



Competitive Anxiety in Obstacle Course Racing; an Athletes' Perspective in the Maltese Context

M.Sc in Psychology of Sport (Dissertation Research)

*Faculty of Health Sciences and Sport, University
of Stirling, Stirling, UK*


Michela Lia



Aims of the Study

To investigate...

1. the *levels* of competition anxiety amongst Maltese OCR athletes,
2. ...



Methodology — Mixed Methods Approach

Part 1 (Quantitative)

- ❑ *Sport Competition Anxiety Test (SCAT) (Martens et al., 1990).*
- ❑ Measures 'competitive trait anxiety'.
- ❑ Gives a score between 10 and 30.
- ❑ Target population and inclusion criteria: Maltese OCR athletes who have been competing for at least 1 year.
- ❑ 72 participants.

Main Findings

Part 1: SCAT Questionnaire

Table 1. Questionnaire Results Overview (Means and Standard Deviations)

	Number of Participants	SCAT Score (\bar{X})	s
All participants	72	23.53	5.11
Females	34	26.35	3.88
Males	38	20.97	4.81
Elite	56	24.00	4.86
Non-Elite	16	20.97	5.75

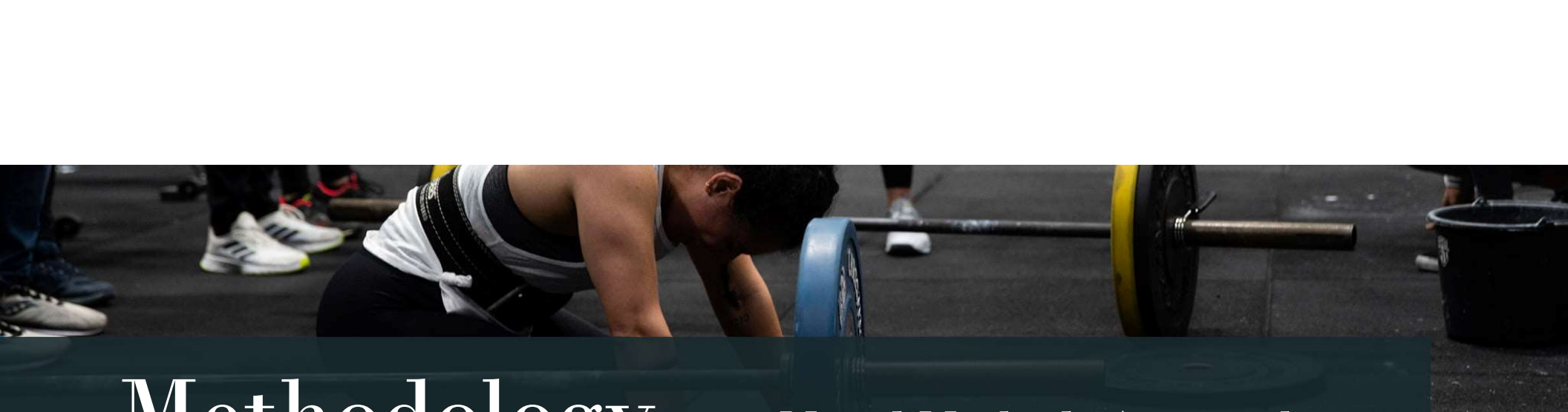
9 participants had a **low** score (10-16), **30** had a **moderate** score (17-24), and **33** had a **high** score (25-30).



Aims of the Study

To investigate...

