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Punitive Exercise and Athlete Mental Health: Multilevel Strategies to Support Athlete Safety and Development

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Punitive exercise (i.e., using physical exercise as a disciplinary consequence) remains a persistent cultural practice across many sport environments despite well-documented physical, psychological, and legal risks. Athletes already experience significant performance-related stress, and associating strength and conditioning (S&C) work with humiliation, failure, or fear introduces an avoidable secondary stressor that undermines long-term engagement with S&C, increases anxiety, and contributes to coping behaviors such as injury masking and deliberate underreporting. Drawing on multilevel perspectives, this practice update synthesizes research, clinical insights, and interdisciplinary guidelines to describe how punitive exercise shapes athlete development at the micro (individual), mezzo (team/organizational), and macro (cultural/policy) levels. The paper incorporates safety recommendations from national sport organizations (e.g., National Athletic Trainers' Association) and legal examples (e.g., Lee v. Louisiana Board of Trustees) to illustrate the consequences of punitive exercise. The manuscript concludes with applied strategies for relevant sports staff to help athletes re-establish a safe, evidence-informed relationship with conditioning and challenge harmful norms that compromise athlete well-being.

Keywords: athlete mental health, punishment, strength and conditioning, discipline

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Punitive Exercise as an Added Stressor in Athlete Development

Athletes frequently operate under high levels of sport-related stress, such as performance expectations, roster competition, non-athletic demands, and interpersonal pressures (Lopes Dos Santos et al., 2020). Introducing punitive physical exercise adds a second, unnecessary stressor that is not physiologically or psychologically aligned with healthy development (Parsons et al., 2019). Exercise used as punishment has been described as “abandoning sound physiologic principles” and elevating risk without meaningful performance benefit (NCAA Sports Science Institute, 2019).

For many athletes, early sport experiences establish long-lasting associations between punitive conditioning and emotional distress (Battaglia et al., 2017). When conditioning is tied to shame, anger, or humiliation, athletes learn to brace for threat rather than engage in S&C activities from a developmental and growth mindset. These associations often persist into later developmental stages, where athletes struggle to differentiate former punitive exercise practices from evidence-informed S&C programming. The result is a maladaptive relationship with S&C training characterized by dread, avoidance, and dysregulated stress responses.

Micro-Level Impacts: Fear Responses and Coping Patterns

Conditioning as a Learned Threat

From a psychological learning perspective, punitive exercise establishes S&C training environments as predictable sites of harm. When athletes repeatedly experience exhaustion, public shaming, or punitive drills, conditioning becomes paired with fear, guilt, or anxiety. These are classical conditioning processes where athletes begin associating neutral stimuli (e.g., whistles, weight rooms, sprints) with negative outcomes, creating anticipatory anxiety long after the punitive environment is gone (Kuśnierz et al., 2024).

Generalization Across Developmental Stages

Athletes may generalize early experiences of punitive exercise to new contexts. For example, a collegiate athlete may enter a new S&C program expecting that “conditioning equals punishment,” even when the program is evidence-based and grounded in athlete safety. This generalization undermines trust and disrupts an athlete's ability to fully engage in the S&C programming (Robazza et al., 2023).

Injury Masking, Underreporting, and Faked Symptoms

Punitive exercise also fosters unsafe coping behaviors. Athletes learn that showing fatigue or struggling physically results in punishment, leading to:

- masking injuries to avoid appearing weak
- underreporting symptoms to avoid triggering additional conditioning
- faking injuries to escape fear-inducing workouts

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These behaviors significantly increase risk of injury (Casa et al., 2012).

Somatic Anxiety

Athletes exposed to punitive exercise often present with anxiety-driven somatic responses such as stomach pain, elevated heart rate, dissociation, or emotional dysregulation before conditioning sessions. These physiological responses mirror trauma reactivity, as the body anticipates danger due to the paired association between conditioning and punishment (Tanguy et al., 2018).

Mezzo-Level Impacts: Team Culture, Discipline, and Organizational Dynamics

Punitive Exercise and Team Dynamics

Punishment conditioning erodes psychological safety, decreases team cohesion, and fosters adversarial team cultures. SHAPE America (2021) notes that using exercise as punishment disrupts positive behavioral climates and reinforces fear-based compliance rather than intrinsic motivation.

Athletes conditioned under punitive norms often misinterpret neutral coaching cues as threats. Conversely, sport coaches and S&C staff may misinterpret athlete avoidance as laziness rather than a trauma-linked response. This mutual misunderstanding strains relationships across the performance team.

Discipline vs. Punishment

Positive discipline, such as clear expectations, consistent boundaries, and relational trust, is developmentally appropriate and enhances intrinsic motivation (Carson, 2021). Punishment, however, uses fear to enforce compliance, undermining learning and, over time, impairing performance. When athletes associate conditioning with behavioral failure, they may become less engaged, less confident, and more reactive to mistakes.

Inherited Norms Across Contexts

Many sport coaches learned under outdated “run until you puke” or “no pain, no gain” cultures (Casa et al., 2012). When these norms persist, they interfere with modern evidence-based S&C approaches that prioritize load management, acclimatization, recovery, and long-term athlete development.

Macro-Level Impacts: Policy, Safety Guidance, and Legal Consequences

Legal Precedent: The Tiger Mix Case

The case *Lee v. Louisiana Board of Trustees* (2019) demonstrates the severe consequences of punitive exercise gone tragically wrong. After being required to run more than four miles in extreme heat as punishment, one athlete died and another sustained permanent, career-ending medical complications. The court upheld a \$660,000 judgment, citing clear negligence and violation of safety standards. This case illustrates that punitive exercise is not only unsafe, but it also exposes institutions, coaches, and staff to significant legal liability.

Safety Recommendations and Best Practice Guidelines

National organizations such as NATA (Casa et al., 2012), the NCAA Sports Science Institute (2019), and SHAPE America (2021) have issued recommendations discouraging exercise as punishment. These bodies serve as examples of recommended best practices, not exhaustive authorities, but their consensus reflects a clear cultural shift toward athlete safety. The following section focuses on strategies for relevant sport staff when working with athletes regarding these issues.

Multilevel Strategies for Athletes Impacted by Punitive Exercise

Modeled after multilevel intervention systems used across education, mental health, and social services, this framework outlines supports at the micro (individual), mezzo (team/organizational), and macro (system/cultural) levels (Wackerle-Hollman et al., 2021). This structure ensures that athletes receive developmentally appropriate, context-specific support that adapts to their unique developmental history with punitive exercise. The approach emphasizes collaboration and ongoing evaluation, allowing sport environments to remain responsive to athletes' evolving needs.

Micro-Level: Individual Athlete Supports

Micro-level supports address the personal, psychological, and physiological challenges athletes may experience following exposure to punitive exercise. At this level, the emphasis is on individualized care, emotional safety, and rebuilding an athlete's trust in the training process.

- Help athletes differentiate between past punitive exercise and current evidence-based S&C practices through psychoeducation and supportive dialogue.
- Address fear-based responses such as anxiety, avoidance, injury masking, or underreporting through trauma-informed communication and gradual exposure-based training progression.
- Provide strategies for emotional regulation, self-awareness, and performance-related coping that support athletes during high-intensity or high-pressure training.

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- Normalize conversations about fatigue, soreness, and mental load to reduce shame and promote honest reporting.
- Offer individualized mental health support (sport psychology, counseling, or social work services) for athletes exhibiting trauma-like reactions or significant distress related to conditioning environments.

Micro-level work acknowledges that athletes' histories shape their present engagement and highlights the need for personalized, trauma-informed, skill-building interventions.

Mezzo-Level: Team and Organizational Supports

Mezzo-level support focuses on reshaping the training environment, team dynamics, and interdisciplinary relationships that influence how athletes perceive and experience conditioning. This level emphasizes cultural clarity, communication, and relational safety across staff and peers.

- Build a team culture where conditioning is framed as development rather than consequence, reinforcing that S&C training is a tool, not a punishment.
- Create predictable and transparent training structures by sharing plans, rationale, and expectations across S&C, coaches, athletic trainers, and athletes.
- Strengthen interdisciplinary collaboration to ensure consistent language and reduce mixed messaging that may trigger past punitive associations.
- Integrate relational practices that encourage trust, including restorative communication, supportive feedback, and role clarity among staff.
- Encourage mentoring and peer support systems that help athletes navigate fear-based reactions and feel less isolated in their experiences.

Mezzo-level strategies ensure that athletes encounter a cohesive, supportive, and emotionally safe team environment that counters punitive exercise narratives.

Macro-Level: System and Cultural Supports

Macro-level supports address the broader structures, policies, and cultural norms that shape conditioning practices across sport environments. This level focuses on institutional accountability, safety standards, and the prevention of punitive exercise at its roots.

- Develop and enforce organizational policies explicitly prohibiting the use of physical exercise as punishment or retribution.
- Align institutional procedures with national recommendations (e.g., NATA, NCAA Sports Science Institute, SHAPE America) to promote safe, evidence-informed conditioning.
- Provide staff training to ensure all personnel, S&C, sport coaches, athletic trainers, medical staff, and administrators understand the risks, legal implications, and psychological impact of punitive exercise.
- Utilize case examples such as *Lee v. Louisiana Board of Trustees* to highlight the legal and ethical responsibilities associated with training oversight.

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- Implement feedback mechanisms and evaluation processes that allow athletes and staff to report concerns, promote transparency, and review conditioning practices regularly.
- Foster a broader culture of athlete-centered care that recognizes the importance of dignity, physical safety, and mental health in all training decisions.

Macro-level work ensures that the entire system, not just individuals or teams, commits to eliminating punitive exercise and to creating consistent, enforceable standards of safe practice.

Collaborative Support Across Levels

Across micro, mezzo, and macro domains, the effectiveness of this framework relies on collaboration between strength and conditioning staff, sport psychology practitioners, social workers, sport coaches, athletic trainers, sports medicine providers, and administrators. Continuous evaluation, community-building, and shared responsibility are foundational to repairing athletes' relationships with conditioning, preventing harmful training practices, and fostering environments that prioritize development, trust, and well-being.

Conclusion and Future Directions

Punitive exercise is not simply a coaching style; it is a multilevel threat to athlete well-being. At the micro level, it contributes to anxiety, avoidance, and distorted injury reporting. At the mezzo level, it disrupts team culture, erodes psychological safety, and damages trust between athletes and staff. At the macro level, it violates established safety standards and exposes institutions to preventable legal and ethical risks.

Protecting athlete development requires coordinated, interdisciplinary action. Strength and conditioning coaches, sport psychology practitioners, social workers, athletic trainers, sports medicine providers, sport coaches, and administrators all contribute to reshaping how conditioning is taught, communicated, and experienced. When implemented consistently, multilevel strategies can help athletes rebuild trust in strength and conditioning, reduce maladaptive coping behaviors, and promote environments grounded in evidence-based practice and safety.

Punitive exercise is a preventable source of physical harm and psychological distress. Moving beyond punishment-based physical exertion is not an act of softness, it is a commitment to protecting athletes, sustaining performance, and supporting healthy long-term development.

Future research should examine how punitive exercise experiences influence athlete development across the lifespan, including the long-term psychological and physiological effects of early exposure. Studies exploring athlete perceptions of safety, trust, and readiness within modern strength and conditioning programs may clarify how prior punitive environments impact current engagement. Additional work is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of multilevel re-engagement strategies and to identify best practices for interdisciplinary collaboration. Research focused on policy adoption, implementation fidelity, and institutional barriers could further support efforts to eliminate punitive exercise and promote athlete-centered training environments.

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“I Have No One To Talk To:” A Call for Greater Support for Head Coaches in High-Performance Sport

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Head coaches in high-performance sport environments operate under intense pressure, often facing emotional and psychological challenges that existing support structures overlook. While increasing attention has been paid to athlete mental health, the same cannot be said for coaches, whose well-being is often neglected. This commentary highlights the urgent need for tailored mental health support for head coaches and advocates for greater involvement from sport social workers in addressing this gap. Drawing from current research and recent developments in sport organizations, we present a range of stressors that coaches experience. Furthermore, we offer a set of practical recommendations, including integrating coach-focused mental health training into certification programs, creating formal support networks, and appointing dedicated mental health professionals within sports organizations. By reframing the narrative of “coaching resilience” and instead prioritizing coaches’ mental health, this article calls for a shift in how high-performance sport environments can better support head coaches. In turn, we consider that these recommendations will enhance coach well-being while optimizing team performance and fostering healthier sport cultures.

Keywords: Resilience, Coaching, Certification, Sport Social Work, Training

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High-performance sport environments are characterized by extreme levels of dedication (Mallet, 2010), the pressure to win (Pearson & Baghurst, 2020), and leading/managing other individuals (Sotiriadou & De Bosscher, 2018). Head coaches, as the leaders of these athletes and teams, are often under the most pressure, with their roles extending far beyond strategic planning, skill development, and coaching during competition. Their responsibilities extend to leading athletes, managing team dynamics, addressing performance issues, navigating public and media scrutiny, and most critically, managing their players' emotional and psychological well-being (Rathwell et al., 2014).

With such responsibilities comes enormous pressure that may (and in our experience has) led to a coach's health and well-being being placed at risk (Griffin et al., 2025). While there is a growing awareness and indeed provision around supporting athletes' mental health (Certified Clinical Sports Social Work Institute, 2025), the mental health and well-being needs of head coaches remain largely unaddressed.

This commentary presents a case for sport social workers and related practitioners to expand their involvement in coaching and, more specifically, in the support of head coaches. We propose that enhanced support structures and mechanisms be made available to head coaches operating in high-performance environments. Furthermore, we explain why certifications should include "self-care training" and "education on pertinent topics like anxiety, stress, and burnout," and how they can be incorporated into coach education.

Relevance to Sport Social Work

The role of social work in supporting coaches can be viewed at different levels (i.e., at the micro–mezzo–macro perspective). At the macro level, the profession can advocate for policy change, resource allocation, and cultural shifts that normalize the discussion of mental health in coaching. Indeed, as alluded to, the landscape is changing, but the rate and consistency of change is uneven. Social workers can help create supportive organizational structures at the mezzo level, such as peer networks, communities of practice, wellness hubs, and dedicated personnel embedded within sport organizations. These recommendations also correlate with the sports coaching literature (Baghurst et al., 2024; Quick & Baghurst, 2025). At the micro level, social workers can provide direct counseling, psychoeducation, and therapeutic interventions to coaches experiencing stress, burnout, anxiety, or depression. This multilayered approach is a helpful way to understand how the needs of coaches in high-performance sport might be addressed at different levels.

The field of sport social work has made significant strides in advocating and providing support for athletes' well-being (Certified Clinical Sports Social Work Institute, 2025). For example, the recently developed "Athlete Clinical Mental Health (ACMH) Certification" (Certified Clinical Sports Social Work Institute, 2025) includes a program to educate social workers about the needs of athletes who operate in competitive sports. Athletes are often provided with resources (i.e., physical, social, and emotional) to address problems such as anxiety, depression, and other mental illnesses. These can come in many forms, such as counselors, sport psychologists, and, more recently, sport social workers.

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Beyond individual interventions targeting athletes, the profession of social work is increasingly positioning itself to support athletic environments in more systematic ways. Schools of social work in the United States and internationally are beginning to provide specialized training, field placements, and research opportunities focused on sport and performance settings (University of Kentucky College of Social Work, n.d.; University of Central Lancashire, n.d.). These programs reflect a growing recognition that sport, including coaching, is increasingly important in areas such as health, equity, and justice. In parallel, governing bodies such as the National Collegiate Athletic Association have issued mental health best-practice guidelines (NCAA, 2021) that emphasize the responsibility of institutions to support the well-being of all stakeholders, including coaches. International organizations such as the International Olympic Committee (Reardon et al., 2019) and FIFA (World Health Organization, 2021) have also begun to highlight mental health as a universal concern in sport, not one limited to athletes alone. Positioning sport social work within this broader professional and institutional landscape underscores its potential as a vital partner in reimagining how coaches can and need to be supported.

The growing field of sport social work is uniquely positioned to help address this gap. However, we recognize a need for collaboration due to the complexity of the domain (i.e., in an intersection between social work, sport, and coaching). Social workers are professionals trained to intervene at the intersection of individuals and systems (Oliver, 2013). Hartman-Shea et al. (2011) concluded that the roles of social workers include “counseling professionals, facilitators of communication, and resource agents” (p.143). Moreover, those who foray into the sporting arena in support of athletes can play an equally pivotal role in providing coaches with the necessary support to maintain their mental and emotional health. The skills and frameworks employed by social workers (e.g., trauma-informed care and cognitive therapies) are well-suited to the challenges head coaches face. These challenges include organizational isolation, public scrutiny, and the immense pressure to perform, which can lead to mental health issues like burnout (DeFreese et al., 2022; Hjälm et al., 2006), anxiety (Lundkvist et al., 2014), and depression (Griffin et al., 2025; Pearson & Baghurst, 2020).

Unfortunately, sports coaches, particularly head coaches, do not receive the same levels of support as athletes. Head coaches face similar stressors, yet are frequently tasked with dealing with and overcoming issues independently. This is a significant concern with existing approaches and systems that do not support head coaches when working in high-performance sport environments. This sentiment is perhaps best expressed by Griffin et al. (2025), who stated, “Organizations should also create opportunities for the coach to spend time with family to improve their work-life balance, which has been reported as one of the most significant stressors for collegiate coaches” (p. 2).

From an ethical perspective, we suggest that coaches’ mental health and well-being needs should be treated with the same urgency and gravity as those of the athletes they serve. High-performance sport environments are often synonymous with individuals needing high levels of character, resilience, grit, and confidence (Lorenz et al., 2013). However, these desirable characteristics are also problematic as they can lead to burnout and other issues over time when the pressure becomes too much, or the individual does not have the resources necessary to cope with it (Pearson & Baghurst, 2020). Therefore, we suggest that the stigma around emotional vulnerability in coaching needs to be challenged. Coaches also deserve access to resources that

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help them manage the pressures of their roles and enable them to practice ethically, sustainably, and at a high level over time.

The Problems for Head Coaches

While elite sports competitions/leagues (e.g., National Basketball Association (NBA), Major League Baseball (MLB), National Ice Hockey League (NHL), National Football League (NFL), and Premier League (UK Soccer)) present some of the most high-pressure environments for head coaches, it is important to recognize that the stressors they face are not exclusive to these leagues. Indeed, collegiate, school, and club-level head coaches are equally likely to deal with consistent “noise” from stakeholders such as sponsors, owners, fans, parents, and recruiters (Baghurst & Parish, 2022). High-performance teams across all sports, regardless of the level of competition, are subject to a variety of similar (and yet also different) expectations, such as performance outcomes that drive job security, public image, and revenue (Altfeld et al., 2015; Van Mullem, 2015). These pressures result in environments where head coaches’ mental and emotional health is viewed as secondary to winning.

Head coaches in these environments have a unique set of responsibilities. Unlike athletes, they are responsible for managing not only the team’s performance but also its culture, interpersonal dynamics, and often the personal issues of the athletes they lead. These multiple responsibilities often place coaches in what could be conceived as a “vulnerable” position, where their own emotional and mental health is routinely overlooked and certainly not checked by others in their professional sphere. Indeed, it could be argued that the head coach is responsible for everyone else working for them.

Who, then, is responsible for the head coach’s well-being? Head coaches have no “natural” support system from above. For example, owners of clubs and franchises can and frequently do make decisions about hiring and firing the head coach (Frick, 2018), so why would a head coach want to confide in owners, general managers, or athletic directors? We acknowledge that spouses and perhaps social connections will offer support, yet these are complex and are as likely to be a stressor as a form of support (Baghurst et al., 2025).

In recent literature on stress in coaching, Griffin et al. (2025) reported the stressors and coping mechanisms of assistant NBA coaches. They found that coaches experienced high levels of stress, feared failure, and that families had the potential to moderate stress levels, though they did not always do so. Additionally, head coaches from minority backgrounds face compounded stressors. Studies have shown that minority coaches often experience additional scrutiny and bias, which can exacerbate feelings of isolation and mental fatigue (Cunningham, 2021; Robinson, 2023).

Although Griffin and colleagues studied assistant coaches at the professional level, it is reasonable to assume that head coaching roles are even more demanding (or at least have different demands) due to the lack of “upward” support systems (Myers et al., 2006). Head coaches are frequently isolated in the upper echelons of leadership with limited avenues for receiving emotional support or sharing their own struggles. As William Shakespeare (n.d.) stated, “Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown” (Henry IV, Part 2). This hierarchical isolation makes it even more crucial for support systems to be available to head coaches, whether through internal organizational structures or possibly external interventions. These challenges are

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multifaceted and complex, intersecting several disciplines (e.g., psychology, coaching, and social work). However, it further highlights the need for targeted support structures for head coaches in high-performance sport.

While the struggles of head coaches can appear to be an individual issue, they are systemic. When coaches experience burnout, anxiety, or depression, the effects extend beyond the individual to athletes, support staff, and the broader organization. Coaches who are unsupported may struggle to maintain healthy team cultures, manage conflict effectively, or model sustainable practices of well-being. For example, Guerrero-Calderón et al. (2021) found that professional soccer coaches at risk of losing their jobs increased their athletes' training intensities. Rausch and colleagues (2025) noted that coaches may pass the pressure they experience directly to their athletes.

Conversely, when coaches receive adequate support, it can positively impact the health of athletes, the strength of organizational cohesion, and the ethical nature of the environment (Adiloğulları et al., 2025). This connection highlights why addressing coaches' needs should be considered both a moral imperative and a practical strategy for sustaining excellence in high-performance sport.

What Support Exists for Head Coaches?

Existing coaching literature prioritizes the visible aspects of coaching, such as leadership, strategy, and performance, while not attending to the less visible, but equally significant, emotional and psychological labor. The pressure to always be available, composed, and result-oriented leaves little room for coaches to address their own mental health needs. Simply put, failing to attend to coaches' mental and emotional well-being is at best problematic and harmful to both the coaches themselves, the teams they lead, and the organization for which they work (Pearson & Baghurst, 2020).

The recent developments of dedicated mental health services represent a significant and positive step forward. Notably, the Boston Celtics recently (2025) advertised a position for a "Director of Mind Health & Wellness." The job description included developing and curating resources for on-demand access to mental health and mental skills content for players, coaches, and staff (NBA, 2025). In Australia, the Australian Institute of Sport has launched a "Coach Wellbeing Hub," aimed at supporting and empowering high-performance coaches; it helps them manage personal wellbeing by providing support, knowledge, and development opportunities to navigate their personal and professional lives (Davoren, 2025). Similarly, the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee (USOPC) has taken proactive steps by forming an external Mental Health Taskforce. This initiative was designed to support Team USA athletes and the coaches, officials, and administrators who serve them by addressing mental health concerns and promoting sustained, holistic well-being throughout the athlete's journey (USOPC, 2020).

In some sporting spaces, especially at the higher echelons of sport, the landscape is starting to shift, which is encouraging. However, the examples shared are situated in leagues with significant financial resources. For coaches working as professionals in "lower leagues" (yet still highly competitive), there remains a notable lack of structured, professional mental health services specifically designed for them. While coaches may have access to peer support networks or coach developers, these are often informal, inconsistent in quality, and not always

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effective. While it is acknowledged that peer support or even mentorship can be helpful for coaches (Loughead & Hardy, 2005), these rely heavily on their personal connections and are not a reliable or sustainable source of care. Furthermore, while valuable, coach developers are not trained mental health professionals; they can signpost coaches toward resources but cannot intervene in clinical or complex mental health situations (Quick & Baghurst, 2025).

Ferreira et al. (2024) conducted a systematic review highlighting the benefits of social support and networks for coaches, which include improved performance and a higher quality of life. However, in many cases, coaches are expected to, or make an inaccurate assumption, that they should “tough it out” or lead by example, to display resilience for the team to follow (Aronen et al., 2021). This is especially true when their team is on a losing streak, has been hit by several injuries, fans are calling for the coach to be fired, and players are upset that they are not receiving enough playing time. However, even when their team is winning, unrealistic expectations exist. For example, in the docuseries “Untold: Swamp Kings,” Urban Meyer, the former head football coach at the University of Florida, spoke about how he felt after winning the National Championship in 2008. “We won two national championships out of the three years. This was an expectation now, an expectation we have to win it next year, and then we have to win it the year after... Anything less than winning a national title, you’re a failure.” (Lemoncelli, 2023).

This “resilience at all costs” is not a badge of honor. Operating in this fashion is not always sustainable and can be, at times, damaging for coaches. The psychological toll of consistently managing their own well-being and the needs of their athletes can quickly become overwhelming (Baghurst, 2024). In a recent example of this, collegiate basketball head coach Josh Schertz described the traumatic experiences of coaching through years of health issues (Moore, 2025). His coaching was severely affected, including sleeping through games, forgetfulness, confusion, skipping office hours, and being unable to drive.

Outside of his home, he kept almost everyone in the dark. Schertz confided in his athletic director, the school president and DeBusk, but he let no one else around the program know how sick he was, and he never missed a practice. “When you’re coaching a team, the last thing you want to do is have the players thinking about or worrying about anything other than what they need to do to play well and to be successful,” he says. “Nobody plays well distracted. And the last thing you want to do as a coach is be a distraction to your own team... I put a lot of it on myself, because I wasn’t able to be for them how I should have been,” Schertz says.

The Call for Support

The purpose of this commentary is to advocate that we can and must do better for head coaches. While significant progress has been made in addressing the mental health needs of athletes, head coaches remain an overlooked population. The rapidly developing field of sport social work is essential in bridging this gap, providing coaches with the support and resources they need to perform their roles effectively and sustainably. This is not a criticism of organizations focused on athlete well-being, but rather a call to expand the scope of support to include coaches facing ongoing challenges.

Quick and Baghurst (2025) shared their experiences as coach developers and highlighted problems shared by the coaches they worked with. These included pressure to win, appeasing

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management, and micro politics. Worryingly so, these issues are often faced in silence and with perceived limited options. Many coaches have shared their concerns about the toll their roles have taken on their mental, physical, and emotional health (e.g., balancing family obligations, lack of sleep, weight gain, poor diet, depression). Some coaches are often reluctant to seek help due to fears of being perceived as weak or unable to handle the job demands. This stigma can prevent coaches from accessing the support they need, and it perpetuates a cycle of isolation and distress, resulting in coaches leaving their roles (Slowiak et al., 2025). As we have outlined, sports coaching is an emotionally and psychologically demanding profession that requires not just technical expertise but also an offering of social support when needed. It exists for athletes; it can also exist for coaches. To address the issues that we have explained, we propose that a collaborative approach is required.

Practical Recommendations

To begin, sports organizations must engage in honest self-reflection. The first (critical) step is determining how supported head coaches feel and what kind of help they need. Bringing in an unbiased, external sport social worker to facilitate these conversations could provide valuable insights into the emotional needs of coaches and the gaps in existing support structures (Quick & Baghurst, 2025).

Second, creating organized communities of practice, where head coaches can share experiences and provide mutual support, would also be a positive step forward. We propose that establishing these networks, where few currently exist, would allow coaches to discuss their unique pressures and provide an avenue for emotional connection and solution-focused conversations. For example, Baghurst (2025) shared the story of a coach who received support from another coach once they overcame the hurdle of seeing them as a competitor but as a colleague going through similar challenges.

Third, creating formalized mental health policies for coaches, with dedicated resources for their psychological well-being, would institutionalize support and ensure that coaches' mental health is prioritized. In their recent study, Griffin et al. (2025) noted the lack of organizational support for coaches' mental health in professional sports, when it was readily available for athletes. Baghurst et al. (2024) proposed the inclusion of an "Athletic Consul" in sports organizations. This individual would be responsible for supporting all coaches, but specifically head coaches, in serving as a conduit of information and being a mentor and advisor.

Finally, we contend that there is a gap in the existing provision for coaches and head coaches. We urge those responsible for developing coaching certification and training programs to include support for coaches' own mental health, not just training on how to support athletes' mental health. As a start, these could focus on aspects such as strategies for emotional regulation (Davis & Davis, 2016), stress management (Olusoga et al., 2009), and resilience-building (Booth & Neill, 2017). Significantly, these proposed topics are merely the start of a long process. Further discussions and collaboration are needed between coaches, organizations, academics, and those in the sport social work field. Embedding this training into coach education frameworks would equip coaches with the tools they need to manage the demands of their roles healthily and sustainably.

Conclusion

Head coaches in high-performance sport face unique levels of pressure and emotional strain. While there is a growing suite of support mechanisms for athletes, the same does not exist for coaches. Therefore, we suggest there is scope for integrating sport social workers into coaching environments, creating structured support systems, and reframing the narrative around resilience. This is as much a practical problem as it is an ethical one. This would ensure that coaches are better supported and equipped in their roles. Enacting the recommendations outlined in this commentary would not only result in improving coaches' well-being but also lead to the likelihood of enhanced coach and athlete performances and organizational stability.

The implications of this work extend beyond coaches themselves. Athletic directors, policy makers, governing bodies, and schools of social work all play a role in shaping environments where coaches operate. Put simply, it is more effective to address problems (e.g., policies, procedures, and organizations) rather than treat symptoms (e.g., burnout, depression, etc.). With their training in systems thinking, advocacy, and mental health care, social workers are uniquely positioned to bridge the gap between individual needs and institutional structures. Therefore, supporting head coaches is an ethical obligation and an opportunity to foster sustainable leadership, enhance athlete welfare, and promote healthier sporting cultures globally.

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Bridging Communities Through Sport: A Social Work Study on Refugees Teaching Cricket to American Citizens

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This qualitative study explores the psychosocial and communal impacts of a reciprocal integration initiative where refugees from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Somalia taught cricket to Americans in New York City, New York and Boise, Idaho (2022–2024). Grounded in Erikson's psychosocial theory and Bandura's self-efficacy framework, the study examines how sport fosters dignity, self-determination, and cross-cultural cohesion. This study recruited 15 refugee coaches and 30 American learners using qualitative methods through interviews, focus groups, and observations. Findings reveal refugee coaches gained self-worth and resolved Eriksonian conflicts, while 78% of American learners reported reduced stereotypes. Cricket fostered social capital, transforming public parks into inclusive "third spaces." Challenges included gender disparities and emotional labor. The study highlights cricket as a tool for integration, emphasizing trauma-informed, refugee-led programs. The study recommends municipal funding, credentialing refugee coaches, and embedding mental health support to enhance sport-based social work initiatives.

