Exploración del impacto de la identidad social y la dinámica de equipo en el comportamiento de búsqueda de ayuda en materia de salud mental entre atletas universitarios: un estudio cualitativo
Exploring the Impact of Social Identity and Team Dynamics on Mental Health Help-Seeking Behavior Among Collegiate Athletes: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract. This study explores the influence of social identity and team dynamics on the mental health help-seeking behaviors of collegiate athletes. The research aims to understand how factors such as gender, ethnicity, and social status shape athletes' attitudes and actions regarding mental health assistance. Method: Using a mixed-method approach that included focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews, data were collected from 30 athletes representing various sports disciplines, ensuring balanced representation in terms of gender, ethnicity, and social status. Result: Thematic analysis revealed significant themes: male athletes faced substantial stigma in seeking mental health assistance, viewing it as a sign of weakness, while female athletes were more open and supported by a culture of emotional expression. Minority athletes encountered additional barriers due to cultural stigma and a lack of culturally competent services, whereas majority athletes had better access to mental health resources. High-status athletes experienced pressure to maintain their image, leading to reluctance in seeking help, while low-status athletes faced challenges in accessing resources despite their willingness to seek help. Positive team dynamics, characterized by support and open communication, facilitated help-seeking behavior, while negative dynamics, such as bullying and lack of trust, created barriers. Conclusion: The study underscores the need for targeted interventions that address specific needs based on gender, ethnicity, and social status, promote mental health literacy, and foster supportive team environments. Future research should focus on the long-term effects of stigma-reduction interventions, culturally tailored mental health services, and the impact of team dynamics over time. These findings provide valuable insights for developing effective mental health support systems for collegiate athletes.
Keywords: Cultural Competency, Ethnicity, Health Literacy, Social Identification, Athletes, Bullying

Abstracto. Este estudio explora la influencia de la identidad social y la dinámica de equipo en los comportamientos de búsqueda de ayuda para la salud mental de los atletas universitarios. La investigación tiene como objetivo comprender cómo factores como el género, la etnia y el estatus social dan forma a las actitudes y acciones de los atletas con respecto a la asistencia de salud mental. Método: Utilizando un enfoque de métodos mixtos que incluyó discusiones de grupos focales (DGF) y entrevistas en profundidad, se recopilaron datos de 30 atletas que representan diversas disciplinas deportivas, asegurando una representación equilibrada en términos de género, etnia y estatus social. Resultado: Temático El análisis reveló temas importantes: los atletas masculinos enfrentaron un estigma sustancial al buscar asistencia de salud mental, viéndolo como un signo de debilidad, mientras que las atletas eran más abiertas y estaban respaldadas por una cultura de expresión emocional. Los atletas de las minorías encontraron barreras adicionales debido al estigma cultural y la falta de servicios culturalmente competentes, mientras que los atletas de la mayoría tuvieron un mejor acceso a los recursos de salud mental. Los atletas de alto estatus experimentaron presión para mantener su imagen, lo que los llevó a ser reacios a buscar ayuda, mientras que los atletas de bajo estatus enfrentaron desafíos para acceder a recursos a pesar de su voluntad de buscar ayuda. Las dinámicas de equipo positivas, caracterizadas por el apoyo y la comunicación abierta, facilitaron el comportamiento de búsqueda de ayuda, mientras que las dinámicas negativas, como el acoso y la falta de confianza, crearon barreras. Conclusión: El estudio subraya la necesidad de intervenciones específicas que aborden necesidades específicas basadas en el género, el origen étnico y el estatus social, promuevan la alfabetización en salud mental y fomenten entornos de equipo de apoyo. Las investigaciones futuras deberían centrarse en los efectos a largo plazo de las intervenciones de reducción del estigma, los servicios de salud mental adaptados culturalmente y el impacto de la dinámica de equipo a lo largo del tiempo. Estos hallazgos proporcionan información valiosa para desarrollar sistemas eficaces de apoyo a la salud mental para atletas universitarios.
Palabras clave: competencia cultural, etnicidad, alfabetización sanitaria, identificación social, deportistas, acoso escolar.