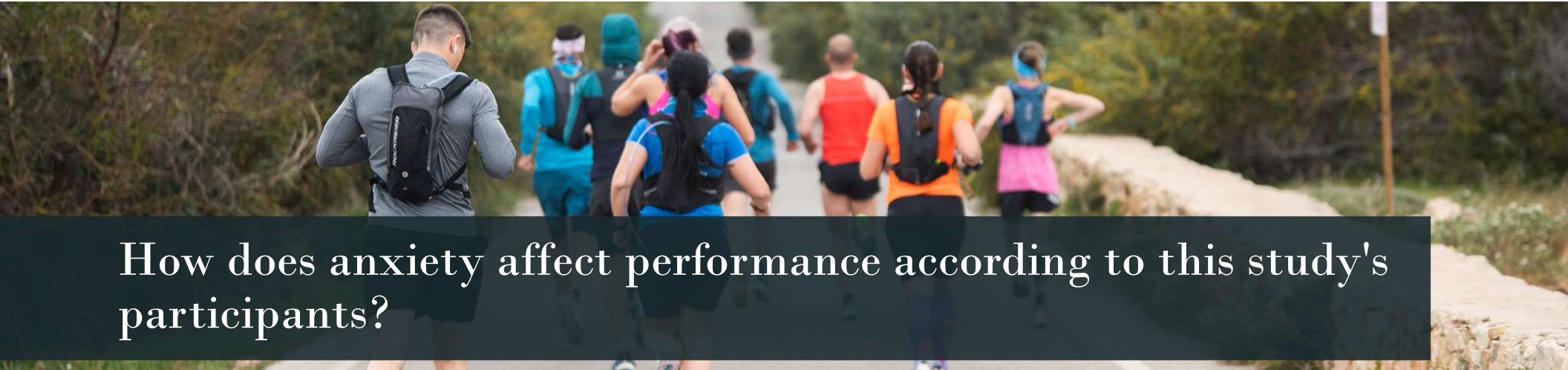
1. the levels of competition anxiety amongst Maltese OCR athletes,
2. the *causes* for anxiety in OCR,
3. their *interpretation* of competitive anxiety,
4. the *somatic* and *cognitive* manifestations,
5. and their *coping* methods



Methodology — Mixed Methods Approach

Part 2 (Qualitative)

- ❑ 6 Semi-structured Interviews
 - ❑ 2 participants with **HIGH** level of 'competitive trait anxiety'
- MODERATE** level
- LOW** level



How does anxiety affect performance according to this study's participants?

Anxiety pre-competition:

- Encourages athlete to be better prepared (training/equipment/nutrition)
- Promotes mental rehearsal

Anxiety During Competition:

(The right amount of anxiety...)

- Helps athlete stay focused
- Encourages athlete to give their all (more competitive)

A man with a beard and a green t-shirt is climbing a rope ladder made of wooden beams and ropes. He is looking down and smiling. The background is a cloudy sky.

How does anxiety affect performance according to this study's participants?

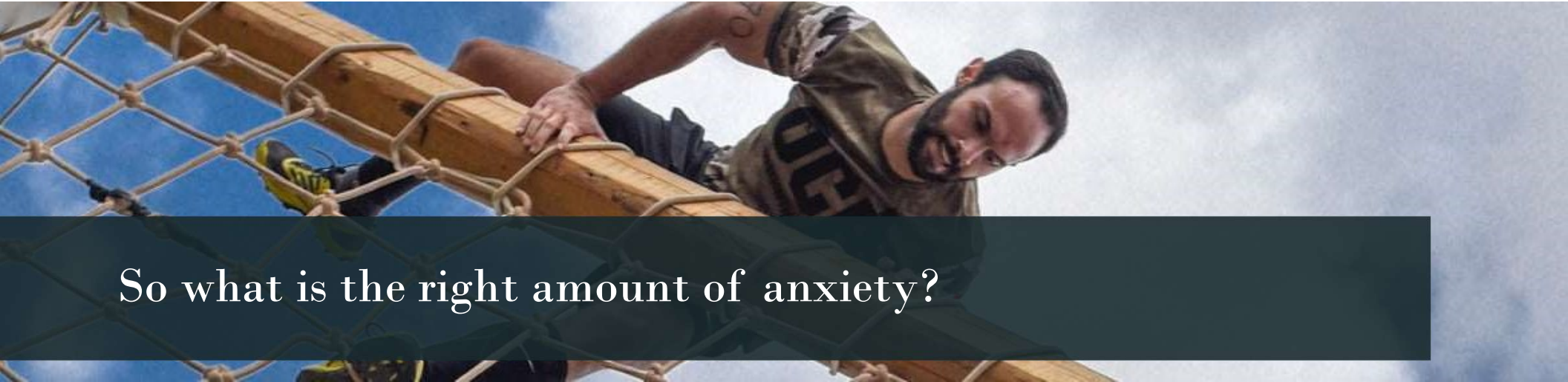
Too much anxiety during competition:

- Loss of focus
- Overthinking skills
- Loss of confidence

Too little anxiety:

- Also loss of focus
- Loss of the competitive edge (too relaxed)

Both may cause athlete's performance to drop



So what is the right amount of anxiety?

IZOF (Hanin, 2000): Individual Zone of Optimal Functioning

If an athlete is in their IZOF, they are much more likely to see competition as a *challenge*, rather than a *threatening situation*.

A woman with dark hair tied back is climbing a rope obstacle course. She is wearing a black athletic top and is focused on her climb. The background is slightly blurred, showing other ropes and greenery.

QUOTE FROM PARTICIPANT WITH HIGH ANXIETY

Somatic and Cognitive Symptoms of Competition Anxiety

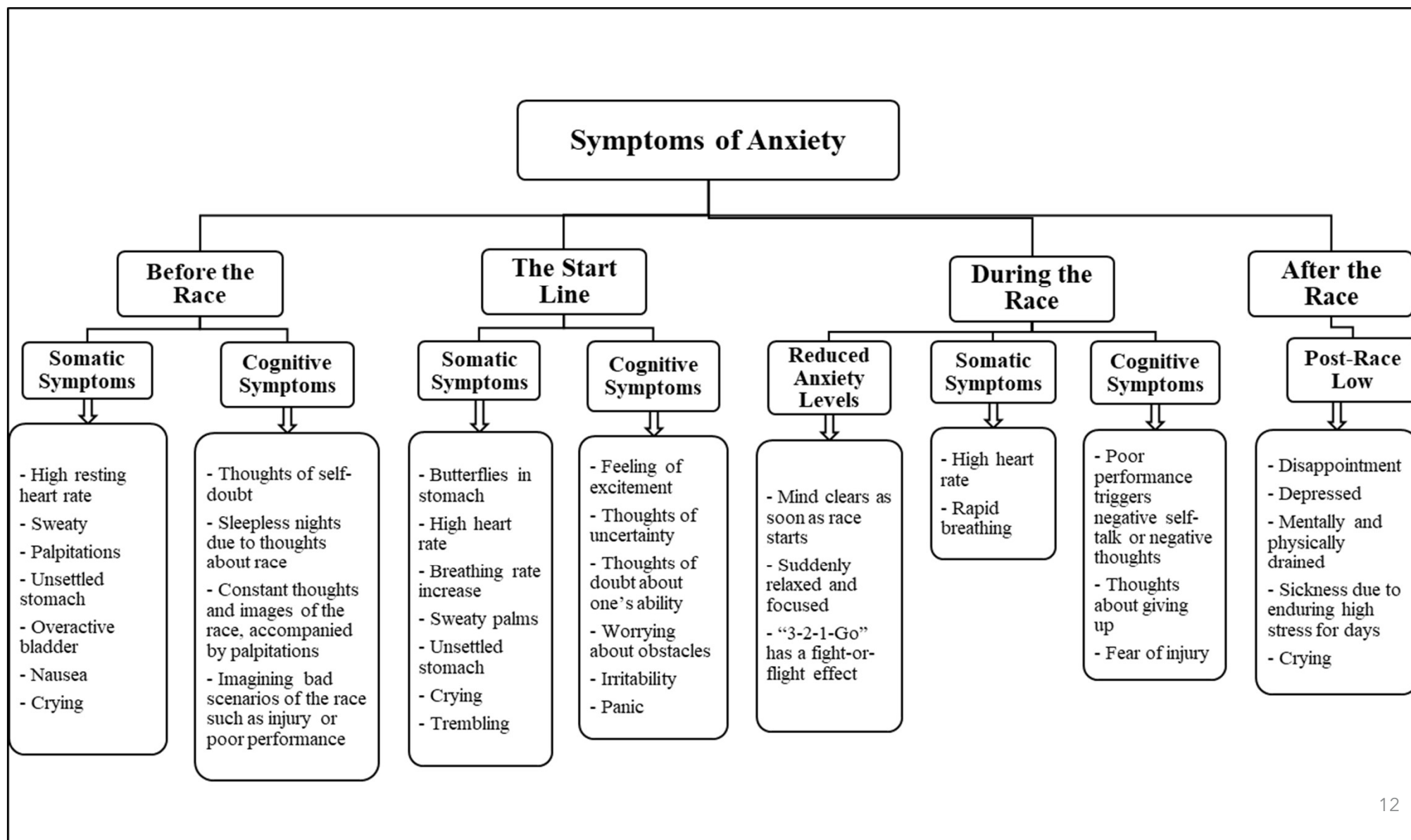
"When the race starts getting close, the anxiety starts. So it's like, from two weeks before. I start doubting myself, I start imagining myself during the race. I really get high heart rate at this time, I start getting really sweaty. In fact, I try to keep my mind off it as much as I can, but it's quite hard. Sometimes I get sleepless nights as well, I mean, not fully sleepless, but as soon as I touch my head to the pillow, I start thinking about the race. I literally imagine myself in the venue running and hanging on obstacles. That's one of the hardest things, you know, because you can't really control it. Sometimes even while I'm driving, I'll just imagine myself and I start getting palpitations. That's the worst."

