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## Self-reported Coping Strategies of Collegiate Student-Athletes During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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**Abstract:** The field of sports is one area that is highly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. To safeguard the health of athletes, the government enforced measures such as the cancellation of all major sporting events in the country as well as the in-person physical training of athletes. Under such conditions, they are forced to confine themselves at home and stop their sport participation. The purpose of the current qualitative study is to examine the coping strategies used by collegiate student-athletes to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. It utilized a survey method and data was gathered through an online survey containing qualitative questions which inquired about the present conditions and ways of coping of student-athletes during the pandemic. A total of 309 out of 527 varsity players (n=149 males; n=160 females) from different sport teams answered the survey. Using the coping model formulated by Parker and Endler (1992), coping strategies of the respondents were categorized into three types: task-oriented (problem-focused), emotion-oriented (person-focused), and avoidance-oriented (distractions and social diversions). The results showed that majority of the student-athletes utilized task-oriented coping strategies (43%) followed by avoidance-oriented coping strategies (29.1%) and emotion-oriented coping strategies (22.3%). A few of them (20.7%) utilized more than one type of strategy. It was derived from the results that task-oriented coping strategies used by the student-athletes focused on taking actions to modify the situation or in generating alternative solutions to minimize the effect of pandemic in their life. Data gathered likewise showed that emotion-oriented coping strategies were adopted by the student-athletes to regulate their emotions triggered by the pandemic and to maintain physical and mental wellness. Results also showed that avoidance-oriented coping which appeared in the form of task and people-oriented activities served as distractions and social diversions. Results would indicate that majority of the student-athletes are coping with the stress brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and that strategies to cope are in place.

Key Words: COVID-19 Pandemic; sports, student-athletes; coping strategies

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In March of 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) classified Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) more commonly known as COVID-19 as a global pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020). The government then imposed safety and confinement measures all over the country to prevent community transmission. Some of the major and impactful safety and precautionary measures include stay-at-home orders, social distancing, travel restrictions, closure of non-essential businesses, closure of educational institutions, and postponement or cancellation of public gatherings which include all sporting events in the country and in-person training of athletes. Over the summer of 2020, professional sports organizations as well as the major collegiate sports leagues in the country such as the University Athletic Association of the Philippines (UAAP) and the National Collegiate Athletic

Association (NCAA) cancelled their tournament seasons due to the continued health threats of COVID-19. As a result, student-athletes had to restructure their sports life including their training habits, goals, mindsets, source of motivation and their social connection with the team in addition to adjusting to the online mode of academic learning and athletic training. While dealing with these unexpected and abrupt changes in their athletic and student life, they must also manage the uncertainty of what the future holds for them in their athletic career. A global sense of threat, social isolation, and uncertainty about the future can cause anxiety, depression, and chronic stress (Makarowski, et al., 2020). The unwanted social isolation, lack of clear and definite schedules as to when tournaments will resume, the decision to continue or to end their collegiate career especially for the seniors, and the lack of competition readiness brought about by limitations in physical and skills



training may put a student-athlete into an array of emotional and mental challenges that may make or break them. It is indeed crucial that these young people develop and employ effective coping strategies while they battle or at least minimize the impact of the pandemic into their active life as student-athletes. The objective of this qualitative research is to examine the specific coping strategies that this population employed while the COVID-19 pandemic is ongoing. This will aid in the planning, decision-making and implementation of programs and services to help student-athletes enhance their capability to adjust into this new and challenging situation.

### **1.1 Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Athletes**

In general, literature suggests that COVID-19 might impact the mental health and the mood of people and athletes are no exception to this (Pfefferbaum, 2020). Since its onset, the COVID-19 pandemic has prevented athletes' sport participation and impeded their time to train in a more suitable environment. This sudden interruption in their training schedule may have forced this special population to modify or set new goals for the season when sports activities resume while for athletes who are almost at the last stretch of their competitive stage, it can mean putting an early and abrupt ending to their athletic careers. These conditions can result to increased stress and unpleasant emotions compounded by confinement and can lead to negative consequences at emotional, cognitive, and behavioral levels. Being confined to their homes, athletes were forced to adapt to a new role which is to be "a family person," which could be overwhelming for some (Samuel, et al., 2020). From being so used to large crowds and audiences, they are now reduced to interactions inside their homes. Maintaining relationships and connectedness with fellow athletes and not disengaging from such relationships is also a possible cause of concern for athletes during the pandemic. Relationships during quarantine might reduce in quality and effort is required to regain the rapport and camaraderie that was built prior to pandemic (Schinke, et al. (2020).

