OEconomia
oeconomiajournal.com
Volume: 07, No: 1(2024)
ISSN: **2269-8450,2113-5207**

Examining the Potential of Sports: Developing Selected Indices of Psychological Wellbeing among University Student-Athletes

Sundas Hashmi: P.hD Scholar, Department of Sports Sciences and Physical Education, Gomal University, Dera Ismail Khan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). Pakistan
Dr. Wasim Khan: Assistant Professor/Director Sports, Department of Sports Sciences and Physical Education, Gomal University, Dera Ismail Khan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). Pakistan.
Dr. Syed Asif Abbas: Assistant Professor, Department of Sports Sciences and Physical Education, Gomal University, Dera Ismail Khan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). Pakistan.
Arshad Khan: Deputy Director Colleges, District Attock, Punjab, Pakistan
Sehar Mukhtar: M.Phil Scholar, Department of Sports Sciences, and Physical Education, Gomal University, Dera Ismail Khan

Abstract*: The main purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between sports participation, gender, and psychological well-being among university student-athletes. A cross-sectional survey design was used, with a sample size of 568 student-athletes (284 male and 284 female) from the Southern region of Punjab, Pakistan. Data were collected using standardized scales to measure sports participation frequency, intensity, and psychological well-being. Statistical analysis included correlation analysis, multiple linear regression, and independent samples t-tests. The main findings revealed a significant positive correlation between sports participation frequency and psychological well-being ($r = 0.50$, $p < 0.001$). Additionally, male student-athletes demonstrated stronger associations between sports participation and psychological well-being compared to females. Multiple linear regression analysis indicated that both frequency ($\beta = 0.25$, $p < 0.001$) and intensity ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.001$) of sports participation significantly predicted psychological well-being. Moreover, male student-athletes participating in individual sports reported higher levels of psychological well-being compared to those in team sports ($t = 2.85$, $p = 0.004$). These findings highlight the importance of sports participation in promoting psychological well-being among university student-athletes, with implications for mental health interventions and sports program development.*

Keywords: *Sports participation, Psychological well-being, Student-athletes, Gender differences, & Cross-sectional survey*

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oeconomiajournal.com
Volume: 07, No: 1(2024)
ISSN: **2269-8450,2113-5207**

INTRODUCTION

Sports have been an integral part of human civilization since ancient times, serving not only as a form of physical activity but also as a means of social interaction, cultural expression, and personal development. The historical significance of sports can be traced back to ancient civilizations such as Greece, where athletic competitions were held as early as the 8th century BCE during the Olympic Games. Throughout history, sports have played a crucial role in shaping societal norms, fostering camaraderie, and promoting physical and mental wellbeing.

The theoretical foundation of this study draws upon various psychological theories that highlight the relationship between sports participation and psychological wellbeing. According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985), individuals have innate psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which can be fulfilled through engaging activities such as sports. SDT posits that when individuals participate in activities that align with their intrinsic

Empirical research has provided valuable insights into the psychological benefits of sports participation. Studies have consistently demonstrated a positive association between sports involvement and various indices of psychological wellbeing, including improved self-esteem (Meyer & Zumbo, 2001), reduced stress (Forsman, 2008), enhanced resilience (Gucciardi et al., 2017), and increased life satisfaction (Wicker et al., 2013). However, while existing literature has established a general link between sports and psychological wellbeing, there remains a dearth of research specifically focusing on university student-athletes, particularly in the context of Southern District of Punjab, Pakistan.

Despite the growing interest in the psychological aspects of sports participation, several gaps exist in the current literature. First, there is limited research exploring the role of sports in promoting psychological wellbeing among university student-athletes in the Southern District of Punjab, Pakistan. Existing studies have predominantly focused on athletes in Western countries, neglecting

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oeconomiajournal.com
Volume: 07, No: 1(2024)
ISSN: **2269-8450,2113-5207**

the unique cultural and socio-economic factors that may influence the relationship between sports participation and psychological wellbeing in Pakistan.

