

## Stress and Coping Strategies of College Student-Athletes

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### **Abstract:**

Student-athletes experience enormous amount of stress due to the nature of the roles that they play. Being a student, one has to deal with the demands of academics- attending regular class hours, studying for tests, submitting projects, working together with their groupmates on certain tasks, etc. As an athlete, one also needs to attend to athletic responsibilities such as long hours of training, local and international competitions, etc. Balancing these roles can be quite challenging. Stress, when not managed effectively may result to negative consequences to a person's physical and mental health.

The study sought to shed light on college student-athletes' unique experiences of coping with the stresses brought about by their dual role of being student and athlete. It aimed to describe the different kinds of stress that student-athletes experience in their daily lives. More importantly, it aimed to investigate on the types of coping mechanisms that student-athletes employ in order to manage their stresses. Findings reveal that stress experienced by athletes come in the forms of interpersonal stress, academics-related, athletics-related and family financial stress. Results also show that athletes employ both vigilant and cognitive avoidance coping in managing their stress.

**Key Words:** student-athletes; stress; approach coping; avoidance coping

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Student-athletes are important members of a school community. They are ambassadors of the university to athletic events and competitions which bring pride and inspiration to the entire school community. They are often looked upon by members of the school community and are often expected to be role models. However, despite the positive image they portray, they are considered as a vulnerable group (Yang, et al., 2007; Wilson and Pritchard, 2005). Being a student in a university, student-athletes' primary task is comply with academic requirements so that it will lead them to earning a degree (NCAA, 2019). They are usually mainstreamed with the rest of the student population so that they can focus on their primary role of being a student. Thus, they are not exempt from the normal stresses that students experience in college

students.

College is one of the most stressful and challenging periods in a students' life. The transition from high school to college brings about new forms of stress that students have no choice but to become familiar with. In order to be successful, they must learn to effectively manage stress. Some of the common stressors of college students are academic pressure, financial concerns, poor self and body image, lack of leisure activities, problematic living arrangements, and relationships with family and friends and poor quality of sleep (Chow and Flynn, 2016). While these stressors are experienced by college students in general, there are other forms of stress that are unique to student-athletes which multiplies their stress to higher levels. Stress, if not managed properly, may lead to physical, emotional and mental health problems (WHO, 2004).

Some of the stresses that student athlete's experience include problem in balancing time, missing classes due to athletic engagements, burnout, fear of failure, dealing with team mates, anxiety, depression and self-esteem issues (Wilson and Pritchard, 2005). Furthermore, student-athletes often worry about getting physical injuries, experience pressure during competitions including that coming from spectators, and experience conflict with coaches and referees while in competitions (Abedalhafiz, Altahyneh and Al-Haliq, 2010).

A review of related literature on student athletes' stress by Lopes, et al. (2020) identified two main sources: 1.) academic stress and 2.) athlete stress. Academic stress refer to pressures brought about by maintaining certain GPA in order to keep their scholarship and keeping up with school requirements (i.e. homework, exams, projects, etc.) while having intense daily trainings. About 86 – 95% of student athletes experience stress related to their academics (Humphrey et al., 2000). Records show that student athletes usually experience the highest levels of stress during periods when academic demands are great, causing them have sleep problems, become more prone to injuries and experience mental health problems (Hamlin et al. (2019). Athlete stress pertain to the stress they experience that are related to their cohort (i.e. sport-specific, individual or team sports). This includes physical training demands, competition schedules (e.g., travel time, missing class), dealing with physical injuries, sport-specific social support (i.e. relationships with teammates, coaches) and playing status (i.e. starting, non-starter, bench time, etc.). In addition to academic and athletic related stress, athletes also often negative and unsatisfactory relationships with their teachers, classmates, coaches and fellow-athletes (Humphrey et al., 2000; Papanikolaou et al., 2003). This is further aggravated by stigma coming from faculty and students associating student-athletes with negative academic behaviors (Simons & Bosworth, 2007).

Research shows that coping styles utilized by university student-athletes can be categorized based on the vigilant and cognitive avoidance coping style framework (Khronne, 1989). Vigilant coping, (also referred to active or approach coping) reflects moving towards the stressor in an attempt to resolve it. Examples of this that were thinking about the unpleasant experience, becoming enthusiastic in overcoming the problem, arguing, analyzing the problem and finding out more information about the problem. On the other hand, cognitive avoidance

coping referred to moving away from the stressor such as mental escape, feeling like giving up, learning from the experience and moving on and focusing on the next task at hand (Albedalhafiz, Altahyneh and Al-Haliq, 2010; Khronne, 1989). People are known utilize both strategies yet some are more inclined to use one over the other depending on the kind of threat they experience (Khronne, 1989).

