
Informational support	21	75%
Emotional support	11	39%
Tangible support	5	18%
Preparation	23	82%
Physical and technical preparation	21	75%
Psychological preparation	14	50%
Holistic preparation	4	14%
Vicarious Experience	18	64%
Innate Factors	8	29%

Table 3.

Confidence Debilitating Factors Identified by Elite Academy Soccer Players (n = 28)

Confidence Debilitating Factors	Number of athletes citing confidence debilitating factor	Total percentage of participants
Lack of Social Support	28	100%
Poor Performances	28	100%
Poor Preparation	19	68%
Pressure and Expectations	19	68%
Injury/Illness	16	57%

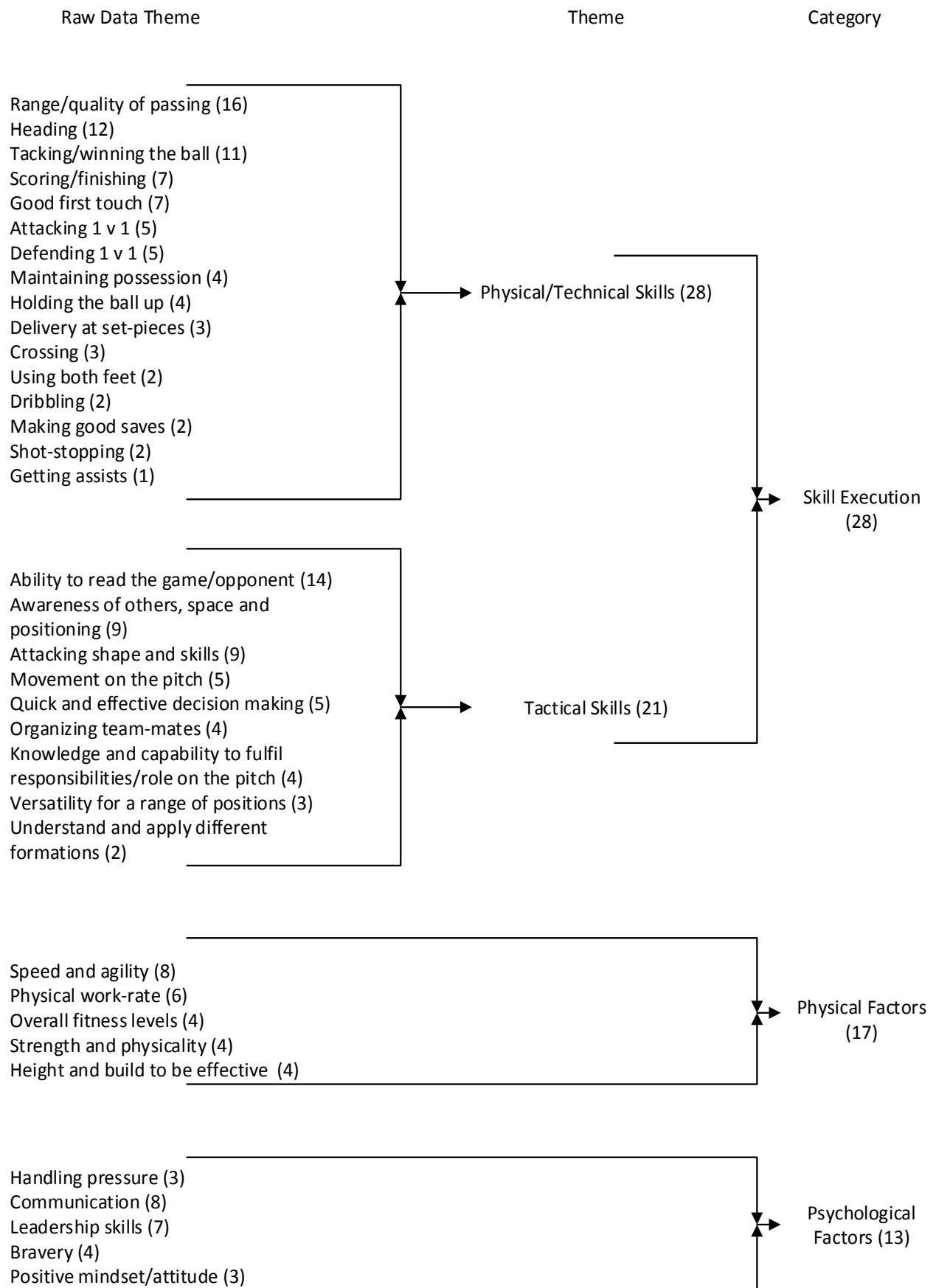
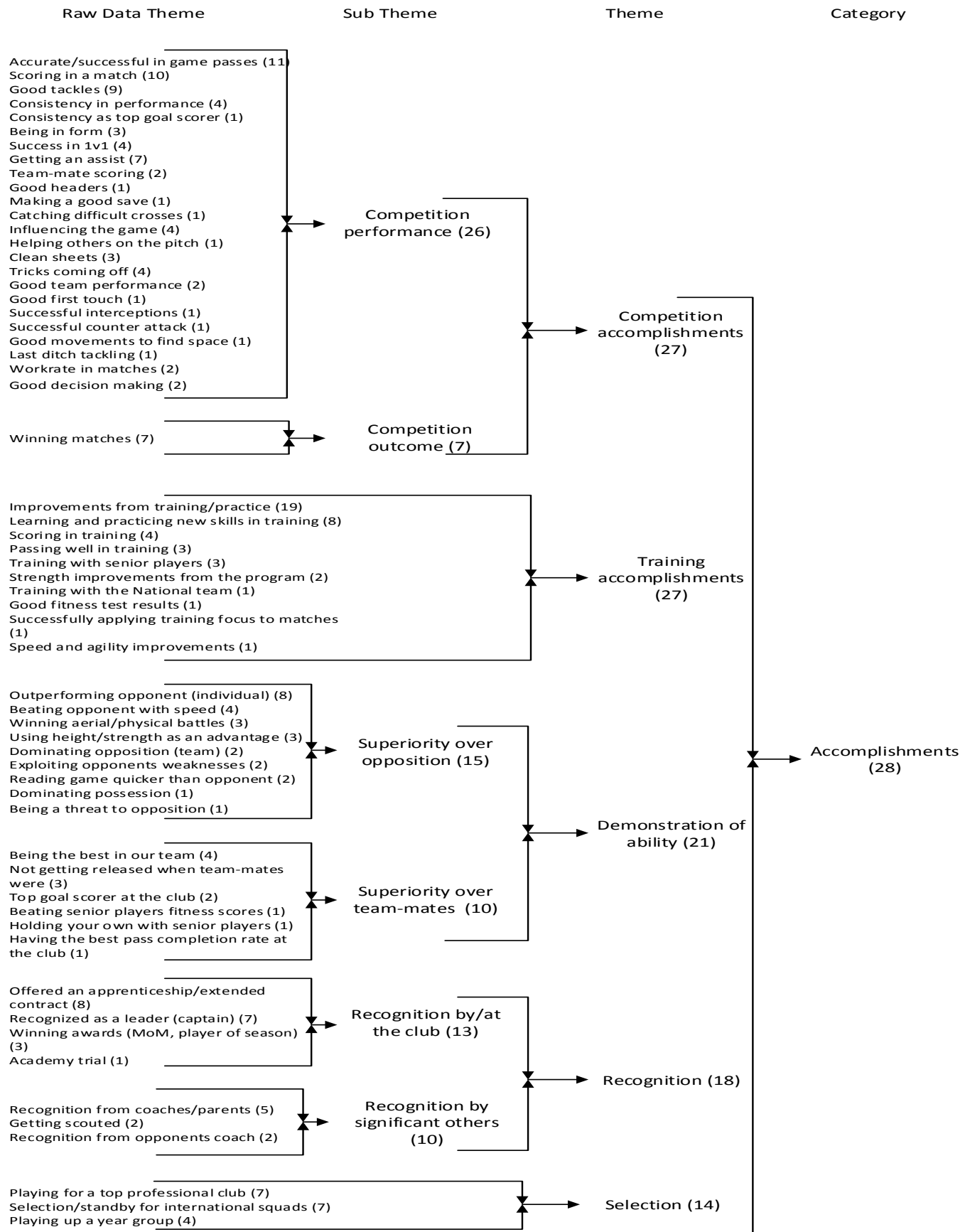
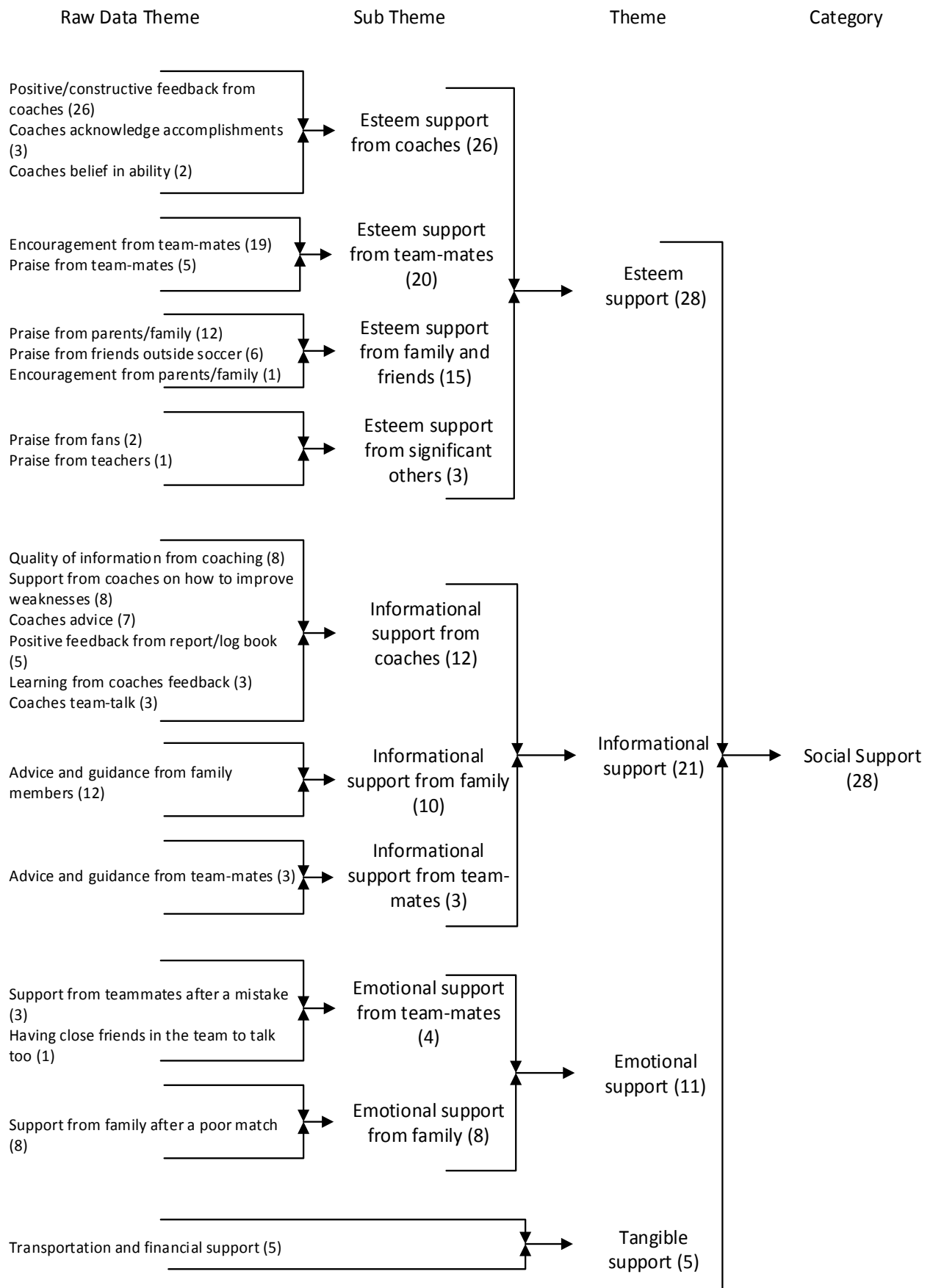