Introduction

The prevalence of mental health issues among collegiate athletes is a growing concern, impacting both their well-being and performance (Beasley & Hoffman, 2023; Ehrnstrom, 2023). Despite the high rates of conditions like anxiety and depression, many athletes do not seek professional help, with stigma being a significant barrier (Rogers et al., 2023). Additionally, the importance of mental health literacy (MHL) among student-athletes is highlighted, emphasizing the need to address mental health stigma and increase MHL campus-wide (Edwards et al., 2023). Factors such as social identity and team dynamics play a crucial role in athletes' help-seeking behaviors, with shared identities between athletes and sport psychologists potentially facilitating seeking mental health care (Eberman et al., 2023). Efforts are being made to create interprofessional healthcare teams dedicated to managing

mental health in collegiate student-athletes, underscoring the need for comprehensive support systems in place to address the mental health challenges faced by athletes.

Social identity, including gender and ethnicity, plays a crucial role in shaping attitudes towards mental health and help-seeking behaviors among athletes. Research indicates that male athletes tend to experience higher stigma surrounding mental health and often perceive seeking help as a sign of weakness (Gharibian & McCarty-Caplan, 2022; Ruben & LaPiere, 2022). Additionally, athletes from minority backgrounds face unique cultural barriers and encounter a lack of culturally competent mental health services, further hindering their willingness to seek assistance (Baker et al., 2022)(Dewi et al., 2023). The sport culture's emphasis on toughness and the "no pain, no gain" mentality may contribute to the stigma associated with help-seeking, affecting athletes' mental well-being and potentially leading to sport dropout (Purcell et al., 2023). Efforts to reduce stigma and enhance help-seeking behaviors should focus on promoting mental health literacy, cultural competency, and positive supports within the sporting environment (Garrett, 2022)(Puriastuti et al., 2013).

Team dynamics indeed significantly impact athletes' help-seeking behaviors. Positive environments with strong peer support and open communication are crucial facilitators for help-seeking (Brown et al., 2022; Ruparell, 2021). Conversely, toxic team dynamics and poor communication can act as barriers, hindering athletes from seeking the necessary support (Haslam et al., 2022). Athletes, especially at elite levels, often face pressures to appear mentally tough, which can further complicate help-seeking behaviors (Schaade, 2022). Recognizing the importance of mental health support in sports, it is essential for stakeholders to normalize mental health discussions, provide tailored online platforms for sharing experiences, and ensure that athletes have access to appropriate resources and support systems (Miller et al., 2023) . By fostering positive team dynamics and promoting open communication, the sporting environment can create a supportive culture that encourages athletes to prioritize their mental well-being and seek help when needed.

This study aims to fill the research gap by qualitatively examining the interplay between social identity and team dynamics on mental health help-seeking among collegiate athletes. Understanding these influences can inform the development of targeted interventions and support mechanisms to improve mental health outcomes in this population

Methods

Participants

The study involved 30 collegiate athletes, evenly split between male and female participants, ensuring gender-balanced representation. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 26 years, with the majority (50%) aged between 21 and 23 years, followed by those aged 18 to 20 years (40%), and a smaller group aged 24 to 26 years (10%). In terms of social status within their teams, 33.3% of participants held high-status positions such as team captains or star players, while 66.7% were considered low-status members, including new members and bench players. This distinction provided insights into how social hierarchies within teams impact mental health support-seeking behavior. Participants were also involved in various sports, with 60% participating in team sports (e.g., soccer, basketball) and 40% engaged in individual sports (e.g., tennis, swimming). This diversity enabled the exploration of how different types of sports environments influence athletes' willingness to seek mental health assistance. These demographic characteristics ensured a comprehensive understanding of the various factors influencing mental health help-seeking behaviors among collegiate athletes, taking into account gender, ethnicity, social status, age, and type of sport (Table 1).