A woman with dark hair tied back is climbing a rope obstacle on an outdoor course. She is wearing a dark athletic top. The background is slightly blurred, showing other ropes and greenery.

QUOTE FROM PARTICIPANT

Somatic and Cognitive Symptoms of Competition Anxiety

"When the race starts getting close, the anxiety starts. So it's like, from two weeks before. I start **doubting myself**, I start **imagining myself** during the race. I really get **high heart rate** at this time, I start getting really **sweaty**. In fact, I try to keep my mind off it as much as I can, but it's quite hard. Sometimes I get **sleepless** nights as well, I mean, not fully sleepless, but as soon as I touch my head to the pillow, I start **thinking about the race**. I literally imagine myself in the venue running and hanging on obstacles. That's one of the hardest things, you know, because you **can't really control it**. Sometimes even while I'm driving, I'll just imagine myself and I start getting **palpitations**. That's the worst."



Coping Techniques used by OCR athletes

Physical Techniques

- Breathing Exercises
- Writing a word/phrase on wrist

Cognitive Techniques

- Practicing positive self-talk and thoughts
- Mentally disconnect from the environment at the start line
- Keeping in Mind that fun is the priority (low anxiety participants)
- Being self-aware and in control of mind and body (low anxiety participants)
- Avoid thinking about the race altogether (high anxiety participants)

Social Support

- Talking to teammates about race doubts
- Asking for help when finding difficulty with an obstacle
- Discussing future races with teammates

Being Present with your Anxiety

- Feeling all emotions and accepting them
- Using anxiety to your advantage

- Relaxation Techniques
- Self-Talk (emotion-oriented or task-oriented)
- Seeking Social Support
- Problem-Focused Strategies



Take Away Points

- Anxiety in sport is NOT always BAD.
- Finding your IZOF!
- Importance of learning and using healthy coping methods.



Thank you

Michela Lia

michela.lia1997@gmail.com