

Lived Experiences of Female Collegiate Athletes: Basis for Policy Enhancement

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ABSTRACT (9 pt)

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This research explores the lived experiences of female athletes at the collegiate level, with the aim of providing a basis for policy improvement in sport. Women in sport often face complex challenges caused by gender inequality, academic pressures and athletic demands. Through a qualitative case study approach, this research involved ten participants from various sports and conducted semi-structured interviews to explore themes such as support, resource inequality, and the influence of gender stereotypes. Findings showed significant disparities in access to resources and incentives compared to male athletes, as well as the negative impact of gender stereotypes on their self-confidence. However, the presence of a strong support system, both from peers and coaches, was instrumental in maintaining athletes' motivation and well-being. This study recommends policy improvements to support the fulfillment of female athletes' aspirations, including more equitable resource allocation, increased visibility of women's sports, and the provision of mentoring programs and mental health support. With the implementation of these recommendations, it is hoped that institutions can create an environment that empowers female athletes to achieve better, both academically and athletically.

INTRODUCTION

Female collegiate athletes face a complex range of challenges shaped by gender-based inequalities, academic pressures, and athletic demands. Historically, women in sports have been marginalized through unequal access to resources, limited opportunities for recognition, and deeply entrenched stereotypes. These challenges are particularly pronounced in collegiate sports, where athletes must balance rigorous training with academic responsibilities. Despite these obstacles, female athletes demonstrate remarkable resilience and determination to succeed both on and off the field (1).

This study explores the lived experiences of female collegiate athletes, focusing on variables such as incentives, support systems, balancing responsibilities, coaching, gender stereotypes, and personal practices like prayer and coffee consumption. By capturing these experiences through qualitative narratives, this research aims to inform institutional policy enhancements that promote equity and support for female athletes(2).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to gain deep insights into the experiences of female collegiate athletes. Ten participants from various sports, including basketball, track and field, swimming, and soccer, were selected. Each participant had at least one year of athletic experience at the university level. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, focusing on themes such as access to resources, academic and athletic balance, mentorship, and personal strategies for performance. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and key issues affecting the athletes (3).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