Table 1.
The demographic characteristics of the study participants

Characteristic	Number of Participants	Percentage
Gender		
Male	15	50%
Female	15	50%
Social Status within Team		
High-Status (e.g., Team Captain, Star Player)	10	33.3%
Low-Status (e.g., New Members, Bench Players)	20	66.7%
Age Group		
18-20 years	12	40%
21-23 years	15	50%
24-26 years	3	10%
Type of Sport		
Team Sports (e.g., Soccer, Basketball)	18	60%
Individual Sports (e.g., Tennis, Swimming)	12	40%

This demographic information provides a clear over-view of the diversity and representation within the study sample.

Data Collection

Data were collected using a mixed-method approach that included focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):

1. Three FGDs were conducted, each consisting of 6-8 participants. The groups were stratified by gender and ethnicity to encourage open and honest discussion about sensitive topics related to mental health.

2. Each FGD lasted approximately 90 minutes and was facilitated by a trained moderator using a semi-structured guide to explore group dynamics, shared experiences, and collective views on mental health help-seeking behavior.

In-Depth Interviews

1. In addition to FGDs, 12 in-depth interviews were conducted to gain deeper insights into individual experiences and perceptions. These interviews provided a more detailed exploration of personal attitudes towards mental health, barriers and facilitators to seeking help, and the influence of social identity and team dynamics.

2. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was conducted either in person or via video call, depending on the participants' preferences and availability.

Data Analysis

The data analysis for this study involved a comprehensive and systematic approach to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings. Both focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process began with transcription and familiarization, where the researcher immersed themselves in the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts to identify initial patterns and impressions. Using NVivo software, the transcripts were then systematically coded to highlight recurring ideas and concepts. Codes were generated inductively, focusing on meaningful segments of text that related to the research questions. The initial codes were grouped into broader themes, and mind maps and thematic charts were employed to visualize the relationships between codes and themes. The identified themes were rigorously reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the participants' experiences. This involved an initial review of the themes against the coded data extracts, followed by a review of the themes in relation to the entire data set. Themes were defined and named to capture the essence of the participants' experiences, with sub-themes identified where necessary to provide detailed insights. A thematic narrative was developed for each theme, integrating participant quotes to illustrate and support the findings. To ensure rigor, triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, and maintaining a comprehensive audit trail were employed. These steps enhanced the credibility and transparency of the findings, providing robust and nuanced insights into the factors influencing mental health help-seeking behavior among collegiate athletes, particularly regarding social identity and team dynamics.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted following ethical guidelines and received approval from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection, ensuring they were fully aware of the study's purpose and their rights. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by assigning pseudonyms to all participants and securely storing all data.

Reliability and Validity

To ensure the reliability and validity of the study, several strategies were employed. Triangulation was used by combining data from both focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews, providing a comprehensive perspective on the research topic. Member checking involved participants reviewing their transcripts and the identified themes to confirm accuracy and resonance with their experiences. Peer debriefing sessions were conducted regularly with colleagues to challenge assumptions, refine themes, and validate interpretations. Additionally, a detailed audit trail was maintained, documenting every step of the data analysis process, including decisions made and changes implemented. These rigorous methods enhanced the credibility, transferability, and transparency of the findings, ensuring that the results accurately reflected the complex factors influencing mental health help-seeking behavior among collegiate athletes.

By employing a mixed-method approach combining FGDs and in-depth interviews, this study provides robust and nuanced insights into the factors influencing mental health help-seeking behavior among collegiate athletes, emphasizing the roles of social identity and team dynamics

Result

This qualitative study revealed several key themes regarding how social identity (gender, ethnicity, and social status) and team dynamics influence collegiate athletes' decisions to seek mental health assistance. The findings highlight both positive and negative factors that impact mental health support-seeking behavior (Table 2).

Impact of Social Identity

The influence of social identity on seeking mental health assistance among collegiate athletes emerged as a significant theme. Social identity factors, such as gender, ethnicity, and social status, shape how athletes perceive and approach mental health issues. These factors interact with personal experiences and societal expectations, influencing whether athletes feel comfortable seeking help and the kind of support they receive.