A survey that was participated by 37,000 student-athletes in the United States revealed that majority of them experienced mental distress, while some felt lonely, lethargic, mentally exhausted and experienced a sense of loss (NCAA, 2020). Iancheva, et al. (2020) likewise posited that confinement during the pandemic has led to several psychological reactions among athletes such as depression,

increased anxiety, problems with motivation, aggressive reactions, and risky behavior mainly because of the uncertainty of the situation which can be likened when one suffers an injury at some point throughout their athletic careers. A survey was carried out on a sample on 1602 professional football players from countries which have implemented lockdown measures to limit the spread of COVID-19. Twenty-two percent (22%) of female players and thirteen percent (13%) of male players have reported symptoms consistent with depression, while 18% of females and 16% of males reported symptoms consistent with generalized anxiety disorder (International Federation of Professional Footballers, 2020). Other researchers likewise confirmed that the number of athletes who exhibited symptoms of depression has doubled, and a significant number had significant changes in their sleep patterns, preferred sedentary than active lifestyle, needing motivation to be keep themselves to exercise or to be physically active, and experienced significant changes in their diet characterized with excessive intake of carbohydrates (Schinke, et al., 2020; Pillay, et al. 2020). They further revealed that most athletes trained alone at moderate intensity and may have reported feeling depressed and have struggled to keep themselves motivated to exercise. Moreover, results of the study of a group of researchers revealed that there was a significant decrease in athletes' self-reported participation time in sport-specific activities specifically on strength training, endurance, and mobility (Jagim, et al., 2020). They further noted that athletes experienced notable reductions in training frequency and time spent in completing various training related activities as compared during in-person organized team practices. Additionally, majority of the athletes reported making a change in their dietary habits and sleep patterns as an adjustment to their altered training. For many athletes who have engaged in very rigorous training prior to pandemic, the unexpected cancellation of competitions can lead them into thinking that their efforts and goals were put into waste and may have affected their sense of direction. Others might see it as the end of their careers and some may have been worried on how this pandemic would impact their income as athletes (Makarowski, et al., 2020). Postponements of competition after a long period of preparation could also led to a reduction in the athletes' self-confidence and perceived sport competence (Schinke, et al. (2020). When athletes with a long endurance-training history suddenly abandon their regular physical activity, they are prone to develop a clinical condition known as "a



detraining syndrome” (Andreato, et al., 2020). It is characterized by a mixture of physical and psychological negative effects usually manifesting on their sleep and diet practices (Mujika and Padilla, 2020). Not being able to use their body as they were used to, athletes tend to feel restless, experiencing somatic anxiety and negative mood (Jukie, et.al, 2020).

Athletes are not also spared from experiencing COVID-19 related loss and grief. Having a family member, friend, or close acquaintance become seriously ill or die due to COVID-19 can result to a range of physical, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral symptoms as well as potential modifications in their identity and motivation, both in life and in the sport domain. A loss in the support resource in an athlete’s career might significantly impair athletes’ ability to maintain their regular activity and their motivation to participate in their sport (Samuel, et al, 2020).

## 1.2 Athletes’ Coping Strategies During the Pandemic

Coping strategies are especially important in the management of psychological stress related to harmful, threatening, or challenging situations (Lazarus, 1999 as cited in Stanisławski, 2019). Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman (1984) theorized that coping could be divided based on its function - problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping includes those strategies that involve acting on the environment (e.g., seeking support from others to solve the problem) or the self (e.g., cognitive restructuring). Emotion-focused coping includes those strategies used to regulate one’s stressful emotions (e.g., using substances, emotional ventilation). Other theorists would classify coping strategies as maladaptive characterized by negative emotional response and adaptive which is associated with positive emotional response (Stanisławski, 2019).