Keywords: Refugee integration, cricket, psychosocial development, self-efficacy, sport social work

Introduction

The integration of refugees after third-country resettlement remains one of the most complex challenges facing host societies, shaped by cultural dissonance and systemic inequities (UNHCR, 2023). In the United States, over 3.5 million refugees have resettled since 1975, yet many continue to face marginalization, economic barriers, and social isolation (Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, 2022). Traditional resettlement models often prioritize short-term economic stability and "self-sufficiency" rather than addressing the psychosocial dimensions of belonging and self-worth (Marlowe, 2010). This gap perpetuates a cycle where refugees are perceived as passive recipients of aid rather than active contributors to their communities. Against this backdrop, sport emerges as a transformative medium for fostering reciprocal relationships, challenging stereotypes, and redefining narratives of resilience and agency.

This study examined a novel intervention where refugees from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Somalia served as cricket coaches for American citizens in New York City, New York and Boise, Idaho. By positioning refugees as educators rather than aid recipients, this program challenged traditional power dynamics and created opportunities for mutual learning and cultural exchange. The research questions guiding this study were: How does teaching cricket impact refugees' psychosocial well-being and sense of identity? What are the effects on American learners' perceptions of refugees? How does sport facilitate the development of social capital between refugee and host communities?

Literature Review

Refugee Integration Challenges

The integration of refugees into host societies extends beyond immediate needs, including housing and employment, to encompass cultural alienation, language barriers, and trauma from displacement (UNHCR, 2023). Marlowe (2010) emphasizes that traditional integration models often reduce refugees to "passive beneficiaries" of aid, neglecting their agency and expertise. This oversight perpetuates cycles of marginalization, where refugees are viewed through a deficit lens rather than as contributors. Mental health challenges, including post-traumatic stress and social anxiety, further complicate integration (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010), underscoring the need for interventions that address both practical and emotional dimensions of resettlement.

Sport as a Vehicle for Social Inclusion

Sport has long been recognized as a catalyst for social inclusion, transcending linguistic and cultural divides (Coakley, 2011). Research demonstrates that participation in sports fosters camaraderie, reduces isolation, and rebuilds trust among displaced populations (Spaaij et al., 2016). Soccer programs in refugee camps have enhanced psychosocial well-being by creating safe spaces for self-expression (Fox-Sowell, 2023). Similarly, basketball initiatives in urban settings promote cross-cultural dialogue, challenging stereotypes between refugees and host communities (Walseth, 2008). These examples highlight sport's dual role as a recreational activity and a vehicle for social cohesion.

Cricket's Cultural Significance

Cricket holds profound cultural and emotional resonance for refugees from South Asia, Afghanistan, and the Caribbean, where the sport is intertwined with national identity (Adair & Rowe, 2010). For Afghan refugees, cricket symbolizes resilience; during Taliban rule, clandestine matches became acts of defiance and hope (Majumdar, 2004). In diaspora communities, cricket serves as a "cultural anchor," preserving heritage while fostering connections across generations (Wagg, 2020). This symbolic value positions cricket as more than a game; it is a medium for storytelling, identity preservation, and intergenerational bonding, making it uniquely suited for integration programs.

Sport Social Work

Sport social work integrates athletic activities into therapeutic and community-building practices, aligning with social work's empowerment ethos (Moore & Gummelt, 2018). Interventions range from trauma-informed coaching to using sport for youth development in conflict zones (Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011). Programs like "Right to Play" employ sport to teach conflict resolution skills to refugee children (Arellano et al., 2018). However, the field remains underexplored in non-traditional sports like cricket, particularly in Western contexts where refugees assume leadership roles.

The cricket community is inherently communal, relying on prolonged periods of shared space, collective problem-solving, and strict adherence to fair play, which closely mirrors the core tenets of sport social work. By leveraging the existing global fellowship of the cricket community, sport social workers can facilitate more natural, culturally resonant interventions that prioritize mutual respect and collaboration over traditional provider-client hierarchies.

Gaps in Current Literature

Existing literature on sport and refugee integration predominantly focuses on soccer and basketball, neglecting culturally specific sports like cricket. Geographic biases are also evident, with most studies conducted in Europe or Australia, leaving United States contexts underexplored (Hughes et al., 2021). Longitudinal research is scarce, limiting understanding of sustained impacts. Furthermore, few studies examine reciprocal interventions where refugees assume leadership roles. This study addresses these gaps by centering cricket in a United States setting and prioritizing refugee agency.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs an integrated theoretical framework combining Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory and Albert Bandura's self-efficacy theory to understand the transformative impacts of sport-based refugee leadership programs.

Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory

Erik Erikson's (1950) stages of psychosocial development provide a framework for understanding how teaching cricket addresses developmental conflicts across life spans. For adult refugees, displacement often disrupts the resolution of industry vs. inferiority, as professional identities are invalidated in host societies. Teaching cricket provides opportunities to reclaim competence and demonstrate mastery, addressing lingering feelings of inadequacy. Erikson's assertion that unresolved conflicts can be revisited and resolved later in life (Kivnick &

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Wells, 2014) explains how refugees can rebuild their sense of competence through coaching roles.

For adolescent American learners, the identity vs. role confusion stage is particularly relevant. Exposure to refugee narratives and cultural practices through cricket broadens their understanding of multicultural identities, contributing to healthy identity formation (Phoenix & Sparkes, 2009). Older refugee coaches engage with generativity vs. stagnation by mentoring younger participants and preserving cultural traditions, finding purpose and meaning in their experiences.

Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory

Albert Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory explains how successful coaching experiences enhance refugees' confidence in their ability to navigate new social environments. Self-efficacy, defined as belief in one's capability to achieve goals, is cultivated as refugees master coaching challenges despite language barriers and cultural differences. This enhanced self-efficacy extends beyond the cricket field, reinforcing refugees' belief in their capacity to succeed in other aspects of their new lives.

For American learners, observing refugees' expertise and resilience through cricket coaching serves as vicarious learning experiences that challenge stereotypes and build empathy (Bandura, 1977). These observations contribute to learners' own sense of efficacy in cross-cultural interactions and community engagement.

Integration of Theoretical Frameworks

These frameworks work synergistically to explain the multidirectional benefits of refugee-led sport programs. While Erikson's theory illuminates how sport addresses fundamental developmental needs across the lifespan, Bandura's framework explains the mechanism through which these benefits are achieved, through enhanced self-efficacy derived from successful mastery experiences. Together, they provide a comprehensive understanding of how positioning refugees as sport educators simultaneously addresses their psychosocial needs while fostering positive community relations.

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative multi-site design to explore the psychosocial and communal impacts of refugees teaching cricket to American citizens. Qualitative methods were chosen to capture participants' nuanced, lived experiences, aligning with the study's focus on self-worth, identity, and cultural exchange (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The multi-site approach included New York City (NYC) and Boise, Idaho, two cities with contrasting refugee resettlement histories and demographic compositions, providing insights into how contextual factors shape integration outcomes (Yin, 2018).

Participants and Recruitment

Participants included 15 refugee coaches from Afghanistan (n=8), Pakistan (n=4), and Somalia (n=3) and 30 American learners aged 15–65. In NYC, 9 refugee coaches worked with 18 American learners, while in Boise, 6 coaches worked with 12 learners. Refugee coaches were recruited through snowball sampling, initiated through partnerships with local resettlement

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agencies, including the International Rescue Committee. This method was employed in recognition of past injustices between refugees and researchers that increase mistrust among this population (Naderifar et al., 2017). American learners were purposively sampled through community centers and social media campaigns to ensure diversity in age, gender, and prior exposure to cricket.

Participant Demographics

Among refugee coaches, 60% identified as male, reflecting cultural norms in their countries of origin. Ages ranged from 22 to 58 years ($M=34.2$). All coaches had played cricket in their home countries, with 8 having formal coaching experience. English proficiency varied, with 12 coaches speaking conversational English and 3 requiring interpreter assistance. The American learner cohort was gender-balanced (52% female, 48% male), aged 15-65 ($M=28.4$), with 73% identifying as White, 13% as Latino/Hispanic, 10% as African American, and 4% as Asian American. Prior cricket exposure was minimal, with only 2 participants having watched cricket matches previously.

The Intervention: "Cricket Bridges" Program

The Cricket Bridges program consisted of 12 weekly cricket workshops held between June 2022 and August 2024, with three complete cycles (two in NYC, one in Boise). Each 90-minute session included structured skill-building activities (batting, bowling, fielding techniques) and cultural dialogue periods where participants shared personal narratives and cultural traditions. Workshops were co-designed with refugee coaches to incorporate culturally meaningful practices, including traditional warm-up rituals from Afghanistan and celebratory customs from Somalia.

Sessions were conducted in English with interpreter support when needed. Teams were mixed-age and multicultural, with rotating partnerships between refugees and American learners. The program culminated in community cricket matches open to the public. Partnerships with NYC Parks and Boise's "City of Trees" initiative secured venue permits and equipment.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred in three phases across all program cycles: pre-intervention (demographic surveys and baseline interviews), mid-intervention (focus groups at week 6), and post-intervention (individual interviews within two weeks of program completion). Semi-structured interviews with refugee coaches explored themes of self-worth, identity, and teaching experiences, using prompts like "How has teaching cricket changed how you see yourself in this community?" Focus groups with American learners examined perception changes and cultural learning, asking questions like "What have you learned about refugees through this experience that you didn't know before?"

All interviews were conducted by the principal investigator in participants' preferred language, with certified interpreters for Somali participants. Interview duration averaged 45 minutes, conducted in private spaces at community centers. Observational field notes were collected by trained research assistants during all 36 workshop sessions, documenting verbal and non-verbal interactions, participation patterns, and emergent community dynamics.

Data Analysis

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Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework was employed to identify patterns in the data. Specifically, this process involved: (1) familiarizing ourselves with the data through repeated reading of transcripts and observational notes; (2) generating initial codes systematically across the entire dataset using NVivo; (3) collating codes into potential overarching themes; (4) reviewing these themes against the coded extracts and the entire dataset to ensure accuracy; (5) defining and naming the final themes through ongoing refinement; and (6) producing the final scholarly report with compelling extract examples.

Transcripts were coded inductively using NVivo software, with initial codes including "reclaiming expertise," "challenging stereotypes," and "cultural pride," later organized into broader themes. Two researchers independently coded 20% of the data to ensure reliability, achieving an inter-coder reliability score of $\kappa = 0.82$. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with participant representatives, who confirmed the accuracy and resonance of the identified themes.

Ethical Considerations

This study received IRB approval from Boise State University (041-SB22-134). Ethical adherence was guided by trauma-informed practices and principles of dignity and self-determination. Informed consent was obtained in participants' preferred languages, with particular attention to avoiding retraumatization when discussing displacement experiences. Participants could skip questions about trauma history, and mental health resources were provided. Confidentiality was maintained through pseudonyms, and data were stored on encrypted servers with restricted access.

Reflexivity and Positionality

As a South Asian immigrant researcher, I engaged in ongoing reflexivity to examine how my background influenced data interpretation. Regular journaling documented assumptions and biases, particularly regarding cricket's cultural significance. Initial assumptions about cricket's universal appeal among refugees were challenged by varying levels of enthusiasm among participants, highlighting the diversity within refugee communities. These reflections were integrated into the analysis to enhance methodological rigor.

Results

Through thematic analysis, four primary themes emerged from the data: (1) Identity Transformation and Dignity Reclamation, (2) Psychosocial Development and Conflict Resolution, (3) Building Bridging Social Capital, and (4) Challenges and Barriers to Full Participation.

Table 1: Summary of Themes and Corresponding Quotes

Theme	Corresponding Participant Quote
Identity Transformation and Dignity Reclamation	"When I teach cricket, I am not just a refugee, I am a coach, a leader, someone who knows something valuable. People listen to my stories about Afghanistan, not just the war parts, but the beautiful parts too." - Ahmed (Afghan coach)
Psychosocial Development and Conflict Resolution	"In America, my engineering degrees meant nothing. I was just another refugee looking for work. But here, teaching cricket, my knowledge matters. These kids want to learn from me." - Rashid (Pakistani coach)
Building Bridging Social Capital	"I started volunteering at the IRC because of this program. Knowing Aaliya's story made me want to help other refugee families settle here." - Jennifer (American learner)
Challenges and Barriers to Full Participation	"Every session, people want to know about the war, about why we left. It's important to share, but it's also heavy to carry these stories every week." - Omar (Somali coach)

Theme 1: Identity Transformation and Dignity Reclamation

Refugee coaches consistently reported experiencing a fundamental shift in how they viewed themselves and how they believed others perceived them. This transformation centered on moving beyond the limiting identity of "refugee" to embrace multifaceted roles as teachers, cultural ambassadors, and community contributors.

Ahmed (pseudonym), an Afghan coach in NYC, articulated this shift: "When I teach cricket, I am not just a refugee, I am a coach, a leader, someone who knows something valuable. People listen to my stories about Afghanistan, not just the war parts, but the beautiful parts too." This sentiment was echoed across interviews, with 14 of 15 coaches emphasizing that teaching helped them transcend restrictive labels.

Participants described how recognition from American learners validated their inherent worth beyond displacement narratives. Fatima (pseudonym), a Somali coach in Boise, explained: "These Americans, they respect what I know. They ask about cricket rules, about Somalia before the fighting. I feel like a whole person again, not just someone who needs help."

Observational data corroborated these self-reports, documenting increased confidence in body language and verbal communication as workshops progressed. Coaches began offering unsolicited cultural insights and took initiative in organizing additional practice sessions.

Theme 2: Psychosocial Development and Conflict Resolution

The coaching experience facilitated progress through several of Erikson's psychosocial stages, particularly addressing industry vs. inferiority conflicts among adult coaches. Many participants had experienced professional invalidation in the United States, with credentials unrecognized and skills undervalued.

Rashid (pseudonym), a Pakistani coach and former engineer, reflected: "In America, my engineering degrees meant nothing. I was just another refugee looking for work. But here,

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teaching cricket, my knowledge matters. These kids want to learn from me." This restoration of competence was reported by 13 of 15 coaches, who described feeling "useful again" and "professionally valued."

Older coaches (ages 45+) particularly emphasized generative aspects of their role. Hassan (pseudonym), a 52-year-old Afghan coach, stated: "Teaching these young people keeps our stories alive. When I show them how we played cricket in Kabul, it makes my struggles mean something. I am passing on more than just a game."

For American learners, exposure to refugee experiences contributed to identity development, particularly among adolescents. Maria (pseudonym), a 17-year-old participant in Boise, shared: "I used to think my identity was just 'soccer player' and 'student.' Learning cricket from Ahmed (pseudonym) made me see myself as someone who connects across cultures. It's part of who I am now."

Theme 3: Building Bridging Social Capital

The cricket program transformed public parks into sites of cross-cultural connection, fostering what participants described as genuine friendships that extended beyond workshop sessions. Mixed teams created collaborative environments where stereotypes were challenged through shared goals and mutual dependence.

Post-intervention data revealed that 40% of participants maintained contact six months after program completion, with several refugee-American pairs developing mentoring relationships. Jennifer (pseudonym), an American learner in NYC, described: "I started volunteering at the IRC because of this program. Knowing Aaliya's (pseudonym) story made me want to help other refugee families settle here."

Observational notes documented the emergence of shared rituals, including Afghan coaches teaching celebratory attan dances to American learners and American participants organizing potluck dinners featuring foods from coaches' home countries. These cultural exchanges created bonds that transcended the formal program structure.

However, social capital development varied by location. NYC's existing diversity facilitated quicker cross-cultural bonding, while Boise's more homogeneous population required additional structured activities to overcome initial cultural hesitancy. A parks official in Boise noted: "These cricket games drew crowds we'd never seen before, families from all backgrounds cheering together. It changed the whole feel of the park."

Theme 4: Challenges and Barriers to Full Participation

Despite significant successes, the program encountered several obstacles that limited its transformative potential. Gender dynamics emerged as a persistent challenge, particularly affecting female Afghan coaches who faced skepticism from both their own communities and some American participants.

Maryam (pseudonym), a female Afghan coach, described: "Some men in my community questioned why I was teaching sports to Americans. And at first, some of the American men didn't take me seriously as a coach. I had to prove myself twice, as a refugee and as a woman."

Language barriers created communication challenges despite interpreter support. Three coaches reported frustration when unable to explain complex cricket rules or share cultural

stories effectively. This limitation was particularly evident during structured dialogue sessions, where linguistic nuances were lost.

Emotional labor emerged as an unexpected burden for coaches, with several reporting exhaustion from repeatedly sharing traumatic displacement narratives. Omar (pseudonym), a Somali coach, reflected: "Every session, people want to know about the war, about why we left. It's important to share, but it's also heavy to carry these stories every week."

American learners in Boise initially showed more resistance than those in NYC, with some expressing skepticism about cricket's relevance in American culture. This resistance diminished over time but required additional cultural sensitivity training for program staff.

Discussion

Theoretical Implications

The findings provide strong empirical support for the integrated theoretical framework, demonstrating how sport-based interventions can simultaneously address multiple psychosocial developmental needs. The identity transformation experienced by refugee coaches aligns closely with Erikson's conceptualization of industry vs. inferiority resolution, showing that developmental conflicts can indeed be revisited and resolved in adulthood through meaningful competence-building activities.

The restoration of dignity and agency observed among coaches reflects successful navigation of what Erikson termed generativity vs. stagnation, as older coaches found purpose in mentoring and cultural transmission. This finding extends existing literature by demonstrating that sport can serve as a vehicle for addressing multiple developmental stages simultaneously, particularly for individuals whose normal developmental trajectories have been disrupted by forced migration.

Bandura's self-efficacy theory effectively explained the mechanism through which coaching experiences enhanced refugees' confidence in broader social navigation. The documented progression from initial anxiety about language barriers to confident use of cricket as a shared language illustrates how domain-specific self-efficacy can generalize to other social contexts, supporting refugees' broader integration efforts.

Implications for Social Work Practice

This study offers several important implications for social work practitioners working with refugee populations. First, it demonstrates the value of strength-based approaches that position refugees as experts and cultural contributors rather than passive service recipients. By recognizing and leveraging refugees' existing skills and cultural knowledge, social workers can design interventions that simultaneously address client needs and challenge community stereotypes.

The finding that 78% of American learners reported reduced prejudice toward refugees suggests that sport-based programs can serve as effective tools for community education and bias reduction. Social workers might consider developing similar reciprocal programs in other areas of refugee expertise, including cooking, crafts, or music, to maximize both individual empowerment and community integration outcomes.

The emergence of emotional labor as a significant challenge highlights the need for trauma-informed approaches in all refugee-led programming. Social workers must balance the

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empowering aspects of storytelling with the potential for retraumatization, ensuring that appropriate mental health supports are readily available.

Community and Policy Implications

The transformation of public parks into inclusive "third spaces" suggests that sport-based integration programs can have broader community benefits beyond direct participants. Municipal governments might consider funding similar initiatives as part of comprehensive integration strategies, particularly given the relatively low cost and high impact demonstrated by this program.

The variation in outcomes between NYC and Boise underscores the importance of contextual adaptation in program design. Rural and less diverse communities may require additional community preparation and cultural sensitivity training to maximize program effectiveness, while urban areas might benefit from scaling successful models to reach larger populations.

The study's findings support policy recommendations for credentialing refugee expertise in non-traditional areas. Recognizing refugee coaches through formal certification programs could create sustainable employment opportunities while addressing community integration needs.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting these findings. The study's reliance on self-reported data may be subject to social desirability bias, particularly given the close relationships developed between researchers and participants. The geographic limitation to two cities and the predominance of male South Asian coaches may limit generalizability to other refugee populations and contexts.

Future research should explore longitudinal impacts to determine whether the psychosocial benefits observed persist over time and translate into concrete outcomes, including employment or civic engagement. Comparative studies examining different sports or cultural activities could help identify which elements of the intervention are most crucial for success.

Research with more diverse refugee populations, including those from different cultural backgrounds and those with varying levels of English proficiency, would enhance understanding of program effectiveness across different groups. Additionally, studies examining the impact of refugee-led programs on host community attitudes and behaviors could provide valuable insights for community development efforts.

Ethical Considerations for Practice

This study highlights several ethical considerations for social workers implementing similar programs. The principle of self-determination requires that refugees maintain control over what aspects of their experiences they choose to share, without pressure to provide trauma narratives for others' learning. Programs must be structured to avoid voyeuristic consumption of refugee stories while still facilitating meaningful cultural exchange.

The intersectional challenges faced by female coaches underscore the need for gender-sensitive program design that addresses both external discrimination and internal community

pressure. Social workers must work collaboratively with refugee communities to navigate these complex dynamics while supporting individual autonomy.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study demonstrates that positioning refugees as cricket coaches creates transformative benefits for both refugee coaches and American learners, challenging traditional integration models that cast refugees as passive aid recipients. The findings reveal that sport-based interventions can simultaneously address multiple psychosocial developmental needs while fostering bridging social capital and reducing community prejudice.

The success of the Cricket Bridges program offers a replicable model for refugee integration that honors cultural diversity while promoting mutual learning. However, the challenges identified, particularly around gender dynamics and emotional labor, highlight the need for trauma-informed, culturally sensitive implementation approaches.

Recommendations for Practice

Social work practitioners should consider developing sport-based programs that leverage refugee expertise in culturally meaningful activities. Such programs should incorporate trauma-informed principles, provide mental health support, and be designed collaboratively with refugee communities to ensure cultural appropriateness and community ownership.

Programs should include specific strategies for addressing gender barriers and intersectional discrimination, while also preparing host communities for meaningful cultural engagement rather than superficial multiculturalism. To effectively bridge sport and social work, practitioners could forge formal partnerships with local cricket clubs or national sporting bodies to ensure access to proper facilities and sustainable funding. Additionally, social workers facilitating these programs should receive specialized training in sports-based interventions to seamlessly blend athletic coaching with psychosocial support. Finally, organizations should establish explicit, destigmatized referral pathways for participants who may need more intensive, individualized clinical care beyond what the community sport setting can provide.

Recommendations for Policy

Municipal governments should invest in refugee-led sport programs as cost-effective integration strategies that benefit entire communities. Policy makers should explore formal credentialing mechanisms that recognize refugee expertise in sports coaching and other areas, creating pathways to sustainable employment.

Immigration and resettlement policies should incorporate recognition of refugees' potential contributions to host communities, moving beyond deficit-based models toward asset-based approaches that value cultural knowledge and skills.

Recommendations for Research

Future research should examine the long-term impacts of refugee-led sport programs on both individual outcomes and community cohesion. Comparative studies across different sports, cultural activities, and geographic contexts would help identify key elements for program success.

Research should also explore the potential for scaling such programs and integrating them with existing social services, educational institutions, and community development initiatives to maximize their impact on both refugee integration and community building.

The findings of this study suggest that sport has untapped potential as a tool for reimagining refugee integration as a collaborative, dignity-driven process that enriches entire

communities. By positioning refugees as teachers and cultural ambassadors, social work can move beyond paternalistic service delivery toward truly empowering practice that recognizes the inherent worth and valuable contributions of all community members.

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Understanding Sports Fandom and Psychosocial Well-being in Cancer Survivors: A Conceptual Framework

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In this article, sports fandom is proposed as being a possible resource to improve cancer survivors' psychosocial well-being. The idea to explore this relationship is driven by the two primary factors. The first is that the number of cancer survivors in the United States is increasing, and cancer survivors are living longer with cancer-related psychosocial difficulties. The second is that a portion of adults in the United States identify as sports fans, and studies have shown that engaging in sports fandom can positively impact psychosocial well-being. Despite this, the relationship between sports fandom and cancer survivor psychosocial well-being does not appear to have been studied significantly. A brief introduction to the research about cancer survivor psychosocial well-being and psychosocial benefits of sports fandom is provided. The Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment (PERMA) theory of well-being is presented as helpful theory for exploring how sports fandom might support psychosocial well-being among cancer survivors. The potential implications of further empirical research into this relationship could identify sports fandom as a possible innovative, non-medical resource to address social isolation, restoration of identity and meaning, and promote long, healthy, and productive lives among cancer survivors.

Keywords: cancer survivorship; psychosocial well-being; social isolation; sports fandom

Introduction

Sports fandom is a pervasive cultural phenomenon, with recent studies indicating that roughly 68%–75% of American adults identify as sports fans (Carmichael, 2024; Morning Consult, 2023; Sienna College and St. Bonaventure University, 2023). Seminal work by Brill (1929) suggested that being a sports fan provides mental, physical, and moral benefits through identification and catharsis. Sports fandom and sports spectatorship research empirically supports this notion, demonstrating fandom and spectatorship behaviors such as but not limited to sports consumption (Carmichael, 2024; Morning Consult, 2023; Sienna College and St. Bonaventure University, 2023), fan identity, and belonging to a fan community can enhance individual well-being by promoting social interaction, providing entertainment and emotional catharsis, and fostering a sense of community and belonging (Guo et al., 2023; Inoue et al., 2017; Kesler & Wann, 2020; Kumai et al., 2024).

In parallel, more individuals are living beyond a cancer diagnosis. By 2040, the U.S. is projected to have 26 million survivors (Office of Cancer Survivorship, 2024; Tonorezos et al., 2024). Cancer survivors include people with varying kinds of cancer and include a population of people with a diverse range of demographic information, identities, backgrounds, life experiences, lifestyles, abilities/skills, experience of disparities, resilience, and coping (American Cancer Society, 2024; American Cancer Society, 2025; American Association for Cancer Research, 2024; Ligus et al., 2020). While such diversity exists, cancer survivors can experience any number of psychosocial challenges including anxiety, depression, isolation, fear of recurrence, impaired family functioning and relationships, loss of a sense of normalcy, existential concerns, identity and self-image distress, struggles with uncertainty, distress from loss of control, and difficulties with returning to life duties and responsibilities following the more intensive phase of treatment (Bagautdinova et al., 2024; Chong et al., 2024; Elkefi & Matthews, 2024; Evan & Khan, 2024; Hannum et al., 2016; Melhem et al., 2023; Osann et al., 2023; Visser et al., 2025). However, exploring the intersection of sports fandom and psychosocial well-being of cancer survivors specifically remains sparse, highlighting an important gap in our knowledge for interdisciplinary sports fan research.

Sports Fandom and Psychosocial Well-being

The psychosocial benefits of sports fandom have been extensively documented satisfaction (Guo et al., 2023; Inoue et al., 2017; Wann et al., 2017; Brill, 1929). Initial theoretical propositions suggested that identification with sports teams can significantly contribute to an individual's mental health by providing emotional catharsis, reducing stress, and fostering meaningful social interactions (Brill, 1929). Recent empirical research has supported these early observations, consistently demonstrating positive relationships between sports fandom and diverse psychosocial outcomes such as happiness, emotional well-being, social connectivity, and life satisfaction (Guo et al., 2023; Inoue et al., 2017; Wann et al., 2017).

Both Wann (2006) and Wann and Fast (2021) found that fan identification with sports teams fulfills basic psychological needs, including belongingness, social integration, and emotional support. These needs, in turn, contribute significantly to positive psychosocial outcomes. Multiple studies confirm that high team identification enhances social connectedness, increases perceived emotional support, and mitigates feelings of isolation and loneliness,

particularly among older adults who are vulnerable to reduced social networks (Wann, 2006; Wann et al., 2017). Moreover, Kesler and Wann (2020) differentiated personal and social life satisfaction, showing that both forms are positively associated with higher levels of fan engagement and team identification.

The dimensions of psychosocial well-being associated with sports fandom have been explored through varied frameworks, including hedonic, eudaimonic, and social well-being (Kumai et al., 2024; Oshimi & Kinoshita, 2022). Hedonic well-being, representing the pursuit and experience of pleasure, is frequently evident in the immediate joy and excitement derived from watching sports, experiencing victories, or participating in celebratory rituals. Eudaimonic well-being extends beyond immediate pleasure, involving deeper psychological benefits such as meaningful personal growth, resilience, identity construction, and a sense of purpose derived from allegiance to a particular team or sport (Guo et al., 2023). Additionally, social well-being highlights the crucial role sports fandom plays in facilitating enduring and supportive social interactions. Fan communities, whether physical or virtual, offer rich opportunities for social integration, development of meaningful and supportive relationships, and collective emotional experiences, often leading to enhanced emotional resilience and reduced psychological distress (Wann et al., 2017).

The integration of these well-being components through fan experiences has been theoretically framed by social identity theory (Wann & Fast, 2021). Social identity theory states that sports fandom offers individuals a meaningful social identity, which not only facilitates personal satisfaction and pride but also bolsters psychological resilience through collective experiences of success and failure (Wann & Fast, 2021). Identification with sports teams has consistently predicted increased resilience, improved mental health, and enhanced life satisfaction (Inoue et al., 2017; Wann & Fast, 2021). Thus, sports fandom emerges not merely as entertainment but as a significant psychosocial resource with tangible benefits for psychological health and community building.

Psychosocial Well-being in Cancer Survivors

Despite significant medical advancements in cancer treatments improving survival rates, cancer survivors often continue to face extensive psychosocial challenges, affecting their quality of life even after treatment ends (Low et al., 2024; Tonorezos et al., 2024). The chronic nature of survivorship means some survivors live with persistent emotional burdens, including anxiety related to recurrence, chronic fatigue, depression, and social isolation, which significantly impacts their overall well-being and daily functioning (Elkefi & Matthews, 2024; Melhem et al., 2024). Psycho-oncology literature highlights that the post-treatment period can be particularly distressing, characterized by fears of recurrence, challenges of returning to a sense of normalcy, and difficulty in re-establishing social roles and relationships disrupted by illness and treatment (Osann et al., 2023; Pituskin, 2022).

