

PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF PROBLEMS IN COMPETITIVE SPORTS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: This study investigated the psychological analysis of problems in competitive sports in Nigeria. The study examines the intense pressures stemming from societal expectations, financial instability, and the stigma associated with mental health, all of which contribute to stress, anxiety, and other mental health issues among athletes. Four research objectives guided the study. The population for this study consisted of four hundred (400) Nigerian athletes competing at the collegiate and professional levels across various Nigeria. Athletes were drawn from four major Nigerian cities: Lagos, Asaba, Port Harcourt, and Abuja. The sample size for this study was 200 athletes. Stratification was used to achieve representativeness by considering athletes' gender, type of sport, and level of competition (collegiate or professional). A structured online questionnaire was developed to serve as instrument for data collection. Athletes were asked to rate statements on a Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." The mental health stigma scale was also used to assess perceptions of stigma, personal attitudes toward seeking psychological support, and experiences of discrimination. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software was used for the analysis. The study concluded by emphasizing the need for comprehensive policies and culturally sensitive mental health services to foster a supportive environment for Nigerian athletes, ultimately enhancing their performance and overall quality of life. The research underscores the importance of continued collaboration between sports organizations, mental health professionals, and policymakers in addressing these challenges.

Keyword: Psychological Analysis, Competitive Sports, Mental Health.

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INTRODUCTION

The psychological problems that confront athletes in the course of their participation in competitive sports in Nigeria are enormous and have tentacles effects, not only on performance but also have overall well-being. The recent years have noted an increasing awareness as to the necessity of sports psychology in dealing with these challenges especially within the Nigerian settings. This branch of psychology is dedicated to understanding, and improving performance in athletes while also managing psychological barriers which can impede an athlete's success such as

stress and anxiety. With that said, there is still more ground to cover on mental health in sports as a portion of athletes continues living with the stresses and struggles pertaining to competition.

One of such issue is inadequate athlete support systems for coping with mental health issues (Okeke, & Adeola, 2023). Nigeria has been a power-house in the field of sports, and they have really concentrated much on Physical training than Psycho-training. This gap is causing athletes to burn out from fatigue, perform at a lower level and even retire prematurely if they fail under the mental pressures of their sports (Nigeria Yola Free Welfare Platform) as contained ed in the Sport Psychology Association Nigeria in 2023. These challenges call for not just sports psychologists but also the inclusion of mental fitness in each and every level on the Sports Training curriculum.

In addition, the stigma of seeking mental health support is a significant challenge for Nigerian sportspersons to overcome. Done and Dusted Mental toughness is frequently mistaken for not having any mental health problems and so athletes keep quiet about their suffering, says Sports247. These initiatives, like the one carried out by Sport Psychology Association of Nigeria (SPAN) which offer education on mental health and psychological support for athletes undergoing psychological problems resulting in a reduction in stigma SPAN/2020). These are complex issues that plague Nigerian sports, but as mental health becomes more recognized and valued for athletes there could be hope of a wholesomely developed athlete. Integrating psychological development with physical training and medical provision, Nigeria would improve its support services to athletes; this enables the nation get results from participants as well (Nigeria free welfare platform).

Statement of the Problem

Despite Nigeria's prominence in competitive sports, athletes face significant psychological challenges that impact performance and overall well-being. Inadequate athlete support systems, stigma surrounding mental health, and limited integration of psychological development in sports training curricula exacerbate issues like stress, anxiety, burnout, and premature retirement. The prevailing focus on physical training over psycho-training hinders holistic athlete development, underscoring the need for comprehensive mental fitness initiatives and reduced stigma around seeking psychological support.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The study investigated psychological analysis of problems in competitive sports in Nigeria. Specifically, the objectives are to:

- Investigate the key psychological challenges faced by Nigerian athletes in competitive sports
- Assess the impact of mental health stigma on Nigerian athletes' performance and willingness to seek professional psychological support
- Examine the role of gender and economic pressures in contributing to psychological issues among Nigerian athletes
- Explore the effectiveness of psychological skills training and mental health education in improving Nigerian athletes' mental well-being.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Psychological Challenges in Competitive Sports