Samuel, et al., 2020 posited the idea that in order for athletes to effectively cope with the uncertainty brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, they could use adaptive coping strategies including (a) relevant support from coaches, fitness trainers, and nutritionists, (b) emotional and psychological support from family, friends, and consultants, (c) making action plans and taking direct actions to enhance their physical and psychological well-being, and (d) being open to new experiences and finding a way to vent out their negative emotions. Alternatively, athletes could decide to ignore the instability in the situation by taking time off from their sport engagement.

A study conducted by Iancheva, et al. (2020) investigated how 199 student-athletes from Bulgaria and Russia managed to cope with the current situation of self-isolation and lack of competitive sports and school activities. Active planning, cognitive restructuring and emotional calming were dominant coping strategies that surfaced. Athletes focused on looking into the good that can come out of the bad situation, learning something new, and modifying their goals. Blocking their negative thoughts by being preoccupied with important tasks to do helped them keep a positive mindset and counter the lack of productivity. They showed a low tendency to seek social support from their coaches, psychologists, parents, friends to cope with the problem. Mental withdrawal received the lowest score which was viewed by the researchers as their refusal to give up their goals as student-athletes. For high-performance athletes, whose levels of stress, anxiety and depressive symptoms are relatively low even with confinement during the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of coping strategies such as cognitive restructuring and emotional calming can be associated with lower levels of negative emotional states (Leguizamo, et al., 2021).

In a study made by Makarowski, et al. (2020), majority of the martial arts athletes experienced low stress levels during the pandemic. Male and female martial arts athletes used a moderate to high level of acceptance as an adaptive coping strategy and low levels of maladaptive coping strategies such as denial, substance use, self-blame, and behavioral disengagement to lower their levels of stress. It was also confirmed in the study that martial arts athletes less frequently used problem-focused coping strategies such as active coping and planning during the height of the pandemic. Interestingly, researchers who surveyed 175 Olympic and Paralympic athletes from several sport disciplines, who had been confined in Spain due to government enforced lockdown found out that Olympic and Paralympic athletes showed negative perceptions of the confinement with regards to their workouts, but not to their performance. Also, no significant impact of the quarantine in the anxiety responses of the athletes was evident. This could be attributed to the well-developed coping skills and the previous experiences of these high-performance athletes in managing their anxiety during competitions (Clemente-Suárez, et al., 2020).

## 1.4 Conceptual Model of the Study

Using the coping model formulated by Parker and Endler (1992), the coping strategies of the

student-athletes during the COVID-19 pandemic were categorized into three types: task-oriented (i.e. problem-focused), emotion-oriented (i.e. person-focused), and avoidance-oriented (i.e. distractions and social diversions). Parker and Endler (1992 as cited in Stanislawski K, 2019, p.325) described problem-focused coping strategies as associated with a task-orientation, whereas emotion-focused coping strategies reflect a person-orientation. They further elaborated that task-orientation refers to strategies used to solve a problem, reconceptualize it cognitively, or minimize its effects while person-orientation refers to strategies that may include emotional responses, self-preoccupation, and fantasizing reactions (Parker and Endler, 1992, as cited in Stanislawski K, 2019, p. 325). A third dimension which they included in the coping model is the avoidance-oriented coping, involving both task-oriented, and person-oriented strategies. Task-oriented avoidance is conceptualized as distraction, while person-oriented avoidance takes the form of social diversion. A person may avoid a stressful situation by engaging in substitute activities (distraction) or seeking out other people (social diversion) (p326.)

