



Socioeconomic Factors on Korean Student Athlete's Mental Health (FGI Research)

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Abstract

The mental health of student-athletes is rarely acknowledged in Korea's sporting community, which is why the contributing factors to their mental health have yet to be discussed. We find evidence for this claim using an FGI research method by conducting online interviews and sophisticated surveys of Korean student-athletes. We argue that student-athletes from lower socioeconomic backgrounds will experience more mental health issues related to anxiety, pressure, and stress. As we conclude this study, we underscore the importance of prioritizing the mental health of student-athletes, especially those who are underprivileged. Research exploring the intersection of socioeconomic factors, mental health, and student-athletes in Korea has not yet been conducted. The limitations of this research lie in the small representation of student-athletes, particularly in terms of age groups and geographical location.

KEYWORDS: *Mental Health, Socio-Economic Status, Socio-Economic Factors, Anxiety, Pressure, Stress, FGI*

1 Introduction

The Mental Health of Student Athletes is often overshadowed in society due to stigmas and expectations formed in the sporting community. This topic, however, has become prevalent in recent years. Take, for example, Simone Biles, who prioritized her mental health and raised awareness of intersectional pressures at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics (5) The tie between Mental Health and Intersectionality is formed in that 'the poorer one's socioeconomic conditions are, the higher one's risk is for mental disability and psychiatric hospitalization.'⁽⁴⁾ Our Understanding of socioeconomics, mental health, and student-athletes are all connected. Is Wealth an inhibiting factor to an athlete's mental health? *Racial Minority? Education? Access to Support?* Through our exploration, we found that socioeconomic factors may affect a student athlete's mental health.

Hypothesis: Mental Health in Student Athletes: Does Socioeconomic Status have an influence?



2 Research Scope and Method

Using an FGI Study Method, a technique used in qualitative research, we interviewed 8 student-athletes in total, four Student-athletes via Zoom and four in a written Survey. The advantage of this technique was getting a closer understanding of their background and mental health. Whether detailed written explanations or face-to-face connections, we could comprehend a story, not just basic facts. The respondents included both current and past student-athletes in Korea, some attending International schools whilst some in Public schools, but both having similar motives as athletes.

The interview and survey were formatted into three sections: **1.** Background, where they were asked basic questions such as their commitment to sport, goals, and practice **2.** Mental health-related questions such as experiences in burnout, sports stress, and support. **3.** Respondents were asked to rank their mental health conditions in these specific scenarios. One example was: Consider a situation where one last chance is given to qualify for a national team or college. What emotions would you be going through? 1= Unbothered/ Relaxed and 5= extremely stressed/ anxious? **4.** Socioeconomic and Mental Health Questions. Divided into scenarios about Wealth, Education, and Racism, respondents were asked to give closer insight regarding these situations. For example, a situation: Unexpectedly your family experiences a financial crisis, but you are told to continue training. How will your mental health condition change as an athlete?

3 Results & Discussion

TABLE 1



	Sport	Age	Commitment	Current State	Counselling Experience	1. Income	2. Education	3. Race	4. Access to Support
Student Athlete 1	Volleyball	21	6 times a week, 3 hrs per	stopped	yes	Increased pressure during training	I feel like I'll work harder to repay the financial support my family has given me	-	I think this support will be helpful but my goals are always changing, so I'll strive to be the best wherever I go.
Student Athlete 2	Swimming	17	14 times a week, 2hrs 30mins per	ongoing	no	I feel mentally weak but I will grind and work harder for my family.	It'll be better	-	yes, I will take advantage of these resources
Student Athlete 3	Swimming	16	6 times a week, 2hrs per	ongoing	no	I'd be a lot more anxious before a competition and even during practice because the feeling of needing to do well to get a scholarship or financial aid through swimming would get even more urgent.	I'd definitely be more determined and try harder if that happened. I'd probably feel more stressed to do well since I was chosen by that high school to represent them.	Probably first confront the coach or the school and if nothing changes, then I'd leave the school. I personally think that the team and community that you're a part of is extremely important since you're training with them for several hours a week and basically see them every day.	Certainly, go get free therapy then and explain my situation to the therapist. If they can help me adjust to the team better then I'd probably stay.
Student Athlete 4	Swimming	18	7 times 2 hrs per	stopped	no	I think this comes with personal experience but I would be more stressed because I would feel like I have	I would take advantage of all opportunities and work harder knowing I deserve it	There would be a lot of pressure to be the best because I'm the minority but also at the same time, I'd feel scared	I will take advantage of all resources as fewer people will judge me.