The current study aims to investigate on the student-athletes' unique experiences of stress. It also aims to explore on the different coping strategies that they use in order to manage the stresses that are brought about by their challenging role of being a student and an athlete at the same time. The study of student-athletes' experiences of stress, as well as their coping strategies is relevant in determining proper interventions that will allow them to manage their stress levels better. Being able to manage stress is detrimental for athletes to succeed. When stress is not managed effectively, it can have negative impact on an athletes' physical health, mental health, as well as their cognitive and brain functioning, (Shankar and Park, 2016, NCAA, 2019). Thus, it is not surprising that athletes become predisposed to emotional distress and symptoms of mental health problems which include feelings of tiredness, nervousness, hopelessness, sadness, depression, effort and worthlessness (Chow and Flynn, 2016; Yang, et al., 2007; Wilson and Pritchard, 2005). Student-athletes' high levels of stress has detrimental effects on their physical health, sleep, academic performance, and mental health (Slingerland, Durand-Bush, Rathwellm 2017; Kohs, 2015). At the worst case, untreated mental health problem can result to suicide (WHO, 2004).

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The study made use of phenomenological approach in qualitative research which allows the researcher to investigate on the unique lived experiences of a phenomena by individuals and describe its essence based on the participants' depictions of the phenomena (Creswell, 2014).

A total of seven (7) student-athlete participants, five (4) females and three (3) males, with ages 20 to 22 years were recruited for the study. Participants' year levels range from second year to fifth year college. All participants are currently enrolled in an academic program and are actively participating in university athletic sport program for atleast a year. They are

receiving either partial (50%) or full (100%) scholarship from their university, fulfilling a minimum grade requirement of 1.6 (GPA) to maintain their scholarship. Four (4) participants are playing under individual sports category (i.e. fencing, lawn tennis) while three (3) are in team sports (basketball, baseball and football). Snowball or referral sampling technique was utilized in recruiting the participants in the study until enough sample was achieved based on the minimum number of participants required for the project.

The current study was a preliminary step in a proposed program development project for student athletes done in 2019. Approval was sought from the university's research ethics committee before data gathering. Informed consent was read and discussed individually to the participants before the interviews. Once written consent was given, the researcher collected data through individual interviews using a self-made semi-structured interview guide which includes questions on demographic data such as type of sport, years of service as an athlete, etc., the kinds of stress that they experience and their coping strategies in managing the stresses they experience as being both an athlete and student.

Data was analyzed using Hesse-Biber and Leavy's (in Mertens, 2010) step-by-step procedure in qualitative data analysis. This consist of 3 phases: 1.) Preparing data for analysis wherein raw data was transcribed in verbatim; 2.) Data exploration which involved reading, 'memoing' or taking notes of participants' responses and how they relate to one another; 3.) Data reduction which includes selecting parts that will be included in the coding process. Participants' responses were content-analyzed using conventional data analysis strategies, were coded and grouped together into aggregate themes. Exemplar statements were chosen to best describe the findings.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 Student-athletes stress

Student-athletes' experiences of stress were categorized into four types namely *academic stress*, *athletic-related stress*, *interpersonal or relationship-related stress*, and *financial stress* which supports previous findings on stressors experienced by student-athletes (Abedalhafiz, Altahyneh and Al-Haliq, 2012; Chow and Flynn, 2016; Yang, et al., 2007; Wilson & Pritchard, 2005).

Student-athletes often described experiencing ***academic-related stress***. They mentioned that they often do not have enough time to study for a test and being too exhausted from training to keep studying. They experience pressure in maintaining grades for their scholarship or for merit such as dean's list, pressure in meeting deadlines for academic requirements, and missing out on classes due to trainings for national competitions. It is common that they have difficulty finding a balance between academics and sports. One male student-athlete reported:

*"Two years ago, it was the time when my load was heaviest. Academic demands were heavy. I was working on my thesis, was enrolled in some other subjects and at the same time it was our sports season, so I had to do a lot of training. After training I have to immediately work on my thesis."*

The findings in the current study provides support to previous studies that identified academics stress as one of the top two stressors that student-athletes experience (Lopes, et al., 2020). Academic stress is often experienced by student-athletes during periods of high academic demands. Oftentimes. It is also in the same period wherein many student-athletes experience injuries and mental health problems (and academic-related stress were often (Hamlin et al., 2019).

