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Citation:

Ring, C and Kavussanu, M and Al-Yaaribi, A and Tenenbaum, G and Stanger, N (2019) Effects of Opponent Verbal Antisocial Behaviour on Anger, Attention, and Performance. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 37 (8). pp. 871-877. ISSN 1466-447X DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02640414.2018.1532061>

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Document Version:

Article (Accepted Version)

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Journal of Sports Sciences* on 29 October 2018, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/02640414.2018.1532061>

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Effects of Opponent Verbal Antisocial Behaviour on Anger, Attention, and Performance

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This is an accepted manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis Group in
Journal of Sports Sciences on 17/04/2018.

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Abstract

Sledging, a form of verbal antisocial behaviour in sport, aims to impair an opponent's performance. Previously, variations in performance have been attributed to changes in emotion and cognition. To improve our understanding of sledging, the current experiment examined the effects of verbal antisocial behaviour on anger, attention and performance. Participants performed a competitive basketball free-throw shooting task under insult (verbal behaviour designed to offend and upset the performer), distraction (verbal behaviour designed to draw attention away from the task), or control (neutral verbal behaviour) conditions. Performance was assessed by the number of successful baskets and a points-based scoring system, while anger and attention were measured post-task. The insult condition provoked more anger than the control and distraction conditions, whereas the insult and distraction conditions increased distraction and reduced self-focus compared to the control condition. Although verbal antisocial behaviour had no overall direct effect on performance, mediation analysis showed that anger indirectly impaired performance via distraction. Implications for the antisocial behaviour-performance relationship are discussed.

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1 Effects of Opponent Verbal Antisocial Behaviour on Anger, Attention and Performance

2 Sledging, a form of verbal antisocial behaviour, defined as behaviour intended to harm
3 or disadvantage another (Kavussanu & Boardley, 2009; Sage, Kavussanu, & Duda, 2006), is
4 commonplace in sport. For example, during the opening match of the 2017 International
5 Cricket Council's Champions Trophy, England's bowler Ben Stokes sledged Bangladesh's
6 batsman Tamim Iqbal, causing the batsman to complain to the umpires. The debate over the
7 morality of such conduct in sport (Lee, 1998) has produced polarized views; some think it is
8 acceptable (Summers, 2007) whereas others consider it cheating and/or gamesmanship
9 (Dixon, 2007, 2008; Lee, Whitehead, & Ntoumanis, 2007; Potter, 1947). Surprisingly few
10 studies have examined the impact of verbal antisocial behaviour on others. For instance,
11 recent evidence has shown that verbal antisocial behaviour by teammates may influence the
12 recipients' feelings, thoughts, and actions (Al-Yaaribi & Kavussanu, 2017; Al-Yaaribi,
13 Kavussanu, & Ring, 2016).

14 Sledging shares similarities with the concept of trash talking, defined as "insulting or
15 boastful speech intended to demoralise, intimidate or humiliate an opponent in athletic
16 contest" (Rainey & Granito, 2010), which many athletes believe can impair performance
17 (Conmy, 2005; Rainey & Granito, 2010). Thus, athletes could be motivated to use
18 comments to try and gain an advantage over opponents and increase their own chances of
19 winning (Tamborini, Chory, Lachlan, Westerman, & Skalski, 2008). However, it has yet to be
20 established whether and how verbal antisocial behaviour influences performance. Trash
21 talking can be classified based on intended outcome. First, one can try to insult opponents
22 by demeaning their skills or calling them offensive names (Rainey & Granito, 2010). Second,
23 one can attempt to distract opponents by making them think about or look at external
24 stimuli, such as the weather (Conmy, 2005, 2008). Given that attention (Abernethy, 2001;

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1 Wilson, 2008) and emotion (Hanin, 2000; Lazarus, 2000) can influence sport performance,
2 verbal antisocial behaviour could influence performance by distracting or annoying athletes.