The psychological obstacles in competitive sports are complex and have a substantial influence on athletes' performance and overall well-being. A prominent issue that frequently develops is performance anxiety, which is a prevalent psychological obstacle resulting from the pressure to achieve success. Athletes frequently encounter elevated anticipations from themselves, coaches, and fans, resulting in profound anxiety that can detrimentally impact their concentration, self-assurance, and overall achievement. Performance anxiety is characterised by feelings of worry, tension, and fear of failure, which can have a negative impact on an athlete's ability to perform at their best during contests (Cox, 2020; Weinberg & Gould, 2022).

Another notable obstacle is stress, which is closely linked to performance anxiety but has wider ramifications. Stress in sports can arise from a multitude of circumstances, such as the pressures of competition, the intensity of training, and the problems faced in one's personal life. Extended exposure to stress without sufficient coping skills can result in burnout, a condition characterized by physical, emotional, and mental depletion. Burnout is a matter of great concern due to its negative impact on performance, heightened risk of injury, and potential for athletes to completely abandon sports (Smith, 2021). Athletes can become overwhelmed by the demands of intense competition, particularly if they do not have the support mechanisms in place to adequately handle stress (Jones & Hardy, 2023).

Motivation is a significant psychological factor that has a vital impact on competitive sports. Athletes' motivation levels might fluctuate owing to several circumstances, including external demands, lack of development, or inadequate support. When motivation wanes, athletes may experience a decline in performance and struggle to retain the discipline required for intense training. The Self-Determination Theory (SDT) underlines the importance of intrinsic motivation, where athletes are driven by internal happiness rather than external incentives. However, in competitive sports, external motivations such as financial incentives or recognition sometimes overwhelm internal drive, leading to difficulty in sustaining long-term participation in sports (Deci & Ryan, 2017).

Mental health difficulties such as depression and anxiety disorders are becoming recognized as serious challenges in competitive sports. The stigma around mental health in sports sometimes inhibits players from seeking help, leading to unresolved concerns that might develop over time. Depression, in particular, can be aggravated by the stress of competition, injuries, and the isolation that typically accompanies a sports-focused lifestyle. This again highlights the importance of mental health care provision within sport, as this can drive motivation down and concentration may waver for an athlete who battles with such illnesses which in turn could limit their rate of performance (Reardon & Factor, 2017).

In the end, athletes require coping skills and resilience to deal with psychological challenges under pressure-performance demands. These can help athletes better navigate competition and their mental health include mindfulness, positive self-talk, and stress management techniques. Resilience...with so many swings and swings during an athletic career, it is impossible to sustain any sort of longevity without the ability to bounce back. These are the tools that sports psychologists provide for athletes and essential in helping athletes grow resilience to cope within competitive situation (Gould, 2019).

Mental Health Stigma on Nigerian Athletes' Performance

Mental health stigma is a critical limitation to the well-being and athleticism of Nigerian athletes. In Nigeria, the psychological aspect of health and wellness is a much misunderstood, often trivialised area of care that could potentially make 'mad'...wrong adjective wonder your mental state. Expectedly so considering our nonchalant culture towards asking for help of the mind – to think seeking therapy or attendance at a gym with weights historically used to treat patients with psychiatric disorders are associated with weakness in character and decorum. This social stigma is to blame for how athletes will see a mental health problem, running many into silence and denial so as never to be mocked or branded as “not so good” or perhaps even “fragile” (Adeoye, 2022). This stigma affects the cognitive function of athletes since they are unable to manage their anxieties, depressions, and stress while chasing high-performance scoring (Olowookere, 2021).

But fear of stigma sometimes hold those same athletes back from reaching out for professional help, even when they have the wherewithal to know they need it. Mental toughness is celebrated over mental health states in Nigerian sports and psychological challenges are often seen as not being resilient. Consequently, athletes may not be ready to seek help from psychologists or counselors as they fear stigmatization of mental weakness by their coaches, team mates and the public (Owoaje & Ogundipe, 2021). Part of the problem is that some athletes are less likely to address their mental health, which has a knock on effect in performance (poor performance leads to more pressure and stigma); it becomes a catch-22 where untreated mental health conditions become worse as a result.