Gender Influences
Male Athletes

Male athletes face higher levels of stigma associated with seeking mental health assistance, often viewing it as a sign of weakness. This perception is deeply ingrained in the culture of male sports teams, where toughness and resilience are highly valued.

"In our team, it's hard to admit that you're struggling mentally because it's seen as a weakness" (Participant 7).

"Guys don't talk about feelings; it's just not something we do" (Participant 11).

"I feel like if I went to a counselor, people would think I'm soft" (Participant 15).

"There's this expectation to be tough and not show any signs of vulnerability" (Participant 19).

"Admitting you need help can be seen as failing, and that's scary" (Participant 22).

These quotes illustrate the significant barrier that stigma

poses for male athletes. The cultural expectation to appear strong and invulnerable discourages them from seeking the help they need, potentially exacerbating mental health issues.

Female Athletes

In contrast, female athletes exhibit more openness and willingness to discuss their mental health issues and seek help. The culture within female sports teams often encourages emotional expression and mutual support.

"*Talking about mental health is more acceptable among the women on the team; we support each other*" (Participant 12).

"*It's easier for us to open up about our struggles; there's less judgment*" (Participant 8).

"*We have a culture of caring for each other, so seeking help is seen as a strength*" (Participant 14).

"*Our team meetings often include discussions about mental well-being*" (Participant 3).

"*Being able to talk about our problems openly has really helped me cope*" (Participant 17).

These quotes highlight the supportive environment in female teams, where mental health discussions are normalized, and seeking help is viewed positively. This cultural difference significantly impacts the likelihood of female athletes pursuing mental health support.

Impact of Social Identity

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Ethnic Influences
Minority Athletes

Minority athletes face additional barriers due to cultural stigma and a lack of culturally competent mental health services. These barriers significantly impact their willingness and ability to seek mental health assistance.

"*In my culture, mental health issues are often ignored or not understood, making it hard to seek help*" (Participant 4).

"*There aren't many counselors who understand my cultural background*" (Participant 9).

"*I worry that talking about mental health will bring shame to my family*" (Participant 20).

"*It's hard to find someone who can relate to my experiences as a minority*" (Participant 13).

"*There's a lot of pressure to appear strong and not admit to mental health struggles*" (Participant 6).

These quotes highlight the significant cultural barriers that minority athletes face. The lack of understanding and representation in mental health services contributes to their reluctance to seek help.

Majority Athletes

In contrast, majority athletes generally have better access to mental health resources and face fewer cultural barriers. This facilitates a more supportive environment for seeking help.

"*I feel more comfortable seeking help because the services are tailored to people like me*" (Participant 10).

"*It's easier to find resources and people who understand my background*" (Participant 5).

"*There's less stigma and more acceptance of mental health issues in my community*" (Participant 16).

"*I have access to counselors who share my cultural experiences, which makes it easier*" (Participant 1).

"*Our school provides a lot of support for mental health, and I feel included in that*" (Participant 21).

These quotes illustrate the advantages that majority athletes have in accessing mental health resources, highlighting the disparities between different ethnic groups.

Social Status
High-Status Athletes

High-status athletes experience significant pressure to maintain their image, leading to a reluctance in seeking help. This pressure comes from their leadership roles and the expectations placed upon them.

"*As a team captain, I feel like I have to be strong for everyone else, so I can't show any weakness*" (Participant 3).

"*There's an expectation to always be at your best, which makes it hard to admit when you're not*" (Participant 7).

"*I worry that seeking help will make me look less capable as a leader*" (Participant 12).

"*Maintaining my image is important, so I can't afford to look vulnerable*" (Participant 18).

"*People look up to me, and I don't want to let them down by admitting I need help*" (Participant 23).

These quotes underscore the internal and external pressures high-status athletes face, which can prevent them from seeking the mental health assistance they need.