3 Verbal antisocial behaviour could impair motor performance via attention in one of
4 two ways: distraction and self-focus (for reviews see Abernethy, 2001; Gray, 2011; Masters
5 & Maxwell, 2008; Vine, Moore, & Wilson, 2016; Wilson, 2008; Wulf, 2013). First, verbal
6 comments might draw attentional resources away from the task. Although this hypothesis is
7 compatible with reports that 19% of athletes believe trash talking distracts opponents, other
8 evidence suggests that verbal comments encourage the recipients to focus and play better
9 (Conmy, 2005). Second, performance of a motor task can be disrupted by focusing attention
10 on task execution and monitoring. Self-focus can be further increased if verbal comments
11 are perceived as a source of pressure (Baumeister, 1984). In sum, changes in attention offer
12 a plausible route through which verbal antisocial behaviour might affect performance.

13 Verbal antisocial behaviour has been associated with anger in some studies (Al-Yaaribi
14 & Kavussanu, 2017; Al-Yaaribi et al., 2016) but not others (Conmy, 2008; Conmy,
15 Tenenbaum, Eklund, Roehrig, & Filho, 2013). For instance, Conmy and colleagues asked
16 competitors to report their affect before and after playing a computer game in silence or
17 trash-talk conditions; the verbal comments did not change affect or performance. Anger has
18 the capacity to impair sport performance (Beedie, Terry, & Lane, 2000; Uphill, Groom, &
19 Jones, 2014), perhaps by switching attention to the provocateur (Lazarus, 2000) and/or
20 impairing concentration (Silva, 1979; Vast, Young, & Thomas, 2010). However, it can
21 improve performance on effortful tasks (Woodman et al., 2009). Finally, there is evidence
22 consistent with the view that teammate verbal antisocial behaviour can impair (via reduced
23 effort) and improve (via increased anger and effort) subjective performance in basketball and
24 football players (Al-Yaaribi et al., 2016). In sum, verbal insults have the potential to influence
25 the recipient's performance via changes in anger.

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1 Our study had two purposes. Our first purpose was to experimentally examine the
2 effects of verbal antisocial behaviour by an opponent on the recipient's anger, attention, and
3 performance. We hypothesised that verbal antisocial behaviour would reduce performance
4 of a basketball free-throw shooting task, elicit anger, and impair attention. We also
5 hypothesised that insult-based comments would lead to greater anger and that distraction-
6 based comments would disrupt attention, evidenced by increased distraction and self-focus.
7 Our second purpose was to examine whether performance was related to attention and
8 anger, and whether the effects of anger on performance were mediated by changes in
9 attention. We hypothesised that performance would be negatively related to anger,
10 distraction, and self-focus, and that anger would disrupt attention.

11

Method

Participants

13 Participants were 60 (30 males, 30 females) undergraduate sport and exercise science
14 students ($M = 19.45$, $SD = 1.25$ years old) recruited from a British university. We tested
15 both males and females to increase the generalizability of the findings. Participants took part
16 in the experiment in exchange for course credit. They had experience playing competitive
17 sport ($M = 7.60$, $SD = 3.82$ years). None of the participants identified basketball as their
18 main sport, and at the time of testing, they indicated that they had never (55%), rarely
19 (37%), or sometimes (8%) played basketball. Thus, participants were experienced athletes
20 but relative novices in basketball.

Experimental Design

22 We employed an experimental design, with Group (insult, distraction, control) as the
23 between-subjects factor and Condition (baseline, competition) as the within-subjects factor.
24 Participants were randomly assigned to one of three groups: insult, distraction, or control.
25 There were 10 males and 10 females in each group.

1 **Task and Equipment**

2 The task involved shooting basketball free throws from a distance of 4.57 m using a
3 size 7 (diameter = 0.23 m) basketball (Nike Baller) through a standard size hoop (diameter
4 = 0.46 m), which was positioned 3.05 m from the ground. Similar tasks have been used in
5 previous experimental research (e.g., Hardy & Parfitt, 1991; Kavussanu, Crews, & Gill, 1998;
6 Tauer & Harakiewicz, 2004). The apparatus (Powerhoop) comprised a hoop, backboard (1.2
7 × 0.9 m), pole, and base.

