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Identity orientation affects rugby players' performance and decision making

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Background

The **Social Identity Approach** emphasises on the importance of group membership and social context on individual behaviour (Haslam, 2004). According to the context, athletes defines themselves relative to different **social identities**, that is, they define themselves as a member of a group, as "we" and "us", or to a **personal identity**, that is, they define themselves as unique individuals, as "I" and "me" (Rees et al., 2015).

Activation of social and personal identities has important implications for social behaviour that need to be further understood in the context of team sports. For example, knowing teammates expectations when personal identity is activated may affect decision-making by dividing attention to the relevant cues for the behaviours related to both personal and team's goals.

Objective

The aim of this study is to examine the impact of self-oriented and group-oriented identities on rugby players' **performance** and on individual players' **decision making**.

Hypotheses

1. Priming a high level of self-abstraction (social identity) would positively influence team's performance (Campo et al., 2019; Slater et al., 2019).
2. Decision making would be affected by an interaction between task complexity and identity: personal goals would interfere with team's expectations in complex game situations.

Methods

Participants

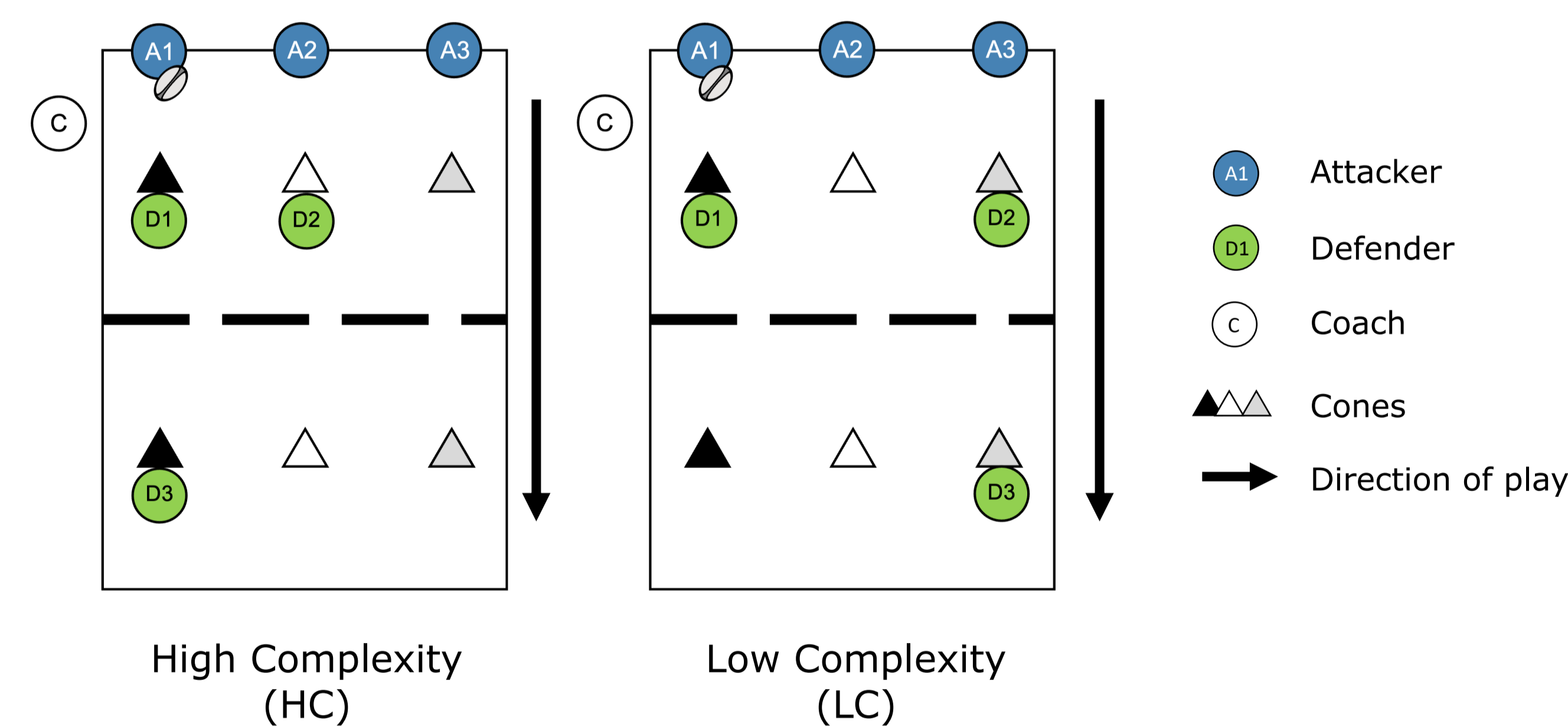
102 rugby players from elite training centres (aged 16-20, 30 females).