Social support, leisure activities, and creative interventions are widely recognized as integral to psychosocial care for cancer survivors, contributing to both coping and recovery of emotional well-being (Ryu et al., 2022; Yildirim et al., 2024). Leisure and recreational engagement have been associated with reduced stress and loneliness, enhanced mood, and a stronger sense of meaning and happiness in daily life (Mengqin et al., 2024; Ryu et al., 2022).

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These activities not only alleviate psychological distress but also foster social connection and emotional resilience by creating opportunities for community involvement and peer support. Furthermore, therapeutic approaches, such as mandala art therapy, music therapy, mindfulness-based stress reduction, and expressive therapies, have also demonstrated effectiveness in reducing psychosocial distress and enhancing emotional resilience among survivors (Mengqin et al., 2024; Yildirim et al., 2024). However, despite these promising results, existing psychosocial oncology interventions typically do not explicitly incorporate survivors' pre-existing interests, identities, or hobbies, including sports fandom, into structured psychosocial interventions. (Murnaghan et al., 2024). The oversight is notable, given the widespread prevalence of sports fandom and the extensive evidence supporting its psychosocial benefits in broader populations (Kesler & Wann, 2020).

This knowledge gap presents an opportunity for interdisciplinary research, integrating insights from sports psychology, social work, oncology, and positive psychology to examine how sports fandom could effectively serve as an innovative psychosocial resource for cancer survivors. Leveraging sports fandom as a therapeutic resource aligns well with contemporary strengths-based approaches in social work and psycho-oncology, emphasizing the importance of using personal interests, existing social networks, and culturally relevant activities in psychosocial interventions for chronic illness management (American Academy of Social Work & Social Welfare, 2024a, 2024b).

Integration and Implications of the Literature

The lack of clarity in existing literature regarding whether study participants are cancer survivors highlights an important gap—and a compelling opportunity—for integrating two distinct but related bodies of research (Murnaghan et al., 2024; Kesler & Wann, 2020). Specifically, examining how the well-documented psychosocial benefits of sports fandom might support cancer survivorship warrants further exploration. Sports fandom has been linked to emotional uplift, social connection, identity formation, and resilience (Wann et al., 2017), all of which align with key psychosocial challenges faced by survivors, such as isolation, emotional distress, identity disruption, and diminished support networks (Yildirim et al., 2024). Despite this overlap, current psychosocial interventions seldom incorporate survivors' leisure identities or personal interests. Leveraging sports fandom as a therapeutic or supportive element—through structured group activities centered on sporting events or facilitated online fan communities—represents a novel and potentially impactful direction for survivorship care.

The absence of explicit reference to cancer survivors in existing studies on sports fandom reveals a notable gap in the literature—and an opportunity to explore a meaningful intersection. While research has established the psychosocial benefits of sports fandom, including emotional uplift, social connection, identity formation, and resilience (Wann et al., 2017; Inoue et al., 2017), these outcomes directly align with the unmet psychosocial needs commonly reported by cancer survivors, such as isolation, emotional distress, identity disruption, and diminished social networks (Mengqin et al., 2024; Yildirim et al., 2024). Despite this alignment, current psychosocial interventions for survivors rarely draw on individuals' personal interests, leisure identities, or existing sources of joy. Integrating sports fandom into survivorship care—through structured group viewing events, online fan communities, or collaborations between cancer

support organizations and local sports teams—represents a promising and underexplored avenue for enhancing psychosocial support and fostering community engagement.

In summary, scientific literature has documented that cancer survivors face significant psychosocial burdens long after more intensive periods of medical treatment end, and literature on sports fandom demonstrates robust psychosocial benefits among general populations. The lack of research explicitly connecting these two domains highlights a meaningful opportunity for interdisciplinary research, providing a theoretical and empirical basis for exploring how sports fandom could enhance psychosocial well-being for cancer survivors. Such research would not only fill a critical knowledge gap but also offer novel, evidence-based directions for future psychosocial interventions in oncology care.

Exploration Based in the PERMA Well-being Theory

The PERMA theory of well-being is a helpful theory and model to support the exploration of how engaging in sports fandom might support psychosocial well-being among cancer survivors. The PERMA theory of well-being was developed by Martin Seligman (2011). The PERMA framework emphasizes five essential dimensions integral to achieving psychological flourishing and overall well-being. Each dimension captures distinct aspects of psychological and social functioning, making it particularly suitable for exploring the comprehensive benefits sports fandom might offer to cancer survivors who face ongoing psychosocial challenges.

Positive Emotions

Positive emotions are central to human flourishing and include feelings such as joy, excitement, contentment, pride, and optimism. Within the context of sports fandom, positive emotions frequently arise from various fan experiences such as witnessing victories, engaging in celebratory rituals, participating in pre- and post-game activities, and sharing emotional highs and lows with fellow fans. Cancer survivors, who often grapple with significant emotional distress, anxiety about recurrence, and mood disturbances, could particularly benefit from the regular infusion of positive emotions that fan engagement provides. Sports events can offer distraction and relief from health-related stressors, momentarily lifting survivors' moods and fostering optimism. Such emotional uplift has the potential to significantly enhance overall emotional resilience and subjective well-being among survivors.

Engagement

Engagement refers to the experience of being deeply immersed in an activity—often described in psychological literature as a state of "flow" (van der Linden, Tops, & Baker, 2021; Cheron, 2016; Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Flow states occur when individuals are fully absorbed in an activity, experiencing intense focus, enjoyment, and intrinsic motivation, to the point that they lose track of time and external concerns (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Sports fandom, through activities such as watching games, following team news, participating in fantasy leagues, or engaging in in-depth discussions about sports, offers opportunities for survivors to enter such immersive states (Carmichael, 2024; Morning Consult, 2023; Sienna College and St.

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Bonaventure University, 2023). This deep engagement may function as a therapeutic distraction, temporarily diverting attention away from illness-related worries, fears of recurrence, or daily stresses associated with survivorship (Pinquart & Duberstein, 2010; Uchino, 2006). Additionally, the frequent experience of engagement through fan activities may promote greater psychological resilience, better emotional regulation, and enhanced overall psychosocial functioning in cancer survivors.

Social Relationships

Social relationships are critical determinants of psychosocial health, significantly influencing emotional well-being and quality of life (Holt-Lunstad, 2024; Uchino, 2006; Leary & Baumeister, 1995). For cancer survivors, maintaining strong social networks and receiving consistent emotional support are crucial components of psychosocial recovery and resilience (Breitbart et al., 2021; Pinquart & Duberstein, 2010). Sports fandom uniquely facilitates relationship-building by providing structured opportunities for social interactions, shared experiences, and community participation. Fan communities—whether online forums, social media groups, local fan clubs, or team or sport supported charitable organizations and foundations—provide opportunities to create meaningful social connections based on common interests and emotional experiences (Kim et al., 2023; Ringlad & Wolf, 2022; Scardaville, 2005). These interactions can reduce survivors' sense of isolation, enhance feelings of belonging, and provide practical and emotional support from peers (Kanozia & Ganghariya, 2021; Bennett, 2014, Annett, 2014). Furthermore, shared fan activities can strengthen existing relationships with family and friends (Kanozia & Ganghariya, 2021; Benett, 2014), enhancing overall social support networks, which are critically important in managing the psychosocial aftermath of cancer diagnosis and treatment (Pinquart & Duberstein, 2010; Diener, 2005).

Meaning

The dimension of meaning within the PERMA framework encompasses the pursuit and experience of purpose, value, significance in life, and serving and belonging to something bigger than oneself (Seligman, 2011). Cancer survivors often experience disruptions to their sense of identity and purpose, struggling to reconcile their pre- and post-cancer diagnosis selves (Bhattacharjee, 2013; Bilgrami, 2006). Engaging in sports fandom may offer survivors a meaningful and affirming aspect of their identity and help survivors reconstruct and reinforce a positive and meaningful personal identity beyond their cancer-related experiences. Loyalty to and support of a sport and/or team, identification with fan communities, and participation in longstanding fan traditions and rituals can provide the means of participating, belonging to, and contributing to something bigger than themselves (Guo et al., 2023; Inoue et al., 2017; Kesler & Wann, 2020; Kumai et al., 2024). This renewed sense of meaning, belonging, purpose, and identity derived from sports fandom may enhance survivors' emotional resilience, motivation for recovery, and overall satisfaction with life.

Accomplishment

Accomplishment refers to the pursuit and achievement of goals, milestones, and tangible outcomes, contributing significantly to a person's sense of self-efficacy, pride, and overall well-being (Wang et al., 2017). In the context of sports fandom, accomplishments may include vicarious victories achieved through team successes, personal milestones such as long-term fan loyalty, mastery of sports knowledge, or active participation in community or team-related activities (Gordon, 2013; Funk & James, 2006). Even though these accomplishments are often indirect or symbolic, they remain psychologically significant. For cancer survivors, recognizing and celebrating accomplishments through their fan activities—such as successfully organizing fan gatherings, achieving personal milestones related to their fandom, or simply experiencing the thrill of their team's success—can foster a greater sense of efficacy, personal pride, and emotional resilience (Faaj et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2021). These experiences of accomplishment may significantly enhance survivors' self-esteem and overall psychosocial well-being.

Integrating PERMA with Fan-specific Well-being

The PERMA model has been used in studies focused on sports fandom and spectatorship (Doyle et al., 2016; Doyle et al., 2021; Kumai et al., 2024; Oshimi & Kinoshita, 2022) and cancer survivor well-being (Fang et al., 2023; Luo et al., 2022; Ren et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024), which makes it well-suited for grounding the proposed conceptual framework to help explain the relationship between sports fandom and cancer survivor well-being.

Kumai et al. (2024) highlight a meaningful alignment between their multidimensional model of fan well-being and Seligman's PERMA framework, suggesting that sports fandom can serve as a holistic contributor to well-being. In their model, hedonic well-being corresponds to the experience of positive emotions, while eudaimonic well-being encompasses engagement, meaning, and accomplishment. Social well-being, in turn, aligns with the relational aspect of the PERMA model (Kumai et al., 2024, p. 5). This conceptual overlap underscores the potential of sports fandom to address multiple interrelated domains of psychosocial well-being for cancer survivors. Through fan-based engagement, individuals may access positive emotion, reconstruct identity through meaningful experiences, and foster social connections—all critical areas often disrupted by the cancer experience. Framing sports fandom within the PERMA model offers a robust theoretical foundation for understanding how structured fan engagement can support emotional resilience, strengthen social bonds, and enhance overall life satisfaction among cancer survivors (Kumai et al., 2024).

Potential Implications

Engaging with sports fandom may present innovative opportunities to reduce isolation among cancer survivors, strengthen their social support networks, and enhance overall life satisfaction (Mastromartino & Zhang, 2020). Oncology social work practices could incorporate sports-related activities and participation in fan communities as part of therapeutic interventions, offering creative, non-clinical approaches to holistic survivor care. These strategies also align with the current priorities of the American Academy of Social Work & Social Welfare,

particularly in addressing social isolation and supporting long, healthy, and fulfilling lives (American Academy of Social Work & Social Welfare, 2024a, 2024b).

Conclusion

This conceptual article proposes an interdisciplinary framework integrating sports social work and psycho-oncology to investigate the potential of sports fandom as a meaningful psychosocial resource for cancer survivors across diverse backgrounds and lived experiences. Sports fandom may contribute to survivor well-being by promoting positive affect, psychological engagement, participation in purposeful and value-driven activities, the cultivation of supportive social relationships, experiences of achievement, and the reinforcement of personal and social identity. Recognizing these potential benefits, future empirical research is needed to rigorously examine the role of sports fandom within the context of survivorship.

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A Different Kind of Walk-On: Sport Social Work Themes and Concepts in the Television Show Chad Powers

Kyle Donohue

Chad Powers is a new television show that gives a comedic and insightful commentary on sport culture, identity, and access within competitive athletics. What started out as a sketch for Eli Manning's College Football show Eli's Places has transformed into a full-fledged comedic series with actor Glen Powell playing the title character. Manning dressed with hair and makeup to go undercover as an older walk-on quarterback during Penn State's walk-on tryout day. Manning and others developed the concept to become a tv series with back story and depth. The show engages with several concepts in sport social work, including athletic identity, power dynamics in sport systems, mental health, team cohesion, and role transition after sport. This paper applies a sport social work lens to examine how Chad Powers reflects and critiques the social, psychological, and systemic dimensions of contemporary athletic environments.

Keywords: sport social work, collegiate athletics, mental health, identity, power dynamics

Introduction

The integration of social work principles into sport contexts has grown in recent years. There has been an emphasis on athlete well-being, equity, and holistic development (Newman et al., 2024). Sport social work explores how sport systems can influence human behavior and how practitioners/clinicians can promote social justice, inclusion, and psychosocial support in athletic settings (Glickman & Huffman, 2022). Aspects of popular media often reflect these sport social work concepts, providing opportunities to analyze sport culture through narrative storytelling. Chad Powers, a television series created and developed by Eli Manning, extends such an opportunity. The original concept followed Manning, a retired NFL quarterback, as he disguised himself to go undercover during Penn State's walk-on tryout day. Manning took the concept and transformed it into a six-episode series starring movie star Glen Powell. While comedic in tone, Chad Powers captures several sport social work concepts relevant to identity, access, mental health, and transition from sport.

Athletic Identity and Authenticity

Athletic Identity refers to the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role (Brewer et al., 1993). Extreme investment in athletic identity can lead to challenges in one's concept of self and post-athletic career adjustment. Glen Powell plays Russ Holliday, a former Division 1 College Football player who lost the National Championship game for Oregon against Georgia and is disgraced. Years after the tumultuous event that left Russ a pariah to the sports world, he learns about a walk-on quarterback tryout at South Georgia University. Russ's father, a film makeup artist, has tasked Russ with delivering some prosthetics to the movie studio. Russ, with the prosthetics in the back, decides to make the trip from Los Angeles to South Georgia University for his second chance. Russ becomes the character of Chad Powers, and from the beginning, there is a dual portrayal. The dual portrayal of Russ and Chad symbolized the internal conflict many athletes experience between authentic self-expression and the performative duties of sport. From a social work perspective, the duality reflects the pressure athletes face to maintain an assured, high-performing persona while masking vulnerability (Glickman & Huffman, 2022). The show's humor stresses how identity concealment, even in disguise, can become a coping mechanism within competitive high-stress environments.

Equity, Access, and Power Dynamics

Sport social work also promotes issues of social justice and equitable access to sport participation (Newman et al., 2024). Chad Powers subtly analyzes systemic barriers in collegiate athletics, especially how appearance, reputation, and institutional association influence opportunity. The "walk-on" cliché highlights how athletes from disadvantaged, marginalized, or unconventional backgrounds must overcome gatekeeping practices to gain acknowledgement. A walk-on is an athlete who wants to try out for their college team without holding a scholarship (Haney, 2021). The athlete who is attempting to walk on to the team might be coming from a small school where they didn't have college scouts at every game, able to see their talent and just want an opportunity to showcase their skills. Some of the disadvantages to being a walk-on are that there are limited spots on rosters already and priority goes to the players recruited by the coaches, the ability to pay for college might come with having to gain outside employment to

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A Different Kind of Walk-on

pay for school, and having to earn the respect of both your teammates and coaches (Haney, 2021; Blake, 2025). The same could be said for women coaches in male-dominated sports. With the establishment of the Equal Employment Opportunity Act, there has been a rise in female employment over many different fields (Hensley et al., 2019). In sports, with the passage of Title IX, female participation increased, but there has been a lack of growth when it comes to more female coaches in the ranks of elite male sports (Flanagan, 2017; Hensley, 2019; Stark, 2017). This trend could be attributed to the perception that female coaches need to act more like their male counterparts, embracing their more “masculine” traits like aggression and discipline (Hensley et al., 2019). The study completed by Hensley and Chen found that it really came down to female coaches not being respected by male athletes being the biggest issue for the low number of female coaches in elite male sports (Hensley et al., 2019). There is a belief and hope that with more time and mentorship from strong male coaches who want to see more female coaches take on head coaching in elite male sports, there can be a breaking of the proverbial glass ceiling (Hensley et al., 2019). Social workers in the arena of sport advocate for dismantling these inequalities by addressing structural bias and fostering inclusive avenues for athlete development. Chad Powers, as a series, uses satire to reveal the embedded hierarchies and patriarchies, illustrating how “who gets seen” often predominates “who has potential.”

Mental Health and Performance Pressure

Athletes face unique mental health stressors like performance pressure, identity and self-worth tied to their sport, injury and physical risks, financial and career uncertainty, and media/social media pressures (Newman et al., 2016). Though comedic in tone, Chad Powers depicts anxiety and self-doubt—Russ/Chad’s fear of exposure parallels athletes’ fears of failure and inadequacy. The same can be said for the Head Coach’s daughter, Assistant Coach Ricky Hudson, who is a former D1 athlete herself. Ricky faces a similar struggle with identity, both as a coach trying to make a name for herself in a male dominated sport and transitioning from athlete to a career. Both Coach Ricky and Russ/Chad could benefit for having a Sport Social Worker that is dedicated to breaking down the barriers that surround the help-seeking stigma and sport culture (Newman et al., 2024). Sport social work highlights early mental health intervention, normalization of vulnerability, and systemic approaches to athlete well-being. If we invest in sport social work programs, there can be a transition where elite athletes see their mental and physical health impacted for the better because social workers know and are trained to break down the barriers holding back holistic care (Newman et al., 2024).

Team Culture and Social Relationships

Team cohesion, trust, and social support are central to an athlete’s well-being. Sport social workers often address team dynamics, conflict resolution, and group inclusion (Glickman & Huffman, 2022). As Chad Powers progresses through episodes, reactions by teammates and coaches to this puzzling newcomer expose the social hierarchies and unstated codes governing sport culture. Chad Powers shows how an athletic team functions as a microcosm of broader social systems—where belonging, hierarchy, and inclusion influence mental health and performance. Looking through a sport social work lens helps unpack how these social relationships are either reinforced or challenged as a supportive team climate.

Transition and Role Exit

Finally, Chad Powers operates as a metaphor for the post-sport transition process. Russ Holliday, a retired and disgraced athlete, reenters the athletic space in disguise and undercover. This process highlights the tension athletes face between past identity and new purpose. Research has shown that athletes often struggle to redefine themselves after they retire due to the loss of structure, community around them, and the concept of self (Park et al., 2013). Social workers play a crucial role in facilitating athlete transition through identity reconstruction, career planning, and psychosocial support (Kimber, 2023). Chad Powers provides a lively narrative—“starting over” as a walk-on— becomes an illustration of rediscovery and rebirth beyond the athlete role.

Conclusion

Chad Powers, even though being a fictional and comedic portrayal of college football, the themes align with key principles of sport social work. Through its exploration of identity, access, mental health, and transition, the show provides a cultural medium through which practitioners/clinicians and scholars can contemplate the systemic, psychological, and social realities of sport. Through the integration of sport social work frameworks into media analysis, it not only enhances academic understanding but also amplifies the profession’s relevance and need in addressing athlete well-being and equity at all levels of sport participation.

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Integrating Social Work with Sport Communications: A Scoping Review and Directions for Future Research and Practice

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Athletes, media outlets, and sport organizations are increasingly discussing mental health via sport communication platforms. Research regarding mental health and sport communication from athletes publicly discussing personal diagnoses or endorsing mental health services, teams promoting mental health campaigns, or media coverage of those topics has followed. However, much of the literature lacks the perspective of mental health professionals, specifically social workers. Therefore, the purpose of this work was two-fold: (a) review the literature at the intersection of mental health and sport communications, and (b) recommend future directions to involve sport social work scholars and practitioners. A scoping review included 27 articles published since 2000. A thematic analysis of the findings resulted in the construction of 4 themes: (1) positive and neutral sentiments toward athlete disclosures, (2) difference in response or coverage based on outlet, (3) changes in media narrative and sport culture, and (4) the role of race and gender in disclosures. Theoretical and methodological gaps were also identified along with future directions for the sport social work field. Specifically, because of the multisystem impact of communication efforts and concerns around ineffective mental health messaging in sport communications, social workers should focus on this burgeoning field of research and practice.

Keywords: Mental health, communications, social work, scoping review, sport

The World Health Organization (WHO; 2022) defines mental health as:

...a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community. It is an integral component of health and well-being that underpins our individual and collective abilities to make decisions, build relationships and shape the world we live in. Mental health is a basic human right. And it is crucial to personal, community and socio-economic development (para. 2)

Athletes are a unique population that possesses increased risk for diminished mental health due to sport-specific risk factors (Dean & Rowan, 2014). In particular, sport culture has prioritized hypermasculine ideals (e.g., playing through pain; Ramaeker & Petrie, 2019). As such, issues of diminished mental health within sport have long been undisclosed, overlooked, ignored, or silenced (Bauman, 2016). Despite mental health stigma in sport, athletes and sport entities have increasingly discussed mental health via sport communications (e.g., athlete mental health diagnosis disclosure, awareness campaigns). For example, National Basketball Association (NBA) players DeMar DeRozan and Kevin Love, challenged stereotypes and stigma related to mental health in 2018 when both athletes used public mediums (i.e., *The Player's Tribune* and X) to discuss their mental health (Lee, 2018). Michael Phelps released his documentary, *The Weight of Gold*, which explored the challenges with mental health experienced by Olympic athletes (Bieler, 2020).

Sport organizations have also demonstrated the importance of mental health in their communications and publicly shared resources. For instance, as part of the NBA's Mind Health program, people can access mental health resources through an NBA-sponsored and branded website (<https://mindhealth.nba.com/>; NBA Mind Health, n.d.). At the collegiate level, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) provides tips to help athletes, teams, member institutions, and conferences create social media mental health campaigns (NCAA, n.d.).

Such efforts may impact internal and external stakeholders because elite, high-performance sport solidifies neoliberal beliefs, which are dominant in Western cultures (Coakley, 2011). A way through which these values are reinforced is through sports media (Broussard, 2020). Because of the vast impact of communication efforts, it is imperative to understand the effects of sport entities' communications from a multitude of vantage points. As such, this work has two purposes: (1) provide a scoping review of the existing literature on sport communications and mental health, and (2) assess ways in which mental health professionals, specifically social workers, can enhance work in this burgeoning field of study and practice.

Social Work

Overall, the purpose of social work is to enhance human wellbeing with a particular focus on vulnerable populations (NASW, n.d.). Because of the unique pressures of athletics, social work and sport is a growing field of study and practice (Newman et al., 2022). Social work interventions are commonly provided at the micro- (e.g., education to athletes; Newman et al., 2024) and mesosystem levels (e.g., interaction of coach and mental health professional; Saxe et al., 2022) within sport settings. However, to date, limited research has addressed exosystem (e.g., athletic department) interventions. Similarly, there have been concentrated efforts to educate athletes and coaches on best mental health practices within organizations, but less attention has

been provided to others within a sport organization (e.g., administrators; Beasley et al., 2023). Despite the current gaps in research and practice, social workers' commitment to an ecological systems perspective well-positions social work scholars and practitioners to address exosystem and macrosystem level concerns within sport (Newman et al., 2022). Communication channels can serve as a micro-, meso-, and exolevel intervention, which can impact mental health stigma in sport culture (Bunch et al., 2024). As such, social workers must increasingly attend to communication efforts at the intersection of mental health.

Sport Communication

In totality, sport industry communications continue to reach some of the largest audiences, despite fragmentation in media consumption (Wenner, 2012). The current study centers on the mass media components of sport communications, as defined by Pedersen and colleagues (2007). This includes any front-facing and widespread messaging effort (e.g., reporting, campaigns, press releases, press conferences, etc.), across any platform (e.g., news outlets, social media, websites, television, blogs, advertising, etc.). Such communication efforts can originate from numerous actors (e.g., athletes, organizations, leagues, journalists, commentators, etc.). Aside from curating content regarding the sport itself (e.g., game recaps, player highlights), sport communications may discuss societal issues and influence cultural values (Evens et al., 2013). For example, sport organizations have engaged in conversations around race-related activism (Bunch & Cianfrone, 2022), journalists have discussed LGBTQ issues (Moscowitz et al., 2018), and athletes have challenged mental health stigma (e.g., Naomi Osaka, Michael Phelps).

Mental health is increasingly discussed within sport media. Despite the systematic and scoping reviews conducted in other facets of mental health and sport research (e.g., Bu et al., 2020; Frost et al., 2024; Perry et al., 2021; Rice et al., 2016, etc.) and literature examining the use of sport communication to address other social issues (e.g., racism, LGBTQ inclusion, environmental concerns, etc.; Broussard, 2020; Rizvi, 2021), there has yet to be a review of literature conducted for mental health and sport communication research, despite the importance of sport media in disrupting or reproducing mental health stigma (Bunch et al., 2024). The Alliance of Social Workers in Sports' guiding principles call those within the field to address "the need for competency and integrity in practice, research, and advocacy" and to engage in the "quest for cultural competency" (ASWIS, n.d.). With those principles at the forefront, the following research questions sought to ensure robust and competent research and practice at the intersection of sport communication and mental health.

RQ1: What peer-reviewed literature exists at the intersection of mental health and sport communications in English language journals between 2000-2024?

RQ2: What were the key findings in the existing literature?

RQ3: What are the methodological and thematic gaps in the existing literature?

RQ4: How can sport social work scholars and practitioners enhance work at the intersection of mental health and sport communication?

Method

A scoping review was conducted to examine existing literature that addresses the intersection of mental health and sport communications. Scoping reviews are a tool used to

comprehensively assess the current literature on a specific topic. Munn and colleagues (2018) suggest that a scoping review is an appropriate method for assessing literature in emerging fields, such as mental health in sport communications. The primary goals of conducting a scoping review include identifying available evidence, research methods, and knowledge gaps (Munn et al., 2018). Comparatively, systematic reviews assess the quality of current work, investigate conflicting results, confirm current practice, and identify new implications for practice (Munn et al., 2018).

There is not a singular way to conduct a scoping review (Dowling et al., 2018). This paper follows the guidelines of Arksey and O'Malley (2005). As such, the review consisted of the following stages: (1) define the research questions, (2) determine relevant studies, (3) select the studies, (4) extract literature, and (5) summarize the findings. Similar to Dowling and colleagues (2018), the research team conducted a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) to examine the existing literature. Specifically, the current thematic analysis summarizes findings, addresses methodological and theoretical gaps, and identifies future directions for research and practice.

Data Collection

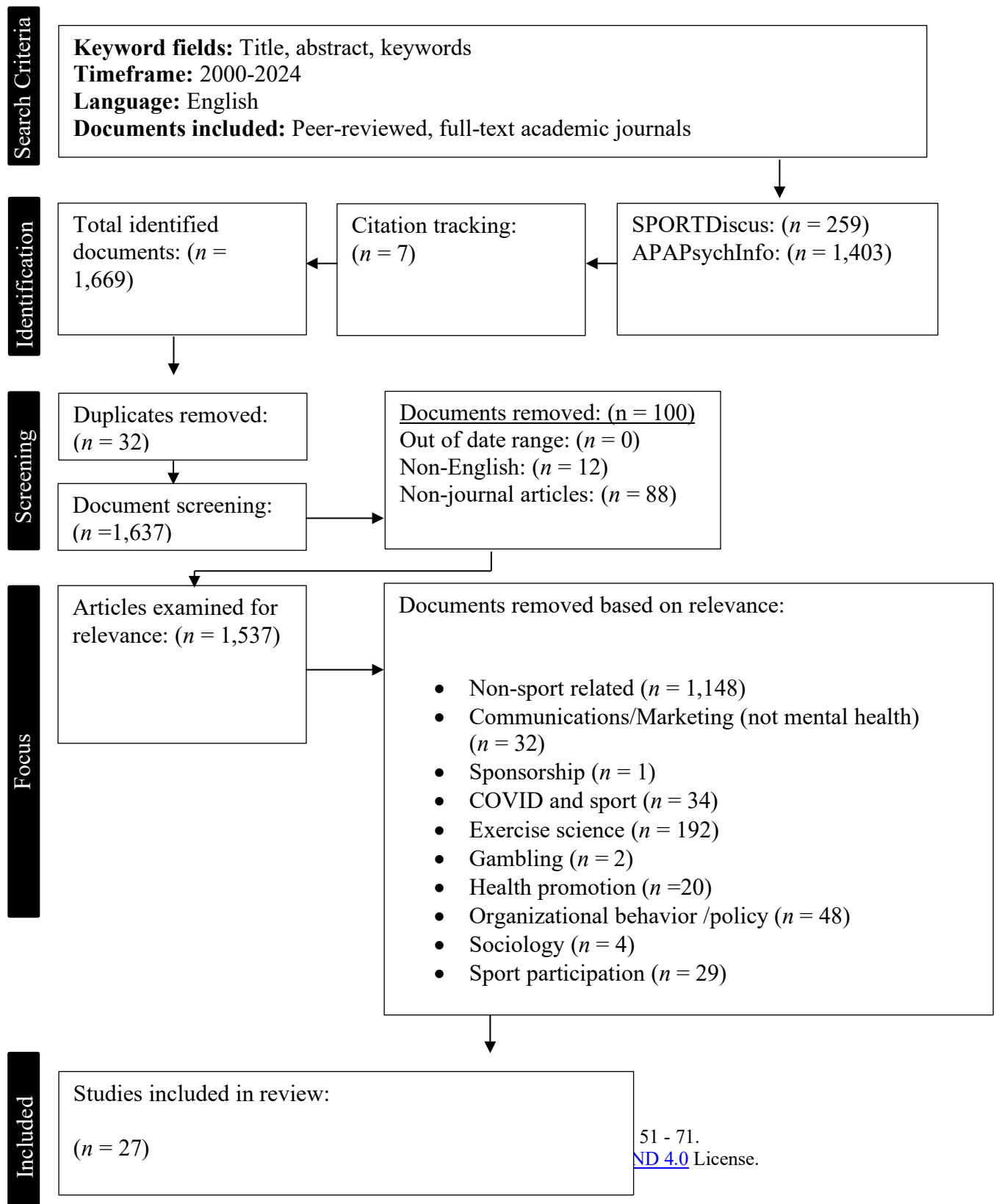
After defining the research questions, relevant studies were identified through two sources: electronic databases (APA PsycInfo and SportDiscus) and reference list checks. Interested in academic literature, the researchers chose to analyze articles published in English language peer-review journals between 2000 and 2024. Based on discussions amongst the research team, the following key search words were agreed upon to adequately address the scope of the present literature search: “mental health” AND “sport” OR “athlete” OR “coach” OR “sport organization” OR “team”, AND “media” OR “journalism” OR “press” OR “social media” OR “branding” OR “response.”

