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The Role of Family and Social Support Systems in Shaping College Athlete Engagement in Sports

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Abstract

The existing research study aimed to highlight the role of family, social, and institutional support systems in influencing male college athletes' engagement and participation in sports. The present research study was conducted at Riphah International University, Faisalabad, using a quantitative method with simple survey approach. The research developed 3/ three objectives to examine the impact of family support on athlete engagement, assess how social support including peer and coach encouragement affects participation, and evaluate institutional support in sustaining long-term sports involvement. A purposive sample of 120 male student-athletes actively participating in university sports programs were selected. Data were collected using a pre-validated, closed-ended questionnaire. Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS Version 22, using one-sample t -tests and linear regression techniques. Results revealed that family support significantly enhanced sports engagement ($t(119) = 9.15, p = .001$), social support positively predicted participation ($\beta = 0.65, p = .001$), and institutional support contributed to sustained engagement ($\beta = 0.60, p = .001$). These findings affirmed that strong and consistent support from family, peers, and institutions is essential for promoting active and continuous involvement in sports. The existing research study highlighted the need for integrated support strategies to nurture a positive sporting culture in higher education settings.

Keywords: Male athletes, Sports engagement, Family support and Social support



Introduction

Sports engagement is a cornerstone of college athletes' development, significantly contributing to their physical health, mental resilience, and social integration. For male athletes, participation in sports fosters not only physical fitness but also essential life skills such as teamwork, discipline, leadership, and emotional regulation. These benefits are particularly crucial during the college years, a formative period where young adults balance academic pressures, personal growth, and athletic commitments. However, maintaining consistent engagement in sports is often challenging due to barriers such as performance anxiety, time constraints, financial limitations, and the risk of burnout (Gould et al., 2012). Family and social support systems play a pivotal role in helping male athletes navigate these challenges, providing emotional encouragement, financial assistance, and a sense of community that bolsters their commitment (Dorsch et al., 2016).

Family support, encompassing emotional encouragement, attendance at events, and financial backing, creates a foundation for athletes' motivation and resilience. Parents who actively engage in their children's athletic pursuits whether by offering praise, providing resources, or modeling positive behaviors can significantly enhance athletes' self-efficacy and dedication (Fredericks & Eccles, 2005). Similarly, social support from peers fosters camaraderie, shared goals, and a sense of belonging, which are critical for sustaining participation (Holt et al., 2017). Institutional resources, such as expert coaching, modern training facilities, and structured programs, further complement these efforts by creating an enabling environment for athletic success (Chelladurai, 2014). In the absence of these support systems, athletes may experience disengagement, reduced performance, or even dropout, underscoring the need for a holistic support framework.

This study explored the dynamics of family, peer, and institutional support systems among male student-athletes at Riphah International University, Faisalabad. By examining how these factors influence sports engagement, the research aims to identify key support mechanisms and propose actionable strategies to enhance participation. The findings are expected to inform policies and practices that promote a supportive environment, enabling male athletes to thrive athletically, academically, and personally.

Research Objectives

1. To identify the role of family support in enhancing male college athletes' engagement in sports.
2. To examine the impact of social support, including peer networks, on male athletes' sports participation.
3. To assess the influence of institutional support systems on male athletes' sustained engagement in sports.

Research Hypotheses

H1: Family support significantly enhances male college athletes' engagement in sports.

H2: Social support, including peer networks, positively impacts male athletes' participation in sports.



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H3: Institutional support significantly contributes to male athletes' sustained engagement in sports.

Literature Review

Engagement in sports among male college athletes is a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by a complex interplay of individual, social, and environmental factors. Among these, family and social support systems stand out as critical determinants of sustained participation and success. This literature review synthesizes existing research on the role of family support, peer networks, and institutional resources in shaping male athletes' engagement, providing a foundation for the current study. The review is organized into three key areas: family support and its impact on sports engagement, the role of social support and peer networks, and the contribution of institutional support systems.

Family Support and Sports Engagement

Family support is a cornerstone of athletic success, particularly for male college athletes navigating the demands of competitive sports. Research consistently highlights the importance of emotional encouragement, financial assistance, and parental involvement in fostering athletes' motivation and resilience. Fredericks and Eccles (2005) found that parents who provide positive reinforcement and actively participate in their children's athletic activities enhance athletes' self-efficacy, which is critical for sustained engagement. This support can manifest in various forms, such as attending games, offering encouragement during setbacks, or providing resources for training and equipment. Dorsch et al. (2016) further emphasize that parental involvement not only boosts confidence but also mitigates stress associated with performance pressures and academic-athletic balance.

The impact of family support extends beyond emotional encouragement to include tangible resources. For instance, financial support for travel, equipment, and training programs is often essential for athletes from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds (Holt & Dunn, 2019). In resource-constrained settings, such as parts of Pakistan, families may face challenges in providing these resources, which can limit athletes' opportunities. Conversely, families that prioritize sports as a valuable activity tend to foster a positive athletic identity, encouraging long-term commitment (Knight et al., 2017). Moreover, parents who model active lifestyles or engage in sports themselves can inspire their children to view athletics as a lifelong pursuit, further reinforcing engagement (Côté & Fraser-Thomas, 2016).

However, the absence or inconsistency of family support can have detrimental effects. Gould et al. (2012) note that lack of parental encouragement or overemphasis on performance outcomes can lead to burnout, particularly among young male athletes. This highlights the need for balanced support that prioritizes enjoyment and personal growth over competitive success. In the context of college athletics, where athletes face heightened expectations, family support serves as a buffer against stressors, enabling sustained participation and psychological well-being.