8 **Measures**

9 Participants were presented with the stem “During the last ten free throws, I felt ...”
10 followed by the items measuring each variable. Responses to each item were made on a 7-
11 point scale and ranged from 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely). Each variable was measured by
12 averaging responses to the respective items as described below. The item pool was designed
13 to avoid overburdening participants.

14 **Anger.** Anger was measured using the anger scale of the Sport Emotion
15 Questionnaire (Jones, Lane, Bray, Uphill, & Catlin, 2005). Participants responded to four
16 items: “angry”, “annoyed”, “irritated”, and “furious”. Cronbach’s alpha coefficients for anger
17 were .89 in both the baseline and competition conditions.

18 **Distraction.** Participants responded to two items: “distracted” and “focused”.
19 Similar attention ratings have been used in past research (e.g., Vast et al., 2010). The latter
20 item was reverse scored. Alpha coefficients for distraction were .76 and .69 in the baseline
21 and competition conditions, respectively.

22 **Self-focus.** Self-focus was measured using an adapted version (Cooke, Kavussanu,
23 McIntyre, Boardley, & Ring, 2011; Vine, Moore, Cooke, Ring, & Wilson, 2013) of the
24 conscious motor processing scale of the Movement Specific Reinvestment Scale (Orrell,
25 Masters, & Eves, 2009). Participants responded to three items: “I was conscious of my

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1 movements”, “I reflected about my technique”, and “I was aware of the way my body was
2 working”. Alpha coefficients for self-focus were .66 and .86 in the baseline and competition
3 conditions, respectively.

4 **Performance.** We collected two measures of performance. First, we recorded the
5 number of successful baskets made out of 10 free-throw attempts, in line with previous
6 research (e.g., Kavussanu, et al., 1998; Tauer & Harakiewicz, 2004). Second, we measured
7 performance using a categorical points-based scoring system (Hardy & Parfitt, 1991): clean
8 basket (5 points), rim and in (4 points), backboard and in (3 points), rim and out (2 points),
9 backboard and out (1 point), complete miss (0 points). A total score was created by
10 summing the points for the 10 free-throws; thus, the total score could range between 0 and
11 50 points. By assessing performance over 10 trials, we attempted to strike a balance
12 between ecological validity and measurement reliability.

13 **Manipulation Checks**

14 Participants rated the extent to which they “felt competitive during the task” on a
15 scale, ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely). This rating served as a manipulation check
16 for the competition. Differences between conditions in anger and distraction/self focus were
17 used to check that the verbal antisocial behaviour manipulation worked as intended.

18 **Selection of Comments**

19 The comments were selected based on a pilot study. They were generated by two
20 academics (1 male, 1 female) with extensive experience teaching and researching in sport
21 psychology together with three college athletes (1 male, 2 females) with many years of
22 experience playing high level competitive sport. Twenty college athletes (10 males, 10
23 females), who played competitive sport at high levels (club, country, or national), and who
24 had many years of experience playing sport, were given definitions of an insult comment
25 (i.e., a verbal comment aimed to impair performance by offending a person) and a

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1 distraction comment (i.e., a verbal comment aimed to impair performance by drawing
2 attention away from the task). Then, they were asked to classify 18 comments as insult,
3 distraction, or neither.

4 The six comments most frequently classified as insult and the six comments most
5 frequently classified as distraction by the athletes were presented to a separate sample of 12
6 college athletes (6 males, 6 females), who rated the extent to which they thought that each
7 insult comment would insult a performer and each distraction comment would distract a
8 performer during a basketball free throw task; responses were made on a Likert scale,
9 anchored by -3 (strongly disagree) to $+3$ (strongly agree). Based on this process, we
10 selected the five comments from each category which attracted the highest ratings, and used
11 them in the experimental manipulations. The five insult comments ($M = 0.68$) were: “Not
12 sure those clothes suit you”; “Didn’t bother to do your hair today”; “A blind man would
13 score better than you”; “I see you need some coaching”; “I think you need to get down the
14 gym”. The five distraction comments ($M = 0.48$) were: “Make sure your laces are done up”;
15 “Look at that squirrel”; “The weather is a bit rubbish!”; “(Name of a popular television
16 program, which varied depending on the schedule) was good last night”; “Can’t wait ‘til
17 dinner tonight”.