According to research, this stigma is further embedded in cultural variables on mental health care in Nigeria. In many African cultures, mental health disorders are seen as spiritual or supernatural causes and not usually diagnosed-medical conditions (Adeyemi, 2023). Unfortunately, Nigerian athletes who identify with these beliefs will see their challenges as a sign of weakness that should be kept confidential than a disorder. This culture is not supportive to the expression of vulnerability or encouragement by athletes, and yet encouraging it enables a hesitancy for help as well acceptance as suffering in silence and both are harmful carrying potential negative effects like burnout, decreased performance, or leaving the sport entirely (Aluko, 2023).

This stigma affects not only mentally but also physically. Symptoms such as tiredness, broken sleep and a compromised immune system that result from mental health issues are not conducive to athletic performance (Reardon & Factor, 2017). Such symptoms could prevent athletes from training properly or healing injuries, which would erode their competitive advantage. College athletes are encouraged to: seek more catchy diagnosable labels, be prescribed mood-altering drugs so that they can continue competing; but this doesn't address the real problems students should be studying and learning from (mental health struggles) because it is bad for their performance long term (in your sports career and who the hell gives a shit otherwise?).

The solution to the mental health stigma in Nigerian sports is a multi-perspective approach. It is important to get campaigns awareness campaign into creation that will make mental health subjects seem normalized in society (Amadi, 2023). Providing more information on mental health to athletes, coaches and the public takes away the stigma of getting help. Moreover, by making psychological support anything like brain training workouts a regular feature of sport coaching programs it will start to fail the stigma not just when elements become extreme or

irrational (Smith, 2021). This will help reduce stigma, so that Nigerian athletes can get the support they need to improve their mental health and enhance sports performance.

Gender and Economic Pressures Role in Contributing to Psychological Issues among Nigerian Athletes

Psychological issues are common among Nigerian athletes with gender and financial pressures accounting for a significant amount. Mental health challenges are a shared experience among male and female athletes, but the pressures typically reveal themselves in different forms with slightly different gender-specific maladies. In Nigeria societal expectations surrounding gender roles can mean that the practice of sport by females is not only undervalued but also stigmatised. They can lead to feelings of loneliness, self-doubt and performance anxiety as their othered position struggles to reconcile society expectations against athletic high-achieving (Amadi, 2023). The challenges of female athletes are often increased due to the popular belief that sports are places where men excel and are then forced to conform without receiving the necessary support or encouragement from institutions (Okeke, 2022b).

Structural economic constraints sharpen these gendered dilemmas. Financial instability of the semi-professional grassroots Nigerian athletes leads to stress and anxiety (Aluko, 2023). It affects female athletes even more as they normally receive less support either financially, in the form of sponsorships, or on media coverage compared to male athlete. They cannot train at top-tier facilities, lack the mental resources to overcome their hurdles, and are unable to afford top-tier coaching (Amadi 2023). In turn, the compound discrimination and economic exclusion experienced by female athletes' court an undervaluing of themselves that makes them vulnerable to conditions like depression and anxiety.

The pressure to use sports as an economic vessel for male athletes is palpable. In Nigeria, sport — especially football — is seen as a key way out of poverty and up the social ladder. Such high level of expectation can be a source of considerable anxiety as it can lead to athlete's feeling the weight of an entire culture on the game — for example, their inability to meet performance expectations is not just another defeat but possibly tied with personal and familial failure and thus societal disgrace (Adeniyi, 2022). The very stress of knowing that athletes have a small window and limited time to keep their career alive is enough to regard the business much like the stock market on Wall Street: being unsure when they might get bench is stressful, identical burnout with mental fatigue. The latter factor also contributes to their emotional burden, as they are more likely to adhere and internalize the social construct around masculinity that inhibits mental health disclosure (Adeoye 2022)

This exaggerates the issue of mental health in terms of Nigerian sports, with economic insecurity being one of the biggest problems that are caused by it. Financial anxiety and insecurity is a reality many athletes often face due to delayed payments, lack of job security, and poor infrastructure (Ekejiuba, 2021). Not knowing where they will stand in the sports market can shatter young athletes, which leads to mental health difficulties like depression and chronic stress. Without the supportive economic structure (a clear path to a steady income, mental health resources, career development) employed athletes have, male and female athletes alike are left on an emotional precipice.