Figure 1: Types of Sport-Confidence identified by elite academy soccer players



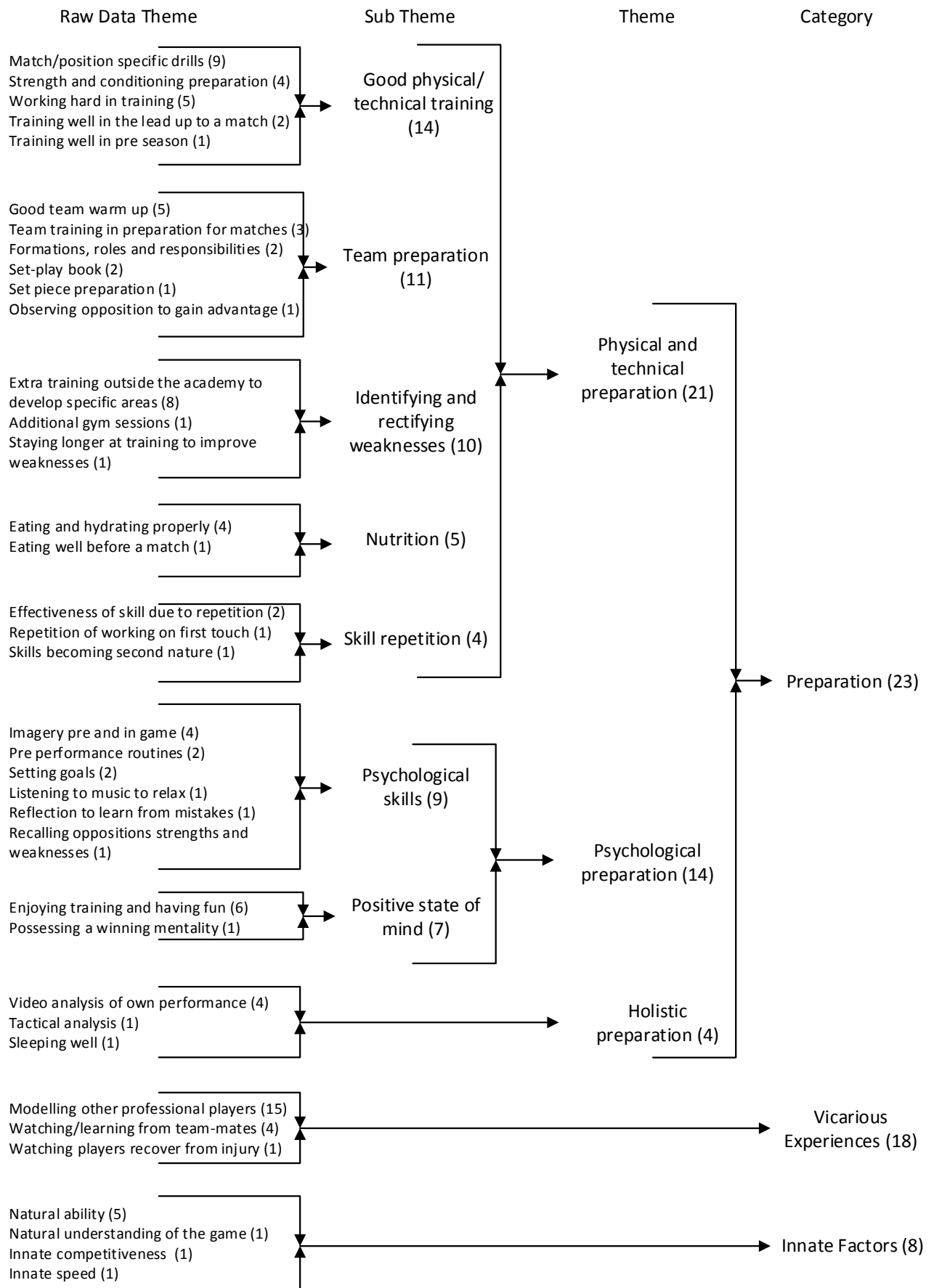
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2