APA PsycInfo and SportDiscus, two electronic databases, were searched based upon the keywords in key fields. The search was further narrowed based on timeframe (2000-2024), article type (full-length, peer-reviewed, journal articles), and language (English). The timeframe of this review was chosen to ensure the inclusion of all relevant and up-to-date literature, like the recent review of literature assessing coaches and mental health research (Frost et al., 2024). The reference lists of identified articles were checked for articles that did not appear in the initial search. Lastly, the research team was comprised of all English speakers. As such, only articles written in English were assessed, which is a limitation of this review.

The search resulted in 1403 articles from APA PsycInfo, 259 from SportDiscus, and seven from reference list searches for a total of 1669 articles. Once articles were identified, the lead author then selected studies for review. First, duplicates were removed ($n = 32$). Next, articles were checked to ensure that they met the agreed-upon inclusion criteria (i.e., academic journal, English articles, etc.). This led to the removal of an additional 100 articles. Next, the lead author checked remaining articles for conceptual relevance. A total of 1510 articles were removed due to the focus not being within the scope of this review. A majority of articles were removed for being non-sport-related ($n = 1148$). Sport-related articles were removed if the focus was on exercise science, sport participation, and COVID-19, among other topics. Articles were also removed if the focus was on policy or the impact of social media usage on athletes' mental health, which are forms of communication. However, based on the operationalized definition of sport communication in this study (i.e., front-facing and widespread messaging effort), policy

and individual social media usage focused works were not considered. Ultimately, a total of 27 articles were included in the analysis. An illustration of the review process is provided in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Determination of Relevant Studies and Study Selection



In extracting and summarizing the literature (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005), the researchers compiled and quantified the following information for each article via Excel: authors and country represented, year of publication, journal title, theoretical framework(s), and employed method(s). This process answered RQ1, which aimed to describe existing peer-reviewed literature at the intersection of mental health and sport communications. Next, the research team conducted an inductive analysis of the findings and discussion sections of the articles to answer RQ2, which sought to synthesize current key findings. The thematic analysis allowed the researchers to identify the gaps in the existing literature (RQ3) and provide practice and research recommendations (RQ4). The lead researcher used Braun and Clarke's (2019) iterative approach to thematic analysis. First, the lead author read the articles' findings and discussion sections to become familiar with the data. Upon the next reading of the articles, the author began creating initial codes based on the findings of the data, which led to the creation of themes. These themes were presented to the remainder of the research team along with the articles. Once the research team had time to familiarize themselves with the articles and read the proposed themes, the authors met to refine the definitions of the themes. The research team met until a consensus was reached. Ultimately, four themes were constructed: (1) positive and neutral sentiments toward athlete disclosures, (2) difference in response or coverage based on outlet, (3) changes in media narrative and sport culture, and (4) the role of race and gender in disclosures. These themes are defined and outlined in the findings below.

After identifying the themes in the key findings, the research team engaged in debriefing sessions to discuss and identify the existing gaps in the literature and to discern pertinent recommendations for future research (Spall, 1998). This resulted in the identification of three key gaps and directions for future scholars and practitioners. The provided scoping review is not without limitations. First, the review only includes articles written in English. Therefore, the selection of articles may not be representative of every published work. As such, the articles centered on American and British athletes and their experiences. An expanded version of this literature review should be conducted to understand mental health and sport communications across cultures.

Findings

RQ1: Characteristics of Peer-Reviewed Literature

The results of RQ1 provide insight into the state of current literature that addresses the intersection of sport communications and mental health. Relevant articles were first published in 2014. However, research in this space was not consistent until 2020 (See Table 1). This result was not surprising as mental health is increasingly being considered an important component of overall health (Mance, 2022). Within the context of sport, the increased research also aligns with athletes disclosing their mental health concerns and diagnoses at a heightened rate. Kevin Love and DeMar DeRozan, some of the first athletes to publicly discuss their mental health, spoke out in 2018, with more athletes speaking out since (e.g., Simone Biles, Michael Phelps, Naomi Osaka, etc.). As conversations around mental health continue to occur over general media (Smit, 2024) and sport communication efforts (i.e., Pro Athlete Awareness Week), it is reasonable to believe that continued research in this area is necessary and will continue to increase.

Table 1
Key Features of Reviewed Mental Health and Sport Communication Articles

Author(s) (Year)	Focus of Article	Theoretical Foundation	Method/Methodology	Journal
Bunch, Beasley, & Copple (2024)	Media framing	Ecological Systems Theory	Critical Discourse Analysis	<i>International Journal of Sport Communication & Sport</i>
Cassilo (2022)	Media framing	Framing/Hegemonic Masculinity	Thematic Analysis	<i>Communication & Sport</i>
Cassilo & Kluch (2023)	Media framing	Framing	Thematic Analysis	<i>Communication & Sport</i>
Else, Southwood, Winter, Thomas, Litchfield, Ogwen, & Billington (2024)	Media framing	N/A	Ethnographic Observation	<i>Sport in Society</i>
Feng & Duncan (2024)	Media framing	N/A	Critical Discourse Analysis	<i>Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health</i>
Jackson, Dirks, & Billings (2022)	Media framing	Social Identity Theory/Framing	Quantitative Content Analysis	<i>International Journal of Sport Communication</i>
Keal, McCabe, Wright, & Renshaw (2022)	Media framing	N/A	Thematic Analysis	<i>Sports Psychiatry</i>
Fedorosko & Bishop (2021)	Media framing	N/A	Narrative Analysis	<i>Communication & Sport</i>
Lavelle (2021)	Media framing	Hegemonic Masculinity/Whiteness	Critical Discourse Analysis	<i>Communication & Sport</i>
McGannon, Staden, & McMahon (2022)	Media framing	N/A	Narrative Analysis	<i>Journal of Applied Sport Psychology</i>
Parrott (2024)	Media framing	Framing	Thematic Analysis	<i>Communication & Sport</i>
Parrott, Billings, Buzzelli, & Towery (2021)	Media framing	Framing/Social Cognitive	Content Analysis	<i>Communication & Sport</i>
Parry, Brain, Jull, & Smith (2023)	Media framing	Framing	Thematic Analysis	<i>International Journal of Sport Communication</i>
Thompson, Carter, Lee, Alshamrani, & Billings (2022)	Media framing	Framing	Quantitative Content Analysis	<i>Electronic News: Broadcast and Mobile Journalism</i>
Vaccaro & Butryn (2020)	Media framing	N/A	Ethnographic Content Analysis	<i>Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal</i>
Cameron & Grano (2023)	Athlete disclosure	Co-Cultural Theory	Phenomenological Thematic Analysis	<i>Communication Studies</i>
Else (2019)	Athlete disclosure	N/A	Ethnomethodology/Conversation Analysis	<i>Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health</i>
Else, Winter, Litchfield, Ogwen, & Southwood (2023)	Athlete disclosure	N/A	Ethnomethodology/Conversation Analysis	<i>Communication & Sport</i>
Kwak & Jang (2024)	Athlete disclosure	Social Cognitive Theory	Experimental Design	<i>Sport Management Review</i>
Lavelle (2022)	Athlete disclosure	Critical Race Theory	Discourse Analysis	<i>Howard Journal of Communications</i>
Parrott (2023)	Athlete disclosure	Stigma Communication	Thematic Analysis	<i>International Journal of Sport Communication</i>

Chen & Kwak (2023)	Social media response	N/A	Quantitative Thematic and Sentiment Analysis	<i>Communication & Sport</i>
Doehler (2023)	Social media response	Framing	Leximancer/Quantitative Content Analysis	<i>International Journal of Sport Communication</i>
Kumble, Diddi, & Bien-Aime (2024)	Social media response	N/A	Machine Learning Thematic Analysis	<i>Communication & Sport</i>
Mitchell, Santarossa, & Woodruff (2018)	Social media response	N/A	Quantitative Content/Social Network Analysis	<i>International Journal of Sport Communication</i>
Parrott, Billings, Hakim, & Gentile (2020)	Social media response	N/A	Quantitative Content Analysis	<i>Reports</i>
Lindsay & Thomas (2014)	Reflection from mental health professional	N/A	Autoethnography	<i>The Sport Psychologist</i>

Bibliographic Details

Much of the research in this space has been published in sport communication-focused journals, specifically *Communication & Sport* ($n = 9$) and the *International Journal of Sport Communication* ($n = 6$). Notably, only three articles were published in psychology or psychiatry journals. Social work journals were not represented in this review. The articles were authored by 53 individuals, who represented institutions from five countries: Australia ($n = 1$), Canada ($n = 7$), South Korea ($n = 1$), United Kingdom ($n = 16$), and United States ($n = 28$).

Theoretical Frameworks

The literature sample primarily focused on the coverage of, or response to, individual athlete mental health disclosures. Because of the purpose of the literature, the most common theoretical perspective in the literature was framing theory ($n = 8$). Half of the articles did not have a stated theoretical foundation ($n = 14$). The remainder of theoretical frameworks used are provided in Table 1.

Research Methods

In terms of method, qualitative methods were employed in 80% of the articles. Most commonly, a form of thematic analysis was used. Certain qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, were not employed. Overall, quantitative methods were undertaken in six of the publications. There was limited use of intervention methodologies (i.e., randomized control), and only one article used an experimental design.

In answering part of RQ3, the existing work exhibited limited diversity in terms of methodological and theoretical approaches. In terms of method, most of the studies employed a qualitative approach. Specifically, thematic analysis (e.g., Cassilo, 2022a; Cassilo & Kluch, 2023; Keal et al., 2022) was the most used technique. Only one study used an autoethnography (Lindsay & Thomas, 2014), two conversational analysis and ethnomethodology (Elsey et al., 2023; Elsey et al., 2024), and three used critical discourse analysis (Bunch et al., 2024; Feng & Duncan, 2024; Lavelle, 2021). In terms of quantitative designs, Kwak and Jang (2024) used an

experimental design to discern consumers' perceptions of warmth and competence upon an athlete's mental health disclosure. Additionally, their work evaluated the effect of a sponsor's stance toward athlete mental health on brand authenticity. Clinical intervention studies could push the literature forward to explore if sport mental health communications can increase viewers' mental health literacy and decrease stigma.

Much of the work ($n = 14$) did not have a theoretical foundation. In regard to studies that used theory, framing theory was the most widely used, which may not be surprising as thematic and content analysis were common methodological choices. However, the similar nature of the existing work leads to limited perspectives and insights. Only one article used Critical Race Theory (Lavelle, 2022), one piece used Co-Cultural Theory (Cameron & Grano, 2023), and one used Ecological Systems Theory (Bunch et al., 2024). Future research would benefit from using social work theories, such as more use of ecological systems theory, to understand the systems impact of mental health communications in sport contexts.

RQ2: Key Findings of the Articles

The inductive analysis of the articles and their key findings resulted in the construction of four themes: (1) positive and neutral sentiments toward athlete disclosures, (2) differences in response or coverage based on outlet, (3) changes in media narrative and sport culture, and (4) the role of race and gender in disclosures.

Theme 1: Positive and Neutral Sentiments Toward Athlete Disclosures

Analysis of media framing and public responses to athlete mental health disclosures was central to the literature. Current literature at the intersection of mental health and sport communications consistently finds that athletes garnered positive or neutral responses on media coverage after their mental health disclosure (e.g., Chen & Kwak, 2023; Keal et al., 2022; Mitchell et al., 2018; Parrott et al., 2021). This is not to dismiss negative frames or commentary that athletes did receive. However, it was apparent that positive or neutral sentiments were a profound finding across the literature. There was a plethora of ways in which athletes received positive attention for their mental health disclosure. McGannon and colleagues' (2022) evaluation of news stories around Andrew Luck's retirement illustrated praise for vulnerability. Other athletes were regarded in a heroic light (Thompson et al., 2022) and recognized as breaking mental health stigma (Cassilo, 2022a; Kumble et al., 2024; Lavelle, 2022). As stigma was being challenged, athletes also garnered words of support (Cassilo & Kluch, 2023; Doehler, 2023) and encouraged others to share their experiences with diminished mental health (Kumble et al., 2024; Parrott et al., 2020). Kwak and Jang's (2024) experimental design demonstrated that sport consumers assess athlete mental health disclosures with greater warmth compared to physical injuries. This finding was particularly true for more prominent athletes. Overall, existing literature well establishes that athletes are often supported in their mental health disclosures through media coverage and consumer response.

Notably, a majority of the current literature does not critically examine the positive nature of media coverage or response. As such, most positive response is viewed as empowering. However, Van Beveren and colleagues (2020) warn against viewing discourse as "exclusively stigmatizing or exclusively empowering and normalizing" (p. 1362). Despite the benefits of a strengths-perspective, *toxic* positivity in overall health communications may misconstrue the

reality of living with an illness or disease. Scholars have found that people responding to posts related to living with endometriosis often reinforce the belief that the only way to “defeat” the disease is through positive thinking, which is unrealistic (Lecompte-Van Poucke, 2022). Furthermore, because the glamorization of mental health concerns and death by suicide is an issue in mass media (Jadayel et al., 2017; Parrott, 2024), it is scholars’ duty to ensure the “positive” coverage is not romanticizing mental health diagnosis. Therefore, the presence of positive responses in the existing literature should not be viewed in a homogenous nature.

Beyond glamorization and toxic positivity, the complexities of mental health should not be overly simplified through media communications. Within this context, Bunch and colleagues (2024) examined how Stanford’s response to the passing of Katie Meyer, although seemingly positive, may have reinforced mental health stigma and the over-identification with athlete identity. Lavelle (2021) briefly discussed this issue in the context of athlete mental health disclosures, stating that media discussion that hyper focuses on the environmental factors which attribute to diminished mental health downplays the complexities around diagnosis. As such, future scholars should increase the critical examination of positivity and nature of the coverage or responses to athlete mental health disclosures.

Theme 2: Difference in Response and Coverage Based on Outlet

Despite the overall positive sentiments toward mental health disclosures, differences in response and coverage based on the reporting outlet were a consistent finding in the literature. For instance, Chen and Kwak (2023) identified that after Naomi Osaka’s withdrawal from the French Open, responses to media outlets’ coverage were less positive than those replying directly to Osaka’s messages. Similarly, Doehler (2023) evaluated the coverage and subsequent response to Facebook coverage of Simone Biles’ withdrawal from the Olympics through CNN, Fox News, Bleacher Report, and her own posts. Once again, the most supportive responses appeared in the replies directly to Biles. The least supportive responses were generated from those replying to the Fox News coverage.

In regard to traditional media formats, mental health disclosures may differ based on the country of the coverage. For illustration, the United Kingdom’s newspaper coverage of Biles’ withdrawal from the Olympics mentioned Biles’ race less compared to the coverage in the United States. Lastly, Elsey (2019) and Elsey et al. (2023) have explored the media ethics surrounding team and organization disclosures of athlete mental health. There is not one best media practice. However, sport organizations and athletes must consider timing, content, and boundaries between public and private matters (Elsey et al., 2023). Elsey and colleagues (2023) caution against sport organizations and teams disclosing an athlete’s mental health diagnoses without the athlete’s permission or counsel (Elsey et al., 2023). In terms of content, athletes should, “(when possible)...speak plainly and frankly in these circumstances” (Elsey et al., 2023, p. 503). As such, because of the range of responses based on reporting outlets, researchers have provided key insights and strategies for disclosing mental health diagnoses.

Theme 3: Changes in Sport Culture and Narratives Around Mental Health

The third theme suggests that sport culture and media coverage of mental health are changing. This theme does not intend to downplay the ongoing mental health stigma that remains. However, evidence suggests that there are improvements. For instance, Cassilo and

Kluch's (2023) examination of the media framing of current NBA player D.J. Carton's exit from Ohio State University supports this by highlighting coaches' increased willingness and desire to discuss mental health.

In terms of media coverage, there was more evidence to suggest changing narratives. Parry and colleagues (2023) examined the media framing of athletes' mental health across three outlets in the United Kingdom from 2000-2019. The results suggest that over time reporters had increased their engagement with official sources (e.g., psychologists), using more specific terminology to discuss diagnoses, acknowledging the need for education and support, and calling attention to changing sport culture. However, this finding is not consistent, as Keal and colleagues (2022) found that journalists covering the 2020 Olympics favored generalized language and did not discuss specific diagnoses, symptoms, or experiences. Therefore, it is evident that despite increased instances of discussing mental health in media, best practices on how to cover athlete mental health are still not universally known, and organizations would benefit from a mental health professional, such as a social worker, assisting in educating communicators on mental health language, helping frame messaging, etc. In this vein, when discussing athlete suicide specifically, Parrott (2023) suggests that journalists consult relevant groups (i.e., Reporting on Suicide or Society of Professional Journalists) to ensure sensitization does not occur and best practices are followed. Inconsistency in discussing mental health is not limited to media coverage from external sources. Athletes often vary in how they discuss their mental health. For example, Kevin Love's essay, while openly discussing his experiences with panic attacks, does not detail the specifics of a clinical anxiety or panic disorder diagnosis (Lavelle, 2021). Whereas Liz Cabbage provided vivid details about her experiences managing her mental health with medication (Lavelle, 2022). The inconsistent nature of coverage and disclosures lends itself to future research opportunities.

Theme 4: The Role of Race and Gender in Disclosures

Despite the generally positive and neutral sentiments, racism, sexism, and intersectionality impacted athlete disclosures of mental health diagnoses. Regarding male athletes, there have been extensive comparisons between the mental health disclosures of NBA players Kevin Love (a white player) and DeMar DeRozan (a Black player). DeRozan came forward with depression first but was only mentioned on ESPN 11 times compared to 70 mentions about Love. Furthermore, despite the proximity of their disclosures, Love was coined the face of mental health in the NBA (Lavelle, 2021). Additionally, Love had increased corporate support from sponsors, which demonstrates white privilege within the NBA (Lavelle, 2021). Because of evidence that race may impact reaction and response to athlete mental health disclosures and coverage, several scholars have called for future research to continue to evaluate the impact of race on such communications efforts (e.g., Cassilo & Kluch, 2023).

Responses to mental health disclosures are also impacted by the gender of the athlete. For example, the media response to Suzy Favor Hamilton's memoir about her bipolar disorder and experiences as an escort in Las Vegas often used gendered language and ideology to negatively portray her (Vaccaro & Butryn, 2020). Favor Hamilton was criticized for dismissing her role as a mother and a wife (Vaccaro & Butryn, 2020). Furthermore, her image was discussed as not fixable, unlike how male counterparts are described after a sex scandal (Vaccaro & Butryn, 2020). Feng and Duncan (2024) discussed the difference between journalists' coverage of male and female athletes with eating disorders. Journalists upheld hegemonic masculinity by using

words of virtue and strength when describing male athletes. However, when discussing female athletes, messages of fragility and inability to manage behavior were used. With reported differences between the coverage and response to male and female mental health, there are existing calls to further examine the impact of gender, mental health, sport, and the media (Else et al., 2023).

It is imperative to also consider the intersectional experiences, particularly those of Black women, because “Black women are frequently encouraged to compartmentalize their emotions and mental health stressors instead of expressing them” (Lavelle, 2022, p. 514). Lavelle (2022) examined media accounts of Liz Cambage’s (a former WNBA player’s) mental health disclosure through counter storytelling. Furthermore, Cameron and Grano (2023) examined Black WNBA players’ long-form mental health disclosures. Findings from both studies suggest that athletes were disrupting existing stereotypes and discourses. Cameron and Grano (2023) suggest that by disclosing specific triggers and turning points in their mental health, Black women combat notions of self-isolation and hyper-productivity, which are normalized for Black women. Lavelle (2022) revealed that Cambage’s disclosures demonstrated that a female athlete can be successful while managing her mental health. In evaluating responses to mental health disclosures, a handful of commenters of Fox News’ coverage of Simone Biles’s withdrawal from the Olympics responded with blatantly racist commentary (Doehler, 2023). Scholars have begun to evaluate different populations as well, such as Chen and Kwak’s (2023) work on Naomi Osaka’s (an Asian and Black female) withdrawal from tennis. However, further intersectional work should continue to be conducted (Lavelle, 2022).

RQ3: Methodological and Theoretical Gaps in the Literature

The evaluation of the methodological and theoretical approaches to the existing literature led to the identification of the following patterns: 1) limited variation in approach (discussed in RQ1), 2) the centering of athletes, and (3) lack of diversity in data sources.

The Centering of Athletes in the Literature

Athletes and the responses to their mental health disclosures served as the focal point of much of the existing literature. In particular, the experiences of Simone Biles (gymnastics), DeMar DeRozan (NBA), and Kevin Love (NBA) were the most discussed and the focus of two or more articles each. Other athletes included in the research were Liz Cambage (WNBA), Suzy Hamilton (runner), Royce White (NBA), Naomi Osaka (women’s tennis), D.J. Carton (NCAA men’s basketball), Andrew Luck (NFL), Jimmy Piersall (MLB), Michael Phelps (swimming), Aaron Lennon (Everton football player), Sarah Taylor (Sussex and England cricketer), Joey Julius (NCAA football), and Mike Marjama (MLB). The evaluation of athletes is undoubtedly important. However, there are other key individuals who require scholarly attention.

Coaches, other members of an organization, or an organization itself may publicly address mental health. Evaluation of coaches is particularly pertinent because current literature suggests that coaches are impactful on athlete health (Gerber et al., 2024) and are increasingly communicating about mental health (Cassilo & Kluch, 2023). For example, the autoethnographic account of Pete Lindsay’s time as a resident mental health professional working in television broadcasting during a sporting world championship suggested that psychologists who are involved in sport media should evaluate their personal motives, agree upon content with the

production team, and seek support from peers both in psychology and communications (Lindsay & Thomas, 2014). Furthermore, communication scholars have warned against performative communication from sport organizations across other social issues (i.e., Black Lives Matter activism; Bunch & Cianfrone, 2022). As such, Bunch and colleagues (2024) implore college sport communicators to specifically name diagnoses, provide calls-to-action, and avoid messaging that overvalues athlete identity. Elsey and colleagues (2024) suggest that mental health campaigns must have a clear goal, target audience, and consistent messaging. Furthermore, action steps must explicitly be named to best help audience members. Overall, it is important to evaluate how other industry professionals and sport organizations address mental health and the subsequent response. Such insights would create more comprehensive literature.

Lack of Diversity in Data Sources

Because of the limited variation in research approach and focus, most studies used similar data sources. Primarily, newspaper/media articles and social media coverage of athlete mental health disclosures were common sources of data. For example, newspaper coverage was used in the examination of Michael Phelps as a mental health advocate (Jackson et al., 2022). Further newspaper articles were used in the examination of how mental health was portrayed during the Tokyo Olympics by two United Kingdom-based newspaper outlets (Keal et al., 2022). More broadly, media articles (e.g., digital media, press releases) were used as the primary data source in the investigation of the framing around D.J. Carton's exit from collegiate basketball due to mental health (Cassilo & Kluch, 2023). Additionally, Lavelle's (2022) examination of the discourse used around Liz Cambage's mental health disclosures used 29 popular press articles as the primary data source. Chen and Kwak (2023) used X to analyze conversations around Naomi Osaka's mental health disclosure. Another social media example includes Doehler's (2023) analysis of Facebook coverage around Simone Biles' withdrawal from the Olympics. Despite the extensive evaluation of media coverage, broadcasts, radio transcripts, and the evaluation of docuseries are largely missing.

There were a handful of works that used varying data sources. Thompson and colleagues examined the coverage of Simone Biles' exit from the Olympics through newspaper articles, television broadcasts, and radio transcripts (2022). Elsey and colleagues (2024) evaluated the implementation of a mental health campaign by the Football Association through assessments of radio coverage, television coverage, social media posts, and in-game communications. Meanwhile, Cameron and Grano (2023) used podcast episodes in their analysis of the communicative practices used by Black women athletes to disclose mental health. It is pertinent to branch into other forms of coverage, such as podcasting, as each platform elicits a different mode of communication. For example, podcasting is viewed as a "hyper-intimate" communication form and is useful in sharing stories around sensitive topics (Cameron & Grano, 2023; Meserko, 2014). Although this group of authors expanded the scope of data, other gaps remain. For instance, first-hand accounts of athletes disclosing mental health challenges were absent, as interviews or focus groups were not used in the studies. Additionally, as athletes increasingly partner with mental health services, the communications surrounding these partnerships were missing as data sources.

RQ4: Directions for Social Work Scholars and Practitioners

An objective of this paper was to inform social work scholars and practitioners to better research and work at the intersection of sport communications and mental health. Sport social workers are charged with ensuring competency in practice, research and advocacy (ASWIS, n.d.). The following directions address this call within sport communications and mental health.

Sport Social Work Scholarship and Practice: Embrace Interdisciplinary Work

This work highlights the need for interdisciplinary collaboration in research and practice between sport administration, communication, and mental health scholars and professionals. Much of the research in this space is written solely by sport management or communications scholars, and none to date has been published in social work journals. However, due to the complexity of mental health and sport communications, scholars should engage in interdisciplinary research. Doherty (2013) states:

Interdisciplinary research is useful, even necessary for addressing complex problems. We can think of high-profile issues, such as smoking cessation, climate change, and the AIDS epidemic, for which it has come to be realized that an interdisciplinary perspective is necessary to ‘join the cracks’ and bridge knowledge gaps about the underlying mechanisms and effective management of these issues (p. 3, para. 7).

Within the academy, interdisciplinary research can prove difficult because scholars may feel uncomfortable embracing a new perspective or negotiating with colleagues in another discipline. Furthermore, a scholar’s institution of employment may not embrace or support interdisciplinary research (Doherty, 2013). However, increased interdisciplinary collaboration will lead to the production of more comprehensive research. This call echoes the need for more interdisciplinary research in social justice, communication, and sport scholarship (Jackson et al., 2020; Obregon & Tuft, 2017).

Social work scholars can ensure more competent research at the intersection of mental health and sport communication because of their commitment to a systems perspective (Newman et al., 2022) and mental health expertise, which is largely missing from the literature. Broadly, scholars are encouraged to move beyond the examination of mental health disclosures, which has been the primary focus of mental health and sport communications work. As such, social work scholars should ensure stakeholders across systems are centered in future scholarship (e.g., coaches, social workers tasked with helping communication efforts, communicators, etc.). A systems perspective can also provide a more nuanced understanding of intersectionality. Specifically, gender and race have proven to impact athlete mental health disclosures; increased research should focus on the intersections of hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic whiteness in the discussion of mental health.

In addition to a systems perspective, social work scholars possess mental health expertise and training. Therefore, with a social work perspective, literature at the intersection of mental health and sport can become more accurate, responsible, and robust. In terms of competency, social work scholars may be more attuned to potential issues with mental health communication efforts (e.g., romanticization, glamorization of mental health diagnoses) compared to sport administration and communication peers. For robustness, social work scholars can explore

mental health and sport communication efforts across different mental health diagnoses. Currently, much of the work centers on athletes' anxiety or depression diagnoses. However, athletes are susceptible to other mental health diagnoses (e.g., eating disorders, substance abuse, etc.; Ströhle, 2019). Despite these mental health diagnoses being known to sport social workers and discussed in the media, scholarship has not comprehensively addressed the impact of such communication. For example, more pieces could explore media response to athletes with bipolar disorder, such as Vaccaro and Butryn's (2020) work regarding Suzy Favor Hamilton and the release of her memoir, or the representation of athletes with eating disorders (Feng & Duncan, 2024; Mitchell et al., 2018).

Lastly, social workers in sport are charged with cultivating cultural competency (ASWIS, n.d.). Because digital interventions can increase mental health literacy (Ito-Jaeger, 2022) and sport communications impact healthy behaviors broadly (Pilar et al., 2018), the effectiveness of mental health communications in sport must be assessed. As mental health communications may lead stakeholders to overinterpret mild mental symptoms for something more serious, which in turn can lead to increased psychological distress (Foulkes & Andrews, 2023), it is prudent to examine stakeholders' self-reflection upon reading sport communications efforts that address mental health. Similarly, athletes and other sport entities are continuing to partner with mental health organizations. It is pertinent to understand if these partnerships and their associated communications challenge stigma, encourage more consumers to use these products, and increase overall mental health literacy. Additionally, researchers have provided communications personnel with advice on how to discuss mental health (Parrott et al., 2021; Parrott et al., 2023; Parrott, 2024). However, the effectiveness of such strategies within the sport environment has not been assessed. Sport social work scholars should increasingly evaluate the effectiveness of communication efforts as an intervention, which can yield academic and practice implications.

Practitioners: Increase Integration Between Social Work and Exosystem Actors in Sport

The vision of the Alliance of Social Workers in Sport is to integrate social work practice within all realms of sports to increase well-being outcomes (ASWIS, n.d.). Additionally, ensuring integrity and competency in practice is a shared responsibility of sport social workers (ASWIS, n.d.). Therefore, collaboration with exosystem actors (e.g., administrators, communicators, etc.) should also be valued as a potential site for advancing well-being. Based on the relative novelty of sport social work, practitioners may face colleagues who misunderstand or delegitimize their role within the organization (Beasley et al., 2021). Knowing this, social work practitioners must build relationships with their colleagues. Specifically, this research brings attention to the importance of collaboration with sport communicators.