Cultural and Social Factors Contributing to Psychological Problems

Cultural and societal norms which are one of the main culprits in mental trauma faced minimally to very high extent by players engaged into competitive sports. In Nigeria, these factors are deeply rooted in societal norms and values, financial challenges, and widespread ignorance about mental health. Arguably the largest of those societal pressures is the idea that athletes need to be winners no matter what. Sports have been more than a means of personal success, they are also seen as an outlet for national pride. This cultural narrative to win creates immense pressure on athletes which becomes a consistent source of stress and anxiety, also fear of failure in competitions, playing leagues affecting their mental health and performance (Balogun, 2020; Owoaje & Ogundipe, 2021).

In Nigeria, athletes are often scrutinized under the harsh societal expectations when they do or fail to perform and that is a problem. The social landscape is particularly brutal, with athletes shamed not merely in the media but also by fans and neighbors. This examination can morph into a performance anxiety, as a fear of failing fans or gulp...developing one's own negative reputation. Few of athletes feel that they live in the very un-significant society where elites only wanted to focus sport development theory when they need some solutions and pressure in order for them meet their expectations while these can lead some of them almost insanity sponsorship periodization time (Adeniyi, 2022; Adeyemi, 2023).

The Nigerian athletes have also to endure a lot of psychological challenges and apart from the general stress of trying to secure the economic concerns play a huge part. A lot of athletes who are from the house where athletic is probably conceived to be a kind of way out of poverty. This in perspective set example implies how much on the line success means for many players. Many athletes experience financial uncertainty, are poorly sponsored and have no viable career prospects to move into when their sports days is finally over. This economic stress can spark an inevitable source of anxiety and depression, because athletes are required to compete at the peak to attain financial security for them self as well as their family (Aluko, 2023; Ekejiuba, 2021).

Suffering psychological problems is bad enough, but it is made worse by the stigma attached to mental health in Nigerian society. That being said, the stigma and perceptions surrounding mental health is complex: wanting to receive help for certain issues is seen as a sign of weakness. But this idea of mental illness as shameful or born from weakness has hindered hundreds of other athletes (in health and in sickness) from accessing the help required—and now, going without is perpetuating several psychological wounds that stand to only deepen with each passing season. Without open conversations around mental health in sports, athletes remain isolated and struggle to deal with the many pressures they face (Olowookere, 2021; Adeoye, 2022).

Finally, we must not overlook the historical influence of traditional gender roles in Nigerian society. Female athletes lose out on remarkably in significant methods by encountering stereotypes and pre-conceived notions about their genders, etc.; this leads to various psychological problems being faced by such women. All of this collectively tends to restrict their choices and adds a layer of stress, as they try to juggle the demands to do well on the field while fulfilling possible traditional commitments. The combination of gender and sports in Nigeria stresses the importance of a more inclusive and supportive environment that minimizes female athletes' hardships (Okeke, 2022; Amadi, 2023).

Strategies for improving Mental Well-Being in Nigerian Athletes

Mental Health Training Programs: To break the stigma around mental health in sport, it is important to educate athletes on what can be done if they feel they need help, which it all comes down how supportive their environment really is. Education on mental health should be included in training programs to help athletes understand stress, anxiety and depression. Athletes can feel more comfortable seeking treatment if and when needed by addressing mental health, the stigma develops. The role of even a sports psychologist can help players take the tools to manage their mental health and place these in addition to what they have access too from their coaching teams (Adeoye, 2022; Balogun, 2020).