Student-athletes also reported ***athletic-related stress***. This includes stresses that they experiences in relation to the demands of their sport. They are not allowed to miss out any training without very valid reasons, otherwise there will be consequences (such as not being given play time, being mistrusted by their coach and being excluded from the national team). One female student-athlete mentioned that the only times one can be excused for a training is when someone died or one is hospitalized. Another mentioned that there are times that not even illness can be used as an excuse to miss out on training:

*"Nagte-training po kahit may sakit. Yung lagnat po or matinding ubo po or matinding sipon po. Pero nasanay na din po ako kasi yung dati kong senior nagsabi kung bakit di daw ako magtetraining porke't may sakit daw ako, dapat magtraining daw ako. Kahit parang di ko na talaga kaya, fino-force po nya ako. Nagalit nga po*

*mama ko eh... pero naiintindihan ko naman po kasi siguro part talaga yun ng pagiging athlete na magsacrifice ka kahit may sakit ka.. na gawin mo kasi para din naman sayo yun. (We train even if we are sick with fever, severe cough or severe colds. But I'm used to it because my former senior asked why I am not training just because I am sick. She said I should train even when sick, even if I think I cannot take it anymore, she forced me. My mother got angry for this... but I understand that this is just part of being an athlete. Sometimes you need to sacrifice even when you are sick, because it is also for your own good.)"*

One female athlete explained how heavy the pressure is to win and perform well during competitions. She mentioned *"just seeing the banners outside the building already makes me so nervous."* Others mentioned about lack of proper equipment for their sport. Some sports are prioritized over others which leaves some teams with poor equipment. There were also some mentions of not enough time to train with their coaches because athletes who compete for national competitions are given priority.

The current findings provides evidences that along with academic stress, athletic-related stress is also a major concern among student-athletes (Lopes, et al., 2020). Athletic stress results from having unique experiences by athletes when they are performing or training with their fellow athletes. Examples of these are physical demands of training, not being able to attend classes, traveling, injuries, and playing status.

Student-athletes reported **interpersonal stress** brought about by family conflicts especially those who are pressured to perform well in school and in their sports. Some who are living away from their families experience homesickness. Depending on how far their provinces are, they only get to see their families on limited occasions. Some reported that being an athlete separates them from the rest of the world which makes them miss out on most social events with friends and families. Relationship problems extend in their classrooms. They experience being isolated in group works as non-athlete classmates do not want to work with them due to difficulty finding common time. They often get stereotyped as *"bobo"* or *"walang alam"* (dull), *"tamad"* (lazy) or "free loaders" by their classmates which contributes to why they feel that others avoid them. One female student-athlete

reported that at one point, she was offered by a groupmate to be included in the group project even without necessarily participating just so the rest of the group can proceed in working on the task without the hassle of meeting up with a student-athlete: *"Basta isulat mo nalang pangalan mo dyan, kami na ang bahala!"* (Just write in your name there and we'll take care of the rest). One athlete suggested that even professors sometimes treats student-athletes badly: *"Mafeel mo talaga hate nila ang athletes."*

Such findings provides support to the notion that student-athletes experience relationship problems and stigma from their teachers and peers (Humphrey et al., 2000; Papanikolaou et al., 2003; Simons & Bosworth, 2007). This may have something to do also with the fact that they often miss out on class discussions due to frequent traveling and training causing them not only to lag behind in academics but also to be socially isolated.

A source of stress that has not often been described in literature is the **family financial stress** that some athletes experience. All the athletes included in the study are considered scholars which means that they are enjoying free tuition fees. Some of them reported family problems concerning money which shows that socioeconomic status of student-athletes may have something to do with their stress. One female athlete illustrated this:

*"Isa po sa mga distractions ko, yung financial. Unstable po. Kasi yung mommy ko ngayon maraming binabayaran so iniisip ko kung paano baa ko makakatulong. Kaso sabi ng mama ko focus lang daw po muna ako sa pag-aaral, kaso po, talagang gusto ko po sanang makatulong. Family financial problems. (One of my distractions is my financial. [Our finances are] unstable. My mom has a lot of bills to pay and I keep thinking how I can help her. However, my mom said I should focus on my studies even if I really wanted to help."*