Figure 2: Sources of Sport-Confidence identified by elite academy soccer players



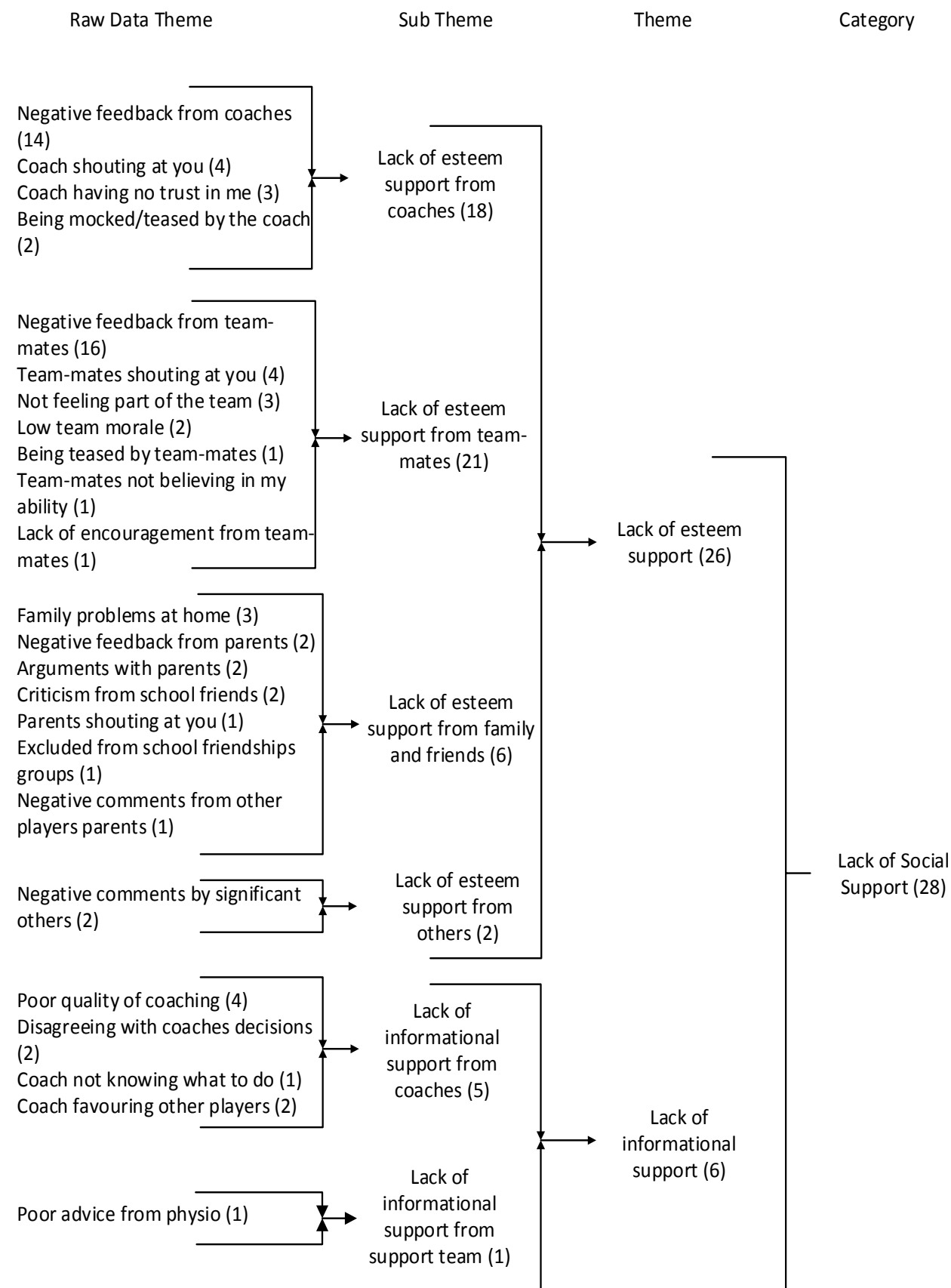
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Figure 2: Sources of Sport-Confidence identified by elite academy soccer players