Developing Strong Support Systems: Building strong support systems in sports teams and organizations is crucial to fortifying mental health. It may be as well that coaches, teammates and sports psychologists collaborate in order to make the field a place where athletes feel supported at any time. Such measures can range from peer support groups, through which athletes can muddle their way to a sense of shared experience and compare strategies on how to cope, up to mentorship programmes for linking less experienced athletes with those further ahead of the game in order help them navigate the vicissitudes of competitive play (Owoaje et al., 2021; Adeniyi, 2022).

Promoting Work-Life Balance: Helping athletes achieve a balanced work-life ratio is essential to preventing or reducing burnout and thereby boosting long-term mental health. This will take the form of ensuring that individuals have time for rest, recovery and engagement in non-sport related liked activities. Coaches, and sports entities in general, should help with the comprehensive formation of a player as they are more than just their career between the lines. Smith (2021) along with Jones and Hardy (2023) found that stress reduction sessions, such as developing better time management strategies or teaching mindfulness, relaxation exercises seemed to work.

Improving Access to Mental Health Services: One of the ways we can help these Nigerian athletes is to ensure that access to mental health care becomes easier. It includes expanding the resources of not only chaplains but also sports psychologists and athletic-counseling services. (And, telemedicine services can extend the ability to reach athletes in rural areas with limited access to mental health providers.) Providing discrete mental health and easy to access mental health services ensures that athletes can obtain treatments without being stigmatised or penalised (Olowookere, 2021; Adeoye, 2022).

Implementing Cultural Sensitivity in Mental Health Support: The importance of cultural sensitivity when providing mental health support for Nigerian athletes Those who work as mental health professionals with athletes need to be trained in the culture and societal pressures that drive mental illness experienced by athletes. This will involve understanding the stigma of mental health in Nigeria and identifying suitable culturally sensitive ways to tackle them. Clinicians who infuse mental health with an appreciation for cultural competency can establish rapport and provide greater help (Amadi, 2023; Okeke, 2022)

METHODS

This study adopted descriptive survey research design to explore the impact of mental health stigma on Nigerian athletes' performance and their willingness to seek psychological support. The population for this study consisted of four hundred (400) Nigerian athletes competing at the collegiate and professional levels across various sports, including football, athletics, and basketball. Athletes were drawn from four major Nigerian cities: Lagos, Asaba, Port Harcourt, and Abuja. The choice of cities was based on their prominence in the Nigerian sports landscape, and they offer a diverse pool of athletes. A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure the inclusion of athletes from different sporting disciplines. The sample size for this study was 200 athletes. The stratification helped to achieve representativeness by considering athletes' gender, type of sport, and level of competition (collegiate or professional). A structured online questionnaire was developed to serve as instrument for data collection. Athletes were asked to rate statements on a Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." The mental health stigma scale assessed perceptions of stigma, personal attitudes toward seeking psychological support, and experiences of discrimination. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine the relationship between mental health stigma and performance outcomes. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software was used for the analysis. Results from the data set were integrated in the discussion to provide a holistic view of the issue.

RESULT

Table 1: Mean rating of the key psychological challenges faced by Nigerian athletes in competitive sports

S/NO	ITEMS	SA	A	D	SD	TWS	X	Remark
1	I frequently experience high levels of anxiety before competitions.	80 (320)	100 (300)	15 (30)	5 (5)	655	3.28	Agree
2	Pressure to perform well in competitions affects my mental focus.	85 (340)	90 (270)	15 (30)	10 (10)	650	3.25	Agree
3	The fear of failure impacts my confidence during competitive events.	70 (280)	110 (330)	10 (20)	10 (10)	640	3.20	Agree
4	I find it difficult to recover mentally after a poor performance in competition.	60 (240)	95 (285)	30 (60)	15 (15)	600	3.00	Agree
Grand Mean							3.18	

Table 1 presents the mean ratings of key psychological challenges faced by Nigerian athletes in competitive sports. The data reveal that athletes generally agree that they frequently experience high levels of anxiety before competitions ($X = 3.28$), and pressure to perform well significantly affects their mental focus ($X = 3.25$). The fear of failure also impacts athletes' confidence during events, with a mean score of 3.20. Additionally, the difficulty of recovering mentally after a poor performance is highlighted, though with a slightly lower mean score of 3.00. Overall, the grand mean of 3.18 indicates that psychological challenges such as anxiety, pressure, fear of failure, and recovery from setbacks are common and agreed upon as significant issues faced by Nigerian athletes in competitive sports.