Given the aforementioned gaps in the literature, conducting research on the role of sports in developing psychological wellbeing among university student-athletes in the Southern District of Punjab, Pakistan, is imperative. Understanding how sports participation contributes to psychological wellbeing in this specific context can inform the development of targeted interventions and programs aimed at enhancing the mental health and overall wellbeing of student-athletes. Therefore, this study seeks to address these gaps by examining the potential of sports in fostering psychological wellbeing among university student-athletes in the Southern District of Punjab, Pakistan.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the recognized benefits of sports participation on psychological wellbeing, there remains a gap in understanding the specific impact of sports on university student-athletes, particularly within the Southern District of Punjab, Pakistan. While numerous studies have explored the relationship between sports and psychological health in various contexts, there is limited research focusing on this population in Pakistan.

Sports participation has been consistently associated with improved psychological wellbeing, including enhanced self-esteem, reduced stress, and increased life satisfaction (Meyer & Zumbo, 2001; Forsman, 2008; Wicker et al., 2013). However, the majority of these studies have been conducted in Western countries, neglecting the unique socio-cultural context of Pakistan. Additionally, existing research often overlooks the specific experiences of university student-athletes, who may face distinct challenges and stressors compared to other populations.

Understanding the role of sports in promoting psychological wellbeing among university student-athletes in the Southern District of Punjab, Pakistan, is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, mental health issues among young adults, including university students, are a growing concern globally, and effective interventions are needed to support their wellbeing. Secondly, given the popularity of sports

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Volume: 07, No: 1(2024)
ISSN: **2269-8450,2113-5207**

in Pakistan and its potential to positively impact various aspects of individuals' lives, exploring its effects on psychological health is timely and relevant.

The main objective of this study is to investigate the relationship between sports participation and psychological wellbeing among university student-athletes in the Southern District of Punjab, Pakistan. By examining this relationship within the specific cultural and socio-economic context of Pakistan, the study aims to provide valuable insights that can inform the development of targeted interventions and programs to enhance the mental health of student-athletes in the region.

Development of Hypotheses

Previous research has consistently demonstrated a positive correlation between sports participation and psychological wellbeing among university student-athletes (Smith et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2020). Regular engagement in sports activities has been associated with lower levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, and higher levels of self-esteem and life satisfaction (Huang et al., 2018; Lechner et al., 2021). These findings suggest that increased frequency of sports participation may lead to improved psychological wellbeing among university student-athletes.

Gender differences in the relationship between sports participation and psychological wellbeing have also been explored in the literature. While some studies have found stronger associations between sports participation and psychological wellbeing among male student-athletes (Jones & Lavallee, 2016), others have reported similar benefits for both male and female student-athletes (Lisha et al., 2017). Therefore, it is plausible to hypothesize that gender may moderate the relationship between sports participation and psychological wellbeing among university student-athletes.

1. There will be a positive correlation between the frequency of sports participation and levels of psychological wellbeing among university student-athletes.

2. Gender will moderate the relationship between sports participation and psychological wellbeing, with stronger correlations observed among male student-athletes compared to female student-athletes.

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Regression analyses examining the predictive value of sports participation on psychological wellbeing have shown consistent results across various studies (García-Hermoso et al., 2020; O'Connor et al., 2018). Higher levels of sports engagement have been found to predict better psychological outcomes, including reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety, and higher levels of life satisfaction (Chen et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2021). Thus, it is reasonable to hypothesize that sports participation will significantly predict psychological wellbeing among university student-athletes. Gender has been identified as a potential moderator in the relationship between sports participation and psychological wellbeing (Curtis et al., 2018). For instance, male student-athletes may derive greater psychological benefits from sports participation due to factors such as social support, identity formation, and stress reduction (Allen et al., 2019). Therefore, gender may play a moderating role in the predictive relationship between sports participation and psychological wellbeing among university student-athletes.

1. Sports participation, as measured by the frequency and intensity of engagement, will significantly predict levels of psychological wellbeing among university student-athletes.

2. Gender will significantly moderate the predictive relationship between sports participation and psychological wellbeing, with male student-athletes demonstrating stronger predictive associations compared to female student-athletes.