Sport communications continue to be one of the most visible platforms (Wenner, 2012) and have the potential to serve as a multisystem site to disrupt mental health stigma and increase public awareness and mental health literacy. As such, it is imperative for sport social workers to engage in practices to ensure responsible and destigmatizing content creation. The findings of the scoping review indicate that content creators are not all implementing best practices when engaging in mental health communication. Social workers can help mitigate these concerns by increasing collaborative efforts across the sport industry (e.g., sport media companies, sport organizations) via education and practice initiatives to ensure more responsible and effective mental health messaging through sport. For example, sport social workers can hold forums with journalists, broadcasters, and other media personnel to provide education on best practices and

describe potential consequences of mishandling such conversations. Social workers within sport organizations can more actively engage with their communication staff in the development of public-facing mental health campaigns, press releases, and associated materials. Overall, this scoping review supports the need for more social work presence in sport communications.

Conclusion

The culture of sport has long contributed to the silencing of mental health; as a byproduct mental health stigma has been perpetuated within sport (e.g., Bauman, 2016; Gorczynski et al., 2020). Increasingly, mental health is being discussed via sport media, which may influence future mental health stigma and help-seeking behaviors. Based on the guiding principles of ASWIS, it is critical that sport social work scholars and practitioners ensure sport media discussions of mental health and associated research are responsible and follow best practices. In conclusion, we offer four calls to action for the field.

1. Sport social workers are charged to embrace interdisciplinary work. Practitioners should introduce themselves to colleagues, educate colleagues on their role, and initiate pathways to collaboration. Social work researchers should consider connecting with faculty in sport administration or communication departments to increase interdisciplinary research efforts.
2. There is early evidence to suggest that sport media can influence health behaviors and outcomes (Pilar et al., 2018). However, researchers should increasingly assess the efficacy of sport communications platforms as an intervention.
3. To ensure responsible mental health messaging is disseminated through sport media, social work practitioners should build relationships with sport communicators. Social workers can create educational and training materials, while also serving as a resource if a sport communicator has concerns.
4. Sport social workers and practitioners must use their extensive mental health expertise to ensure diagnoses beyond anxiety and depression are discussed within media and academic literature.

Ultimately, social work scholars and practitioners should not just view this article as a passive indicator of where the field is now, but rather as an active call to advance academic literature and practitioner work at the intersection of sport communication and mental health.

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Sidelined by Stigma: Exploring Self-Stigma and Mental Health Help-Seeking Among College Athletes

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This study explored the factors that promote or hinder student-athletes from seeking support when faced with mental health challenges. Guided by Self-Determination Theory (SDT), survey data from a sample of collegiate student-athletes (N=389) were analyzed using hierarchical multiple regression analysis. The model was constructed to predict levels of self-stigma, as measured by the Self-Stigma of Seeking Help (SSOSH) scale, while controlling for demographic covariates including age, active roster status, and race. Results indicated that self-stigma serves as a primary barrier to help-seeking. Even after accounting for control variables, gender emerged as a significant predictor, with male athletes reporting 13% higher levels of self-stigma than their female counterparts. These findings underscore the influence of hypermasculine sport culture and highlight the need for holistic, athlete-centered interventions. Such strategies must be both culturally and gender-responsive to effectively address the unique mental health needs of the student-athlete population.

Keywords: student athletes, stigma, mental health, social supports

More than 556,000 college athletes competed in the 2024-25 season, an all-time high record, according to the National Collegiate Athletic Association ([NCAA], 2025). As reported by the NCAA, 57% of the athletes were male and 43% were female. To further define the demographics of the population, the racial makeup of the male athletes was 32% White, 12% Black, and 13% other races. While the female athletes were 28% White, 4% Black and 10% other races (NCAA, 2025). Many of the student-athletes recruited into high-level collegiate competition come from high-risk environments fraught with poverty, crime, and poor educational outcomes and may view collegiate sports as opportunities for economic and social mobility. (Beasley et al., 2021). Student-athletes are held in high esteem by their fans and are therefore often under tremendous pressure to perform (Galván, 2021). At the same time, they are in the prime years of body and brain development, which causes additional stress and anxiety (Galván, 2021).

Collegiate student-athletes experience similar mental health concerns, such as anxiety and depression, as their non-athlete peers; however, they also experience unique stressors which put them at risk for the development or exacerbation of mental health disorders (Barkley et al., 2018). The long hours dedicated to their sport-along with balancing their academics, social life, and, for many, being away from home for the first time may be more than a young adult can manage (Barkley et al., 2018). For these reasons, collegiate athletes may need different mental health support than their non-athlete peers.

Literature Review

There are numerous studies exploring the mental health and wellness of collegiate student-athletes (Barcza-Renner et al., 2020; Galván, 2021; Gray et. al., 2023; Lopes Dos Santos et al., 2020; Rocchi & Pelletier, 2018). Of particular importance is the literature spotlighting social support and other external factors that serve as protective factors for college student athletes and prevent mental health disorders from developing (Hagiwara et al., 2017; Kuettel & Larsen, 2020; Sullivan et al., 2022).

Stressors Faced by Collegiate Student Athletes

Numerous external factors can act as stressors and have the potential to adversely affect the daily functioning, athletic performance, and mental well-being of student athletes (Galván, 2021). In addition to the burdens facing most college students—such as social pressures, academic performance and living independently—student athletes also must devote a tremendous part of their life to improving their sporting ability and playing at the top of their game. In a simplistic definition, stress is described as a psychological and physical state of activation response to external demands that exceed one's ability to cope (Lopes Dos Santos et al., 2020).

Collegiate student athletes usually spend four years navigating the cycle of academic, athletic, social, and career planning demands, making stress unavoidable (Gray et. al., 2023). Compounding the stressors over the past few years have been the uncertainties and loss of normalcy caused by the COVID-19 global pandemic (Hagerdon et al., 2022). Acute stressors are stressful situations that occur suddenly, producing physiological arousal, such as increased heart rate and rapid breathing; generally, when the situation subsides, the body can return to a balanced state (Lopes Dos Santos et al., 2020). However, when acute stressors become chronic,

they may increase the risk of an athlete developing depression, anxiety, or metabolic disorders, any of which can lead to susceptibility to illness and injury (Lopes Dos Santos et al., 2020).

A systematic review by Lopes Dos-Santos et al. (2020) and a longitudinal study by Hamlin et al. (2019) both concluded that academic expectations created increased stress and anxiety for student-athletes. It is important to note, however, that the Hamlin et al. (2019) study was conducted in New Zealand, where cultural norms and values regarding higher education and athletics may differ from those in the United States. Their results may not be generalizable to American athletes.

Additionally, there may also be varying stressors on male and female athletes. The results of the 2023 NCAA's Student Athlete Health and Wellness study indicated 40%-45% of female athletes cited planning for the future, financial, and academic worries as significant stressors, compared to 25%-30% of male athletes (NCAA, 2023). In a systematic review examining the comparison of mental health symptoms by athlete gender, Kew et al. (2024), found that male athletes reported higher levels of substance misuse and gambling problems while female athletes reported higher levels of depression, disordered eating, and distress.

Student Athletes' Help-Seeking Behaviors

Over the years, the NCAA has made efforts to provide formal structure and guidance to collegiate athletic departments regarding the care and attention that should be afforded to student-athletes (NCAA, 2022). The stigma surrounding mental health could contribute to the perceived and actual expectation for mental toughness within athletics, but it could also contribute to the athlete's perceptions about seeking help (Sasso et al., 2022).

Student athletes often view their anxiety, depression, or other mental health challenges as a sign of weakness and, consequently, may feel apprehensive about seeking assistance from their coaches (Sasso et al., 2022). Existing data concerning student-athletes' help-seeking behaviors suggest stigma is the primary barrier to seeking help (Yoon & Petrie, 2023). Self-stigma refers to a decline in an individual's self-esteem or self-worth resulting from the person labeling themselves as socially unacceptable (Vogel et al., 2006). Self-stigma is a representation of the internalization of public stigma that leads an individual to feel less socially desirable for seeking help. The prevalence of self and social stigma among college athletes is increased due to the sociocultural aspect of sports, the athlete's visibility to the public, and the masculine tenets which discourage seeking help associated with the sport environment (Hilliard et al., 2022).

According to the data of the NCAA 2023 Health and Wellness study, 72% of female athletes and 67% of male athletes knew where to seek mental health help on campus. However, only about half, or 49% of female athletes and 51% of male athletes, felt comfortable seeking support from campus mental health providers. Additionally, 59% of female athletes and 70% of male athletes believed their coaches prioritized their mental health, but only 40% of female athletes and 54% of male athletes felt comfortable discussing mental health with their coaches. Compared to 2019, the 2023 data showed a 21% decrease for female athletes and a 5% decrease for male athletes in feeling that their coaches cared about their mental health, and an average 9% decrease in comfort level for both genders in discussing mental health with coaches (NCAA, 2023).

Other studies have shown Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC) students utilize mental health services less frequently than White students and are more likely to have unmet mental health needs (Lipson et al., 2018), leaving BIPOC student-athletes at higher

risk. Additionally, BIPOC athletes may experience more distinct stressors such as minority stress, which could arise from athletes identifying with stigmatized racial-ethnic minority groups; such minority stress is tied to mental health (Ballesteros & Tran, 2018).

Student Athlete Attitude Towards Resources

Sasso et al. (2022) found student athletes primarily engaged with informal supports and frequently refused to seek help from mental health professionals because of the perceived stigma that surrounds mental illness. Student-athletes were more likely to seek professional counseling if they felt the counselor had familiarity with their sport or had a sports-related background. Student-athletes also must deal with the stress caused by the substantial amount of time and energy they devote to attending practices, training sessions, team meetings, traveling to events, and sport performance expectations, which are all barriers to seeking mental health support if needed (Lopes Dos Santos et al., 2020). Student-athletes were less likely to seek help despite being more vulnerable to mental health issues than their non-athlete counterparts because of their schedule compression, competitive pressure, and the stigma of mental health (Sasso et al., 2022). Student-athletes with stronger feelings of grit are able to independently overcome negative external factors (Howard et al., 2022). Grit is defined as an individual's capacity to endure challenges while retaining a deep-seated enthusiasm and unwavering commitment to long-term objectives (Duckworth et al., 2007). To be more specific, grit is a fusion of the capability to persist and overcome obstacles while also sustaining dedication and passion for extended goals in a particular domain (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009). Additionally, Stamatis et al. (2020) found an athlete's identity was comprised of two crucial elements: mental resilience and self-compassion. These elements serve as psychological assets that enhance overall psychological well-being and equip athletes with enduring skills that can extend beyond their college years.

Despite the provisions implemented by the NCAA, unaddressed mental health needs continue to impact the lives of student-athletes, some to the point of suicide (Mazzella, 2023). Death by suicide has become the second leading cause of death among college student-athletes (Whelan et al., 2023). In 2022 alone, five NCAA student-athletes died by suicide: Stanford soccer player Katie Meyer; SUNY Binghamton lacrosse player Robert Martin; University of Wisconsin runner Sarah Shulze; James Madison softball player Laura Bernet; and Northern Michigan track athlete Jayden Hill (Mazzella, 2023). These tragedies serve as indicators that more must be done to create environments that will break the stigma around mental health and provide the resources and support needed for collegiate student-athletes to live healthy and successful lives. Determining the mental health status of athletes and providing clinical support is crucial to their athletic performance and overall well-being as humans. Identifying the factors that may serve as barriers to, or facilitators of, student athletes' help-seeking behaviors is crucial (Yoon & Petrie, 2023).

Self-Determination Theory

In exploring the factors that influence student-athletes' well-being, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) offers an approach to understanding the role of motivation and basic psychological needs. SDT posits the social environment shapes motivation through the meeting of three psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

When these three needs are met, individuals are more likely to experience intrinsic motivation and healthier psychological functioning.

Autonomy reflects an individual's ability to make choices aligned with their values, while competence refers to the feeling of being effective and capable in one's actions, which are supported through experience and positive feedback (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Relatedness for student athletes refers to a sense of connection and support through positive relationships with teammates, coaches, and peers (Saxe et al., 2017). Collegiate student athletes navigate a unique set of challenges that make them particularly susceptible to mental health concerns. The pressures of balancing rigorous academic schedules with demanding training and competition regimens can take a toll on their overall well-being (Brown et al., 2021). SDT can help explain why college student-athletes may or may not seek mental health support. Focusing on the three key needs –autonomy, competence, and relatedness, it can help examine if athletes avoid getting help due to stigma, fear of judgment, or feeling like they have no control over their choices.

Methodology

Leaning on the underpinnings of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), this research aimed to explore the factors that motivate or act as barriers to student-athletes seeking support when dealing with mental health concerns. Research guided by the self-determination theory has focused on the social-contextual conditions that facilitate versus undermine intrinsic motivation, self-regulation, and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Target Population & Informed Consent

The population identified for this research study was collegiate student-athletes, age 18 and older, either enrolled in an undergraduate or graduate academic program and actively participating in or retired from collegiate-level sports. The study focused on the lived experience of student-athletes; non-student-athletes were not the focus of this study. To assess eligibility for survey participation, potential participants were asked a nominal question inquiring about their present athletic involvement. Failure to answer this question prevented participants from proceeding further in the survey. The survey introduction incorporated informed consent and presented essential details for individuals to decide their willingness to participate. Before progressing to the survey, participants had to acknowledge their age in compliance with the informed consent process. To streamline the process, all participants had to be 18 years of age or older, as obtaining parental consent within the specified time constraints was unfeasible.

Sampling Procedures

This cross-sectional survey design was utilized to recruit a convenience sample of current collegiate student-athletes. The survey was available through a cloud-based survey platform, Qualtrics. This study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board. Remuneration was not offered for participation.

Recruitment

To recruit the purposive sample of student athletes, an email (Appendix B, Introduction email) with information regarding the study was sent to directors of athletics & recreation, directors of athletic training, student athlete success coordinators, athletic coaches at university

campuses local to the institution of this researcher, and to the national membership of the Alliance of Social Workers in Sport. The email communication included the recruitment flyer and requested that the research information be sent to student athletes through the listserv of the recipients. The research flyer was also posted on the campus of the researcher's university in areas frequented by student athletes, such as athletic facilities, academic buildings, bus stops, and the dining hall. Additionally, the research information was posted on the researcher's LinkedIn social media profile.

Given the multiple platforms used for survey recruitment, including networks from outside of the home state of this researcher, the data collected represents a national sample.

Measures

For this research, quantitative data collection was conducted using an electronic 24-question survey, developed and administered through the Qualtrics platform (Appendix F, Qualtrics Survey). The survey included the complete SSOSH (Vogel et al., 2006) and PSOSH (Vogel et al., 2009) scales in addition to an informed consent statement explaining the purpose of the survey, its voluntariness, and any benefits and risks to the participants. There were seven multiple choice demographic questions to capture the nominal data of race, gender, academic level, sport participation status, and housing status. The sport participation status question helped with the exclusion criteria for the study, as the research sought only student-athletes.

Self-Stigma of Seeking Help Scale (SSOSH)

The research question aimed to explore, from the student athlete's perspective, what factors facilitate or hinder them from seeking support when dealing with a mental health issue. Existing data concerning student-athletes' help-seeking behaviors has suggested that stigma is the primary barrier to seeking help (Yoon, 2023). Self-stigma refers to a decline in an individual's self-esteem or self-worth resulting from the person labeling themselves as socially unacceptable (Vogel et al., 2006). The Self-Stigma of Seeking Help Scale (SSOSH; Appendix D, Self-Stigma of Seeking Help Scale) is a 10-item Likert scale questionnaire that predicts willingness and attitudes to seek counseling and internal consistencies range from .86 to .90 in college student samples (Vogel et al., 2006).

Perceptions of Stigmatization by Others for Seeking Help Scale (PSOSH)

The differentiation between societal stigma and that within one's social circle holds significance, as an individual might be more impacted by the stigma within their immediate social interactions than by the broader societal stigma (Vogel et al., 2009). In alignment with these claims, the role of an individual's social network has been identified as a crucial factor in determining whether to pursue mental health services (Vogel et al., 2009). The Perceptions of Stigmatization by Others for Seeking Help (PSOSH; Appendix E, Perceptions of Stigmatization by Others for Seeking Help Scale) is a five-item Likert scale survey developed to examine the impact of perceived stigmatization by those a person interacts with has on whether an individual self-discloses about a problem and whether the individual seeks psychological services (Vogel et al., 2009). In the two-year study used to develop the scale, the PSOSH demonstrated strong internal consistency and test-retest reliability of .82, exhibiting a favorable fit with the data

within the college student population. Furthermore, it exhibited connections with, yet maintained distinction from, other assessments gauging stigma and attitudes toward seeking help (Vogel et al., 2009).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 27). Preliminary univariate analyses were conducted to describe the demographic characteristics of the sample (N=389). To examine the influence of gender on self-stigma, a hierarchical multiple regression was performed. In the first step of the model, age, athlete status, and race were entered as covariates (control variables) to account for their potential influence on the outcome. In the second step, gender was entered as the primary independent variable to determine its unique contribution to the variance in self-stigma, as measured by the SSOSH scale. This approach ensured that the observed effects of gender were not confounded by the athletes' demographic or professional backgrounds. There was linearity as assessed by partial regression plots and a plot of studentized residuals against the predicted values. There was independence of residuals, as assessed by a Durbin-Watson statistic of 1.970. Homoscedasticity was assessed through visual inspection of a plot of studentized residuals versus unstandardized predicted values. Variance inflation scores were all below Allison's (2012) recommended cutoff of 2.5. There were no studentized deleted residuals greater than ± 3 standard deviations, no leverage values were greater than 0.2, and values for Cook's distance were above 1. The assumption of normality was met, as assessed by a Q-Q plot.

Results

Participant Characteristics

A total of 411 athletes responded to the survey. There were 22 responses omitted due to participants only answering demographic questions, leaving 389 athlete responses sufficient for inclusion. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the gender, race, competition level, academic level, and hours spent on sport that were reported by the survey participants. Of the student-athletes who answered this question, 67% identified as White. The remaining 33% of athletes identified into one of four other race categories, with American Indian/Alaskan Native being the largest group at 17%; when combined with the 4% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, a total 21% of the sample represented the Indigenous population, in addition to 9% Black and 7% Hispanic/Latinx. Just over half of the participants were female, and just under half were male. These results align closely with the athlete demographic data reported by the NCAA for the 2023-24 season (2024). The responding athletes were also broken down by competition level (formal team, club team, and recreation team). This demographic factor was captured to illustrate that athletic identity is not reserved for only individuals competing at formal institutions.

The literature review for this study outlined the varying levels of stressors faced by college athletes (Galván, 2021; Hamlin et al., 2019; Lopes Dos Santos et al., 2020), including the academic level and number of hours spent on athletic activity. To capture these factors, survey data was collected on the academic level and number of hours spent on sports related activities. As shown in Table 1, most of the participants identified as undergraduate students. A substantial

number of participants, 78%, reported spending between 11 to 30 hours a week with an additional 18% reporting 31 or more hours spent on sports-related activities.

Table 1

Participant Characteristics (N = 389)

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Female	195	50%
Male	194	49%
Non-binary/Transgender	3	1%
Race		
White	261	67%
Black	37	9%
Hispanic/Latinx	28	7%
Asian/Pacific Islander	19	5%
American Indian or Alaska Native	75	19%
Competition Level		
Formal team	171	44%
Club Team	180	46%
Recreational Team	40	10%
Academic Level		
Undergraduate	342	87.9%
Post-graduate	50	12.8%
Hours spent on Sports		

0-10 hours	44	11%
11-20 hours	146	37%
21-30 hours	130	33%
31 or more hours	72	18%

Self-Stigma by Gender

A regression model with self-stigma and gender compared the regression coefficients of males with females was conducted to test the null hypothesis $H_0: B_f = B_m$, where B_f is the regression coefficient for females, and B_m is the regression coefficient for males. The regression analysis revealed a significant relationship between gender and self-stigma, with men having higher stigma scores with scores (mean 22.7, 95% confidence interval 22.4-23; $p < 0.05$) than women (mean 10.0, 95% confidence interval 9.7-10.3; $p < 0.05$). The effect size for this difference, as measured by Cohen's d , was $d = [.48]$, indicating a small-to-medium effect. Results of the SSOSH indicated gender accounted for 13% of variance in self-stigma.

Self-Stigma by Athletic Status

Results of the SSOSH indicated that there is an increased level of self-stigma around seeking help among injured athletes. The data represented 15% higher self-stigma reported by athletes identifying as injured.

Perceived Stigma of Seeking Help

Results of the PSOSH indicated athletes are 25% more likely to have a higher level of perceived societal stigma if they have a high rate of self-stigma.

Discussion

The results of this research provide valuable insights into the question of what factors facilitate or hinder student athletes from seeking support when dealing with a mental health issue. The participants of this study were of varying racial backgrounds, with a majority identifying as White and nearly equally split male and female, with a very small sample of non-binary and transgender athletes. Additionally, there were three participants who identified as non-binary or transgender athletes, which is not a statistically significant representation of the LGBTQIA+ population. This response sample aligns with the NCAA (2024) demographics data, which reported of all athletes competing in 2023-24, with 67% identified as White and 47 % identified as female. The 2023-24 NCAA demographics data did not include a breakout of the count of LGTBQIA+ athletes.

Additionally, most of the participants were undergraduates who reported spending a significant amount of time and energy on their sport, aligning with existing literature on the multiple demands faced by student athletes compounding their stress levels (Galván, 2021; Gray et al., 2023; Hamlin et al., 2019; Lopes DosSantos et al., 2020).

One goal of this study was to identify if the presence of perceived societal stigma or self-stigma influenced help-seeking behaviors among college student athletes. Survey results indicated that athletes are 25% more likely to have a higher level of perceived societal stigma if they have a high rate of self-stigma. There were notable patterns in the responses indicating higher rates of perceived societal stigma and self-stigma among male athletes. The results indicate the way in which males feel about themselves highly impacts how they feel others see them. This finding coincides with previous research, which concluded that when compared to women, male college students have a higher rate of perceived stigma, which decreases their willingness to disclose mental health symptoms and seek support (Brown et al., 2018). The socialization of male student athletes includes the upholding of a hypermasculine culture and norms which makes it harder for them to seek mental health support (Sasso et al., 2022). Conversely, female athletes are open to seeking formal and social supports when dealing with health problems (Yang et al., 2010).

As demonstrated in the reviewed literature, while seeking academic support and physical training has been normalized in athletics, there continues to be a strong stigma attached to seeking help when dealing with mental health concerns (Newman et al., 2019). While student athletes feel supported by their athletic department staff, they also point out there may be a lack of experience or knowledge to assist with mental health concerns. However, athletes will rarely seek help outside of the athletic department as formal services are intimidating and bring on a sense of failure and weakness (Sasso et al., 2022). Historically, most athletic departments have relied on sports psychologists to enhance the mental skills of athletes related to sport-based performance. Embedding social workers into athletic departments would expand the continuum of care by applying an ecological, person in the environment framework that focuses on the holistic and overall wellbeing of student athletes (Newman et al., 2019).

Implications

The mental health and wellbeing of collegiate student athletes is an increased area of interest, as evidenced by a growing number of studies being conducted in this area (Barcza-Renner et al., 2020; Galván, 2021; Gray et al., 2023; Lopes Dos Santos et al., 2020; Rocchi & Pelletier, 2018). There remains vast opportunity for future research to explore the systematic change needed to reduce stigma on university and college campuses to allow student athletes to feel supported and mentally healthy. Future research exploring how male and female athletes experience distinct mental health challenges influenced by sport culture, societal expectation, and feelings of stigma can help to inform the development of culturally and gender responsive care (Brown et al., 2018; Kew et al., 2024). Additionally, research examining the effectiveness of routine mental health screenings, conducted concurrently with preseason physical examinations, could provide valuable insights into reducing stigma and increasing access to care (Purcell et al., 2019). Further studies should investigate the impact of embedding social workers into athletic departments to determine the effectiveness of direct access to care, stigma reduction, and improved equity of culturally and gender responsive services (Sasso et al., 2022).

The social work profession is grounded in principles shaped by the core values of service, social justice, integrity, the centrality of human relationships, and honoring the dignity and worth of all people (NASW, 2021). Social workers hold the ability, through interprofessional collaborations, to promote system changes to support positive mental health in collegiate athletes (Newman et al., 2019). Over recent years, there has been an increase in the number of undergraduate and graduate social work programs that have developed and included courses in the curriculum that focus on the unique needs of athletes across the lifespan (Bates & Kratz, 2021). The inclusion of these courses will better prepare social workers to meet the needs of athletes and increase interest in interprofessional collaboration across other disciplines. Expanding these offerings to include a focus on culturally and gender-responsive practices will ensure future social workers can provide equitable and relevant care to college student athletes.

Interprofessional collaboration between social workers and university leadership, coaches, athletic staff, and teams could change the negative mindset surrounding the utilization of services, address the complex challenges faced by student athletes in therapeutic settings, and facilitate their access to mental health education materials (Beasley et al., 2021). Embedding social workers into athletic departments to provide direct access to care would eliminate the barrier created by the guilt and shame that is connected to seeking help from resources where their identity may be uncovered (Sasso et al., 2022). Social workers could provide culturally, and gender responsive routine mental health screenings completed concurrently with preseason physical examinations, at times of increased risk of emotional crisis, such as at the time of an injury or when an athlete faces transition out of sport (Purcell et al., 2019).

Limitations

While the use of a standardized survey is beneficial to reach a larger sample, it could also minimize the social context of responses (Rofuth & Piepenbring, 2022). There is also a risk of self-reporting bias as participants may answer questions in the way they think they should be answered (Poulin et al., 2022). Moreover, as a cross-sectional study capturing a single point in time, there is not the opportunity to examine change in student athletes help seeking behaviors over time. The survey did not ask participants to identify the NCAA division or sport which they participated in and retrospectively; this information may have added a deeper understanding into the unique experiences of athletes. While the survey was sent to national networks and yielded hundreds of responses, social contexts such as community dynamics, campus and athletic culture and norms cannot be considered in the analysis of the data as questions specific to location were not included. Therefore, the results are not generalizable to the entire collegiate student athlete population.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore, from the student-athlete's perspective, the factors that promote or hinder student-athletes from seeking support when faced with mental health challenges. The findings outlined key barriers, including self-stigma, perceived stigma, and reliance on social support over seeking professional help. Several factors emerged as facilitators of help-seeking behaviors, including strong social support systems, spirituality, and access to dedicated team social workers. Additionally, athletes' experiences with stressors and help-seeking behaviors vary not only by gender but also by race, with cultural norms and systemic issues influencing how these challenges are perceived and addressed.

Framed within the lens of self-determination theory, these findings highlight the critical role of social work in the promotion mental health awareness, reducing stigma and fostering a culture of support for student-athletes. By integrating social work practices—such as psychoeducation, crisis intervention, and advocacy—into sport environments, athletes can be empowered to seek help and normalize mental health services as a fundamental aspect of their overall performance and well-being. These findings emphasize the importance of fostering interprofessional collaboration to reduce stigma and increase accessibility to mental health professionals to better support student-athletes.

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The Relationship Between Psychiatric Symptom Severity and Positive and Negative Experiences with Sport Culture Among Collegiate Athletes

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Although mental health professionals have expressed interest in understanding the relationship between sport culture and mental health, this relationship has yet to be examined psychometrically. In this study, the Semi-Structured Interview for Consideration of Sport Culture in Therapy Scale (SSICSCTS; see Donohue et al., 2006) was administered to 59 collegiate athletes. The SSICSCTS examines positive (Sport Culture Importance Scale; SCIS) and negative (Sport Cultural Problems Scale; SCPS) experiences with sport culture. Participants were also assessed for psychiatric symptomology using the Symptom Checklist 90-Revised (SCL-90-R; Derogatis, 1994). MANOVA results indicated no significant differences between NCAA and Club athletes on SCIS or SCPS scores. As hypothesized, regression analysis revealed SCPS scores significantly predicted SCL-90-R Global Severity Index (GSI) scores, while SCIS was not a significant predictor. These findings suggest negative experiences with sport culture may contribute to poor mental health outcomes and should be considered during the implementation of mental health programs for athletes.

Keywords: Sport Culture, Assessment, Mental Health, Psychiatric Symptoms, Athlete

In the United States, approximately half a million athletes participate in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), while more than 2 million college students compete in Club sports (Pennington, 2008). Outside the United States, most college athletes participate in either intramural or club sports, while Canadian collegiate students participate in U Sports, Canada's equivalent of the NCAA. At the college level in the United States, students can participate in three levels of organized sport (i.e., National Collegiate Athletics Association or NCAA, club, intramural). Collegiate athletes on college campuses share some similarities but also have distinct differences. At the NCAA level, for instance, prospective collegiate athletes are typically recruited with incentives, such as athletic scholarships or, less often, the ability to earn money through "Name, Image, Likeness" (NIL) campaigns. Although prospective collegiate athletes at the club level can still be recruited to academic institutions, there are no athletic scholarships awarded to them, as this level is traditionally organized outside the respective school's athletic department (Dahab et al., 2019). Club sports are funded through fundraising campaigns, annual member dues, and donations. There are exceptions where some club teams are fully funded either through the university or through fundraising efforts and donations. Compared to NCAA funded athletics, club level athletes typically pay for sport equipment and other expenses associated with their sport, including but not limited to their travel and staff salaries. Intramural sports offer college students of all skill levels a cost-effective way to compete in organized leagues with flexible schedules compared to NCAA or club athletes. They provide opportunities for physical activity, social connection, and enjoyment, making sport participation accessible without the pressures of higher-level competition (Cooper et al., 2012).