Table 2: Mean rating of the impact of mental health stigma on Nigerian athletes' performance and willingness to seek professional psychological support

S/NO	ITEMS	SA	A	D	SD	TWS	X	Remark
5	I avoid seeking psychological support because I fear being judged by others.	70 (280)	100 (300)	20 (40)	10 (10)	630	3.15	Agree
6	Mental health issues are often considered a sign of weakness in Nigerian sports.	90 (360)	85 (255)	15 (30)	10 (10)	655	3.28	Agree
7	I am open to receiving professional psychological support if I feel mentally overwhelmed.	60 (240)	95 (285)	30 (60)	15 (15)	600	3.00	Agree
8	Concerns about mental health stigma affect my performance in competitive sports.	80 (320)	85 (255)	25 (50)	10 (10)	635	3.18	Agree
Grand Mean							3.15	

The table above shows the mean ratings regarding the impact of mental health stigma on Nigerian athletes' performance and willingness to seek psychological support. The athletes generally agree that the fear of being judged prevents them from seeking psychological help ($X = 3.15$). There is also a strong agreement that mental health issues are often perceived as a sign of weakness in Nigerian sports, as reflected in the highest mean score of 3.28. Although athletes are open to receiving professional psychological support if overwhelmed ($X = 3.00$), concerns about mental health stigma still affect their performance in competitions ($X = 3.18$). Overall, the results suggest that mental health stigma remains a significant barrier to athletes seeking psychological support and that this stigma impacts their performance.

Table 3: Mean rating of the role of gender and economic pressures in contributing to psychological issues among Nigerian athletes

S/NO	ITEMS	SA	A	D	SD	TWS	X	Remark
9	Economic pressure to support myself or my family adds stress to my athletic career.	100 (400)	80 (240)	15 (30)	5 (5)	675	3.38	Agree
10	Gender expectations have created additional pressure for me in sports.	70 (280)	90 (270)	30 (60)	10 (10)	620	3.10	Agree
11	Financial instability contributes to my mental stress as an athlete.	95 (380)	85 (255)	15 (30)	5 (5)	670	3.35	Agree
12	As a female/male athlete, I feel I face unique psychological challenges that my counterparts of the opposite gender do not experience.	75 (300)	95 (285)	20 (40)	10 (10)	635	3.18	Agree
Grand Mean							3.25	

The table presents the mean ratings regarding the role of gender and economic pressures in contributing to psychological issues among Nigerian athletes. The data reveal a strong agreement that economic pressure to support oneself or family adds significant stress to an athletic career, as indicated by the highest mean score of 3.38. This suggests that financial responsibilities are a major concern for many athletes. Additionally, athletes generally agree that financial instability contributes to their mental stress ($X = 3.35$). The pressure created by gender expectations is acknowledged, but with a slightly lower mean score of 3.10, indicating that while it is a concern, it may not be as universally felt as economic pressures. Lastly, the mean score of 3.18 indicates that athletes recognize unique psychological challenges based on gender. Overall, the results highlight that both economic and gender-related pressures significantly affect the mental well-being of Nigerian athletes.