Low-Status Athletes

Low-status athletes are generally more willing to seek help but face challenges in accessing resources due to their lower influence and recognition within the team.

"*I want to get help, but I don't know where to start or who to talk to*" (Participant 8).

"*I feel like my concerns aren't taken as seriously because I'm not a star player*" (Participant 5).

"*It's hard to get the support I need because I'm not as well-known*" (Participant 13).

"*I feel overlooked when it comes to mental health resources*" (Participant 16).

"*There's less attention given to us, so finding help is more challenging*" (Participant 21).

These quotes highlight the struggles of low-status athletes in accessing mental health resources, emphasizing the need for more inclusive support systems.

Influence of Team Dynamics

Positive Team Dynamics

Teams with a supportive environment and open communication about mental health facilitated help-seeking behavior. Such environments encourage athletes to discuss their issues without fear of judgment.

"*Our coach encourages us to talk about our mental health, which makes it easier to seek help*" (Participant 5).

"*Having teammates who understand and support you makes a big difference*" (Participant 9).

"*We have regular check-ins where we talk about how we're doing mentally*" (Participant 14).

"*Knowing that it's okay to not be okay has been a big help for me*" (Participant 3).

"*Our team culture promotes mental well-being, so seeking help feels normal*" (Participant 11).

These quotes illustrate the positive impact that a supportive team environment can have on an athlete's willingness to seek mental health assistance.

Negative Team Dynamics

Teams with toxic dynamics, such as bullying or a lack of trust, created additional barriers to seeking help. These environments foster fear and discourage athletes from addressing their mental health needs.

"*The team culture here is very competitive and unsupportive, which discourages anyone from seeking help*" (Participant 11).

"*There's a lot of bullying and no real sense of trust, so I don't feel comfortable seeking help*" (Participant 6).

"*We rarely talk about mental health issues, so it feels like it's not important*" (Participant 18).

"*The environment is so toxic that admitting you need help would make things worse*" (Participant 20).

"*It's hard to find support when the team dynamics are so negative*" (Participant 15).

These quotes highlight the detrimental effects of a toxic team environment on athletes' mental health and their reluctance to seek help. Understanding these dynamics can inform interventions to create healthier, more supportive team cultures.

Table 2.
Themes and Subthemes

Gender Influences	Male Athletes: Higher levels of stigma
	Female Athletes: More openness and willingness
Ethnic Influences	Minority Athletes: Cultural stigma and lack of culturally competent services
	Majority Athletes: Better access to resources
Social Status Influences	High-Status Athletes: Pressure to maintain image
	Low-Status Athletes: Challenges in accessing resources
Team Dynamics	Positive Team Dynamics: Supportive environment
	Negative Team Dynamics: Toxic environment

This table provides a structured overview of the main themes and subthemes along with representative quotes from participants.

Visual Representation

These visual representations and thematic analyses provide a comprehensive understanding of how social identity and team dynamics affect mental health help-seeking behavior among collegiate athletes. The insights gained can inform the development of targeted interventions to support mental health in this population.
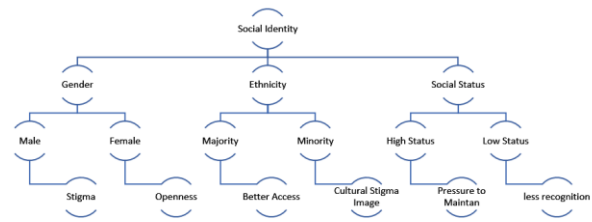

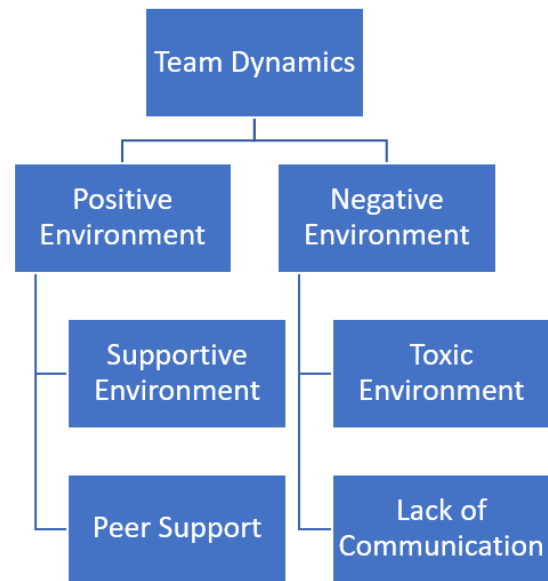Figure 1. Influence of Social Identity on Seeking Mental Health Assistance