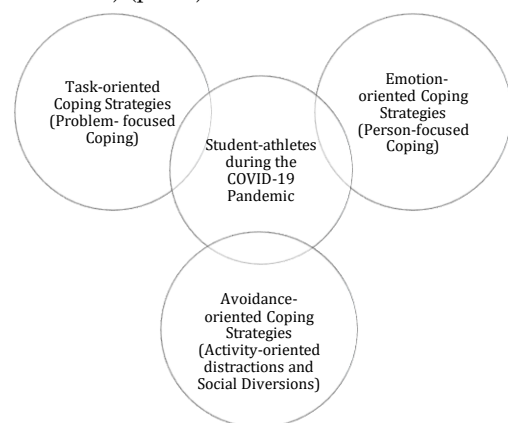


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Study

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative approach to describe the coping strategies of collegiate student-athletes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Survey method was applied wherein participants were requested to answer an online survey using the Google forms online platform. The survey contained open-ended/qualitative questions which inquired about the current whereabouts and the overall

health, academic, family, mental and emotional conditions of the student-athletes and to know their ways of coping with the current pandemic. The open-ended questions allowed the participants to elaborate on their responses to the survey items.

### 2.2 Participants

A total of 309 out of 527 (58.6%) collegiate varsity players (n=149 males; 48.2%; n=160 females; 51.8%) ranging from rookies to seniors from fourteen sports events responded to the survey. They are enrolled in different degree programs in a private university, of different academic year levels, and currently attending the online mode of classes and athletic training while there is an ongoing pandemic. Their whereabouts indicated that they are currently staying with their respective families and relatives locally and abroad. Student-athletes from the following sports were represented: athletics (n=15), badminton (n=18), baseball (n=18), cheerleading (n=39), chess (n=6), fencing (n=22), football (n=33), judo (n=13), lawn tennis (n=23), softball (n=11), swimming (n=27), table tennis (n=14), taekwondo/poomsae (n=28), and volleyball (n=42). Their participation in the survey was endorsed and strongly encouraged by the university's sports office. They were informed about the objective of the survey which is primarily to help the sports office and its staff to plan on interventions that can be extended to the student-athletes while the pandemic is ongoing.

### 2.3 Procedure

The study was conducted during the first few months of the pandemic and while strict government-imposed restrictions are being implemented in the country. An electronic survey was distributed to the student-athletes by a coordinator in the sports office via Google forms with the help of the coaches and team captains of the respective sports. They were instructed to use their university assigned email addresses in completing the survey. Aside from informing them of the rationale for the survey, their consent in the utilization of the gathered data for research and program development was obtained as well. Permission to use the data for research purposes was also secured from the Executive Director of the university's sports office. Participants were also informed that no identifiable information will be shared in the event that the data gathered from them will be used for research presentation or publication. Data gathering took place in a two-month period (July to September 2020). The retrieval of data and participation of some student-



athletes became challenging and limited because of internet connectivity issues.

## 2.4 Data Analysis

In examining the qualitative data that was gathered from the responses of the participants, a deductive approach in doing thematic analysis was employed by the researcher. Survey responses of the participants were classified according to the three types of coping strategies (i.e. task-oriented, emotion-oriented, avoidance-oriented) that were formulated by Parker and Endler (1992) and was used as a framework for this study. Individual items were examined, and codes or labels were used to highlight or describe the responses which are relevant to how each type of coping strategy was described or defined in the coping model that was used. The data were grouped based on the codes which allowed the researcher to have an overview of the main ideas and patterns that came up repeatedly. Common themes from each type of coping strategy are then derived. A careful review of these themes was done by comparing them again to the set of data and reassessing whether there is a need to discard or combine some of them. Aside from the researcher, the common themes were also examined by two external validators to ensure consistency with the researcher's interpretation. Results of the analysis were reported to the university's sports office who handles the needs of the student-athletes to aid in intervention and program planning.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the data gathered, 186 out of 309 (60.19%) student-athletes indicated that they are coping well with the COVID-19 pandemic while 108 (34.95%) responded "maybe" but interestingly listed down specific coping strategies that they employed to cope. A small percentage of the respondents (4.85%) indicated that they are not coping well during this pandemic. The findings of the study showed that majority of the student-athletes utilized task-oriented or problem-focused coping strategies (43%) followed by avoidance-oriented coping strategies (29.1%) and emotion-oriented or person-focused coping strategies (22.3%). A few of the respondents (10.7%) did not specify any strategies used to cope but indicated that they are coping well while almost twenty one percent (20.7%) of them utilized more than one type of strategy.