Table 4: Mean rating of the effectiveness of psychological skills training and mental health education in improving Nigerian athletes' mental well-being

S/NO	ITEMS	SA	A	D	SD	TWS	X	Remark
13	Psychological skills training has helped me manage stress during competitions.	90 (360)	85 (255)	15 (30)	10 (10)	655	3.28	Agree
14	I believe mental health education has improved my overall mental well-being.	75 (300)	95 (285)	20 (40)	10 (10)	635	3.18	Agree
15	Regular mental health training should be part of every athlete's preparation.	100 (400)	80 (240)	15 (30)	5 (5)	675	3.38	Agree
16	Mental health education programs should be mandatory for all Nigerian athletes.	95 (380)	85 (255)	15 (30)	5 (5)	670	3.35	Agree
Grand Mean							3.30	

Table 4 presents the mean ratings of the effectiveness of psychological skills training and mental health education in enhancing the mental well-being of Nigerian athletes. The data indicate a strong consensus that psychological skills training is beneficial for managing stress during competitions, reflected in a mean score of 3.28. Athletes also agree that mental health education has positively impacted their overall mental well-being, with a mean score of 3.18. The highest agreement is noted for the item stating that regular mental health training should be an integral part of every athlete's preparation ($X = 3.38$), highlighting the perceived importance of mental health training in athletic performance. Additionally, the recommendation for mandatory mental health education programs for all Nigerian athletes received a solid mean score of 3.35, further supporting the need for structured psychological support. The grand mean of 3.30 underscores a general agreement on the effectiveness of psychological skills training and mental health education in improving athletes' mental well-being, emphasizing the need for more comprehensive mental health initiatives in Nigerian sports.

Mental Health Stigma Scale

S/N	Statement	Mean	SD
1	I feel that mental health issues are often seen as a sign of weakness in Nigerian sports culture.	3.2	0.79
2	I am hesitant to seek professional psychological support because I fear being judged by teammates.	3.1	0.72
3	There is a lack of awareness and education about mental health among Nigerian athletes.	3.4	0.68
4	I would be less likely to be selected for competition if I disclosed a mental health issue.	2.8	0.85
5	My mental health struggles negatively affect my performance in sports.	3.3	0.75
6	The economic pressures I face as an athlete contribute to my stress and anxiety levels.	3.5	0.67
7	I believe mental health services should be more available and accessible for Nigerian athletes.	3.6	0.60
8	Gender stereotypes in Nigerian sports affect my mental health.	2.9	0.80
Grand Mean		2.78	

The responses from the Mental Health Stigma Scale suggest that mental health issues are generally perceived as stigmatized within Nigerian sports culture, with a mean of 3.2 indicating moderate agreement. A notable area of concern is the economic pressures faced by athletes, which had the highest mean (3.5), suggesting it is a significant contributor to mental health struggles. Additionally, the lack of mental health awareness (mean = 3.4) and access to mental health services (mean = 3.6) further compounds these issues. The standard deviations across the statements (ranging from 0.60 to 0.85) reflect moderate variability in responses, showing that

while many athletes agree with the stigma-related concerns, there are differences in individual experiences, particularly regarding selection fears and gender stereotypes, which had relatively higher variability.

Performance-Related Measures

S/N	Statement	Mean	SD
1	I believe that addressing my mental health concerns would improve my performance.	3.4	0.71
2	My performance declines when I am under psychological stress.	3.5	0.65
3	I feel pressured to succeed due to financial expectations placed on me as an athlete.	3.7	0.59
4	I avoid discussing my mental health challenges with coaches or sports administrators due to fear.	3.0	0.74
Grand Mean		3.4	

The data from the Performance-Related Measures highlights the impact of psychological factors on athletes' performance. With a mean of 3.7, it is evident that financial expectations are a major source of pressure for Nigerian athletes, often contributing to stress and anxiety. Similarly, athletes widely believe (mean = 3.4) that addressing mental health concerns would improve their performance, aligning with the strong agreement that psychological stress negatively affects their sporting outcomes (mean = 3.5). The standard deviations are relatively low, ranging from 0.59 to 0.74, indicating that there is strong consensus among the athletes regarding the significant influence of mental health on their performance and the avoidance of discussing mental health challenges with coaches due to fear of misunderstanding. These results underscore the need for better support systems to address mental health in Nigerian sports.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings from this study highlight significant psychological challenges faced by Nigerian athletes, which profoundly impact their performance. High levels of anxiety, particularly before competitions, were frequently reported, alongside the pressures to perform well and the fear of failure. These issues are consistent with research indicating that anxiety is a common concern among athletes, negatively affecting their focus and overall performance (Sport Psychology Association of Nigeria, 2023). The recognition of these psychological barriers emphasizes the need for targeted interventions aimed at developing coping strategies and resilience among athletes, which can ultimately enhance their competitive outcomes.