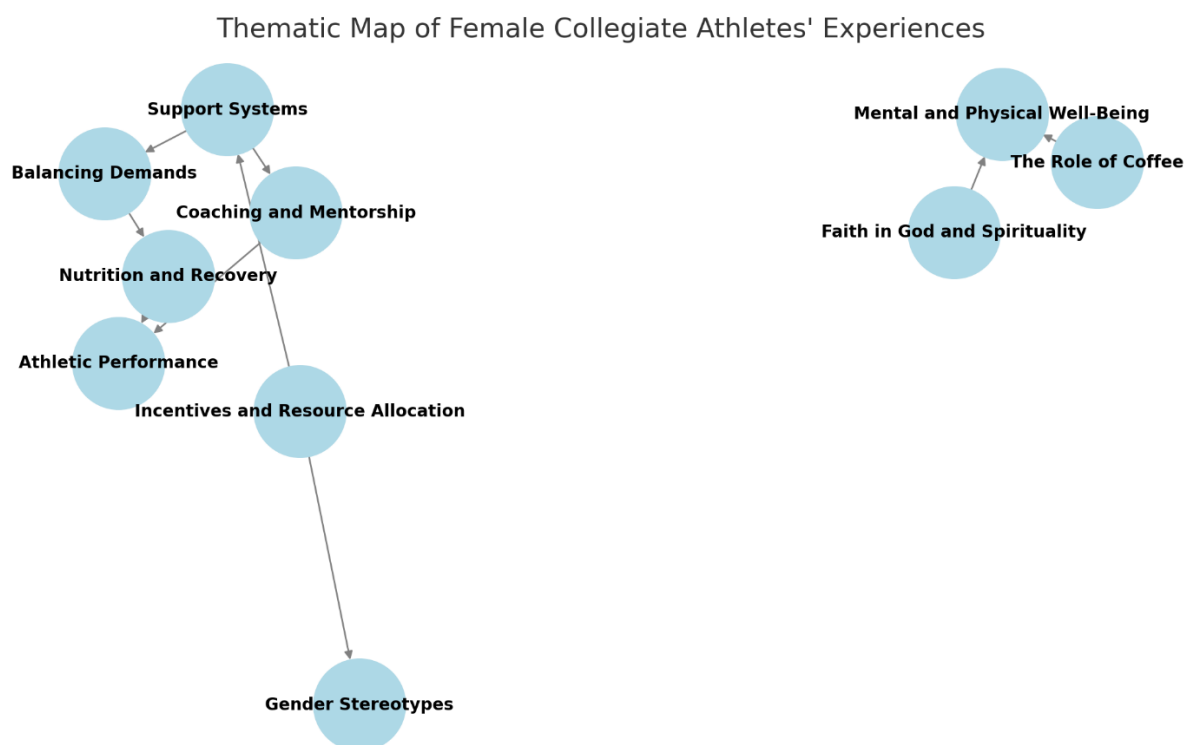


Figure 1. Thematic map of female collegiate athlete's experiences

1. Thematic Analysis and Narratives

1. Incentives and Resources

The narratives revealed that female athletes often face significant disparities in resources and incentives compared to their male counterparts. Julia, a volleyball player, shared that her team had to cover travel expenses out-of-pocket due to insufficient funding. "We often fundraise just to get to tournaments, while the men's team has everything covered."

Ashley, a basketball player, observed that the men's team received better training facilities and more media coverage. "Our games aren't even televised, while the men's games always have full coverage," she lamented. Mira, a tennis player, noted that inadequate equipment impacted her team's performance. "We have to use worn-out tennis balls that barely bounce. It affects how we train and ultimately how we compete."

Kyra, a track athlete, shared her experience of scholarship inequalities. "While male athletes received full scholarships, my partial scholarship barely covers my tuition. I've had to work part-time jobs to make ends meet."

Emma, a soccer player, highlighted the lack of sponsorship opportunities for women's sports teams. "Sponsors seem more interested in male-dominated sports. We rarely get new jerseys or travel gear."

Additional Narratives:

- **Lack of Travel Support:** Jasmine, a softball player, discussed the difficulties of traveling for competitions without institutional support. "We've had to use personal cars for long-distance games. It's exhausting and affects our performance."
- **Disparities in Health Resources:** Leah, a swimmer, noted that the men's team had priority access to physiotherapists. "I've had injuries that took weeks to get treated because the facilities were always booked by the men's teams."

2. Support Systems

Support systems were a crucial factor in sustaining athletes' motivation and well-being. Sophia, a swimmer, emphasized how her parents' encouragement kept her grounded during stressful times. "Every time I feel like giving up, my mom reminds me of how far I've come."

Diana, a soccer player, described the strong sense of unity within her team. "We're like a family. We push each other to be our best. Without their support, I wouldn't have survived some of the toughest training sessions."

Evelyn, a track athlete, highlighted the importance of mentorship from her coach. "My coach not only gives me training advice but also helps me manage my academic workload."

Elise, a long-distance runner, shared how prayer gave her a sense of calm before races. "I say a short prayer before every run. It clears my mind and helps me focus on the present moment." Similarly, Kelly, a volleyball player, said, "My faith gives me strength. I pray with my team before games, and it helps us feel united and motivated."

Additional Narratives:

- **Peer Support:** Rachel, a gymnast, expressed how her teammates were her emotional anchor. "They've been there for me through injuries and personal struggles. We lift each other up."
- **Mental Health Resources:** Laura, a basketball player, highlighted the importance of institutional counseling services. "Accessing mental health support helped me manage the pressure of balancing school and sports."
- **Coffee Culture:** Allison, a basketball player, mentioned that post-practice coffee runs had become a ritual. "We bond over coffee after morning practices. It's a small but essential part of our routine."