### 3.2 Student-athlete's coping

Student athletes made use of both *vigilant* and *cognitive avoidance coping*. Examples of their **vigilant coping** include time management; talking things out with their team mates; attending to the needs of other athletes; staying focused on their task; making sure they had enough time to sleep; resolving



disagreements; positive self-talk; studying hard; motivating others to study; seeking help from coaches/superiors/ counselor; prioritizing their academics and living by good example so that others will follow them. One female student-athlete gave an exemplar description on this:

*“Gigising po ako lagi ng 6am to 7am po para magprepare. Nakaprogram na po kasi ang schedule ko, Every Monday, Wednesday and Thursday, kailangan magtetraining po ako until 12 noon. Tapos po kain na po ako, Siguro yung rest ko lang po mga 1 hour and 30 minutes tapos po nun pasok na po ako hanggang 6pm. Tapos after po nun daily struggles po like mahirap po sumakay, siksikan po sa LRT, so kahit pagod ka na, pag ginagawa mo po yun, parang in the long run, masasanay nalang din po yung katawan ko na kahit na mahirap sumakay, sige go lang para makauwi. Tapos pag dating pa po sa bahay, sabi ko- ano bayan may gagawin nanaman ako kasi may mga assignments po ako, projects, tapos may mga times na may iuutos pa po yung mama ko na magwalis ka muna, pero ok lang naman po sa kin yun, di naman po ako nagrereklamo. It’s part lang naman ng lahat. Nasa tao po yun. Dun ka po nag-gogrow. (I wake up between 6am to 7am to prepare. My day is usually programmed. Every Monday, Wednesday and Thursday, I need to train until 12 noon. Then I eat I get to rest for 1.5 hours and then I attend classes until 6pm. I then deal with daily struggles of commuting home. Even if I am tired, I still pursue because if I do that, in the long run, my body will get used to it. I just tell myself, just go so you can reach home, when I reach home, I say I still have things to do because of my assignments, project. Then there are times that my mom will ask me to sweep the floor, but it’s okay, I am not complaining. It’s just part of all these. It all depends on the person. That is how you grow.”*

Although vigilant coping allows individuals to deal with stressful situations actively, for student-athletes, vigilant coping does not necessarily mean that it is an effective way of coping as shown in one the student athlete’s example who tended to ruminate on his stressful experiences at night:

*“It makes me sad at night, I just lay in bed and wonder did I really live up my college life dedicating so much to the sport, unlike everyone else, they get to join orgs, other activities, meeting so many people. I barely know anyone except other athletes. College is supposed to be the years that you establish a lot of connections, but I can’t do that because I’m busy. I just tell myself ‘ginusto mo yan’ (That is what you wanted). Scholarship keeps me going. There’s also pride in saying that I’m an athlete. It makes you think that you have your life together, but then deep down, it’s really sad. It’s okay, I know what I signed up for. But there are just times when it makes me sad.*

**Cognitive avoidance coping** has also been observed among the student-athletes. Some of the examples given were directly related to academic-related stress. One female athlete implied that she tends to stop and just cry in the bathroom if she thinks she is not improving, which another example of avoidance is coping. Another athlete mentioned that he and his fellow athletes prefer sports over academics, thus they try to avoid doing academic-related tasks by purposely coming late to class and free-loading in group works. Some athletes resort to spending more time in gaming or working out in the gym just to avoid academic tasks. Similar reports were recorded by (Abedalhafiz, Altahyneh and Al-Haliq, 2010) that athletes make use of escapism as avoidance coping.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Student-athletes experience a wide array of stress related to fulfilling their challenging roles as university student and athletic ambassador of their schools. These have to do with interpersonal stress, academic, stress related to athletics and financial stress. Stress can have detrimental consequences on student-athletes academic and athletic performance, cognition, behavior, emotions and overall wellbeing. If neglected, it can take a toll on ones’ mental health. Student-athletes also make use of a variety of coping strategies which can be classified as approach or avoidance coping (Khrone, 1996). Although approach coping is often more favorable because it makes a student-athlete face stressful situations actively in the hopes of resolving a problem, not at all times do they employ effective strategies. Findings in this study provide useful information that can help schools

develop interventions on helping student athletes cope with stress. Results can be beneficial to teachers, administrators, counselors, student-athletes, coaches, trainers and student-athlete's families on how they can provide effective support to ensure the success of student-athletes. Future researches may want to look into other sources of information of student-athletes experiences of stress such as coaches, teammates, parents, etc., as well as utilize other research design and methodologies in examining student-athlete's stress and coping.

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