18 **Procedure**

19 Upon approval of the study protocol by the local research ethics committee,
20 participants were tested individually attending a single testing session run by two
21 experimenters. Testing took place outdoors. One experimenter gave instructions to the
22 participant and collected the data (and is referred to as the “experimenter”) and a second
23 experimenter acted as the confederate pretending to be another participant (and is referred
24 to as the “confederate”); the confederate was gender-matched to the participant in line with
25 previous research (Cooke, Kavussanu, McIntyre, & Ring, 2011). Participants were pseudo-

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1 randomly assigned to one of the three groups (i.e., insult, distraction, or control), with the
2 constraint that there were 10 males and 10 females in each group.

3 The protocol was the same for all three groups. First, the experimenter informed the
4 participant that the study aimed to investigate the effects of competition on performance,
5 outlined the protocol, and provided instructions on how to shoot a basketball free throw.
6 Then, the participant performed five practice free throws in order to become familiar with
7 the task, followed by 10 free throws, which constituted the pre-test (or baseline). Next, the
8 participant responded to the items measuring anger and attention and the manipulation
9 check. In the meantime, the confederate completed the practice and pre-test free-throws.
10 Both the participant and the confederate performed the practice and pre-test free-throws
11 alone in the presence of only the experimenter.

12 Upon completion of the pre-test, the competition took place. The experimenter
13 explained to both the participant and confederate at the same time that the goal was to beat
14 the other person, with the winner being entered into a draw to win a £30 prize, and
15 informed the participant that he or she had been randomly selected to perform the free-
16 throw task first. Then the manipulation was administered while the participant performed
17 the ten free throws. In the two experimental groups, the confederate verbalized each of the
18 five insult or distraction comments to the participant, just as he or she was about to
19 attempt the first, third, fourth, seventh, and ninth free-throw. In the control group, the
20 participant completed the competition while the confederate looked on silently. Both at
21 pre-test and during the competition, the participant completed the free throws at their own
22 pace. Upon completion of the 10 free throws, the participant responded to the items
23 measuring anger and attention and the competition manipulation check. Finally, the
24 confederate completed the task (but no data were recorded). At the end of the experiment,
25 the participant was thanked, debriefed, and asked not to disclose the protocol to anyone.

1 **Preliminary Data Analyses and Data Analytic Strategy**

2 A series of 3 Group (insult, distraction, control) x 2 Condition (baseline, competition)
3 x 2 Gender (male, female) analyses of variance were conducted on the dependent measures
4 to identify potential gender differences. These exploratory analyses indicated no gender
5 main effects and no gender interaction effects for any variable. Therefore, gender was not
6 included as a factor in the main analyses reported below.

7 Our analytic strategy was designed to address our two study purposes. Our first
8 purpose was to determine the effects of verbal antisocial behaviour on anger, attention, and
9 performance. This purpose was addressed by conducting analyses of covariance
10 (ANCOVAs), with Group (insult, distraction, control) as a between-subjects factor and pre-
11 test (baseline) score as a covariate, on our measures of anger, distraction, self-focus, and
12 free throw shooting performance. Our second purpose was to examine whether
13 performance was related to attention and anger, and whether any effects of anger on
14 performance were mediated by changes in attention. This purpose was addressed by
15 computing correlations between the process variables (anger, distraction, self-focus ratings)
16 and outcome variables (number of baskets, shooting performance) to quantify the degree of
17 association. Subsequently, we conducted multiple regressions using the predictor variable
18 (anger), potential mediator variable (attention), and outcome variable (performance) to
19 determine whether anger influenced performance directly and/or indirectly via attention.