It was derived from the results that task-oriented or problem-focused coping strategies used by the student-athletes centered on taking actions to

modify the situation and in generating alternative solutions to minimize the effect of the current stressful situation in their life. The common themes that were found include maintaining focus on their academic and athletic goals, complying with government-prescribed health and safety protocols, adopting a healthy lifestyle, learning new skills to manage the problem, maximizing available support, and keeping themselves informed of the current COVID situation. The unexpected halt in the competitions that they were rigorously preparing for prior to pandemic could have led them to modify their goals and focus. They dealt with the situation by balancing their time to attend to other important responsibilities such as attending online classes and team trainings and fulfilling of academic requirements. In addition, they are now given responsibilities at home while on confinement. Common statements specified by the participants include "I keep myself busy and productive by focusing on schoolwork and house chores"; "I get through the day doing what I have to do in my classes and in my team training"; and "I try to stick to a routine and take breaks when I'm tired". It is also noteworthy that the strategies that these student-athletes used in order to confront the stressful situation and to minimize its effect include being updated about the current situation through news and strictly complying with government-imposed protocols on health and safety and at the same time adopting a healthy lifestyle to improve their diet, fitness and well-being. Commonly stated responses which describe these strategies include "I stay most of the time at home, listen to the news and follow the government's rules for our safety"; "I try my best to focus on maintaining my grades and fitness"; and "I monitor the COVID situation in the news and social media". Moreover, they have looked for alternative solutions to aid them and their families financially while the pandemic is ongoing. They learned new skills that will allow them to earn, and they explored community and online sources of support which they can avail for information and assistance. In relation to this, participants gave statements such as "I looked for side jobs to earn money because my parents are out of work"; "My family and I avail of support from our barangay"; and "I used my skill in baking and learned digital arts to earn extra money". Maximizing their time with the family is also one of their ways to modify the limitations in the current situation. "I make the most out of my time at home with my family; being with them makes it easier to have support while on quarantine" is a sample statement from a participant that describe a problem-focused/task-oriented coping strategy.



Data gathered likewise showed that emotion-oriented coping strategies were adopted by the student-athletes to regulate the different emotions triggered by the pandemic and to maintain physical and mental wellness. The common themes which were found in the participants' responses include having a positive mindset and being grateful despite the situation; accepting and adjusting to the situation by focusing on one's physical and mental wellness; engaging oneself with self-care activities, physical and spiritual activities that may ease the stress brought about by the pandemic; regulating one's emotions; and trying to have a sense of normalcy in their daily activities. Positive mindset mostly described staying grateful despite the unpleasant situation and having the acceptance that they can no longer compete during the rest of the tournament season but remains clear about the importance of maintaining physical and mental wellness. Some of the statements that gave meanings to the themes mentioned include "I'm just trying to live in the moment with a positive mindset and pray when I worry too much"; "I have faith that this pandemic will come to an end and things will go back to normal again"; "I choose not to give up despite what's happening"; "I just stay calm at home and remind myself how lucky I am compared to others"; and "There's no other way but to accept and adjust to the situation". Commonly used activities that were highlighted as helpful in managing their emotions and maintaining calmness are meditation, prayer, holding on to one's faith, journal writing, practice of mindfulness and exercise. These allowed them to be mentally tough and to adapt to the new way of living their student-athlete life. Participants wrote relevant statements such as "It feels good to write down your frustrations about the situation and then pray about it after"; and "I try to manage my emotions by staying calm, meditate and doing regular exercise." There was also effort to maintain other pre-pandemic activities that are still doable even through a different mode in order to feel a sense of normalcy out of the unusual situation that is being experienced.