3. Balancing Responsibilities

The challenge of balancing academic and athletic commitments was a recurring theme. Rachel, a gymnast, described how frequent competitions caused her to fall behind in coursework. "I sometimes miss classes for competitions. It's a constant struggle to catch up."

Lana, a basketball player, shared that the pressure to excel in both academics and sports led to anxiety attacks. "The pressure can be overwhelming. I've experienced anxiety attacks before big tournaments."

Amy, a tennis player, explained that her schedule left little time for rest. "There are days when I go from class straight to practice, and by the time I finish, it's late at night."

Nicole, a soccer player, recounted experiencing burnout from constant demands. "There were moments when I thought I couldn't do it anymore. I even considered quitting sports altogether."

Olivia, a swimmer, emphasized the importance of time management. "I had to learn time management skills quickly. Otherwise, I would have failed both academically and athletically."

Additional Narratives:

- **Caffeine Reliance:** Jameson, a tennis player, discussed how coffee became a necessity. "It's not ideal to rely on caffeine, but sometimes it's the only thing that keeps me going during long training days."
- **Prayer for Balance:** Madison, a diver, shared how prayer helped her stay grounded. "When I feel overwhelmed, I take a moment to pray. It reminds me why I'm doing this and gives me strength."
- **Academic Flexibility:** Sarah, a volleyball player, mentioned that some professors were understanding of her schedule. "A few of my professors offered flexible deadlines during tournaments, which made a huge difference."

4. Coaching and Mentorship

Athletes described the dual impact of positive and negative coaching experiences. Emma, a runner, praised her coach for balancing high expectations with emotional support. "He knows how to push us without breaking our spirits."

In contrast, Natalie, a gymnast, recounted how a previous coach's harsh style affected her negatively. "He would yell at us constantly. It made me dread practice and hurt my performance."

Olivia, a diver, emphasized how constructive feedback motivated her. "Hearing my coach say, 'You can do this' during a tough session gave me the energy to keep pushing forward."

Claire, a sprinter, spoke about the empowering experience of having a female coach. "It's empowering to have someone who understands what I'm going through. She gives the best advice."

Additional Narratives:

- **One-on-One Mentorship:** Sophia, a volleyball player, explained how personal mentoring sessions helped her. "The individual attention helped me refine my technique and boosted my confidence."
- **Spiritual Mentorship:** Elise, a runner, mentioned that her coach incorporated mindfulness into practices. "We start and end each practice with a moment of reflection or prayer. It helps us stay grounded."

5. Gender Stereotypes

Many athletes expressed frustration over persistent gender stereotypes. Hannah, a soccer player, felt the pressure to prove herself to male athletes. "They think we're not as good just because we're women. I constantly have to prove them wrong."

Layla, a track athlete, described how sexist comments affected her self-esteem. "Someone said that women's sports aren't real sports. It hurt, but it also made me more determined."

Claire, a basketball player, overcame negative perceptions by focusing on self-improvement. "I stopped caring about what others thought and focused on being the best version of myself."

Additional Narratives:

- **Underestimation:** Evelyn, a swimmer, recounted being underestimated at mixed training camps. "They assumed I couldn't keep up, but I outperformed many of them."
- **Stereotypes in Contact Sports:** Lauren, a rugby player, shared how public perception limited support for her sport. "People say women's rugby is too rough. It's frustrating because we train just as hard."

Prayer for Confidence: Hannah, a soccer player, shared how prayer helped her overcome self-doubt. "I pray before every game to boost my confidence and remind myself of my worth."

CONCLUSION

This research highlights the multifaceted challenges faced by female collegiate athletes, including resource disparities, academic pressures, gender stereotypes, and the need for effective mentorship. Despite these obstacles, the narratives demonstrate the resilience and passion of these athletes, who rely on strong support systems, personal practices, and self-determination to succeed. By implementing the recommended policy changes, institutions can create an environment that empowers female athletes to thrive both academically and athletically, ensuring that they receive the recognition and opportunities they deserve.

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