20 We report effect size measures for each statistical test to quantify the importance of
21 our findings, and provide values corresponding to small, medium, and large effects (Cohen,
22 1992). For t tests, standardized mean difference, d , values are .20, .50, and .90. For analyses
23 of covariance, partial eta-squared, η_p^2 , values are .02, .13, and .25. For Pearson correlations,
24 coefficient, r , values are .10, .30 and .50. For tests of mediation (Preacher & Kelley, 2011),
25 completely standardised indirect effect, CSIE, values are .01, .09, and .25.

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Results

Manipulation Check

We performed a Student t-test to examine whether the basketball free-throw task was rated as more competitive in the competition condition compared to the baseline condition. This confirmed that the competition ($M = 5.35, SD = 1.34$) was judged to be more competitive than baseline ($M = 4.43, SD = 1.42$), with a large-to-medium effect, $t(59) = 5.49, p < .001, d = 0.77$.

Baseline

At baseline, participants scored one basket every three free throws ($M = 3.32, SD = 1.74$), achieved a middling total points score ($M = 22.50, SD = 5.88$), and reported relatively low levels of anger ($M = 2.06, SD = 1.31$), moderate levels of distraction ($M = 3.28, SD = 1.04$), and high levels of self-focus ($M = 4.90, SD = 0.95$).

Effects of Verbal Antisocial Behaviour: Study Purpose 1

Our first study purpose was to experimentally examine the effects of verbal antisocial behaviour by an opponent on the recipient’s anger, attention, and performance. To this end, we performed Analyses of Covariance (ANCOVAs) separately on each variable, with Group (insult, distraction, control) as a between-subjects factor and pre-test score as a covariate. The results of these analyses are presented in Table 1. Significant group effects emerged for both anger and attention. Tukey post-hoc tests revealed that the insult group reported more anger than both the distraction ($d = 0.93$) and control ($d = 0.83$) groups, while the distraction and insult groups reported more distraction ($d = 0.63$ & 0.62 , respectively) and less self-focus ($d = 1.31$ & 1.07 , respectively) than the control group². Importantly, the three groups did not differ in performance.

Correlation and Mediation Analyses: Study Purpose 2

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1 The second study purpose was to examine whether performance was related to
2 attention and anger, and whether the effects of anger on performance were mediated by
3 changes in attention. These analyses were conducted separately for the baseline and
4 competition conditions.

5 **Baseline**

6 Pearson correlations indicated that baseline performance was negatively associated
7 with anger (baskets, $r = -.35$, $p < .006$; total points, $r = -.30$, $p < .02$) and distraction
8 (baskets, $r = -.46$, $p < .001$; total points, $r = -.37$, $p < .003$), but unrelated to self-focus
9 (baskets, $r = .00$, $p = .99$; total points, $r = .09$, $p = .51$). Mediation analyses using the
10 PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2017) were conducted to examine the anger-attention-
11 performance relationship. We report the point estimate and 95% bias corrected confidence
12 intervals associated with bootstrapping using 10000 samples. With the number of baskets as
13 the outcome variable, anger as the predictor variable, and distraction or self-focus as the
14 potential mediator variable, only distraction mediated the effect of anger on performance
15 (indirect effect = -0.233 , 95% CI = -0.493 , -0.089 , CSIE = $-.175$). Similarly, with the total
16 points score as the outcome variable, only distraction mediated the effect of anger on
17 performance (indirect effect = -0.626 , 95% CI = -1.632 , -0.054 , CSIE = $-.139$).

18 **Competition.**

19 Pearson correlations indicated that performance was negatively associated with
20 distraction (baskets, $r = -.36$, $p < .005$; total points, $r = -.30$, $p < .02$), positively associated
21 with self-focus (baskets, $r = .29$, $p < .02$; total points, $r = .36$, $p < .004$), and negatively, albeit
22 not significantly, related to anger (baskets, $r = -.18$, $p = .16$; total points, $r = -.19$, $p = .15$).
23 Mediation analyses, with the number of baskets as the outcome variable, anger as the
24 predictor variable, distraction or self-focus as the mediator variable, and baseline
25 performance as the covariate, indicated that the effect of anger on performance was

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1 mediated by both distraction (indirect effect = -0.320 , 95% CI = -0.608 , -0.123 , CSIE = $-$
2 $.231$) and self-focus (indirect effect = -0.100 , 95% CI = -0.354 , -0.002 , CSIE = -0.072).
3 Similarly, with total points score as the outcome variable, the effect of anger on
4 performance was again mediated by both distraction (indirect effect = -0.837 , 95% CI = $-$
5 1.693 , -0.237 , CSIE = -0.211) and self-focus (indirect effect = -0.339 , 95% CI = -1.111 , $-$
6 0.018 , CSIE = -0.085).