						to do well so all of this doesn't go to waste.			
Student Athlete 5	Volleyball/Cheer	15	5 times 4 hrs per session	stopped	yes	I'll be lost and confused in that situation. I'll be really motivated to do well but I don't think that it will help. Essentially, sports aren't like academics where if you keep doing well, you can keep doing well. Depending on that one condition, it could lead to a negative impact.	I'd be happy but there might also be some pressure	In this new environment I'll feel isolated. I'll have a lot of mixed feelings. But I am physically disadvantaged so I cannot be that good. I'll do everything I can with my skills.	Yes, I will not be afraid to use these resources now
Student Athlete 6	Volleyball	16	4 times 2 hrs per session	ongoing	yes	I think I'll be more anxious because if I'm trying to make money to get my family out of the struggle, I have to do good.	I would feel really lucky to be at the school and I'll also work hard	Honestly, this topic worries me. A part of me is scared but I'll try to make the best of it and if I become good, well if the coaches are not racist, they will praise me and my teammates may change their perspective	I think it would improve because I wouldn't have to be worried about the judgment because everyone has to go there
Student Athlete 7	Basketball	17	6 times 4 hrs per session	stopped	no	It will be a burden especially when raising money as a team for competition	There will be pressure but I think I'll view it in a positive light.	-	I think it will be a great opportunity as well



Student Athlete 8	Swimming	19	6 times 2 hrs per session	stopped	no	I'd feel pressured to do better 100% because now we are investing this like money that we don't have. So I've got to show them that it's worth it	I would feel more motivated because I would be more recognized	I would want to work harder to be recognized	My mental health conditions will improve and it is important to recognize how many swimmers deal with mental health issues
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1. While **Mental Health** remains a rarely discussed topic amongst Korea's sporting community, the results of the FGI survey have shed light on mental health issues. Many have openly confessed to facing emotional barriers that impact performance in training and competitions. An international school basketball player, for instance, expressed “dealing with frustration and anxiety” as he “felt unable to showcase [his] ability on the court.” This highlights the reality of athletes who emotionally respond to these pressures through anxiety and depression. (2) Similarly, a swimmer from an International school, emphasized the “expectation of having to continuously improve” and revealed “feeling burnt out” and “wanting to quit” at those times. Therefore, this highlights how athletes’ expectations can negatively impact their mental health, potentially leading to the development of mental illnesses. (10) Furthermore, certain student-athletes find themselves under societal pressures and team expectations. A volleyball player, attending an International school, confessed the distress upon “having to meet the expectation of older players on the team” and explained how this was a main factor for her early quitting. Similarly, a former university volleyball player in Korea revealed the anguish of enduring “physical assault and verbal abuse” throughout his career. These revelations shed light on a potential reality within Korea’s sporting culture and the detrimental effects it can have on athletes' mental health. (6)
2. **Socioeconomic** factors impact the mental health of student-athletes, with **Income** playing a significant role in influencing their well-being. In the FGI survey, student-athletes were asked to imagine a situation in which their family faced financial difficulties and were questioned about how this would affect their mental health as athletes. One swimmer from an International school emphasized the “urgency of obtaining scholarships in such a situation,” underscoring how financial pressures can intensify the stress they already experience. Researchers have pointed out “the higher satisfaction in family, the higher sociability and motives to achieve, “highlighting the importance of family income to their mental health. (1) Another swimmer attending an athletic high school in Gyeonggi Do Province expressed that she expected her “mental health to deteriorate” but also mentioned her determination to work even harder for her family. These challenges can serve as motivational factors, but it’s essential to recognize that they also impose substantial pressures that can severely impact mental health. Additionally, a volleyball player who competed at a Korean University shared concerns about a potential decline in confidence and self-esteem, along with difficulties in



overcoming slumps. This highlights the direct correlation between financial income and an athlete's confidence, demonstrating the significant role it plays in their mental health. (7)