Participation in collegiate sport occurs within distinct social environments that shape shared values and beliefs. Along these lines, culture involves a set of values, ideas, and beliefs shared by a group of people (Velasquez et al., 1994) and is a critical component of what shapes human experience throughout life (Thomas, 2001). As defined by Barkan (2016), culture includes symbols, language, beliefs, values, and artifacts that are part of a specified society. Furthermore, it is how individuals receive, organize, rationalize, and understand their experiences in the world (Saleebey, 1994). As individuals identify with a specific culture or groups of cultures, they embody a cultural identity. Chen and Lin (2016) describe cultural identity as the active process through which individuals engage in and negotiate their sense of belonging within social groups depending on context. They further emphasize that the ways individuals experience as well as express intersecting cultural identities can shift according to contextual factors, such as the environment, specific situations, and the people involved.

With culture manifesting itself differently across populations, professionals have consistently indicated their interest in understanding the culture of athletes, particularly as it relates to mental health (Thompson et al., 2001). Elite athletes have been found to experience comparable severity of mental health symptoms relative to the general population (Rice et al., 2016); with mental health concerns most often including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress and sleep disorders (Purcell et al., 2019). However, studies have found elite athletes experience better mental health when compared to the general population (Donohue et al., 2004; Grasdalsmoen et al., 2022). Therefore, there appears to be heterogeneity of mental health prevalence rates among athletes in comparison to non-athlete populations (Ekelund et al., 2022; Gouttebarger et al., 2019).

Sport culture can be understood through Barkan's framework. In this framework, culture includes specific symbols. For instance, a logo can be an object of symbolism that represents an

athlete's team or organization. The logo is a symbol or visual representation of what the culture of the team or organization represents.

In sports, some terms are universally understood. For instance, in basketball, the word "shoot" can be universally understood even in situations where athletes speak different languages. Athletes also may use slang words that are idiosyncratic to their respective sport (e.g., in baseball "hitting the ball out of the park"). Norms are standards and expectations for behavior and are often encouraged within the sport industry through contracts at the amateur, collegiate, and professional levels (Bayramklichevna & Okyulov, 2022). Rituals that occur across time may become normative, such that athletes may perform them over generations (e.g., warming up together, team cheers, hazing). Athletes may have routines that they perform individually to prepare for practices and games, or rituals that are consistent across sport culture. Values contribute to the development of norms and involve judgments of what is good or bad and desirable or undesirable. Values that are particularly relevant to sport include fair play, sportsmanship, respect, and community.

These aspects of culture may contribute to athletes' mental health (Scotto di Luzio et al., 2019) through friendships and social relations (Dalen & Seippel, 2021). For instance, participating under a logo or participating in traditions that are universally considered positive (e.g., pre-game or post-game meals, post-game celebrations, team building activities) often facilitates relationship building. In contrast, some aspects of sport culture may be harmful. For instance, symbols such as team logos, team names, and team mascots (e.g., Cleveland Indians, Washington Redskins, Fighting Sioux) have been changed to eliminate the possibility of being perceived as offensive. Along this vein, context is important in the consideration of these changes (e.g., Native Americans have historically faced oppression).

Another example of sport culture that is unhealthy concerns the phenomena of hazing. According to the NCAA, hazing is considered any act committed against someone becoming a member or maintaining membership in an organization that is humiliating, intimidating or demeaning, or endangering the health and safety of the person. Hazing can involve active or passive engagement in harmful behaviors regardless of an individual's willingness, creating a climate that undermines personal dignity and respect (NCAA, 2020). Diamond et al (2015) suggest physical forms of hazing include beating/paddling, branding, burning, tattooing, calisthenics, head shaving, kidnapping, abandonment, and sexual assaults. Psychological forms of hazing include forced embarrassing acts, wearing embarrassing clothes or makeup, being verbally abused, deprived of both sleep and food, being tied or taped up, and being forced to do whatever the hazer asks of them. Alcohol use associated hazing includes forced drinking. Hazing has led to both short-term and long-term physical and mental health problems in athletes (Chang et al., 2019).

Building on these experiences, another foundational aspect of sport culture is athletic identity, which involves the extent to which the role of being an athlete is perceived (Brewer, 1993). Individuals with a strong athletic identity base their self-worth on sport outcomes (Weinberg, Vernau, & Horn, 2013). Therefore, athletes who strongly identify with their sport may experience negative mental health consequences when aspects of their sport environment are disrupted. For example, athletes who receive scholarships and rely on structured schedules for training, competition, and daily life may experience distress if these supports are suddenly removed (Hollabaugh et al., 2023). These aspects of sport culture may also affect athletes' attitudes toward mental health and help-seeking. There are inherent differences in being an athlete that cause stigma when pursuing mental health care, as compared with non-athlete peers

(Watson, 2005). For instance, being a celebrity may compromise confidentiality in their pursuit of mental healthcare, resulting in fear of being judged or treated negatively by others (Montero et al., 2022). Moreover, athletes have traditionally been taught to play through pain, which creates a culture of silence within sport (Richardson et al., 2024).

Sport culture may have an impact on performance and mental health through its interaction with existing personality traits and environmental factors (Chang et al., 2019). For collegiate athletes, the pressures of succeeding both academically and athletically increase their susceptibility to burnout, over-training, and conflicting thoughts. The observed pattern of advancement in sports increases internal and external pressure. Although many collegiate-athletes report that involvement in intercollegiate athletics is rewarding, an increasing number also face challenges related to adjustment, emotional well-being, and psychological distress, often due to their participation in activities that are linked to sport culture (Watson, 2005).

When examining collegiate-athletes at the highest level of collegiate competition in the United States (i.e., the NCAA), 30% of collegiate-athletes reported feeling extremely overwhelmed, and nearly a quarter report significant mental fatigue (NCAA, 2020). Approximately 31% of male and 48% of female collegiate-athletes endorse symptoms of depression or anxiety (Moreland, 2018). In general, it is estimated that between 10% and 15% of collegiate athletes struggle with psychological concerns that warrant professional counseling (Watson & Kissinger, 2007). This prevalence is notably higher than the general student population, according to findings from the 2005 National Survey of Counseling Center Directors (Gallagher, 2005).

Culture has been shown to impact how individuals describe their symptoms to health care providers (Thompson et al., 2001). With the number of hours that athletes spend training, practicing, competing in games, and travelling, it may be difficult to distinguish between typical feelings of fatigue and symptoms of a mental health condition (Gulliver et al., 2012). Athletes may also have trouble acknowledging symptoms of a mental health disorder due to physical and physiological requirements in their sport. For instance, athletes often compete optimally when their weight is relatively high (e.g., defensive lineman in American football) or low (e.g., long-distance runners), which may result in problems associated with unhealthy under- or over-eating (Gulliver et al., 2012). In an NCAA collegiate-athletes sample, researchers found that 25.3% of athletes were classified at risk for eating disorders (Torres-McGehee et al., 2023).

The transition into retirement can expose athletes to potential mental health difficulties, especially when athletic identities are solidified (Jewett et al., 2018). Athletes are often encouraged to dedicate much of their lives to develop athletic identity within the culture of sport, which is lost upon retirement (Lavalley & Robinson, 2007). This is a concern because retirement is sometimes associated with a decline in mental well-being and overall life satisfaction (Haslam et al., 2021), including other negative consequences, such as losing sport-based relationships with coaches and teammates and established routines that are often managed by others. Athletes tend to experience feelings of loss, identity crisis, career regret, and difficulties with abrupt lifestyle modifications during their retirement transition (Voorheis et al., 2023). Therefore, greater athletic identity and immersion within sport culture may contribute to professional, social, and emotional difficulties (Schmid et al., 2023). Recognizing the challenges that sport culture can pose for athletes emphasizes the need for clear tools to measure and understand this complex part of their experience.

Assessments Measuring Sport Culture

Culture is one of the most contested words in the English language (Hawkes, 2001) and has been reported to be difficult to understand and evaluate (Partal & Dunphy, 2016). The Semi-structured Interview for Consideration of Ethnic Culture in Therapy Scale (SSICECTS) and parallel Semi-structured Interview for Consideration in Sport/Exercise Culture in Therapy Scale (SSICSECT) were developed in a controlled trial involving 151 collegiate students (Donohue et al., 2006). The overarching aim of the study was to develop a method of assessing cultural competence in therapy. Both scales include the same question stems and response sets but are focused on either ethnic culture or sport culture, respectively (see Appendix A). The questions are designed to capture interviewees' positive and negative experiences with the respective culture, and the response set is a 7-point scale of agreement (1 = Extremely Disagree, 4 = Unsure, 7 = Extremely Agree). In this initial study, the SSICECTS demonstrated strong factor structure, good internal consistency, and satisfactory convergent validity, whereas the SSICSECT was not examined psychometrically. In the random assignment phase of the study, administration of a corresponding interview that discussed SSICSECT answers resulted in improved perceptions of the interviewers. In a subsequent study, Donohue et al. (2021) examined the SSICSECTS in 289 collegiate athletes. Results showed that reviewing the participants' responses, both positive and negative, led to greater mental health intervention engagement. The SSICSECTS is highly customizable and able to address unique aspects of sport culture. Item stems are focused on sport culture from the participant's perspective, and interview prompts encourage athletes to discuss symbols, language, norms, rituals, and values that are pertinent to sport culture. For instance, the interviewing format permits a hockey player to talk about sport culture within the context of hockey.

As the previous review indicates, negative experiences with sport culture may contribute to mental health concerns. However, investigators have yet to examine the relationship between sport culture and mental health in athletes using psychometrically validated scales. Therefore, the current study sought to determine whether negative experiences with sport culture predict mental health symptom severity in Club and NCAA athletes. Specifically, it was hypothesized that Sport Culture Problem Scale (SCPS) scores in the SSICSECTS, but not Sport Culture Importance Scale scores of this measure, will significantly predict psychiatric symptom severity.

Method

Participants

Participants in this study were collegiate-athletes ($n = 59$) who attended a university in the southwestern United States that is classified as a Division I NCAA institution (see Table 1). Athletes completed a survey to better understand life transitions, performance, perception of various aspects of life, utilization of medical and mental health services, and culture. Eligibility requirements to participate in this study include: (1) at least 18 years of age, and (2) identified as an NCAA or Club athlete.

Table 1
Participant Demographics for Overall Sample

Demographic		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age in Years	20.6	2.07
	<i>A</i>	<i>%</i>
Gender		
<i>Male</i>	34	57.6
<i>Female</i>	25	42.4
Ethnicity		
<i>White</i>	38	64.4
<i>Hispanic</i>	6	10.1
<i>Asian</i>	7	11.9
<i>Black</i>	4	6.8
<i>Native American</i>	1	1.7
<i>Pacific Islander</i>	1	1.7
<i>Other</i>	2	3.4
Year in School		
<i>Freshman</i>	14	23.7
<i>Sophomore</i>	12	20.3
<i>Junior</i>	15	25.4
<i>Senior</i>	18	30.6
Athlete Type		
<i>NCAA</i>	37	62.7
<i>Club</i>	22	37.3

Note. $N = 59$. λ = frequency.

Measures

Demographic Questionnaire

Participants were asked about demographics, which included gender, ethnicity, age, enrollment status, class standing, and current level of participation in sport.

The Semi-Structured Interview for Consideration of Sport Culture in Therapy Scale (SSICSCTS; see Donohue et al., 2006)

The SSICSCTS includes two subscales. The Sport Culture Importance Scale (SCIS) includes four items that assess the extent to which sport culture is perceived to be important (i.e., My sport culture is a big part of my everyday life; My sport culture is of great importance to me; There are many things I like about my sport culture; My sport culture should be addressed in therapy). The Sport Culture Problem Scale (SCPS) assesses the extent to which problems are perceived to occur due to sport culture (Sport Culture Problem Scale; SCPS). The SCPS includes two items (i.e., Others have said things to me about my sport culture that have been offensive to me; I have experienced problems due to my sport culture). Items are endorsed using a 7-point Likert-type response scale (1 = Extremely Disagree, 7 = Extremely Agree). The SSICSCTS has been successfully utilized to engage athletes in treatment in clinical trials (e.g., Donohue et al., 2021). Internal consistency was evaluated for the current sample using Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = .78$ for Importance scale; $\alpha = .76$ for Problems scale).

The Symptoms Check-List-90-Revised (SCL-90-R) (Derogatis, 1994)

This 90-item measure is a widely utilized scale for general psychiatric symptoms, which have been normed on psychiatric outpatients, psychiatric inpatients, and adult and adolescent non-patients and has demonstrated acceptable convergent-discriminant validity, internal consistency, and test-retest reliability (see Donohue et al., 2020 for review). The SCL-90-R's reliability and validity have been evaluated in multicultural environments and has been utilized to assess the psychometric characteristics of various screening instruments (Donohue et al., 2023; Martin et al., 2006; Øiesvold et al., 2011; Donohue et al., 2023). Sub-scales assess the following psychiatric symptomology: Somatization, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Interpersonal Sensitivity, Depression, Anxiety, Hostility, Phobic Anxiety, Paranoid Ideation, and Psychoticism. Items (symptoms) are endorsed using a 5-point Likert-type scale (0 = Not at All, 4 = Extremely). The current study will use the GSI for analysis (Todd, Deane & McKenna, 1997).

Procedures

Collegiate athletes (NCAA, Club), who were at least 18 years of age and attending a southwestern university, were included in the proposed analyses. Data were obtained from two sources: (1) a study examining mental health, performance, and culture among military and non-military collegiate students ($n = 24$), and a study conducted to examine mental health, performance and culture in collegiate student-athletes ($n = 35$). Study procedures, including measures, were the same for participants in both studies. However, the method of recruitment varied between these two studies. In the former study, all collegiate students were invited to participate to receive course credit for their participation. In the latter study, NCAA participants

were encouraged through social media, email, text, and instant messaging by their team leaders to complete the study and club athletes were invited through their respective sport listservs.

Participants completed study measures on their own personal devices, and their information was immediately de-identified. The survey was created in Qualtrics, where all information was exported to an SPSS document after the collection of data. To reduce risk of human error and to provide both accurate and valid results through this survey, data was checked for accuracy in research team pairs. The sample size of fifty-nine (59) athletes consisted of thirty-seven (37) NCAA athletes and twenty-two (22) club athletes. The study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board for the protection of human participants.

Statistical Analysis Plan

It is unclear if NCAA athletes attribute greater importance to their sport culture and experience greater problems due to their sport culture, as compared with athletes in potentially less involved levels of sport participation (i.e., club sports). Indeed, club sports are not as structured in their scheduled activities as NCAA sports, although club and NCAA collegiate athletes both compete in intercollegiate games, practices, and travel to competitions. Therefore, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) test was planned to determine if NCAA and club athletes (Independent Variable) differed significantly in their Sport Culture Importance Scale scores and Sport Culture Problem Scale scores (Dependent Variables). Post-hoc univariate analyses (ANOVAs) were planned if the omnibus MANOVA was significant between NCAA and club sport athletes on the SCIS and SCPS. If NCAA and Club Sport athlete SCIS and SCPS scores are similar, the primary analysis (i.e., multiple linear regression performed to determine if SCIS and SCPS scores predict SCL-90R GSI scores) was planned to occur combining NCAA and club sport athlete SCIS and SCPS scores. If NCAA and club sport athlete SCIS and SCPS scores were statistically significant, the primary analysis will be done separately for NCAA and club sport athletes. Assumptions of linear regression, including normality, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity were examined.

Power Analyses

Separate power analyses indicated that a sample size of 68 participants would be required to detect a medium effect size ($f^2(V) = 0.15$) with 80% power at an alpha level of 0.05 for both the proposed MANOVA and linear regression analyses (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007; Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009). The obtained sample size was 59 participants in the current study, suggesting that both the MANOVA and regression analyses may have been slightly underpowered.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Raw score means, standard deviations, and standard scores for the SCIS, SCPS and SCL-90-R GSI for NCAA athletes, club athletes, and the combined athlete sample are presented in Table 2. Additionally, NCAA and club sport athletes scored approximately one standard deviation above the normative mean of 50 ($SD = 10$) (clinical cut-off score = 63; Derogatis,

1994) (see Table 2). Twenty-six athletes (15 NCAA and 11 Club) representing 44% of the sample (26/59), met or exceeded the clinical cut-off score.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for the SCIS, SCPS, and SCL-90-R GSI by Athlete Type (N=59)

	Athlete Type	n	SCIS	SD	SCPS	SD	SCL-90-R GSI	SD
Mean Raw Score	<i>NCAA</i>	37	5.7	1.12	4.43	1.23	0.74	0.65
	<i>Club</i>	22	5.77	0.89	4.73	1.46	0.85	0.84
	<i>All Athletes</i>	59	5.72	1.04	4.54	1.31	0.78	0.72
Mean Standard Score	<i>NCAA</i>	37	-	-	-	-	58.32	-
	<i>Club</i>	22	-	-	-	-	60.73	-
	<i>All Athletes</i>	59	-	-	-	-	59.22	-

Athlete Status (NCAA & Club) as a Predictor of Sport Culture Perceptions (SCIS & SCPS)

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to determine whether NCAA and club athletes differ significantly in their scores on the Sport Culture Importance Scale (SCIS) and the Sport Culture Problem Scale (SCPS). Athlete status (NCAA vs. Club) served as the independent variable, while SCIS and SCPS scores were the dependent variables. The results of the MANOVA indicated that there was no statistically significant multivariate effect of athlete status on the combined dependent variables, Pillai's Trace = 0.013, $F(2, 56) = 0.356$, $p = .701$. These findings suggest NCAA and club athletes do not differ significantly in the extent to which they believe their sport is important to them or the extent to which they perceive problems due to their sport culture. NCAA and club sport athlete SCIS and SCPS scores were therefore combined for the subsequent primary analysis (described below).

Primary Analysis

Sport Culture Scales (SCIS & SCPS) as Predictors of Mental Health (SCL-90-R GSI) Among Athletes

A linear regression was performed to examine if SCIS (Importance Scale) and SCPS (Problem Scale) scores predict SCL-90-R GSI scores among athletes. The model was statistically significant, $F(2, 56) = 7.114$, $p = 0.0018$, indicating that the predictors explained a sizable proportion of the variance in SCL-90-R GSI scores. The model accounted for 20.26% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.203$, with an adjusted ($R^2 = 0.174$)).

An examination of the individual predictors revealed that SCPS was a significant predictor ($B = 0.247$, $SE = 0.066$, $t = 3.768$, $p < 0.001$), such that higher SCPS scores were associated with higher SCL-90-R GSI scores. However, the SCIS was not a significant predictor ($B = -0.049$, $SE = 0.083$, $t = -0.585$, $p = 0.561$) of SCL-90-R GSI scores.

These results suggest that the SCPS (Problem Scale) is a meaningful contributor to the prediction of mental health outcomes, as measured by the SCL-90-R GSI, while SCIS (Importance Scale) does not appear to have a significant impact by itself.

Discussion

Overview of Findings

The primary aim of this study was to examine the relationship between sport culture and mental health outcomes in a sample of 59 NCAA athletes. There were no significant differences between NCAA and club athletes in the extent to which they perceived their sport culture was important or the extent to which their sport culture was problematic. These findings may suggest that athletes at both levels perceive their sport culture similarly, which may unite NCAA and club sport athletes, despite their structural differences (Paule & Gilson, 2010; Dahab et al., 2019). For example, both groups often navigate the pressures of balancing athletic commitments with academic and personal responsibilities, which may result in similar cultural experiences (Cooper et al., 2012). This finding is also consistent with previous research showing no significant differences in athletic identity across collegiate competitive levels, which suggests athletes may maintain similar identification with the athlete role regardless of their competitive level (Houle, Brewer, & Kluck, 2010).

Regression analyses supported the hypothesis that negative experiences with sport culture would in turn be significantly associated with psychiatric symptom severity, whereas the extent to which sport culture was perceived to be important was not predictive of psychiatric symptom severity. These combined results are important when attempting to appreciate the influence of sport culture on collegiate athletes' mental health. Indeed, the results suggested athletes' negative experiences with sport culture, and not the extent to which they perceive sport culture is important to them per se, should be a primary concern when screening athletes for mental health disorders. This finding is consistent with existing evidence suggesting negative sport culture experiences (i.e., hazing, performance pressures, burnout, and criticism, to name a few) are harmful to athletes' well-being (Rice et al., 2016; Chang et al., 2019; Diamond et al., 2015).

There is also existing evidence suggesting negative sport culture experiences (e.g., hazing, performance pressures, burnout, criticism) may have a harmful impact on athletes' well-being (Rice et al., 2016; Chang et al., 2019; Diamond et al., 2015). Thus, the current findings are consistent with previous research linking negative aspects of sport culture to poorer mental health outcomes and provide meaningful insight into the mental health risks associated with these experiences while challenging assumptions about differences between NCAA and club athletes.

Limitations

Overall, while the power analysis indicated that a sample size of 68 participants was ideal for both the MANOVA and linear regression analyses, the final sample of 59 was influenced by

resource constraints such as limited access to participants. As Lakens (2022) discusses, resource limitations are a common and justifiable reason for smaller sample sizes, especially when the data are interpretable and provide valuable insights. Although the study may be underpowered, the consistency of the findings with previous research on the negative impact of sport culture experiences on mental health suggests that the data offer reliable findings. Furthermore, the observed similarities between NCAA and Club athletes align with existing evidence that their experiences may be more alike than often assumed. Morgan and VanVoorhis (2007) suggest that support from previous studies can lend credibility to findings, even in underpowered studies.

It is important to mention that mean SCL-90-R scores were relatively high (mean = 59.22; clinical cut-off 63) for athletes in this study. In considering these scores, it is important to appreciate that athletes experience idiosyncratic stressors, such as performance pressures, intensive training demands, and public criticism (Reardon, 2023; Rice et al., 2016; Gulliver et al., 2012; Chang et al., 2019). However, there were no differences between athletes and non-athletes in this study, and the timing of this study was partially conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic when mental health symptom severity was relatively high nationwide. For instance, 60% of college students were determined to evidence at least one mental health problem (Healthy Minds Study; Lipson et al., 2022), and almost three-quarters of collegiate students reported Moderate to Severe psychological distress (National College Health Assessment, American College Association, 2021), during the time of the current study. Thus, study generalizability may have been compromised by COVID-19, or the relatively small number of participants in the study.

Although the Semi-Structured Interview for Consideration of Sport Culture in Therapy Scale (SSICSCTS) shows promise for assessing athletes' experiences within sport culture, its validation remains relatively limited. For instance, as with many self-report measures, responses may have been influenced by social desirability bias. Indeed, sport environments often emphasize toughness and resilience, which may discourage athletes from reporting negative experiences or psychological symptoms due to fear of appearing "weak" (Reardon, 2023; Watson, 2005). Supporting the argument that social desirability was not a concern in this study, participants reported relatively high mental health symptom severity.

Lastly, it is important to note that the cross-sectional design of the study limits causal inference about the relationship between sport culture problems and mental health outcomes. All variables were measured at a single time point. Therefore, the direction of the relationship between these variables may not be fully determined (Capili, 2021). Cross-sectional studies are useful for examining associations among variables within a population and may help guide the development of future longitudinal research approaches (Capili, 2021).

Clinical Implications

The meaningful relationship between perceived sport cultural problems and psychological distress underscores the need for targeted interventions aimed at reducing negative aspects of sport culture. Strategies such as psychoeducation, mental health workshops, and promoting open environments where seeking help is encouraged have been recommended by others (Chang et al., 2019; Watson & Kissinger, 2007). One such program that embodies these principles is The Optimum Performance Program in Sports (TOPPS), a sport-specific cognitive-behavioral intervention adapted from Family Behavior Therapy, shown to optimize both mental health and athletic performance (Donohue & Perry, 2022). TOPPS consists of structured, athlete-

driven interventions that address various aspects of performance and well-being, while emphasizing structured assessments of sport culture (Donohue et al., 2018), including the Semi-Structured Interview for Consideration of Sport Culture in Therapy Scale (SSICSCTS). Relevant to clinical utility along these lines, the SSICSCTS has been used successfully to engage athletes into mental health programming (Donohue et al., 2021).

In summary, the present study contributes to the growing literature examining mental health in collegiate athletes by demonstrating that negative perceived experiences with sport culture are associated with greater psychological distress. While the perceived importance of sport culture itself was not related to mental health outcomes, negative experiences with sport culture affect athletes' psychological well-being. These findings highlight the importance of assessing athletes' experiences within their sport environments when evaluating mental health concerns. Future research with larger samples is needed to further clarify the direction of these relationships and to expand validation of the SSICSCTS. Further research may help inform interventions that improve both athlete well-being and sport culture. The results of this study suggest the SSICSCTS warrants potential examination as a non-stigmatizing method of identifying mental health concerns in athletes.

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Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview for Consideration of Sport Culture in Therapy Scale (SSICSCTS)

Instructions: For each of the statements below, select the response that is most consistent with your level of agreement or disagreement.

1. My sport culture is a big part of my everyday life.
 - Extremely disagree

- Very much disagree
 - Somewhat disagree
 - Undecided or not sure
 - Somewhat agree
 - Very much agree
 - Extremely agree
2. My sport culture is of great importance to me.
- Extremely disagree
 - Very much disagree
 - Somewhat disagree
 - Undecided or not sure
 - Somewhat agree
 - Very much agree
 - Extremely agree
3. There are many things that I like about my sport culture
- Extremely disagree
 - Very much disagree
 - Somewhat disagree
 - Undecided or not sure
 - Somewhat agree
 - Very much agree
 - Extremely agree
4. Others have said things about my sport culture that have been offensive/rude to me.
- Extremely disagree
 - Very much disagree
 - Somewhat disagree
 - Undecided or not sure
 - Somewhat agree

- Very much agree
 - Extremely agree
5. I have experienced arguments or problems with others due to my sport culture.
- Extremely disagree
 - Very much disagree
 - Somewhat disagree
 - Undecided or not sure
 - Somewhat agree
 - Very much agree
 - Extremely agree
6. If I were pursuing intervention, I would want the professional to address, or ask me about, my sport culture.
- Extremely disagree
 - Very much disagree
 - Somewhat disagree
 - Undecided or not sure
 - Somewhat agree
 - Very much agree
 - Extremely agree

Virtual Mindfulness-Based Interventions for College Athletes' Mental Health: A Narrative Review and Implications for Sport Social Work Practice

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The mental health and well-being of college athletes have increasingly been identified as critical concerns within collegiate athletics. Mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) have been explored as an approach to support psychological well-being and performance among this population, with most existing studies examining in-person delivery. However, limited research has explored the use of virtually delivered MBIs for college athletes. The purpose of this narrative review was to examine the existing literature on MBIs among college athletes and, from a translational perspective, consider implications related to intervention delivery and accessibility. A literature review was conducted between January and August 2025 using databases available through Tulane's Howard-Tilton Memorial Library. Gray literature was also consulted to provide contextual information regarding college athlete mental health. Findings suggest that MBIs are associated with improvements in outcomes such as stress, anxiety, and depression among college athletes. However, gaps remain in the literature regarding the use and accessibility of virtual MBIs within collegiate athletic contexts. Further research is needed to examine the practicality, accessibility, and implementation of virtual MBIs for college athletes.

Keywords: college athletes, mental health, virtual delivery, mindfulness-based interventions, sport social work

Background

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) (2024) has acknowledged the importance of understanding and supporting college athletes' mental health and well-being. In 2013, based on the recommendation from an interprofessional mental health coalition, the NCAA released guidelines outlining best practices for addressing the mental health concerns of college athletes. In 2019, these efforts expanded requiring member institutions to provide athletes with access to mental health services. More recently, the NCAA has developed a comprehensive mental health and wellness initiative and published an *Inter-Association Consensus Document* to guide institutions in implementing best practices that are evidence-informed, developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive to the mental health needs of college athletes (NCAA, 2024). At the focus of the NCAA's efforts is an emerging awareness of the unique social, academic, psychological, and performance-related challenges that college athletes face, which may increase their risk for mental health concerns (NCAA 2021; Chang et al., 2020; Moore et al., 2018).

Addressing barriers and promoting well-being, particularly among vulnerable populations, is central to the mission of the social work profession (NASW, 2021). College athletes may not always be recognized as a vulnerable population (Gill, 2008); however, emerging research suggests that college athletes have elevated instances of stress, anxiety, identity issues, and help-seeking barriers. Social workers' perspectives are particularly relevant within the collegiate athletic context, considering that performance-related demands, time constraints, and institutional culture may impact mental health risk and access to care (Chang et al., 2020; NCAA, 2024). Social workers can bring a unique lens to the field of college athletics, emphasizing the interconnected impact of individual, institutional, cultural, and systemic factors, as well as the importance of a strength-based, person-in-environment approach (CSWE, 2022; NASW, 2021). As the NCAA continues to expand its efforts to address the mental health needs of college athletes, it is imperative that social workers and other helping professionals working with college athletes are aware of evidence-informed best practices in mental health care that are responsive to the college athletes' contextual realities to promote overall well-being.

In addition to addressing systemic barriers, college athletes require access to evidence-informed mental health support and treatment that are both practical and effective. Within this manuscript, treatment effectiveness is reflected in the extent to which evidence-informed interventions are associated with improvements in mental health outcomes (e.g. decreased anxiety, stress, and depression), as measured by validated assessment tools and supported by existing empirical literature. The literature suggests that Mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) are of particular interest due to their accessibility and their potential to support the mental health and well-being of college athletes (Petterson & Olson, 2017; Anderson et al., 2021). However, within the college athlete literature, MBIs have most often been examined through in-person delivery formats, typically facilitated by trained professionals. Comparatively, there is limited attention to virtual modalities (Mistretta et al., 2017; Gross et al., 2018; Glass et al., 2019; Hut et al., 2023). This gap is worth noting considering post-COVID pandemic shifts in service delivery and the scheduling demands that may impact college athletes' ability to engage with in-person interventions (Schwartz-Mette et al., 2025; Cheese et al., 2025; Eberman et al., 2024).

A growing body of research has examined virtual MBIs in general and non-athlete populations. However, little is known about how these findings translate to the unique contextual needs of college athletes (Schwartz-Mette et al., 2025; Cheese et al., 2025; Gao et al., 2024).

Given this developing and uneven evidence base, there is a need to synthesize what is currently known, identify where evidence is absent, and consider how findings from adjacent populations may inform future research and practice with college athletes.