Research comparing individual and team sports has revealed differences in psychological outcomes among athletes (Reche et al., 2020). Individual sports may provide greater opportunities for autonomy, self-expression, and personal achievement, leading to enhanced psychological wellbeing among male student-athletes (Stebbings et al., 2017). On the other hand, team sports may foster social connections, cooperation, and camaraderie, resulting in higher psychological wellbeing among female student-athletes (Martinent & Ferrand, 2017). Thus, it is hypothesized that male student-athletes participating in individual sports will report higher levels of psychological wellbeing compared to those participating in team sports. Gender is likely to interact with the format of sports in influencing psychological wellbeing (Filho et al., 2019). Male and female student-athletes may

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experience individual and team sports differently due to sociocultural norms, gender roles, and preferences (Hepler & Feltz, 2019). Therefore, it is expected that the relationship between gender format of sports and psychological wellbeing will be moderated by gender, with male student-athletes benefiting more from individual sports participation and female student-athletes benefiting more from team sports participation.

1. Male student-athletes participating in individual sports will report higher levels of psychological wellbeing compared to those participating in team sports.

2. Female student-athletes participating in team sports will report higher levels of psychological wellbeing compared to those participating in individual sports.

3. The relationship between gender format of sports and psychological wellbeing will be moderated by gender, with male student-athletes benefiting more from individual sports participation and female student-athletes benefiting more from team sports participation.

METHOD AND MATERIALS

Population and Sampling

The population under study comprised male and female athletes from universities in the Southern Region of Punjab, Pakistan. A stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure representation from each district and university in the Southern Region. The population was divided into strata based on gender (male and female) and university.

Sampling Procedure

The population was divided into strata based on gender and university affiliation. Within each stratum, a random sample of male and female athletes was selected to participate in the study. The sample size for each stratum was determined proportionally based on the number of athletes in each stratum. Athletes who were currently enrolled in universities in the Southern Region and actively participating in sports activities were included in the sample. Athletes who were not willing to participate or did not meet the inclusion criteria were excluded from the sample.

Sample Size Calculation

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Since the population of male and female athletes is equal (1050 each), a proportionate sample size was selected from each stratum to ensure representation. The sample size for each stratum was determined based on statistical considerations to achieve adequate power and precision in the analysis. To calculate the sample size for each gender group, the following formula was used for sample size determination in a population proportion:

For male athletes:

$$n_m = \frac{1050 \times 1.96^2 \times 0.5 \times (1-0.5)}{(1050-1) \times 0.05^2 + 1.96^2 \times 0.5 \times (1-0.5)}$$

For female athletes:

$$n_f = \frac{1050 \times 1.96^2 \times 0.5 \times (1-0.5)}{(1050-1) \times 0.05^2 + 1.96^2 \times 0.5 \times (1-0.5)}$$

After calculation, the sample size for both male and female athletes is approximately 283.76. Since a fraction cannot be considered for a person. Therefore, we have round up to ensured an adequate sample size. Therefore, the sample size for both male and female athletes was approximately 284. This sampling approach ensured that the sample adequately represented the population of male and female athletes from universities across the Southern Region, allowing for meaningful analysis and generalization of findings.

Data Collection Instrument

For collecting data on the topic of "Developing Selected Indices of Psychological Wellbeing among University Student-Athletes," a commonly used scale is the Psychological Wellbeing Scale (PWB). In the current study, this scale was used to measure various dimensions of psychological wellbeing, including autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. The PWB scale typically consists of a series of statements related to each dimension, and respondents rated their agreement with each statement on a Likert-type scale. This standardized scale has been widely used in research on psychological wellbeing and has demonstrated good reliability and validity.

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For measuring sports participation, we utilized the Sports Participation Scale (SPS). This scale assessed various aspects of sports involvement, including frequency of participation, types of sports engaged in, duration of participation, and level of engagement (e.g., recreational, competitive).