Discussion

8 Previous research has highlighted the prevalence and significance of verbal antisocial
9 behaviour intended to harm or disadvantage an opponent in competitive sport (Kavussanu,
10 2008; Lee, 1998; Lee et al., 2007). A number of emotions and cognitions have been
11 implicated in the putative verbal antisocial behaviour-induced impairments in task
12 performance. However, the amount of experimental evidence is extremely limited.
13 Accordingly, the first purpose of our study was to examine the effects of verbal antisocial
14 behaviour by an opponent on anger, attention, and basketball free throw performance. The
15 second purpose of our study was to examine whether performance was related to attention
16 and anger, and whether any effects of anger on performance were mediated by changes in
17 attention. In this section, we discuss our findings.

Effects of Antisocial Behaviour

19 In support of our hypothesis, insult-based verbal antisocial behaviour induced anger
20 (Al-Yarribi et al., 2016; Harmon-Jones & Sigelman, 2001; Kavanagh, 2014). Participants in the
21 insult group responded to verbal comments with more anger than did those in both the
22 distraction and control groups. Specifically, the insult group reported relatively low levels of
23 anger, whereas the distraction and control groups reported very low levels of anger. It is
24 possible that the relatively mild emotions evoked by the insults are due to the task being an
25 experiment and not real-world setting, where the goal would be expected to have a

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1 stronger personal meaning. Our experimental evidence suggests that the negatively-valenced
2 state induced by insult-based verbal antisocial behaviour may not have been sufficiently
3 intense to directly impact performance during the competitive basketball free-throw
4 shooting task. Past experimental research shows that anger-induction does not affect fine
5 motor skills, such as reaction time tasks, and can even facilitate gross motor skills, such as
6 force production tasks (Woodman et al., 2009). The effects of verbal antisocial behaviour in
7 the anger-performance relationship may be moderated by the type of task involved; thus,
8 future research employing different types of task could help paint a more detailed and
9 nuanced picture of the relationship between anger and performance in sport (see also Al-
10 Yarribi et al., 2016; Carver, 2001).

11 In line with previous research showing that anger can disrupt the execution of
12 complex psychomotor tasks (Beedie et al., 2000), such as basketball free throw shooting
13 (Uphill et al., 2014), our second study purpose led us to expect that anger would be
14 associated with impaired performance (Hanin, 2000; Lazarus, 2000). Our pre-test
15 correlation analyses on the baseline measures supported the expected negative anger-
16 performance relationship, with higher anger being linked with fewer successful baskets and
17 lower total points scores.

18 In support of our hypothesis, distraction-based verbal antisocial behaviour increased
19 distraction and decreased self-focus, such that attention was directed away from the
20 execution of the task. We also found that our insult comments disrupted attentional focus
21 to a similar degree as the distraction comments. Previous research has suggested that
22 distraction can interfere with task execution and lead to less accurate movements (e.g.,
23 Abernethy, 2001; Wilson, 2008). We also found that task performance was negatively
24 associated with distraction and positively associated with self-focus, albeit to a lesser extent.
25 However, although the distraction and insult comments elicited changes in attention, they

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1 did not affect motor performance. Motivation-related changes in effort (e.g., Cooke,
2 Kavussanu, McIntyre, & Ring, 2010) may have compensated and masked the effects of
3 disruptions to attention associated with verbal antisocial behaviour. Finally, the finding that
4 both distraction and insult groups reported similar attention-related disruptions suggests
5 that any type of verbal communication from an opponent may disrupt attentional focus
6 during the performance of psychomotor skills.