Accordingly, the purpose of this narrative review was to examine the existing literature on MBIs with college athletes, with particular attention to delivery methods (in-person versus virtual), mental health outcomes assessed, and gaps in the current evidence base. Thus, rather than determining the comparative effectiveness of virtual versus in-person MBIs, the researchers sought to highlight the extent to which virtual MBIs have been studied with college athletes, the outcomes that have been examined, and implications for future research to inform accessible, evidence-informed mental health care for college athletes.

Methods

Design

A narrative literature review was conducted to synthesize existing research on MBIs with college athletes, with particular attention to intervention modality (in-person versus virtual), mental health outcomes assessed, and gaps in the current evidence base. A narrative review approach was selected due to the emergent and heterogeneous nature of the literature, including variation in populations studied, intervention type, outcomes assessed, and study design. This approach was deemed most appropriate for examining the scope of available evidence, identifying gaps and overlap, and informing future research and practice rather than determining which intervention is superior or comparative effectiveness (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Search Strategy

Peer-reviewed literature searches were conducted between January and August 2025 using EBSCO through Tulane's Howard-Tilton Memorial Library. Databases searched include Academic Search Complete, APA PsychArticles, APA PsychInfo, CINAHL Complete, MEDLINE, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, Social Work Abstracts, SocINDEX with Full Text, and Sport Periodicals. Search terms reflected three primary concept areas: (a) college athletes, (b) mental health outcomes, (c) MBIs and delivery modality. Boolean operators and equivalent terms were used to broaden the scope of retrieval.

Search terms included combinations of *college athletes*, *student-athletes*, *mental health*, *anxiety*, *depression*, *mindfulness*, *mindfulness-based interventions*, *mindfulness-acceptance-commitment*, *mindful sport performance enhancement*, *virtual*, *online*, *in-person*, *intervention*, and *randomized controlled trials*. Searches were limited to peer-reviewed academic journals published between 2015 and 2025.

Study Identification and Selection

The search strategy was implemented across three phases to reflect the evolving focus of the review. Initial searches examined mental health interventions broadly among college athletes, followed by targeted searches specific to MBIs, and subsequently, searches addressing virtual and in-person delivery modalities. Across all phases, articles were screened for relevance based

on population, intervention focus (mindfulness-based interventions), and relevance to mental health outcomes.

A total of 8 peer-reviewed articles directly informed the core findings of this review. Additional peer-reviewed articles were included to support conceptual framing and interpretation. Gray literature, including reports and consensus documents from the NCAA, was consulted to provide contextual information regarding policy priorities and the mental health landscape within collegiate athletics (NCAA, 2021; NCAA, 2024). Contextual sources were used to inform background and discussion sections and were not treated as empirical evidence of intervention effectiveness.

Quality Appraisal

A formal quality appraisal of included studies was not conducted, as the purpose of this narrative review was not to evaluate intervention effectiveness or determine comparative effectiveness, but rather to synthesize the existing literature, identify gaps, and examine patterns in intervention modality and outcome focus (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach aligns with the review's translational and gap-identification aims.

Findings

Mental Health Concerns Among College Athletes

Recent literature highlights growing concern regarding the mental health and well-being of college athletes (Chang et al., 2020; NCAA, 2024; Eberman et al., 2024). While participation in competitive sport has historically been viewed as a protective factor, research continues to demonstrate that the interaction of social, environmental, academic, and performance-related demands may contribute to elevated mental health risk among this population. Therefore, professionals working with college athletes must attend not only to individual symptoms but also to contextual influences that shape mental health outcomes (Chang et al., 2020; Moore et al., 2022; NCAA, 2024).

Findings from a large-scale virtual study conducted by the NCAA (2021) indicated elevated rates of anxiety, mental exhaustion, and depressive symptoms among college athletes. Additionally, there were disproportionately higher concerns reported by athletes from historically marginalized backgrounds. Participants identified academic pressure, future planning uncertainty, and financial stress as primary contributors to psychological distress. While approximately 30% of respondents were aware of available campus mental health services, fewer than half reported feeling comfortable accessing support. These findings highlight persistent barriers related to stigma, help-seeking, and institutional culture, supporting the need for accessible, acceptable, and contextually responsive mental health interventions within collegiate athletics (NCAA, 2021; NCAA, 2024).

Mindfulness-Based Interventions with College Athletes

MBIs emerged as a frequently studied approach for supporting college athlete mental health and well-being across the reviewed literature (Mistretta et al., 2017; Gross et al., 2018; Glass et al., 2019; Hut et al., 2023). Among these studies, mental health outcomes most assessed

included anxiety, stress, depressive symptoms, emotional regulation, psychological distress, and general well-being; some studies also assessed sport performance-related outcomes.

Several studies examined the acceptability and perceived utility of MBIs among college athletes. Mistretta et al. (2017) found that college athletes expressed interest in MBIs for reducing stress and anxiety, as well as improving psychological well-being outside of sport. Similarly, Economou et al. (2025) found that college athletes generally perceived mindfulness as acceptable and a beneficial practice for promoting well-being and sport-related performance. Though the authors noted limited literature exploring college athletes' perceptions of mindfulness-based interventions.

Empirical studies that employed structured MBIs with college athletes have primarily used in-person delivery methods. Gross et al. (2018) compared the Mindfulness-Acceptance-Commitment (MAC) intervention to an active control Psychological Skills Training (PST) condition among female college athletes. The authors observed greater reductions in psychological symptoms, emotional distress, and behavioral disturbances among MAC participants. Glass et al. (2019), in a randomized controlled trial with Division III athletes, demonstrated that participants who received a Mindful Sport Performance Enhancement (MSPE) intervention experienced stabilization or improvement in depressive symptoms relative to a waitlist control, with effects maintained at six-month follow-up. Hut et al. (2023) further compared MSPE and PST using a mixed-methods design and found improvements in well-being across both interventions. However, among participants, the MBI was perceived as particularly beneficial for focus and sport performance.

Collectively, these findings posit that MBIs delivered in-person are associated with mental health and well-being outcomes among college athletes. However, several studies also identified practicality and acceptability concerns, including time burden, scheduling conflicts, perceived formality, and discomfort with group-based personal disclosure. These concerns center on the importance of considering intervention modality and delivery logistics when implementing MBIs in collegiate athletic settings (Mistretta et al., 2017; Glass et al., 2019; Hut et al., 2023).

In-Person Versus Virtual Mindfulness-Based Interventions: Evidence and Gaps

Notably, no studies were identified that directly compared in-person and virtual MBIs among college athletes. This absence of comparative evidence represents a central finding of the present review. While MBIs have been examined extensively with athletes in in-person formats (Mistretta et al., 2017; Gross et al., 2018; Glass et al., 2019; Hut et al., 2023), and virtual MBIs have been studied in other populations (Schwartz-Mette et al., 2025; Cheese et al., 2025), the literature does not currently support conclusions regarding the effectiveness of delivery modality for college athletes.

Several studies examining delivery modality in adjacent populations provide limited translational insight. Schwartz-Mette et al. (2025) compared in-person and virtually delivered MBIs among nursing students and found no significant differences in outcomes across modalities. In contrast, Cheese et al. (2025) reported greater improvements in resilience, life satisfaction, and mindfulness among college students receiving in-person MBIs compared to those receiving virtual interventions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Gao et al. (2024) examined a virtual MBI among international college athletes and found no significant

intervention effects, though the study did not include an in-person comparison and was limited by sample homogeneity.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate inconsistencies across populations and study design, as well as a lack of athlete-specific comparative research. While virtual MBIs may offer advantages related to flexibility and accessibility, particularly for populations with demanding schedules (Schwartz-Mette et al., 2025; Cheese et al., 2025; Gao et al., 2024), current evidence is insufficient to determine whether virtual MBIs are comparable to in-person interventions for college athletes. The absence of modality-comparison studies within collegiate athletics highlights a critical gap in the literature and illuminates the need for future research to examine delivery format, practicality, and outcomes in collegiate athletic contexts.

Table 1 presents a summary of the primary empirical intervention studies included in this review. Additional sources were used to provide contextual and conceptual grounding.

Table 1

Summary of Empirical Mindfulness-Based Intervention Studies Included in the Narrative Review

Economou et al., 2025	NCAA Division I college-athletes	The study used 4 survey items to assess acceptability of a MBI intervention (Pilot study)	Survey delivered virtually	Acceptability of MBIs among Division I student-athletes	Two-thirds of the athletes found MBIs acceptable	Findings not generalizable, limited to Division I student athletes who were predominantly white; limited empirical outcome data; pilot design
Mistretta et al., 2017	NCAA Division III college-athletes	Mindful Sport Performance Enhancement (MSPE)	In-person	Expectations, experiences, engagement, psychological benefits for depression, anxiety and stress, focus, satisfaction with life, mindfulness, psychological flexibility, flow, sport anxiety, sport performance	Athletes reported benefits for sport-related and general psychological functioning (reduced stress, improved focus, mental toughness, self-confidence), as well as mindfulness and flow skills; most athletes intended to	Limitations included small sample size; self-report bias; some participants disliked session format (length, timing, group dynamics, content); no control group; limited to in-person delivery

					continue practicing mindfulness and would recommend MSPE	
Gross et al., 2018	NCAA Division III female college-athletes	Mindfulness Acceptance Commitment approach (MAC) vs. Psychological Skills Training (PST)	In-person	Psychological symptoms (depression, generalized anxiety, social anxiety, academic distress, eating concerns, family distress, hostility, substance Abuse, psychological distress), psychological flexibility, emotion regulation, mindfulness, sport performance	MAC reduced distress, anxiety, eating concerns, substance use and hostility; improved emotion regulation and psychological flexibility; increased sport performance; no change in mindfulness; PST showed no significant improvements	Limitation included small sample; variability in performance scores; no change in mindfulness; limited to in-person delivery
Glass et al., 2019	NCAA Division III college-athletes	Mindful Sport Performance Enhancement (MSPE) vs. wait-list control	In-person	Depression, anxiety and stress, satisfaction with life, mindfulness, psychological flexibility, flow, sport anxiety, sport performance, coach-related sport performance	MSPE reduced depressive symptoms (particularly for athletes in the control group after receiving the intervention); decreased sport related worry; improved flow, mindfulness, self-rated sport	Generalizability limited (Division III athletes only, participants primarily female and white); mixed-team groups and scheduling conflicts may have reduced engagement; limited to in-person delivery

					performance and life satisfaction; benefits were maintained at follow up	
Hut et al., 2023	NCAA Division III varsity track and field college-athletes	Mindful Sport Performance Enhancement (MSPE) vs. Psychological Skills Training PST active control	In-person	Flow, depression, anxiety and stress, sport anxiety, mindfulness, emotion regulation, avoidance tendencies, sport performance satisfaction, and program evaluation	MSPE and PST improved psychological outcomes; MSPE showed stronger effects on mindfulness and flow; both interventions supported reduction in anxiety and enhanced focus	Findings not generalizable due to small, sport-specific sample; unclear impact on performance; reliance on self-report; variability in intervention engagement; limited evidence of long-term effects; scheduling and practical challenges noted; limited to in-person delivery
Gao et al., 2024	International college-athletes	WeChat app (Therapist-guided mindfulness-based intervention) vs. Control (received mental and physical health informational pamphlets only)	Virtual	Dispositional anxiety, Pre-competition anxiety, anxiety during competition, and mindfulness	No statistically significant reductions in anxiety compared to the control group; no significant improvement in mindfulness; the intervention was practical and acceptable, but limited effectiveness was observed	Sample homogeneity; generalizability limited; Participants were not selected for elevated levels of anxiety; variability in sport schedules may have impacted engagement; No in-person comparison

Schwartz-Mette et al., 2025	Nursing school students, faculty and staff	Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)	In-person vs. Virtual	Perceived stress, burnout, positive and negative affect, satisfaction with life, mindfulness	MBSR reduced stress, burnout and improved select mindfulness skills; there was no difference between virtual and in-person delivery	Non-randomized design; potential selection bias and self-selection effects; homogenous sample; limited generalizability; limited follow-up data
Cheese et al., 2025	College students	Mindfulness-Based Intervention Course	In-person vs. Virtual	Mindfulness, life satisfaction, resilience	In-person group saw significant improvements in mindfulness, life satisfaction and resilience; virtual group saw improvements across outcomes, but statistical significance for resilience only; Overall MBIs appear beneficial for student well-being; in-person delivery demonstrated stronger effects than virtual delivery	Small sample size; potential selection bias due to self-selection into the course; non-randomized design; no long-term follow up data; limited generalizability

Discussion

Virtual Mindfulness-Based Interventions and College Athletes

There remains a dearth of research directly comparing the effectiveness of virtual and in-person MBIs for college athletes. The literature used in this review is mostly characterized by in-person MBI delivery, which limits conclusions regarding the practicality and evidence-informed use of virtual MBIs for this population (Mistretta et al., 2017; Gross et al., 2018; Glass et al., 2019; Hut et al., 2023). This narrative review provides a translational synthesis of the available evidence, highlighting both the potential benefits of MBIs for college athlete mental health and the practical challenges associated with their delivery.

Findings across studies in this review examining virtual and in-person MBIs suggest that virtual delivery is a practical and adaptable approach to supporting mental health outcomes. Nonetheless, the modality's effectiveness and practical implementation remain mixed. For example, Gao et al. (2024) highlights that while virtual MBIs align with the scheduling demands of college athletes, engagement challenges may impact effectiveness. Similarly, research by Cheese et al. (2025) shows that virtual delivery was practical within the academic context, though in-person delivery was associated with stronger outcomes across several well-being measures. In contrast, findings from Schwartz-Mette et al. (2025) suggest comparable outcomes across delivery modalities, indicating that virtual MBIs may be an appropriate alternative when in-person participation is not practical.

From a translational perspective, both in-person and virtual delivery modalities may be appropriate approaches for supporting college athlete mental health. Findings from this review demonstrate that virtual MBIs show promise as accessible interventions. Additionally, the findings highlight the importance of coordinated, interprofessional collaboration in the development and implementation of mental health initiatives involving college athletes (Moore et al., 2022), which is aligned with the NCAA (2024) recommendations that mental health programming be developed in partnership with licensed mental health providers. This is particularly relevant because, although the reviewed studies suggest that MBIs may be a suitable evidence-informed approach for supporting college athletes' mental health, a recurring theme across the literature highlights inconsistencies and challenges related to practicality, engagement, or both in in-person and virtual delivery modalities (Mistretta et al., 2017; Glass et al., 2019; Hut et al., 2023; Gao et al., 2024; Cheese et al., 2025; Schwartz-Mette et al., 2025). As such, further research is needed to better understand what is influencing engagement, effectiveness, and implementation within collegiate athletics.

Moreover, based on included studies, the professional backgrounds of facilitators were often unspecified, and none of the primary authors identified as social workers. This observation is not presented as a critique of existing literature, but rather as an opportunity to highlight the value of interdisciplinary collaboration and the role of ongoing evaluation in intervention design and implementation, which are core competencies within social work practice (Moore, 2018; Council on Social Work Education, 2022). Given increasing concerns regarding college athlete mental health (Chang et al., 2020; NCAA, 2024; Eberman et al., 2024), the evaluation of current literature suggests that alternatives to exclusively in-person MBI delivery warrant further exploration. Thus, leveraging interprofessional collaboration among sport social workers, sport psychologists, certified mental performance consultants (CMPC) and other licensed mental health professionals who are all qualified to deliver MBIs can help optimize MBIs for college

athletes, ensuring they are practical, engaging, and tailored to the unique mental health needs of this population (NCAA, 2024; CSWE, 2022; Gill, 2008).

Implications for Practice

Access to Virtual Mindfulness-Based Interventions

Access to virtual MBIs for college athletes remains mostly unknown due to limited empirical investigation. However, existing literature indicates that in-person MBIs may be perceived as inconvenient or burdensome for college athletes, particularly given demanding schedules and competing academic, personal, and athletic responsibilities (Mistretta et al., 2017; Hut et al., 2023; Glass et al., 2019). Thus, virtual MBIs may represent a promising avenue for increasing accessibility and reducing logistical barriers to mental health support.

Implications for practice include the potential development of web-based or app-based mindfulness platforms that are affordable, easily accessible, and tailored to the unique needs of college athletes. Interprofessional teams may include software developers, sport social workers, sport psychologists, nutritionists, psychiatrists, and mindfulness-based researchers, as well as current and former athletes willing to contribute to program development. Ensuring that virtual MBI content is evidence-informed, culturally responsive, and sport-specific may enhance acceptability and engagement among college athletes. Following development, pilot testing with college athlete samples and appropriate comparison groups may allow for the incorporation of participant feedback and refinement of intervention components prior to broader dissemination.

Interprofessional Collaboration and Best Practices for College Athlete Mental Health

The NCAA emphasizes collaboration as a foundational component of college athlete mental health support (NCAA, 2024). In line with this position, greater collaboration within collegiate athletic departments may enhance the quality and effectiveness of mental health services available to athletes. Professionals working with college athletes bring distinct expertise to the athletic environment, and coordinated collaboration allows for more comprehensive and contextually responsive care (Moore et al., 2022; Eberman et al., 2024).

A core element of social work practice involves ensuring that individuals and communities are connected to accessible, appropriate, and culturally responsive services. Social workers possess the training and skillset necessary to identify barriers to care and facilitate connections to resources that align with the needs of the population being served (National Association of Social Workers, 2021; Council on Social Work Education, 2022). This approach aligns with NCAA principles of collaboration and continuous improvement (NCAA, 2024) and reflects a core competency of social work education and practice known as interprofessional collaboration (Council on Social Work Education, 2022).

Additionally, sport social workers recognize the intersectionality that exists in collegiate athletics (Moore et al., 2018). College athletes navigate multiple intersecting identities, including race, gender, socioeconomic status, and athletic role. These intersecting identities interact with institutional and sport-specific contexts, and the cumulative demands associated with balancing these identities may contribute to increased psychological strain, barriers to help-seeking, and disparities in care. As such, sport social workers are uniquely positioned to address the complex social, emotional, environmental, and contextual factors influencing college athletes' mental

health. Integrating social work perspectives alongside other professional expertise is essential to fostering holistic and culturally attuned, athlete-centered approaches to care, particularly in addressing the diverse and intersecting needs of this population (Moore et al., 2018; NCAA, 2024).

Limitations

Several limitations of this narrative review should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the literature was limited to selected databases, and relevant studies may not have been captured. Second, study selection was not conducted systematically, which may have introduced selection bias and limited comprehensiveness. Third, a formal appraisal of study quality was not undertaken, restricting the ability to assess methodological rigor across included studies. Finally, heterogeneity in study populations, intervention types, outcome measures, and delivery formats limited direct comparison across studies.

These limitations are consistent with the aims of a narrative review, which prioritize conceptual synthesis and identification of research gaps over systematic comparison (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Despite these limitations, this review provides a useful synthesis of the existing literature and highlights critical directions for future research.

Conclusion

Further research is needed to examine the impact of virtual MBIs on college athletes to address persistent gaps in the literature. College athletes face unique contextual challenges that should be considered when developing best practices for accessible, evidence-informed mental health interventions (NCAA, 2024). In addition to the development of college athlete-specific virtual MBIs, future research should examine athletes' perceptions, engagement, and sustained use of virtual MBIs.

Mixed-methods research designs may be valuable for qualitatively exploring perceptions of virtual MBIs while quantitatively examining engagement patterns, perceived effectiveness in addressing depression and anxiety symptoms, duration and frequency of use, cognitive and emotional engagement, and the relative importance of specific intervention features. Such research is necessary to determine whether virtual MBIs are comparable to in-person delivery and to inform the development of accessible, athlete-centered mental health supports within collegiate athletics.

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Mental Health and Varsity Student-Athletes in Canada: Is there a Role for Sport Social Workers?

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The profession of social work is an available profession for increasing mental health and well-being across Canadian post-secondary campuses. This research focuses on better understanding the experience of a subset of university students, namely those identified as 'varsity student-athletes' (VSAs). The framework for this pilot study is informed by sport social work, an emerging area of social work practice in Canada. A descriptive survey design was employed, gathering both qualitative and quantitative data to explore the experiences of a subset of VSAs attending an affiliated liberal arts university college in Southwestern Ontario, Canada. The survey focused on participants' experiences of seeking and accessing support services while also soliciting their feedback on potential unmet needs and programmatic recommendations to inform the development of a Student-Athlete Support Network (SASN). The authors of this research contend that although only a small sample of VSAs participated in this study, the preliminary findings suggest that there is significant potential to support this population through a sport social work approach. The central objective of this paper, grounding in the principles and values of sport social work, is to assess VSAs untapped and unmet support service needs to explore the potential of integrating a SASN into Canadian post-secondary institutions. The development of a SASN would provide programming to VSAs which moves beyond traditional performance-focused models to one that supports the athlete as a whole person.

Keywords: varsity student-athlete (VSA), mental health, support services, Canada

Introduction

Post-secondary institutions (PSIs) in Canada offer a diverse range of professional and foundational programs, support research activities, host extracurricular organizations and recreational sport, and provide employment opportunities. The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) reports that there are over 400 public and/or private universities and colleges across Canada's ten provinces and three territories (2025). In Ontario alone, there are 23 universities, 24 colleges, 9 Indigenous Institutes, and more than 500 career-specific institutions (Government of Ontario, 2025).

The challenges faced by students entering the PSI environment are well documented and span practical, social and academic domains, with estimations of roughly 1.2 million youth in Canada requiring mental health support and over half (57%) not receiving the care they require (Chatoor et al., 2023; Dooley et al., 2013; Drolet & Sarabia, 2020; Jack.org, 2024; Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations, 2024). Published reports highlight a national housing crisis (Danis et al., 2024), food insecurity (Meal Exchange, 2021), and cultures of sexual violence and misconduct (PACSW, 2023) intersectional to continued rises in reported rates of poor mental health among post-secondary students. These reports include, but are not limited to, an increase in sleep disturbances, stress, anxiety, depression, eating disorders and suicidal ideation (American College Health Association, 2019; Canadian Alliance of Student Associations, 2022; Universities Canada, 2025; Van Slingerland & Durand-Bush, 2018). In addition, rates have almost tripled in the reported cases of depression, anxiety, eating-related, psychotic, and comorbid presentation since the early 2000s (Chatoor et al., 2023) while experiences remain particularly precarious for marginalized, Indigenous, and racialized students (CFS, 2022; Hop Wo et al., 2020; Sen et al., 2025; Universities Canada, 2019).

This research focuses on better understanding the experience of a subset of university students, namely those identified as 'varsity student-athletes' (VSAs). A VSA is defined as a full-time university student who competes in an individual or team sport at USports-sanctioned games and events (Gomez et al., 2018; USports, 2025). Studies indicate that the post-secondary experience of a VSA differs significantly from that of non-athlete students in Canada (Adusei et al., 2020; Sullivan et al., 2019; Van Slingerland & Durand-Bush, 2018). In addition to the challenges faced by the general student population, VSAs are at greater risk of experiencing mental health challenges at some point in their university career due to their simultaneous commitment to both academics and athletics (Adusei et al., 2020; Sullivan et al., 2019; Van Slingerland & Durand-Bush, 2018; Kegelaers et al., 2022; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). The uniqueness of the VSA experience lies in the need to allocate time not only for attending classes, studying for exams, and completing assignments, but also for practices, strength and conditioning sessions, nutrition and body composition assessments, travel, video analysis, mental performance training, and, of course, competitive games and tournaments. This "dual-career" commitment (Fahrner & Burk, 2025) requires VSAs to balance their time and energy between athletic responsibilities and maintaining academic excellence.

Research also indicates that the VSA experience is further complicated by heightened exposure to social and internalized stigma, as well as the pressures embedded in sport culture; these factors collectively place VSAs at a disproportionately higher risk of experiencing poor mental health and threats to overall well-being compared to their non-athlete peers (Bauman, 2016; Bird et al., 2020; Johnston & Frake-Mistak, 2024; Kegelaers et al., 2022; Van Slingerland & Durand-Bush, 2018; Whelan et al., 2024). Existing research has documented the prevalence of

binge drinking, substance misuse, anxiety, depression, eating disorders, body image issues, and suicidal ideation within the university experiences of student athletes (Brown et al., 2020; Grubic et al., 2021; NCAA, 2024; Terzis & Beasley, 2022).

Despite the challenging mental health landscape experienced by VSAs, research consistently highlights low rates of help-seeking behaviours within this population as a significant cause for concern (Akesdotter et al., 2020; Bauman, 2016; Bird et al., 2018; Gavrilova & Donahue, 2018; Kern et al., 2017). This trend has been attributed to a range of factors, including scheduling conflicts, limited mental health literacy, and negative past experiences with support services (Grubic et al., 2021; Terzis & Beasley, 2022). Van Slingerland and Durand-Bush (2018) identified a socio-cultural conditioning among VSAs that leads to “over-reporting high functionality and under-reporting ill-being symptoms,” a pattern correlated with the stigma surrounding athlete mental health (pg. 162). As a result, studies suggest that VSAs are more likely to seek psychosocial support from external services outside of their PSIs and athletic environments (Akesdotter et al., 2020). This tendency is further compounded by deeply entrenched stigma and a lack of culturally sensitive services attuned to the invisible struggles athletes endure while managing their dual-career commitments (Akesdotter et al., 2020; Bauman, 2016). Kern and colleagues (2017) found that while both varsity-athletes and non-athletes express relatively high willingness to seek psychosocial support services, VSAs’ follow-through is often “met with barriers...reinforced by expectations of toughness, invulnerability, and battling through adversity” (pg. 325). Such narratives foster a belief among VSAs that seeking professional help will be perceived as weakness or failure by teammates, coaches or their institution (Bauman, 2016; Gucciardi et al., 2017).

Importantly, there is a growing recognition of the need for mental health services specifically tailored to the unique needs and experiences of VSAs on Canadian campuses. As a result, national organizations are beginning to promote VSA mental health initiatives across Canada. For example, the USports Mental Health Best Practices provides a framework for PSIs to follow for the “appropriate management” of VSA mental health (USports, 2019). The USports (2019) Best Practices outlines the following recommendations: “(1) ensure access to qualified and licensed mental health practitioners; (2) ensure proper procedures for identification of VSAs with mental health concerns and appropriate referral to relevant practitioners; (3) implement mental health screening into pre-participation examinations; and (4) encourage sporting environments that support mental wellness and resiliency.” Additionally, across Canadian PSIs, a continuum of mental health support services exists for VSAs, ranging from informal help-seeking pathways to more structured access to care via integrated support teams (see Appendix B and C). However, current models largely place the burden of help-seeking on the VSA as opposed to embedding mental health support staff within academic and athletic environments to facilitate regular, direct engagements. Further research is required to evaluate the efficacy, accessibility and responsiveness of these programs in meeting the unique mental health needs of VSAs on Canadian campuses.

The framework for this pilot study is grounded in sport social work, an emerging area of social work practice in Canada. Sport social work, as defined by Moore and Gummelt (2019), “promotes social justice and social change by focusing on the unique needs of athletes at both an individual and environmental level” (pg. 1). Similar to other domains of Canadian social work practice, sport social work operates across individual, interpersonal, group and systemic levels of practice (Moore & Gummelt, 2019; Magier et al., 2025; Newman et al., 2024). In contrast to sport psychology’s focus on optimizing mental skills for performance, sport social work centres

the athlete as a whole person, attending to both internal and external influences (Newman et al., 2019). Moore and Gummelt (2019) argue that “one of the largest challenges facing sport social workers is illustrating how athletes are a vulnerable population who deserve the assistance of social workers” (pg.1). Several studies suggest that embedding social workers within existing PSI support services could enhance the holistic well-being of VSAs as these professionals bring ecological systems knowledge and a person-in-environment lens to their work, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted factors at play in the lives of student athletes (Adusei et al., 2020; Moore, 2017). The following research presents future programmatic recommendations for implementing a VSA-specific Student-Athlete Support Network (SASN) based off preliminary findings from this pilot project. The researchers coined the term SASN as it identifies untapped potential for specialized, holistic care to VSAs as dual-career post-secondary students potentially managing a plethora of issues in their many pursuits and endeavors. As we present the findings, we aim to demonstrate the critical need to integrate SASNs guided by sport social work across Canadian PSI landscapes to best support the whole person of the VSA.

Methodology

This pilot research study was developed and initiated by a former varsity athlete as part of their Master of Social Work (MSW) degree requirements. The project was informed in part by the student’s lived experience as a VSA and their interest in developing a mental health program that reflects the unique realities of post-secondary life for varsity athletes. A descriptive survey design was employed, using a survey and short answer narrative questions, to gather data with respect to the support needs of a subset of VSAs attending an affiliated liberal arts university college in Southwestern Ontario, Canada. The purpose of a descriptive study is to describe events and conditions by them as they exist (Siedlecki, 2020). The survey focused on participants’ experiences of seeking and accessing support services and solicited their input on unmet needs to inform the development of a Student-Athlete Support Network (SASN). The research was grounded in the values, beliefs and principles of sport social work, while also acknowledging the sociocultural and dual-career barriers that VSAs experience when seeking support (Moore & Gummelt, 2019). This research project was approved by the Research Ethics Review Committee of King’s University College at Western University.

Data Collection

The pilot project utilized an online survey (Qualtrics) completed by VSAs enrolled at the affiliated liberal arts university college. The study did not aim for a specific targeted sample prior to data collection. The rationale for this decision was grounded in the reality of the limited pool of VSA registered as students at the site of the research. The study was advertised by the research team virtually through various social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, Linkin, Facebook), as well as through hard copy posters placed in locations where VSAs were likely to congregate, such as outside classrooms, hallways, student unions and the library. Prior to beginning the survey, participants were required to review the letter of information and provide informed consent through the Qualtrics platform.

The survey consisted of three sections (see Appendix A): 1) demographic information; 2) questions using a Likert scale; and 3) open-ended questions designed to solicit narrative responses. Notably, sections two and three of the survey were developed to assess participants’

perceived support needs as VSAs, their awareness of existing on-campus services, and their perceptions of unmet needs that could potentially be met by the development of a SASN. A \$10 Starbucks gift card was provided to participants who completed the survey. Participant anonymity was ensured, and all data stored on password-protected computers, accessible only to the master's student and their faculty research supervisor.