Figure 2. Influence of Team Dynamics on Seeking Mental Health Assistance

Discussion

The research findings indicate that gender, ethnic background, social status, and team dynamics significantly influence mental health stigma and help-seeking behaviors among athletes. Male athletes generally exhibit higher levels of stigma and are less likely to seek mental health support, whereas female athletes show greater openness to addressing their mental health needs. Minority athletes face cultural stigma and a lack of culturally competent services, while athletes from majority ethnic groups have better access to resources. High-status athletes feel pressured to maintain their image, preventing them from seeking help, whereas low-status athletes struggle with resource accessibility. Furthermore, positive team dynamics foster a supportive environment that encourages mental health support, while negative dynamics create a toxic atmosphere that exacerbates mental health issues. These findings underscore the need for tailored mental health interventions that address these diverse influences to support athletes effectively.

The results of the study indicate significant gender-based differences in how athletes experience and respond to mental health stigma. Male athletes tend to exhibit higher levels of stigma towards seeking mental health support compared to their female counterparts. Research consistently shows that traditional masculine norms contribute to men's reluctance to seek psychological help, while women, including female athletes, tend to be more open and willing to seek mental health assistance (Purcell et al., 2023; Yoon & Petrie, 2023). This aligns with broader societal trends where women are more likely to utilize mental health services and openly discuss their mental health concerns (Kantar & Yalçın, 2023; Miller et al., 2023)(Derivaty Neo Alfenny et al., 2023). In elite sports, the stigma surrounding mental health issues, coupled with the idealization of psychological strengths, can further hinder help-seeking behaviors among athletes, emphasizing the need to address vulnerability and normalize discussions about mental health in sport settings (Sagar-Ouriaghli et al., 2023)(Pramudya et al., 2023). Additionally, studies on college student-athletes highlight the impact of perceived norms on help-seeking intentions, with gender playing a moderating role in the relationship between norms and intention to seek help, indicating differences in how male and female athletes approach mental health support services (Turgeon et al., 2022).

Ethnic background also plays a crucial role in shaping athletes' experiences with mental health services. Minority athletes often face cultural stigma and a lack of culturally competent services, which can hinder their willingness to seek help. Elite athletes face challenges in finding adequate support to address their unique cultural and psychological needs, as highlighted in various research papers. The importance of psychological support for athletes, including football players, is emphasized (Reardon, 2023)(Ernawati et al., 2023), while the need for a comprehensive mental health framework to cater to the mental health needs of elite athletes is underscored (Yoon & Petrie, 2023). Research also points out the limited attention given to the psychological and social aspects of concussive injuries in elite athletes, indicating a gap in addressing their holistic well-being (Purcell et al., 2023). Furthermore, the development of a system of psychological support for athletes at higher competitive levels is deemed essential to aid in their transition to elite performance and foster career longevity (Miller et al., 2023). These findings collectively suggest a critical need for tailored psychological and cultural support systems to meet the diverse needs of elite athletes(Evi et al., 2023). Conversely, athletes from majority ethnic groups generally have better access to mental health resources and face fewer cultural barriers when seeking support .