Procedure

Step 1 – Priming Attacking Players Level of Self-abstraction

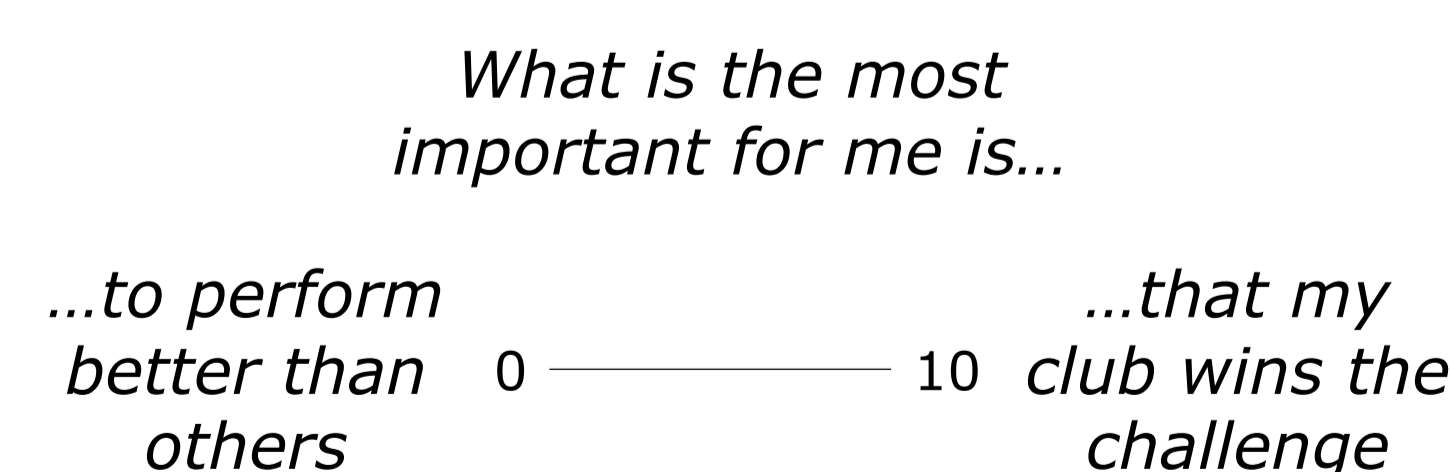


Step 2 – Rugby Game Situations