Data Analysis

Demographic data from the survey results were categorized for dissemination purposes, including participants' gender, the specific varsity sport in which they were involved and their year of study. The narratives provided by participants in the short-answer component of the survey were analyzed using a descriptive thematic approach wherein researchers independently reviewed, coded and organized the responses into generalizable themes.

Study Sample

The Qualtrics survey was completed by 31 participants over the three-week period during which it was available. Sociodemographic characteristics collected included gender identity, year of study, and varsity sport represented (see Appendix A). Of the 31 respondents, sixteen (16) identified as female and fifteen (15) identified as male. All participants were undergraduate students: five (5) were in first year, eight (8) in second year, six (6) in third year, eight (8) in fourth year, and three (3) did not respond to this question. Varsity sports represented included football (6), soccer (4), hockey (4), baseball/softball (3), rowing (3), swimming (2), wrestling (2), and one (1) response each for volleyball, basketball, squash, and track and field. Two participants did not indicate their sport. The demographic data presented above highlights the variety of quantitative and qualitative data collected from this pilot project below as there is diversity in the gender, year of study and sports represented. Outside of missing demographic data from which year of study (3) and sport represented (2) participants belonged to, there was no missing quantitative data to report in data analysis, while qualitative data was left optional and most participants chose to answer.

Findings

The responses to the survey provided by the participants yielded several important insights regarding participants' experiences with support services. When asked about their level of *awareness of current supportive services within the College*, one (1) participant indicated "no awareness," five (5) reported being "very aware" and the majority, sixteen (16), indicated they were "somewhat aware." In response to their experience accessing support services (see Appendix D), most participants (55%) reported accessing academic advising, while 16% sought services related to tutoring or academic writing. Thirteen percent of respondents indicated that they had sought individual counselling during the academic year. In assessing participants' perceptions of the *overall quality of current mental health and well-being supports available* (see Appendix E), 64% believed the services met their expectations. An additional 19% of participants indicated the overall quality of these support services exceeded their expectations, 14% believed they needed improvement, and 3% rated them as outstanding. When asked *what types of programs would they be interested in if they had access to VSA-specific mental health*

and well-being programs in the future (see Appendix F), 29% indicated a preference for in-person, on-campus counselling. Other preferences included student-athlete specific wellness presentations (24%), hybrid counselling (21%), peer support groups (10%), virtual counselling (8%), and virtual self-led educational modules (8%). This question allowed for multiple responses, and therefore totals exceeded 31 responses. Finally, participants were asked *how likely they would be to access a VSA-specific mental health and well-being support at the affiliate liberal arts campus*, using a Likert scale where 1 indicated “very unlikely” and 5 indicated “very likely” (see Appendix G). Results showed that 6% of participants were very unlikely, 24% were unlikely, 37% were unsure, 24% were likely, and 9% were very likely to access such services in the future.

When invited to provide open-ended feedback on what they considered important in the development of an SASN, three key themes emerged: (1) a desire for more opportunities to connect with other VSAs; (2) a need for flexible service delivery models that accommodate game and training schedules; and (3) a limited awareness of available support services and insufficient coach encouragement.

Desire for more opportunities to connect with other VSAs

Participants expressed a strong desire for more opportunities to connect with other VSAs as a means of support from peers who share similar post-secondary experiences. As noted by several of the participants:

Support groups/athlete mentorship programs would be both beneficial for connecting with other athletes who have faced similar situations as you and could provide support in a positive environment. Sometimes it's hard for people who haven't experienced athletics at a high level to truly relate to your issues and provide realistic support.

Other participants highlighted the importance of building relationships through “events that bring together [University] student-athletes.” The opportunity to connect with and feel mutually supported by others navigating the multiple demands unique to the VSA experience was a recurring theme in participant responses. This theme’s support from participants acknowledges the research’s pursuit to highlight unmet or untapped support service desires by VSAs which could be met through a SASN.

Flexible service delivery models that accommodate game and training schedules

Another theme that emerged from the data was the desire among VSAs for support services to be delivered in a way that acknowledges the unique time commitments associated with being a student-athlete. These include, but are not limited to, practice times, weekend games, training sessions and weight-lifting schedules. For example, many athletes lived off campus, making it difficult to attend in-person counselling sessions. As one participant explained, “I’m not on campus often enough to access it. Because I have practice and appointments at [name of treatment centre] and the varsity clinic, I’m not at [University] physically most of the time.” For some respondents, the need for flexibility was closely tied to the accessibility of services: “I would go to counselling if I could arrange it around my practice and game schedule or when I had an off day. Virtual would be better as going to campus is not

always easy.” These responses emphasize that service delivery models must be flexible in both format (e.g., virtual or in-person) and time (e.g., outside regular hours) to accommodate the demands of student-athlete life. This theme recognizes the researchers' pursuit to understand possible programmatic recommendations for future SASNs; guided by a sport social work approach, we identify a correlation between VSAs support service needs and moving beyond traditional ways of providing care as professionals.

Limited awareness of available support services and insufficient coach encouragement

Participant narratives reflected ongoing barriers to help-seeking within the athletic culture of universities. These included both a general lack of awareness about what services are available and the stigma associated with VSAs reaching out for support. One participant shared, “I think information about mental health support systems should be more accessible to athletes. Whether people choose to take advantage of these services or not, knowing that there are options for support can go a long way.” Another participant highlighted how a lack of awareness of the services available was also an issue. They explained, “For me, the barrier that exists is not even being aware of some of the mental health services that [University] does offer. This survey is the first time I’m hearing about the various counselling options and other services.” Others echoed this sentiment, with observations regarding a “lack of exposure about the services available.” This general lack of awareness may have significant implications for VSAs who are struggling with their mental health but remain unaware of the services available to support them.

In addition to this limited awareness, participants also identified a lack of acceptance from coaches when VSAs seek mental health supports outside of the team environment. As one participant poignantly noted, “I find a barrier I have is that my coaches don’t seem to promote the services or I don’t truly feel they care.” Other related responses included “Having more awareness for coaches and having them understand what they do affects athletes’ mental health,” as well as “Being informed by people who care and not just my teammates but coaches also.” This need for validation and support from coaches aligns with existing research on help-seeking behaviours among student-athletes and underscores the importance of fostering a culture of acceptance within sport environments to reduce the stigma associated with mental health concerns (Bauman, 2016; Bird et al., 2020; Way et al., 2020).

Discussion

Published research highlights that the post-secondary reality of VSAs is marked by unique challenges compared to the general student population, as they attempt to meet both academic and athletic commitments. The findings from this pilot study reflect several important considerations regarding the provision of support services to help VSAs navigate the terrain of post-secondary education. First, the study highlights that a segment of this population is unaware of the services available to them beyond academic supports, which tend to be emphasized early in their post-secondary experience to assist with improving grades and managing their schedule. This is unsurprising given that academic counselling and advising are typically embedded in general orientation programs offered to first-year students. Without a working knowledge of the broader range of support services available, or how to access them, VSAs may find themselves in the precarious position of having to locate help during a time of crisis or mental health instability. Second, consistent with previous research in this area, there continues to be a stigma

associated with VSAs seeking mental health support for concerns that fall outside the realm of performance-based interventions (Bauman, 2016). This minimization contributes not only to the isolation of VSAs who may be struggling with mental health or other psychosocial challenges but also places them at greater risk of experiencing a range of serious mental health conditions. Third, the findings from this pilot study offer valuable insight for designing and delivering support services to meet athletes' needs. It is clear that these services must not be homogenous; VSAs have diverse needs, and a "one-size-fits-all" approach is inadequate. The development of an SASN must consider multiple delivery formats, including online and virtual options in addition to traditional face-to-face counselling support (see Appendix F). These flexible formats would allow for "on-demand" support tailored to the VSAs' game, practice and training schedules. Virtual models also help preserve anonymity, which may reduce the internal and external stigma associated with accessing support services in visible, campus-based locations. In addition, hybrid options would further empower VSAs to choose the mode of support that best fits their needs. Finally, the narratives shared by participants reflected a strong desire for opportunities to connect with other VSAs as a form of support. Notably, this desire was grounded in a need for shared understanding, being with others "who know what it's like to be a varsity athlete."

The authors of this research contend that although only a small sample of VSAs participated in this study, the preliminary findings suggest that there is untapped potential to support this population through a sport social work approach. The development of an SASN, grounded in the principles and values of sport social work, could result in the development of programming that moves beyond a traditional performance-focused model to one that supports the athlete as a whole person. Firstly, a sport social worker's orientation includes a conscious recognition that a binary approach to supporting VSAs' holistic well-being, one that separates academic and athletic identities, is insufficient. Instead, sport social work promotes a "both/and" perspective that honours the dual role of student and athlete. This includes operationalizing both ecological systems thinking and a biological-psychological-social-cultural-spiritual (BPSCS) framework in practice. An ecological systems theory approach acknowledges that VSAs presenting concerns are not isolated experiences, but rather are shaped by the broader, interconnected sociocultural factors in their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1992; Moore & Gummelt, 2019). Similarly, a BPSCS framework emphasizes that VSAs must be recognized as whole persons whose biological, psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions are interwoven and shaped by the systems they inhabit (Brown et al., 2020). Any future SASN support service that fails to account for the broader sociocultural and environmental factors in the life of a VSA risks further minimizing the very mental health concerns for which they seek help. Importantly, this framework aligns closely with both the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers (OCSWSSW) scope of practice and the core values and ethics of sport social work (Moore & Gummelt, 2019; OCSWSSW, 2023).

Secondly, any SASN that is developed must recognize that VSAs require more than mental health support delivered solely by social workers; rather, they would benefit most from an interdisciplinary continuum of care. Interdisciplinary approaches to health and well-being are evidence-based practices "designed to forward effective use of professional judgement in integrating information about each client's unique circumstances and characteristics," while drawing on external supporting data (Gambrill, 2019, pg. 22). Social work, in collaboration with psychology, athletic therapy, dietetics and other disciplines, can foster an approach to care that reflects the many needs of student-athletes in a truly holistic manner. Introducing sport social

workers into existing athlete support structures within PSIs would help facilitate meaningful connections between athletes, support personnel and interdisciplinary professionals, ideally throughout the duration of the student's university athletic career and beyond. These considerations would also serve to reduce barriers to care, including both internal and external stigma, that often prevent VSAs from seeking support for the comorbid mental health challenges they face.

Lastly, contributions from the subspecialty of sport social work within Ontario PSIs, as part of an interprofessional team, could promote equitable attention to both athletic performance and mental health. In contrast to the current narrative of highly stigmatized and low help-seeking behaviours among VSAs, Bauman (2016) argues for adaptations to organizational processes so that equal value is placed on athlete "software" as their "hardware." Hardware refers to the athlete's biomechanics and physical functioning, while software refers to mental health and performance psychology (Bauman, 2016). The challenge, and opportunity, lies in closing the gap between the traditional emphasis on hardware and an expanded focus that includes both. Doing so inevitably requires moving beyond the path of least resistance and fostering culturally attuned environments where VSAs can seek support without fear of negative consequences (Bauman, 2016). Given that sport social workers are trained to view an athlete as the whole person, they are well-positioned to cultivate a culture where help-seeking for psychosocial issues is as normalized and valued as physical maintenance, ensuring that VSA mental health issues are neither hidden nor dismissed.

Ultimately, the gap between culturally attuned service provision and VSA mental health support can be narrowed through the integration of interdisciplinary teams. Purcell and colleagues (2019) succinctly capture this imperative: "Any mental health framework that ignores wider ecological factors runs the risk of...potentially pathologizing the individual athlete, when other factors may be more influential in contributing to, or perpetuating, poor mental health" (pg. 3). Updating and augmenting current PSI organizational processes in Canada will be essential to minimizing both internalized stigma and external pressures that inhibit help-seeking among VSAs. Operationalizing an interdisciplinary approach to VSA mental health, one that includes sport social work, holds strong potential for the development of an SASN that supports student-athlete success both on and off the field.

Future Implications for Practice, Education and Research

Professional Practice

The inclusion of sport social work within the Canadian professional social work landscape is still an emerging venture, as it is not fully recognized as a distinct, social justice-driven subspecialty area of practice. At present, few internal or external sport social work networks exist for Canadian practitioners or affiliated professionals working in sport-related contexts. The U.S.-based Alliance of Social Workers in Sport (ASWIS) remains the sole platform offering Canadian social workers access to practice guidance and professional development opportunities. However, differences in regulatory frameworks and national accreditation systems between the U.S. and Canada limit the direct applicability of ASWIS resources in the Canadian context. Therefore, social workers engaged in therapeutic roles within sport must continue to advocate for the formal recognition of sport social work as a legitimate area of practice. The ultimate goal is to position social work as a core discipline within

established interdisciplinary teams to deliver innovative, ethical and equity-focused support services within Canadian university athletics.

Teaching and Practicums

An exciting area of innovation for VSA mental health across Ontario PSIs lies in the robust availability of practicing professionals and trainees in the helping disciplines who are eager to offer support services to this population. In addition to social work students, disciplines such as physical therapy, sport psychology and medicine regularly seek practicum opportunities that could be embedded within a future SASN program offered across Ontario PSIs. These programs would be financially feasible, especially given decreasing government funding to PSIs, by leveraging student practicums and utilizing hybrid and existing campus spaces for service delivery. This model could also help eliminate common barriers to services, such as long waitlists and complex referral processes.

Education

Grounded in both ecological systems and BPSCS perspectives, future education and training would promote conversation with VSAs, coaches, parents and academic administrators that acknowledges the ongoing experienced tension that exists between a student's academic and athletic goals, and the uniqueness of an individual's varsity athletic experience. Education and training for coaches, PSI administrators, and academic personnel's should include developing awareness regarding the difference in VSAs being 'mentally tough and experiencing a variety of intersecting mental health concerns as both can coexist in their lives' (Bennett, 2024, pg. 72).. We encourage PSIs to implement psychoeducation and training for both coaches, academic administrators and the athletes themselves, to make transparent the reality of the unique needs and timing constraints intersectional to their invisible reluctance to seek professional help for mental health concerns. Only through increased awareness and education of all involved in varsity athletics will progress be made to create an environment for VSAs that focuses on the health of the whole person, not just the athlete, in a way that is compassionate and destigmatizing in the realm of mental health.

Research

The results of this pilot study highlight the need to develop programs of research that focus on the VSA experience at the micro, mezzo and macro level. This includes but is not limited to the production of research that continues to evaluate VSA experiences across Ontario PSIs, particularly exploring their need for tailored support services considering their tendency for low help seeking behaviors. In addition, continued research in this area will aim to better inform coaches, parents and university educators as to the impact of the dual-career commitment required of VSAs, and the intersecting social and emotional challenges impeding their overall health and wellness. Such programs of research will not only aid in developing a more comprehensive understanding of the experience of VSAs, but also potentially assist in highlighting the important contribution the profession of social work can make in supporting VSAs both in policy and practice.

Limitations

While this study offers valuable insights, it is not without limitations. First, the findings are based on a small sample of VSAs from a single affiliated college and therefore cannot be generalized to reflect the needs and perspectives of all VSAs across Canada. Second, there is limited published research on the experiences of VSAs within the Canadian context from which the researchers could draw comparisons and/or conclusions. Finally, the primary researcher had lived experience as a VSA, and this ‘insider’ perspective may have introduced bias or assumed knowledge in the analysis and reporting of the data.

Conclusion

The findings from this study suggest that sport social work, as a developing subspecialty within the broader field of professional social work, is well-positioned to address both the challenges facing the general student population in Canadian PSIs and the unique needs of VSAs. This pilot study highlighted several barriers that VSAs face in accessing appropriate mental health and well-being support services. It is evident that more research is needed to assess the needs of VSAs throughout their academic journey. Additionally, there is a clear need for an interdisciplinary approach to supporting VSA mental health and well-being, one that includes the person-in-environment perspective so integral to social work practice. By implementing SASN support services, institutions can shift toward a more holistic model that treats VSAs as whole individuals, not just athletes.

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Appendices

Appendix A:

Student-Athlete Support Network (SASN) Pilot Study Survey

1. What year of study are you in?

Answer options:

- 1st
- 2nd
- 3rd
- 4th
- 5th
- 6th

2. What gender do you identify with?

Answer options:

- Female
- Male
- Transgender female
- Transgender male
- Nonbinary
- Other: [textbox]
- Prefer not to answer

3. What varsity team(s) at [University] are you currently a member?

Answer option:

- Name of sport(s): [textbox]
- Prefer not to answer

4. How would you rate your current level of awareness of the various mental health & well-being supports and services at [affiliate College]:

Answer options:

- 1 = Not at all aware
- 2 = Not aware
- 3 = Somewhat aware
- 4 = Aware
- 5 = Very aware

5. Please indicate which, if any, support services you have accessed during your time at [affiliate College] [select all that apply]:

Answer options:

- Academic advising
- Individual counselling
- Crisis supports
- Career counselling
- The Write place
- Campus Ministry
- [Affiliate College] Academic Mentoring Program

6. Overall, how would you personally rate the quality of mental health and well-being supports at [affiliate College] in meeting your needs as a varsity student-athlete?

Answer options:

- 1 = Unacceptable
- 2 = Needs improvement
- 3 = Meets expectations
- 4 = Exceeds expectations
- 5 = Outstanding

7. Are there any support services or programs currently not offered at [affiliate College] that you feel would be beneficial to your success as a varsity student athlete?

Answer option:

- Text box

8. If you had access to a student-athlete specific mental health & well-being program, what type of program would you be interested in? [select all that apply]

Answer options:

- One-on-one counselling:
 - In-person off-campus counselling
 - In-person on-campus counselling
- Virtual one-on-one counselling
- Virtual self-led educational modules
- Hybrid counselling [option of in-person or virtual]
- Peer support groups
- Student-athlete specific mental health & wellness presentations

9. In your opinion, are there any barriers that currently exist in being able to access mental health and well-being services at [affiliate College] for you as a varsity student-athlete?

Answer option:

- Textbox

10. If yes, what do you feel could be done to remove barriers to accessing services and supports for varsity student-athletes at [affiliate College]?

Answer option:

- Textbox

11. On a scale of 1-5, how likely would you be to access student-athlete specific mental health & well-being supports at [affiliate College]?

Answer options:

- 1 = Very unlikely
- 2 = Unlikely
- 3 = Unsure
- 4 = Likely
- 5 = Very likely

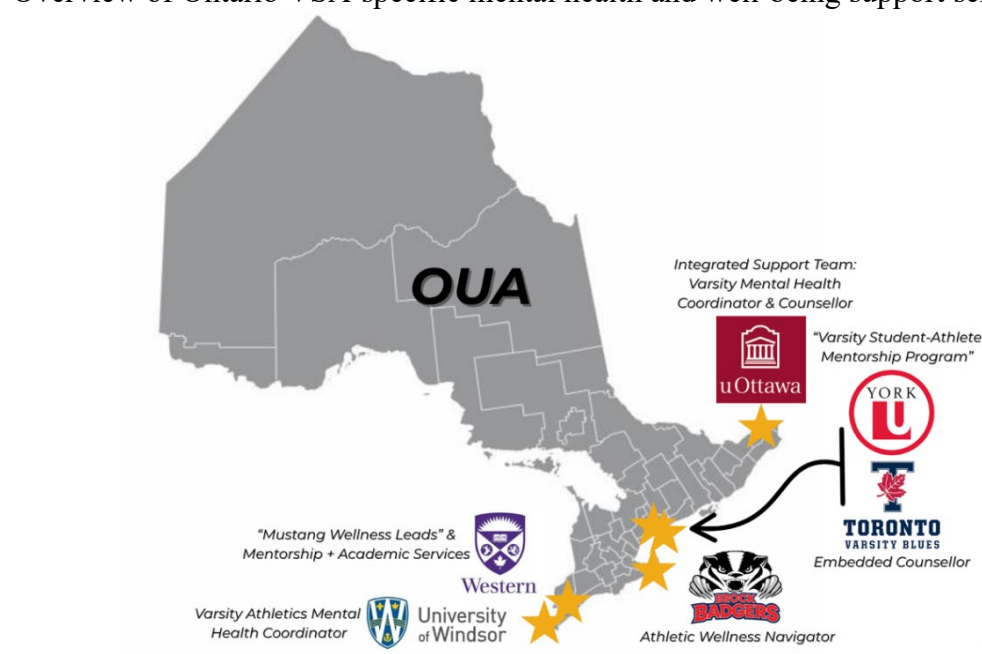
12. Is there anything else about your experience at [affiliate College] as a varsity student-athlete that we have not asked about and would be important for us to know when thinking about future support services for student-athletes?

Answer option:

- Textbox

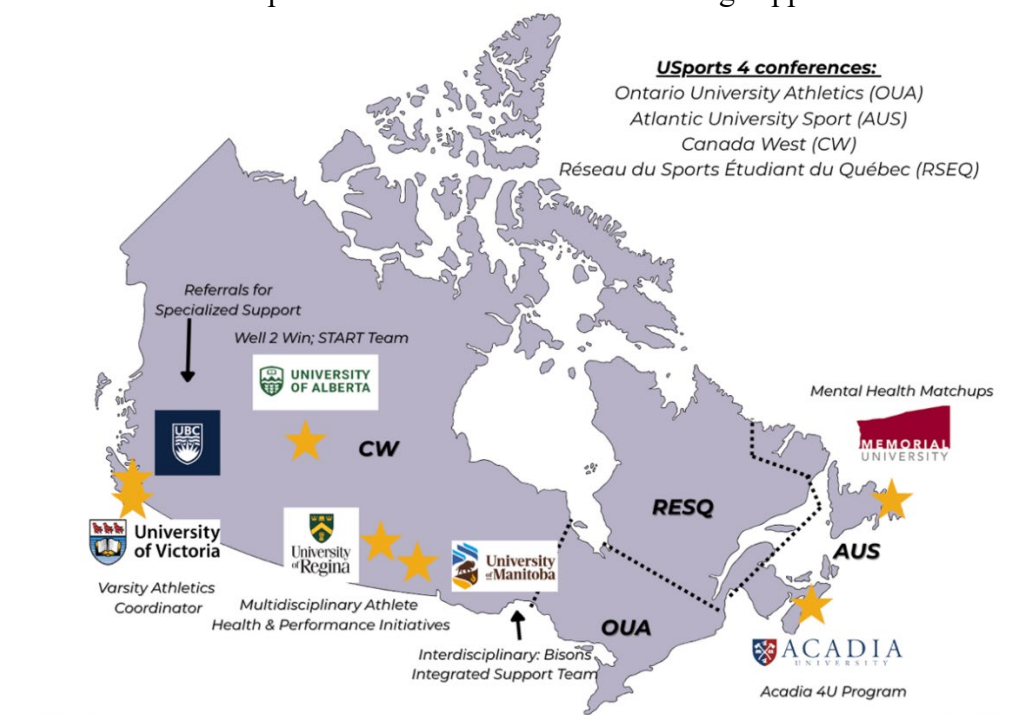
Appendix B:

Overview of Ontario VSA-specific mental health and well-being support services.



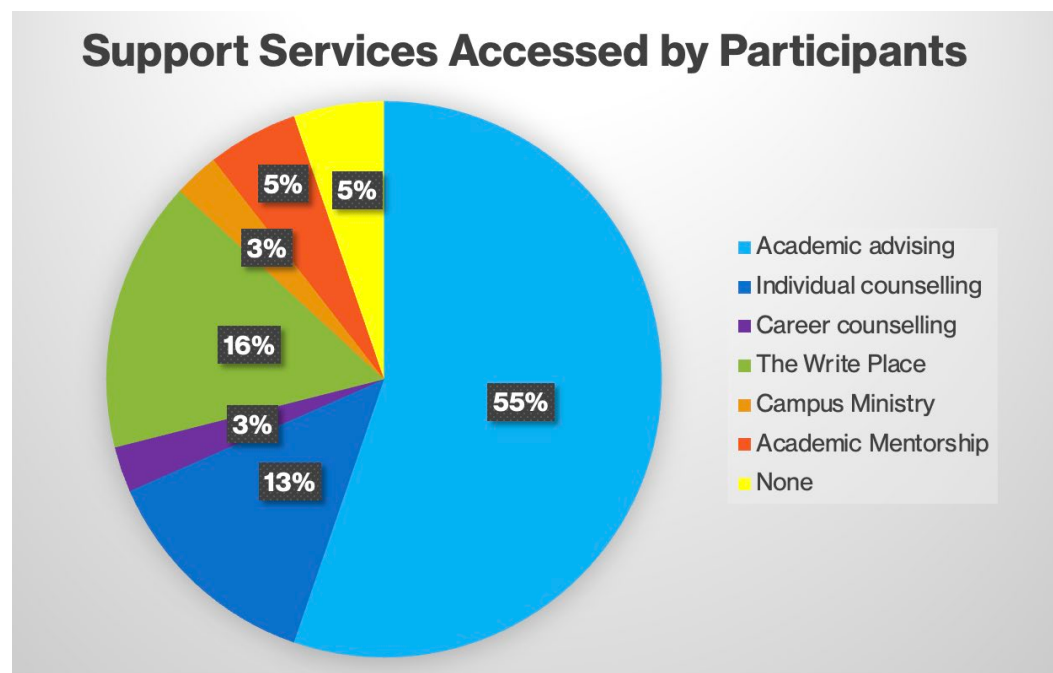
Appendix C:

Overview of VSA-specific mental health and well-being support services across Canada.



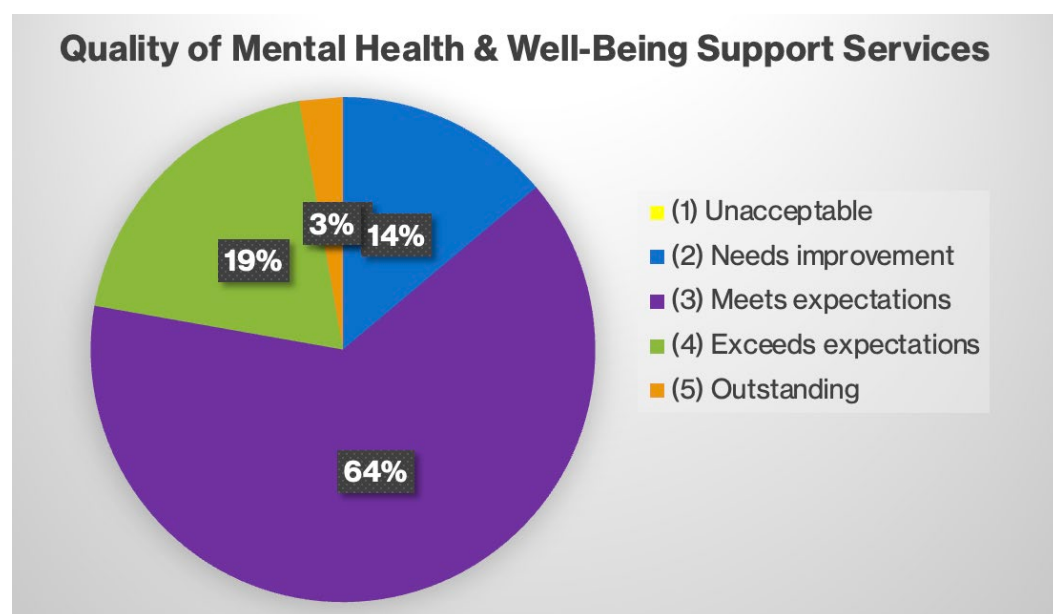
Appendix D:

Previously accessed by mental health and well-being support services by participants.



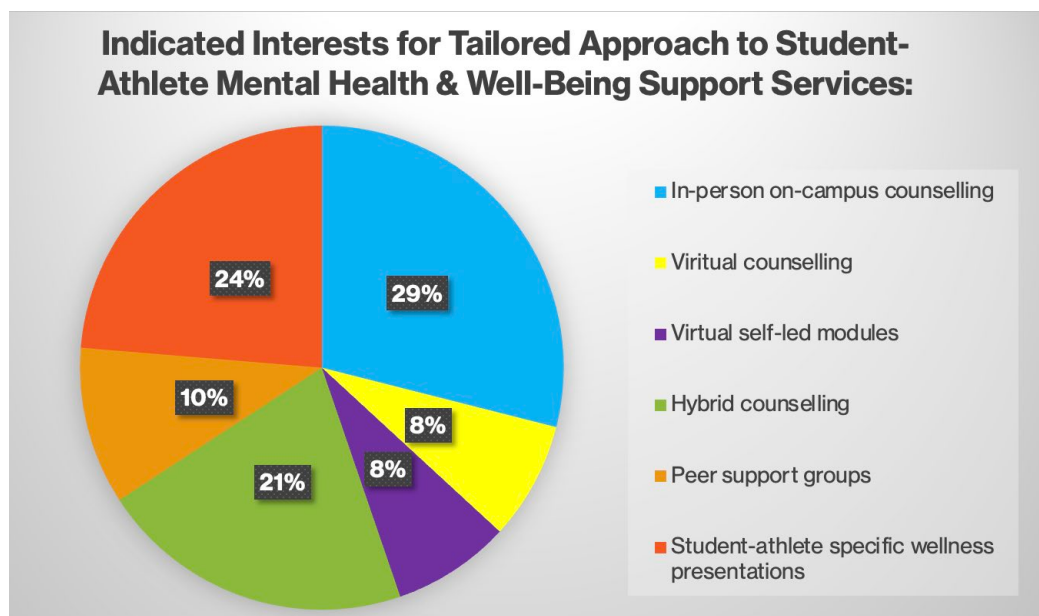
Appendix E:

Reported overall quality of current mental health and well-being support service by participants.



Appendix F:

Indicated interested by participants to have access to a SASN-like program.



Appendix G:

Reported likeliness by participants to access a SASN-like program in the future.