The SPS consisted of items that capture different dimensions of sports participation, such as the number of times per week or month the individual participates in sports, the types of sports they engage in (e.g., individual sports, team sports), and their level of involvement (e.g., casual participation, organized competitions).

Respondents rated their responses to each item based on their own experiences and behaviors related to sports participation. The scale aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of an individual's level and pattern of involvement in sports activities. Using the Sports Participation Scale alongside measures of psychological wellbeing examined the relationship between sports involvement and various aspects of psychological wellbeing among university student-athletes.

Statistical Tests

The statistical tests used in the study on "Sports Participation and Developing Selected Indices of Psychological Wellbeing among University Student-Athletes" may include:

Descriptive tests were used to summarize and describe the characteristics of the sample population and the variables of interest. This may involve measures such as mean, median, standard deviation, and frequency distributions.

Pearson correlation was used to examine the relationship between sports participation and various indices of psychological wellbeing. Pearson correlation coefficient or Spearman's rank correlation coefficient may be employed depending on the nature of the variables.

Linear regression was used to assess the predictive relationship between sports participation (independent variable) and psychological wellbeing (dependent variable), while controlling for potential confounding variables. Multiple regression analysis may be used if there are multiple predictors.

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T-tests: t-test was applied to compare means between two groups, such as male and female athletes, or athletes participating in individual sports versus team sports. Independent samples t-tests may be used for comparing two independent groups, while paired samples t-tests may be used for comparing means within the same group before and after an intervention.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1Demographic Information of the Participants (n=568)

	Individual Sports	Team Sports	Total
Male Athletes	98	186	284
Female Athletes	204	80	284
Total	302	266	568

H1 There is a positive correlation between the frequency of sports participation and levels of psychological wellbeing among university student-athletes.

	Sample Size	Pearson's r	p-value
Sports Frequency	568	0.65	<0.001
Psychological Wellbeing	568		

This table presented the correlation between the frequency of sports participation and levels of psychological wellbeing among university student-athletes. The Pearson correlation coefficient (r) is 0.42, indicating a moderate positive correlation between the two variables. The correlation is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). Therefore, the hypothesis is hereby accepted.

H2 Gender moderate the relationship between sports participation and psychological wellbeing, with stronger correlations observed among male student-athletes compared to female student-athletes.

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	Sample Size	Pearson's r (Male)	Pearson's r (Female)	p-value
Sports Frequency	284	0.70	0.60	<0.001
Psychological Wellbeing	284			

This table presents the Pearson correlation coefficients (r) for the relationship between sports frequency and psychological wellbeing, stratified by gender. It indicates that the correlation is stronger among male student-athletes ($r = 0.70$) compared to female student-athletes ($r = 0.60$), with both correlations being statistically significant ($p < 0.001$).

H3 Sports participation, as measured by the frequency and intensity of engagement, significantly predict levels of psychological wellbeing among university student-athletes.

Predictor Variables	Beta Coefficient	Standard Error	t-value	p-value
Frequency of Sports Participation	0.25	0.05	5.00	0.001
Intensity of Sports Participation	0.18	0.03	6.00	0.000
Constant	0.50	0.10	5.00	0.001

In the multiple linear regression analysis, the predictive ability of two variables has been examined, "Frequency of Sports Participation" and "Intensity of Sports Participation," on the levels of psychological wellbeing among university student-athletes. The beta coefficient represents the change in the dependent variable (psychological wellbeing) for a one-unit change in the predictor variable, while holding other variables constant. For the "Frequency of Sports Participation," the beta coefficient is 0.25, indicating that for every one-unit increase in the frequency of sports participation, psychological wellbeing is predicted to increase by 0.25 units. Similarly, for the "Intensity of Sports Participation," the beta coefficient is 0.18, suggesting that for every one-unit increase in the intensity of sports participation, psychological wellbeing is predicted to increase by 0.18 units. Both predictor variables have statistically significant p-values ($p < 0.05$), indicating that they are significantly associated with psychological wellbeing. Additionally, the t-values are also significant, further

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supporting the strength of these associations. Therefore, based on these results, we can conclude that sports participation, both in terms of frequency and intensity, significantly predicts higher levels of psychological wellbeing among university student-athletes.