7 **Performance**

8 Contrary to our hypothesis, verbal antisocial behaviour by an opponent had no direct
9 effect on performance of the basketball free throw shooting task. Participants were able to
10 successfully make one in every three attempts from the free throw line despite the verbal
11 comments from their rival in the basketball shooting competition.¹ This finding is in line with
12 the results of Conmy's (2008) experiment showing that trash talking had no effect on
13 performance on a computer-based American football game. Conmy's manipulation
14 incorporated a *mixture* of different types of comments, including ones that were distracting,
15 funny, strategic, and self-aggrandizing. Thus, our finding, using manipulations based on
16 comments from just one category, extends the previous research by showing that personal
17 insults alone and general distracting comments alone do not directly impair performance of
18 a motor skill.

19 The absence of any clear performance deterioration in either of the two
20 experimental groups, who were the recipients of verbal antisocial behaviour, compared to
21 the control group may be explained in other ways. Participants in the two verbal antisocial
22 behaviour groups may have been more motivated than normal to beat their competitor, and
23 therefore increased their effort to counteract the negative impact of the verbal antisocial
24 behaviour and thereby maintain their basketball performance with reduced efficiency
25 (Eysenck & Calvo, 1992; Wilson, 2008). This explanation is compatible with evidence that

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1 83% of college athletes reported that being a recipient of trash talk inspired them to try and
2 improve their performance (Conmy, 2005; see also Al-Yarribi et al., 2016).

3 The null findings with respect to a direct effect of verbal comments on performance
4 from our experiment and Conmy's (2008) experiment run counter to anecdotal evidence of
5 impaired performance by athletes subjected to verbal antisocial behaviour by opponents.
6 For instance, it is claimed that sledging, which can be considered a verbal form of
7 gamesmanship (Lee et al., 2007), is used by the fielding side against the batsmen to cause
8 'mental disintegration' at the crease in a game of cricket (Jeffreys & Newman, 2009; cf.
9 Porter, 1950). Two key differences between the comments used in this experiment and
10 sledges used in a game situation concern their frequency and intensity. We used five
11 comments (on average, one comment every other throw) that were constrained by a
12 research ethics code of practice, whereas during an actual competitive match there are
13 fewer and less limiting constraints. Thus, while our comments increased anger and
14 decreased attentional focus, they were not offensive enough to provoke violent reactions or
15 distracting enough to prevent completion of the task. Future research could examine the
16 effects of a greater number of comments on performance.

17 Our results suggest that sledging does not hinder performance of a motor skill. The
18 extent to which verbal antisocial behaviour impairs performance may be moderated by the
19 way athletes interpret comments from other athletes, with some athletes considering them
20 as motivational and others as disruptive (e.g., Rainey & Granito, 2010). Thus, the appraisal of
21 whether verbal antisocial behaviour is perceived as a challenge or a threat could contribute
22 to this process (Meijen, Jones, McCarthy, & Sheffield, 2014). However, verbal antisocial
23 behaviour appears to disrupt attentional focus and, depending on the content of the
24 comments, may do so by influencing the emotions felt by the recipient. Specifically, our
25 findings suggest that distraction-based verbal antisocial behaviour may directly hinder

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1 attention by directing resources to task-irrelevant cues whereas insult-based verbal
2 antisocial behaviour may hinder focus by increasing anger and directing attention away from
3 the task and on to the provoker (e.g., Lazarus, 2000). These speculations are supported by
4 the mediation analyses, which revealed that the effects of anger on performance acted, at
5 least in part, indirectly by distracting attention away from task.

6 It is also important to note that our power calculations showed that with the sample
7 size we recruited, we could detect large differences among the groups. Clearly, such an
8 effect was evident with our distraction and anger ratings, but not performance measures
9 (see Table 1). Verbal antisocial behaviour, particularly acts that involve more frequent and
10 provocative comments, may have a small effect on performance, which we were unable to
11 detect. Finally, it is important to point out that previous studies have indicated that novices
12 may profit from a different focus of attention than experts (e.g., Perkins-Ceccato, Passmore,
13 & Lee, 2003) and that they are also using a different focus (e.g., Beilock & Carr, 2001). It is
14 therefore possible that verbal antisocial behaviour would have impaired the performance of
15 expert basketball players. Choking implies an expert status, and therefore, it is possible that
16 experts and novices might differ with respect to the effects of gamesmanship-like verbal
17 antisocial behaviour by other athletes.