Social status within the athletic community further influences mental health outcomes. High-status athletes, particularly star players or team captains, indeed face substantial pressure to uphold their image, which can impede their willingness to seek help for mental health concerns due to the fear of being viewed as weak or less competent (Åkesdotter et al., 2023; "Psychological and Social Needs: Athletes' and Mental Performance Consultants' Perspectives on a Gap in Concussion Protocols," 2022)(Leandre et al., 2023). Research highlights that stigma, both internal beliefs about mental health and external factors like negative attitudes from coaches, remains a prevalent barrier to athletes seeking mental health care (Bochkareva et al., 2022)(Masfi et al., 2023). Moreover, the performance narrative prevalent in elite sports often demands a focus on outcomes, leading athletes to hide psychological suffering and adopt impression management strategies to protect themselves within their sport environments (But-Husaim et al., 2023)(Setyowati et al., 2020). This pressure to maintain a facade of strength can hinder high-status athletes from acknowledging and addressing their mental health needs, underscoring the importance of normalizing mental health discussions and support systems within sports to facilitate help-seeking behaviors (Purcell et al., 2019). In contrast, low-status athletes may face challenges in accessing mental health resources, possibly due to fewer connections or lower visibility within the team or institution.

Team dynamics are critical in shaping the mental health environment for athletes. Teams with positive dynamics, fostering mutual support and open communication, indeed play a crucial role in creating a supportive environment that encourages athletes to seek mental health help when needed. Research emphasizes the importance of mental health care in sports, advocating for annual screenings and ongoing monitoring to ensure athletes' overall well-being (McHenry et al., 2021). Additionally, the development of evidence-informed resources for coaches and sports clubs aims to better respond to mental health concerns among athletes, promoting well-being and early intervention strategies (Moore et al., 2022). Furthermore, collegiate student-athletes benefit from integrated care models and interprofessional healthcare teams that provide comprehensive support for their mental health needs (Barrio et al., 2021; Pilkington et al., 2022). Athletes, coaches, and high-performance staff in elite sporting environments face unique stressors that may hinder help-seeking behaviors, highlighting the necessity of creating mentally healthy environments through evidence-informed frameworks and tailored policies (Purcell et al., 2022). Conversely, negative team dynamics, marked by toxicity and poor communication, can exacerbate mental health issues and discourage athletes from seeking the necessary support .

Using qualitative methods in this research presents several limitations. First, the findings are not generalizable due to the limited sample size and the specific context in which the study was conducted. The qualitative approach relies heavily on subjective interpretations, which may introduce researcher bias and affect the neutrality of the findings. Additionally, qualitative data collection methods such as interviews and focus groups depend on the willingness and openness of participants to share their

experiences, which can be influenced by social desirability bias. Participants might withhold sensitive information or provide responses they believe are expected or acceptable. The depth of insight gained from qualitative methods, while rich, is also constrained by the variability in participants' communication skills and their ability to articulate their experiences and feelings. Furthermore, the analysis of qualitative data is time-consuming and requires a high level of expertise to ensure that the data is accurately interpreted and that thematic saturation is achieved. Despite these challenges, the qualitative approach provides valuable, in-depth insights into the complex factors influencing mental health among athletes, which are essential for developing nuanced and effective interventions.

Conclusions

The study reveals significant influences of gender, ethnic background, social status, and team dynamics on mental health stigma and help-seeking behaviors among athletes. Male athletes exhibit higher levels of stigma and are less likely to seek mental health support, while female athletes are more open to addressing their mental health needs. Minority athletes face cultural stigma and lack culturally competent services, whereas athletes from majority ethnic groups have better access to resources. High-status athletes feel pressured to maintain their image, preventing them from seeking help, while low-status athletes struggle with accessing resources. Positive team dynamics foster a supportive environment that encourages mental health support, while negative dynamics create a toxic atmosphere exacerbating mental health issues. These findings underscore the need for tailored mental health interventions for athletes, emphasizing the role of schools, families, health institutions, and government bodies. Schools should foster positive team dynamics and create inclusive environments, while families must provide emotional support and encourage open discussions about mental health. Health institutions and governments should develop policies and programs offering accessible and culturally competent mental health services, and future research should explore larger and more diverse samples, longitudinal studies, and the effectiveness of specific interventions to provide comprehensive recommendations for stakeholders.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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