Results also revealed that avoidance-oriented coping which appeared in the form of task and people-oriented activities were very much adopted by the student-athletes in order to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. Task-oriented activities which serve as distractions or distancing from the stressful situation (i.e. pandemic) include keeping oneself busy with household chores, hobbies, and other relaxation activities while person-oriented activities which are considered social diversions include online interaction with friends and family members who are away from home. Maintaining connections or communication

with friends and teammates was expressed more since majority of the respondents are staying at home with their respective families. This social diversion seemed to allow the student-athletes to veer away from the stressful situation that is confronting them. It was also evident that most of the respondents kept themselves busy with household chores and with hobbies (e.g. baking, cooking, digital art, drawing, reading, and playing musical instruments) that were not part of their daily or weekly routine prior to pandemic; while others have preoccupied themselves with online activities such as gaming, using social media and watching movies or TV series. Others would distance themselves from the stressful situation by sleeping and by not reading or watching the news about the pandemic. Participants' specific statements that gave meaning to the themes developed in the avoidance type of coping strategy include- "I try to be busy with my hobbies"; "I distract myself with other activities to keep my body and mind working"; "I indulge in good books, nice movies and fixing my room"; "I do a lot of gaming and watching series online"; "I spend time to bond with my friends online"; and "I do a lot of activities with the family".

While in many cases these student-athletes did not have control over the existing environmental circumstances, they still opted to assume control over their emotional responses and their willingness to adjust their goals and routines accordingly. Majority of them made a conscious decision to modify their goals for the quarantine period (e.g. maintain fitness and strength) and apply any required modifications to their daily and weekly routines and lifestyle so as to prepare as well for in-person return to sport activities. The decision to change and to look for alternatives could indicate the student-athletes' effort and willingness to keep their motivation and perhaps to stay close to their sport engagement and athletic identity despite the uncertainty.

The findings of this study also suggest the importance of self-efficacy in coping with the effects of a stressful situation such as a pandemic. Self-efficacy is explained by Bandura (2001) as "people's beliefs in their capability to exercise some measure of control over their own functioning and over environmental events". Through the coping strategies that they employed, the student-athletes in this study were able to exercise control over their stressors brought about by the pandemic and regulate their functioning in the different roles that they must perform in their academics, sports, and families. They have explored means to be productive to achieve positive outcomes and have used their capabilities outside of being an athlete to battle or minimize the effects of the



pandemic. Findings may also indicate that these student-athletes have the capacity to develop and implement a self-care plan in order to protect themselves from stress.

Connectedness with friends and teammates seem to also play a vital role in their coping with confinement, however, limitations to online connectivity may have posed major challenges in terms of building the team's relationship and cohesiveness which is easier to form during in-person team activities. This connectivity issue may have also greatly impacted their effort to manage their online classes and academic requirements however, it is noteworthy that despite this issue, student-athletes still use it as a strategy to cope with the pandemic by redirecting their focus on academic work.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Results would indicate that a big majority of these student-athletes are coping with the stress brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and that strategies to cope are in place. The unexpected changes and stress caused by the restrictions triggered different types of emotional responses from the student-athletes in this study but still they were able to produce effective change processes as a result of active decisions and adaptive coping efforts. The use of task-oriented or problem-focused coping strategies allowed them to restructure their goals while on quarantine and be creative in generating alternative solutions to the problem. The use of emotion-oriented or person-focused coping strategies helped them to discover their resources within themselves and how to be able to use them to maintain physical, emotional, and mental wellness. The avoidance-oriented coping strategies, on the other hand, allowed them to rediscover their interests for other activities as well as their roles in their families and to reconnect with people through a different platform. It is recommended that interventions to improve psychological flexibility and coping should be extended to those who are unable to manage the stress brought about by the pandemic. Counseling can be initiated to facilitate self-reflection, resetting of goals and to help them regulate their stress levels. Conduct of learning sessions and team meetings to discuss and share coping strategies employed may be done with reinforcement of the effective strategies used as the focus. For possible future research idea, a quantitative approach in treating the data gathered may also be conducted.

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