18 **Limitations and Research Directions**

19 The findings of the current study should be interpreted in light of some potential
20 limitations. First, it is possible that the comments may have not been sufficiently distracting
21 or insulting to impair performance. To address this issue, future research could increase the
22 frequency and intensity of comments. Second, performance was assessed over the course
23 of ten free throws. By doing this, we attempted to strike a balance between ecological
24 validity and measurement reliability. Nevertheless, the effects of verbal antisocial behaviour
25 may have been diluted by assessing performance over multiple trials because participants

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1 had chances to redeem bad throws. Third, the participants' perception of pressure and
2 tension during the task was not measured. Verbal antisocial behaviour may only affect
3 performance if the competitor feels increased levels of pressure and tension. Future studies
4 could assess the role of a range of emotions, including anxiety, and their perceived impact,
5 on the verbal antisocial behaviour-performance relationship. Finally, researchers could use
6 other tasks which vary in difficulty, complexity, and duration, using participants with a wide
7 range of abilities, from novices to experts, in settings from the laboratory to the field, in
8 order to determine the impact of verbal antisocial behaviour on athletes' cognition, emotion
9 and performance.

10 **Conclusion**

11 The current study showed that attentional processes and affective responses can be
12 manipulated using verbal behaviour intended to disadvantage an opponent. Although anger
13 and attentional states were related to task performance, with these relationships already
14 manifested during baseline task performance, manipulating these states using verbal
15 antisocial behaviour did not directly lead to changes in performance. Our findings suggest
16 that sledging, which has potential costs for both the individual and team, such as player
17 sanctions by the officials and injury caused by provoked opponents, may not impair
18 performance (Al-Yaaribi et al., 2016). Indeed, after being sledged by England bowler, Ben
19 Stokes, during the opening match of the 2017 International Cricket Council's Champions
20 Trophy, the Bangladesh batsman Tamim Iqbal, went on to score a century for his country.

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Author Notes

¹ Power calculations (Cohen, 1992) using G*Power (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007) indicated that, with power ($1-\beta = .80$) and significance ($\alpha = .05$) at conventional levels, and given the effect sizes obtained, the study would have required 267,630 participants to detect significant between-group differences in the number of baskets and 42,820 participants to detect between-group differences in the total points score. Accordingly, the non-significant direct effects for task performance were evidently true null effects and not marginal effects in need of a few more participants to become significant.

² The fact that, compared to the control group, the insult comments elicited greater anger and both the insult and distraction comments elicited greater distraction confirm that our verbal antisocial behaviour manipulations were effective.

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Table 1

Effects of the Verbal Antisocial Behaviour Manipulation on Anger, Attention and Performance

Variable (Range)	Group						<i>F</i> (2, 56)	<i>p</i>	η_p^2
	Insult		Distraction		Control				
	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>			
Anger (1-7)	2.57 _b	0.16	1.92 _a	0.16	1.99 _a	0.16	4.87	.01	.148
Distraction (1-7)	3.78 _a	0.24	4.02 _a	0.24	2.68 _b	0.23	9.27	.01	.249
Self-Focus (1-7)	4.53 _a	0.22	4.52 _a	0.22	5.14 _b	0.23	2.70	.07	.088
Baskets (0-10)	3.69	0.41	3.36	0.40	3.50	0.40	0.17	.84	.006
Total Points (0-50)	25.26	1.15	23.76	1.13	24.43	1.14	0.43	.65	.015

Note: Groups with different subscripts are significantly different from each other. The covariate-adjusted means were calculated using the grand mean value of the covariate (i.e., pre-test value). Performance was assessed by the number of successful basketball free throws and the total points scored.