Data Collection

Before the Game Situations



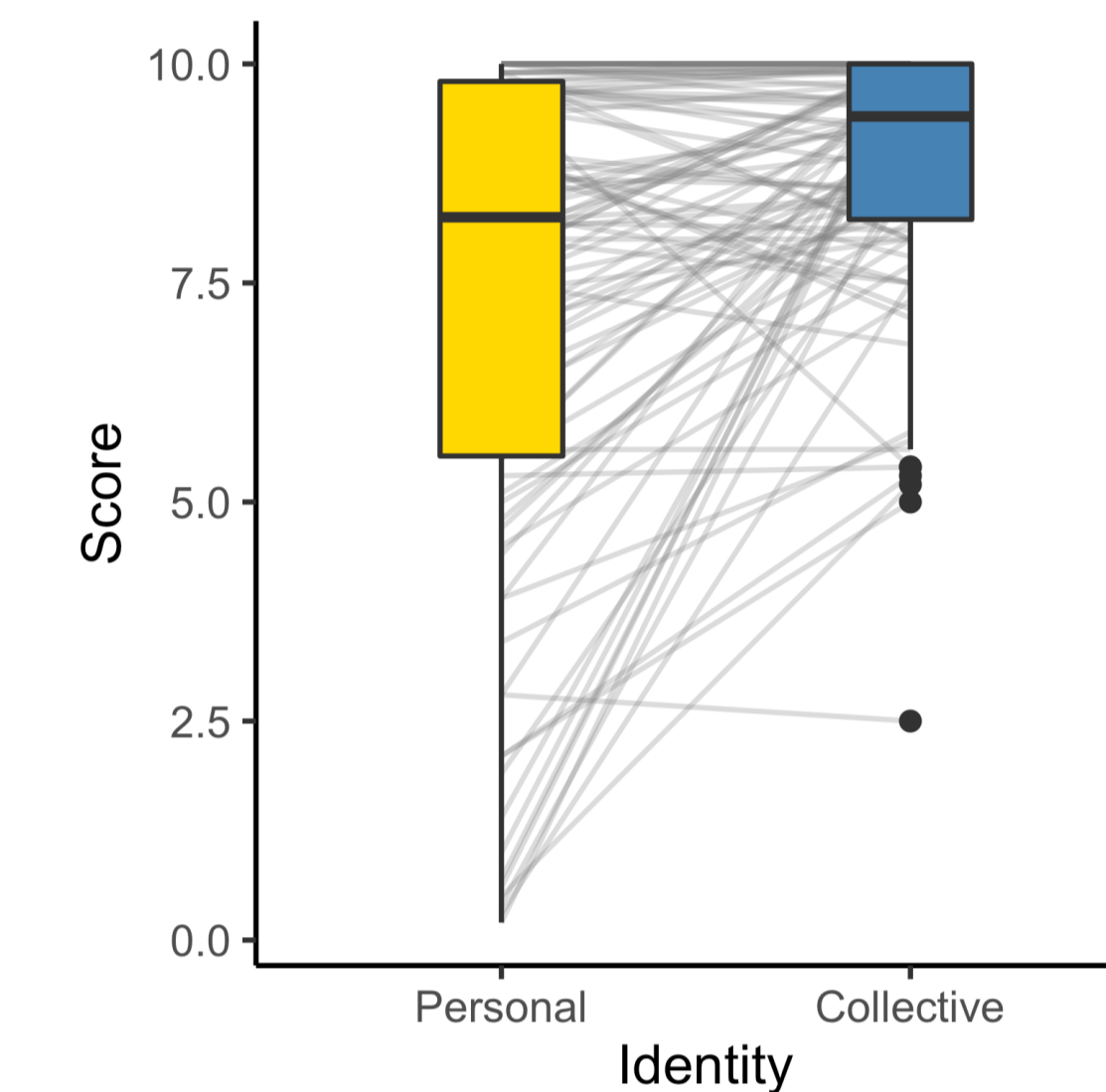
Visual Analogue Scale (VAS) for identity manipulation check