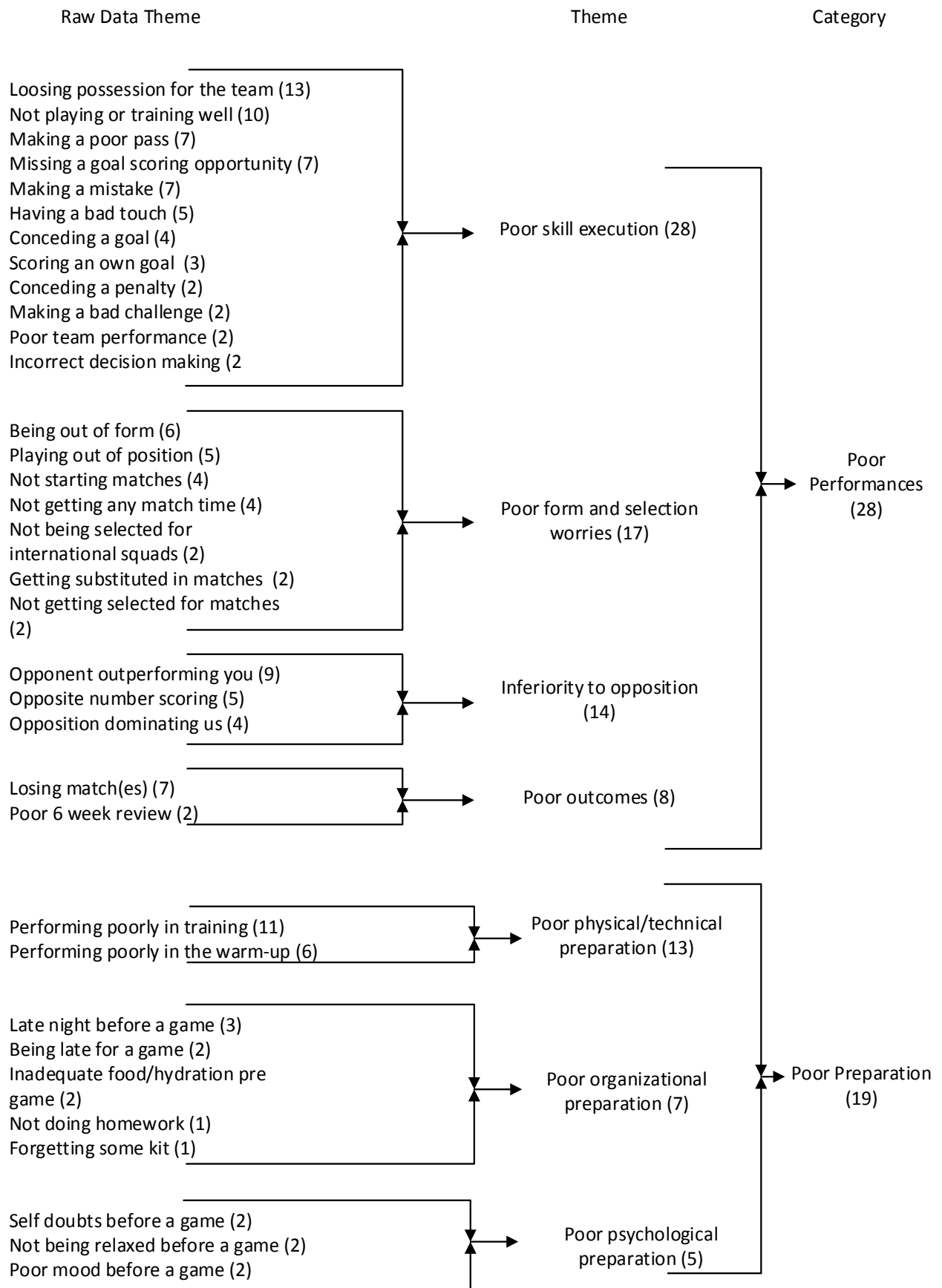
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Figure 2: Sources of Sport-Confidence identified by elite academy soccer players



1
2

Figure 3: Confidence debilitating factors identified by elite academy soccer players



1

Figure 3: Confidence debilitating factors identified by elite academy soccer players