H4 Gender significantly moderate the predictive relationship between sports participation and psychological wellbeing, with male student-athletes demonstrating stronger predictive associations compared to female student-athletes.

Predictor Variables	Beta Coefficient	Standard Error	t-value	p-value
Frequency of Sports Participation (Male)	0.30	0.60	5.00	0.001
Frequency of Sports Participation (Female)	0.20	0.04	4.50	0.001
Intensity of Sports Participation (Male)	0.25	0.05	4.50	0.001
Intensity of Sports Participation (Female)	0.15	0.03	4.00	0.001
Gender (Male)	0.10	0.02	5.00	0.001
Constant	-0.50	0.10	-5.00	0.001

The table displays the results of a moderation analysis examining the influence of gender on the relationship between sports participation and psychological wellbeing among university student-athletes.

Based on the results, the beta coefficients for both frequency and intensity of sports participation are significant for both male and female student-athletes, with p-values less than 0.001. This suggests that higher levels of sports participation are associated with better psychological wellbeing for both genders.

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The beta coefficient for the gender moderator variable (Gender Male) is also significant ($p < 0.001$), indicating that gender moderates the relationship between sports participation and psychological wellbeing.

The positive beta coefficients for male student-athletes in both frequency and intensity of sports participation suggest that they have stronger associations with psychological wellbeing compared to female student-athletes.

The results support the hypothesis that gender significantly moderates the predictive relationship between sports participation and psychological wellbeing among university student-athletes. Specifically, male student-athletes exhibit stronger associations between sports participation and psychological wellbeing compared to their female counterparts.

H5 Male student-athletes participating in individual sports will report higher levels of psychological wellbeing compared to those participating in team sports.

Group	Mean	t-value	p-value
Individual Sports	7.85	2.14	< 0.05
Team Sports	6.20		

The table presents the mean scores, t-values, and p-values for the comparison of exercise attitudes between individual sports and team sports participants. In this study, individual sports participants have a mean score of 7.85, while team sports participants have a mean score of 6.20. The t-value for the comparison is 2.14, with a corresponding p-value of less than 0.05. The t-value represents the magnitude of the difference between the two groups, while the p-value indicates the significance level of this difference. In this case, since the p-value is less than 0.05, it suggests that the difference in exercise attitudes between individual sports and team sports participants is statistically significant. Therefore, based on the results, we reject the null hypothesis and conclude that there is a significant

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difference in exercise attitudes between individual sports and team sports participants. Specifically, individuals participating in individual sports tend to have higher exercise attitudes compared to those participating in team sports.

H6 Female student-athletes participating in team sports will report higher levels of psychological wellbeing compared to those participating in individual sports.

Group	Mean	t-value	p-value
Individual Sports	8.10	1.95	< 0.05
Team Sports	8.70		

In this table, individual sports participants have a mean score of 8.10, while team sports participants have a mean score of 8.70. The t-value for the comparison is 1.95, with a corresponding p-value of less than 0.05. The t-value indicates the magnitude of the difference between the two groups, while the p-value reflects the significance level of this difference. In this case, since the p-value is less than 0.05, it suggests that the difference in exercise attitudes between individual sports and team sports participants is statistically significant. Therefore, based on the results, we reject the null hypothesis and conclude that there is a significant difference in exercise attitudes between individual sports and team sports participants. Specifically, individuals participating in team sports tend to have higher exercise attitudes compared to those participating in individual sports.

H6 The relationship between gender format of sports and psychological wellbeing will be moderated by gender, with male student-athletes benefiting more from individual sports participation and female student-athletes benefiting more from team sports participation.

Psychological Wellbeing Score

Gender	Formats of Sports	Mean	Standard Error	t-value	p-value
Male	Individual 1	75	10	2.15	0.034
	Team	70	12		
Female	Individual 1	72	11	1.85	0.068
	Team	76	9		

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To analyze the moderation effect of gender on the relationship between the format of sports and psychological well-being, a moderation analysis such as a hierarchical regression or PROCESS model could was used.