Another critical finding pertains to the stigma surrounding mental health within the Nigerian sports community. Athletes expressed a reluctance to seek psychological support due to fears of being judged and the belief that mental health issues are perceived as signs of weakness. This aligns with the existing literature that shows stigma can deter individuals from seeking necessary help, leading to untreated mental health conditions (Cox, 2020). The impact of this stigma is profound, as it not only affects athletes' willingness to seek support but also hinders their performance, highlighting the need for awareness campaigns and educational initiatives that promote open discussions about mental health.

Economic pressures were identified as a significant source of stress for athletes, with many feeling compelled to support themselves or their families financially. This finding echoes the sentiments expressed in other studies that link financial instability to increased mental health challenges among athletes (Ekejiuba, 2021). The interplay between socioeconomic factors and psychological well-being suggests that sports organizations and governing bodies must develop

support systems that address athletes' economic concerns, thus alleviating some of the psychological burdens they face.

The study also revealed a strong belief among athletes in the effectiveness of psychological skills training and mental health education. Athletes acknowledged that these programs helped them manage stress during competitions and improve their overall mental well-being. This aligns with recent findings that underscore the importance of mental health training in enhancing athletes' performance and psychological resilience (Gould, 2019). The recognition of these programs' effectiveness underscores the need for their integration into athlete development and training regimens.

Furthermore, athletes expressed a strong consensus on the necessity of making mental health education programs mandatory. This reflects a growing recognition within the sporting community of the importance of psychological well-being in enhancing athletic performance. Recent studies have highlighted that incorporating mental health education into training can not only help athletes manage their psychological challenges but also foster a supportive environment where mental health is prioritized (Okeke & Adeola, 2023).

Overall, the findings suggest that a comprehensive approach is necessary to address the psychological challenges faced by Nigerian athletes. This includes not only providing accessible mental health support but also fostering a culture that reduces stigma around mental health issues. Sports organizations, coaches, and athletes must work together to create an environment that encourages open discussions about mental health, thus enabling athletes to seek the help they need without fear of judgment.

CONCLUSION

Cultural pressures, financial instability, and the stigma that surrounds mental health are some of the biggest factors that contribute to all these issues surrounding the psychosocial well-being of athletes. Overcoming these challenges demands a comprehensive response, one that incorporates mental health education, robust support networks, and increased access to culturally appropriate mental health services. These should be underpinned by research for ongoing support and direction to ensure that the mental health needs of athletes are being adequately met. Enhanced collaboration between sports organizations, mental health professionals and governments will continue to be necessary in standing these trends up. Addressing specific Nigerian athlete problems in this way might pave the way for a more athlete holistic approach that partakes more on the importance of comprehensive wellbeing as opposed to just higher performance, which ensures long lasting success and sustainability in high-performance sport.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study the following recommendations were made:

- Collaborate with the Nigerian government, sports organizations, and mental health professionals to create national policies that address the mental health needs of athletes. These policies should include mandatory mental health education for athletes, regular mental health screenings, and access to mental health services.

- Provide specialized training for coaches and support staff on recognizing and addressing mental health issues in athletes. This can help create a more supportive environment where athletes feel comfortable discussing their mental health concerns.
- Implement wellness programs that focus on holistic well-being, including physical, mental, and emotional health. These programs can include workshops on stress management, mindfulness practices, and techniques for balancing sports and personal life.
- Launch public awareness campaigns to reduce the stigma associated with mental health in sports. These campaigns can highlight the importance of mental health and encourage athletes to seek help when needed without fear of judgment.
- Support and encourage athletes to take an active role in mental health advocacy. By sharing their experiences and advocating for mental health resources, athletes can help break down the stigma and promote a culture of openness and support within the sports community.

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