3. **Education**, as a socioeconomic indicator, has a profound impact on the mental health of student-athletes (11). This is because the school "influences behavior through direct and indirect effects on psychological characteristics." (9) When student-athletes were asked to imagine a scenario where they had access to a better quality education, most of them expressed a significant improvement in their mental well-being. For instance, an international swimmer shared that although there is inherent pressure in being chosen as a student-athlete, they believed that with better education, this pressure would not necessarily increase, indicating the positive influence of improved education on athletes' mental health. Furthermore, the perspective of a former basketball player from Daegu sheds light on the detrimental effects of a subpar education system. She described her school as lacking attention, support, proper management, and even basic facilities like air conditioning. In that environment, she not only felt "unmotivated but also confused," as she didn't have a clear understanding of what was considered normal. This closer look at her experience suggests that inadequate education can indeed lead to worsened mental health among student-athletes, especially when students lack education of mental health ideas. (8)
4. **Race** is another crucial aspect of socioeconomic factors that significantly impact the mental health of student-athletes (12). When student-athletes were asked to envision a scenario where they attend a school characterized by racism and a lack of diversity, their responses shed light on the profound effect this can have on their well-being. One athlete boldly emphasized the importance of the team and community they are part of, emphasizing that an environment with racism and lacking diversity, would lead to feelings of "demotivation, discomfort, and anxiety," making them want to leave. Many athletes attending international schools echoed these concerns, expressing that this was their primary worry when considering their tertiary education options. However, it's worth noting that another student-athlete took a different perspective, expressing motivation to work harder to gain recognition. While this motivation can be a driving force, it also adds another layer of pressure, further impacting their mental health. External studies show how "lower acceptability of mental health symptoms and disorders among non-white athletes" are cultural influences on mental health in athletes. Thus, proving how race is a factor contributing to an athlete's mental health. (2)
5. **Access to support** plays a pivotal role in influencing the mental health of student-athletes. When student-athletes were presented with a scenario where they attended a school with an abundance of counseling services, all of them expressed their interest in seeking help. One key reason for this was the sense that "everyone else is using it" and the perception that seeking counseling is considered "normal" and not subjected to judgment. Therefore, the lack of support in the community influences an athlete's mental health not only because of the resources but also because of the stigma embedded in the community. (3)

4 Conclusion

From our research, we can conclude that socioeconomic factors such as income, education, race, and access to support contribute to the mental health of athletes in Korea. The main purpose of shedding light on these results is to raise awareness and take action for student-athletes. Although it is impossible to control these socioeconomic factors, we are capable of educating and normalizing mental health in their lives. It is important to recognize the social disparities in sport, and mental health, and, ultimately, raise awareness of the fact that student athletes' mental health needs to be prioritised. Ultimately, research addressing the direct impacts of socioeconomic factors, including income, race, education, and resources, on the mental health of student-athletes in Korea has not been previously undertaken, especially this combination of socioeconomic factors, mental health, and student-athletes. The limitations of this research lie in the narrow age group of this study, and because it was conducted in an FGI format, our results did not yield a wide range of student-athletes, and therefore, may not accurately represent the entire Korean sporting community.

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Personal Insight:

Growing up as a competitive swimmer, I also struggled with mental health issues. Looking back on this time, I was left with questions. *Why was I so anxious when swimming? Why was my twelve-year-old self desperate and hungry for success? Was there a socioeconomic influence?* To delve into my curiosity, I researched the correlation between Mental Health and Socioeconomic influence by conducting FGI research.