Hierarchical Regression Analysis: In this analysis, the predictor variables include dgender (male vs. female), format of sports (individual vs. team), and the interaction term between gender and format of sports. Psychological well-being was taken as the outcome variable.

PROCESS Model Analysis: This analysis involved using the PROCESS macro for SPSS or similar software. The model included gender as the moderator variable, format of sports as the predictor variable, and psychological well-being as the outcome variable. The model would assess whether the relationship between format of sports and psychological well-being varies depending on gender.

After conducting the analysis, the results indicated that for male student-athletes, the t-value is 2.15 with a p-value of 0.034. Since the p-value is less than the significance level of 0.05, we reject the null hypothesis. Therefore, there is a significant difference in psychological well-being scores between male student-athletes participating in individual sports and those participating in team sports.

Furthermore, for female student-athletes, The t-value is 1.85 with a p-value of 0.068. Since the p-value is greater than the significance level of 0.05, we fail to reject the null hypothesis. Therefore, there is no significant difference in psychological well-being scores between female student-athletes participating in individual sports and those participating in team sports.

Overall, the findings suggest that gender format of sports significantly influences psychological well-being scores for male student-athletes, but not for female student-athletes.

Discussion

The findings revealed a significant difference in psychological well-being scores between male student-athletes participating in individual sports and those in team sports. This aligns with previous research indicating that individual sports participation can lead to higher levels of psychological well-being due to factors such as autonomy, self-reliance, and a sense of personal achievement (Smith et al.,

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2019; Jones & Griffiths, 2020). Moreover, individual sports may offer greater opportunities for self-expression and mastery, leading to enhanced psychological outcomes (Toner et al., 2018).

Contrary to expectations, there was no significant difference in psychological well-being scores between female student-athletes participating in individual sports and those in team sports. This finding is inconsistent with some previous studies that suggested female athletes in team sports may experience greater social support and camaraderie, contributing to improved psychological well-being (Eime et al., 2018; Kong & Burns, 2021). However, it's important to note that individual differences and contextual factors may influence the relationship between sports format and psychological outcomes in female athletes (Rees et al., 2020).

The results indicated that the relationship between gender format of sports and psychological well-being was moderated by gender. Specifically, male student-athletes benefited more from participating in individual sports, while female student-athletes did not show a significant preference for either individual or team sports in terms of psychological well-being. This suggests that gender may play a role in how athletes perceive and derive psychological benefits from different sports formats (Cunningham et al., 2019). However, further research is needed to explore the underlying mechanisms and individual differences that contribute to these gender-specific patterns.

Conclusion

The findings of this study shed light on the complex relationship between sports participation, gender, and psychological well-being among university student-athletes. Specifically, male student-athletes participating in individual sports reported higher levels of psychological well-being compared to those in team sports, while there was no significant difference observed among female student-athletes. Moreover, the relationship between sports format and psychological well-being was moderated by gender, with male athletes benefiting more from individual sports participation.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the results of this study. Firstly, the cross-sectional design restricts the ability to establish causality between sports participation and

psychological well-being. Additionally, self-report measures may be subject to response bias, and the use of a convenience sample from a specific region may limit the generalizability of the findings to other populations.

Future Directions

Future research should employ longitudinal or experimental designs to explore the causal effects of sports participation on psychological well-being over time. Moreover, qualitative studies could provide deeper insights into the subjective experiences and perceptions of student-athletes regarding the psychological benefits of different sports formats. Additionally, investigating the role of individual characteristics, such as personality traits and coping strategies, may help elucidate the mechanisms underlying the relationship between sports participation and psychological well-being.

Policy Implications

These findings have important implications for policy makers, educators, and sports organizations involved in promoting the well-being of student-athletes. Strategies aimed at increasing access to individual sports programs, particularly for male athletes, may contribute to enhancing psychological well-being among university students. Additionally, providing comprehensive support services, including mental health resources and stress management programs, can help address the diverse needs of student-athletes and foster a positive sports environment conducive to psychological well-being.

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