During the Game Situations



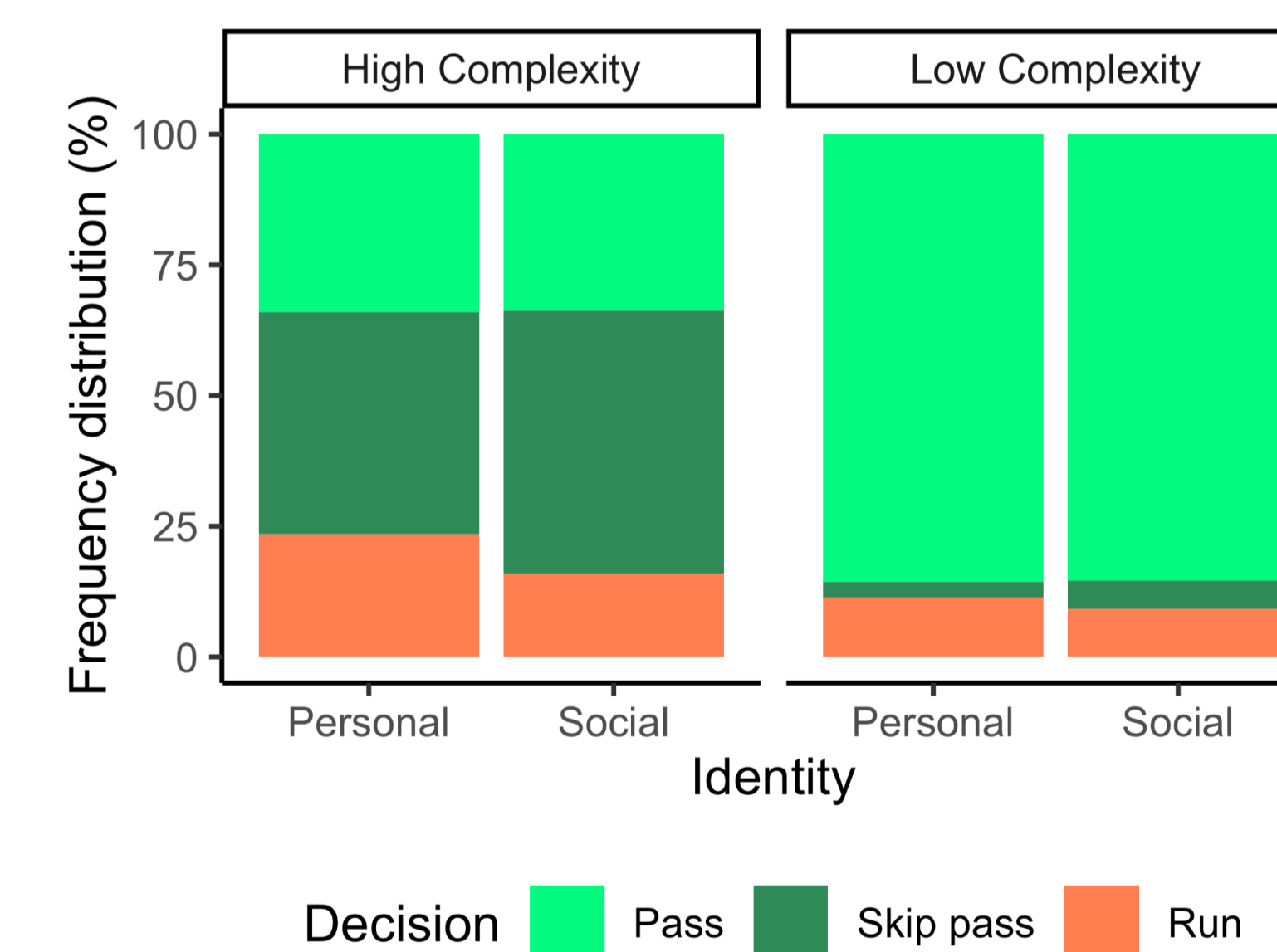
Results & Discussion

Manipulation Check

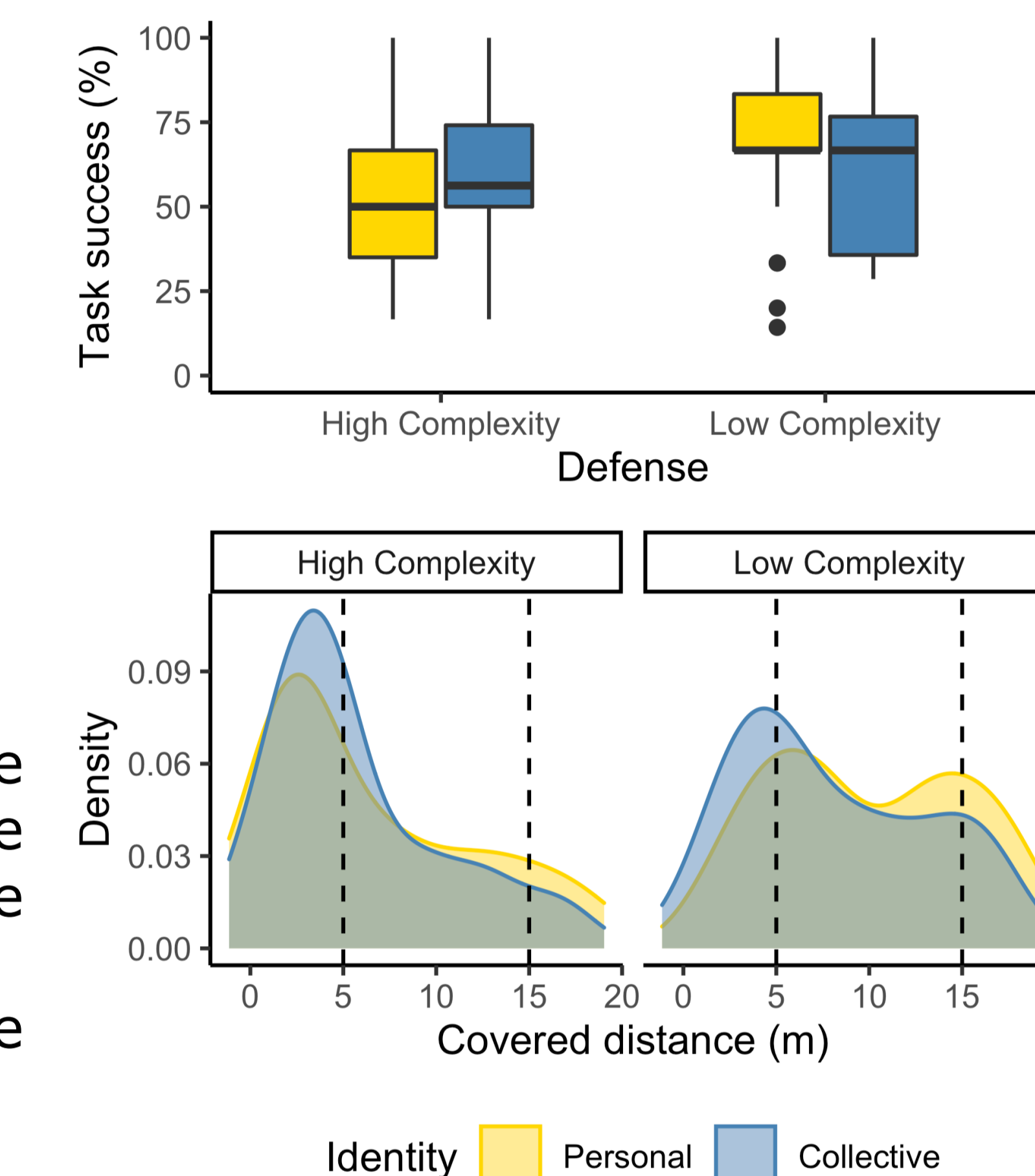


Setting individual or collective motivational goals influenced the score on the VAS (mean difference of 1.4 points, $p < .001$). This difference confirms the effectiveness of the manipulation.

Decision Making



Performance



The number of tries scored was higher in the LC (+8.8% of success, $p = .005$). Also, in PI, attacking team scored 14% more tries in LC than in HC ($p = .010$). This was not observed in SI ($p = 1$). Performance in terms of distance covered was better in PI than in CI (+1.3m, $p = .043$) and in LC than in HC in (+2.9m, $p < .001$).

These results contrast with those of previous studies (Campo et al., 2019; Slater et al., 2019). This contrast may be due to the chosen rugby game situation, where an individual action has more impact on performance than in the real rugby game context used by Campo et al. (2019).

The decision of the first attacker was affected by the game situation ($p < .001$), and was close to be influenced significantly by the level of self-abstraction ($p = .064$).

Moreover, in PI, the first attacker kept the ball longer in HC than in LC (+0.4s, $p < .001$), whereas in CI this time was not affected by the situation ($p = .642$).

These results support that the influence of players' activated identity on decision making is more salient in complex situations

Key Takeaways

- When PI is activated, rugby players appear to be more sensitive to available spaces for themselves and less sensitive to available spaces for their teammates (and conversely in CI), especially in complex situations.
- This effect of PI benefited performance in our 3 vs. 2+1 rugby task as it may have facilitated overcoming the first line of defence. However, the CI effect may be more relevant to performance in a real rugby game context.

Acknowledgements

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