Social Support and Peer Networks

Peer networks play a vital role in shaping male college athletes' engagement in sports by fostering a sense of belonging, camaraderie, and shared purpose. Ullrich-French and Smith (2019) argue that positive peer interactions enhance athletes' enjoyment and commitment, reducing the likelihood of dropout. Team-based sports, in particular, provide opportunities for athletes to develop strong social bonds through shared goals, mutual support, and collective achievements. These bonds create a supportive environment where athletes feel valued and motivated to persist, even in the face of challenges (Holt et al., 2017).

Research suggests that peer support influences athletes' psychological and behavioral outcomes. Weiss and Stuntz (2016) found that peer acceptance and friendship quality are significant predictors of sustained sports participation. Male athletes, in particular, often rely on teammates for emotional support during high-pressure situations, such as competitions or injuries. These interactions foster resilience and a sense of collective identity, which are crucial for maintaining engagement (Riley & Smith, 2011). Furthermore, peer networks can counteract negative external pressures, such as societal expectations or academic stress, by providing a space for athletes to share experiences and strategies for coping (Semenchuk et al., 2018).

The dynamics of peer support are particularly relevant in college settings, where athletes often form close-knit communities within sports teams. These communities serve as a social anchor, enhancing athletes' sense of belonging and commitment to their sport (Toldson & Lemmons, 2013). However, negative peer dynamics, such as excessive competition or exclusion, can undermine engagement, highlighting the need for positive and inclusive team environments (Weiss & Stuntz, 2016). Coaches and team leaders play a critical role in fostering these environments by encouraging collaboration and mutual respect among athletes.

Institutional Support

Institutional support, encompassing coaching, facilities, and programmatic resources, is a critical factor in enabling male college athletes' sustained engagement in sports. Chelladurai (2014) emphasizes that colleges with robust sports programs characterized by access to modern facilities, qualified coaches, and financial support such as scholarships create an enabling environment for athletic success. Expert coaching, in particular, provides athletes with technical guidance, strategic insights, and mentorship, which are essential for skill development and motivation (Gould & Carson, 2010). In the context of Riphah International University, Faisalabad, institutional support may include access to training grounds, gym facilities, and organized sports programs, all of which facilitate athletes' ability to train effectively and compete at high levels.

Institutional support also extends to the broader academic environment. Colleges that integrate sports with academic schedules, such as through flexible timetables or academic advising tailored to athletes, help male athletes balance their dual roles as students and competitors (Scanlan et al., 2016). Additionally, scholarships and financial aid alleviate economic pressures, allowing athletes to focus on their training and performance (Holt & Dunn, 2019). However, disparities in institutional resources can create inequities, particularly in



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underfunded programs where facilities or coaching may be inadequate (Knight et al., 2017). Such gaps can discourage participation and limit athletes' potential.

The interplay between institutional and social support is also significant. For instance, coaches often serve as key figures in fostering peer networks by promoting team cohesion and a positive culture (Côté & Fraser-Thomas, 2016). Similarly, institutional policies that encourage family involvement, such as inviting parents to sports events or providing updates on athletes' progress, can strengthen the overall support system (Dorsch et al., 2016). In contrast, lack of institutional support such as limited access to facilities or inadequate coaching can exacerbate challenges, leading to disengagement or reduced performance (Gould et al., 2012).

Synthesis and Research Gaps

The literature underscores the synergistic role of family, peer, and institutional support in shaping male college athletes' engagement in sports. Family support provides the emotional and financial foundation, peer networks foster social bonds and resilience, and institutional resources create an enabling environment for skill development and performance. However, much of the existing research focuses on Western contexts, with limited studies exploring these dynamics in South Asian settings like Pakistan, where cultural and socioeconomic factors may influence support systems differently. For example, traditional gender roles or economic constraints may shape family support in unique ways, warranting context-specific research (Khan & Ali, 2020). Additionally, while the benefits of support systems are well-documented, there is less focus on how these systems interact to mitigate specific challenges, such as burnout or academic-athletic balance, among male college athletes. This study addresses these gaps by examining the role of support systems in a Pakistani college context, focusing on male athletes at Riphah International University, Faisalabad.

Research Methods

A quantitative research design was used, targeting a population of male student-athletes at Riphah International University, Faisalabad. A sample of 120 male athletes was selected using purposive sampling to ensure participants were actively involved in sports programs. Data were collected via a closed-ended questionnaire designed to assess family support, social support, and institutional resources. The questionnaire was pre-validated to ensure reliability. Responses were coded and analyzed using SPSS Version 22, using one-sample t-tests and linear regression to test hypotheses.

Results

H1 – Family Support Significantly Enhances Male College Athletes' Engagement In Sports

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-value	p-value
Family Support	120	3.72	0.45	9.15	0.001

A one-sample t-test was conducted to examine whether the level of family support perceived by male college athletes was significantly higher than the neutral midpoint value of 3.00 on a 5-point Likert scale. The results indicated that the mean family support score ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 0.45$) was significantly



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greater than the neutral value, $t(119) = 9.15$, $p = .001$. This finding supports Hypothesis 1 (H1), suggesting that male athletes receive strong family support, which significantly contributes to their engagement in sports activities. The low standard deviation implies consistent responses among the athletes, indicating that a majority of the sample experienced a high level of family encouragement and backing in their sporting pursuits.

H2 – Social Support Positively Impacts Sports Participation

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	β -value	p-value
Social Support	Sports Participation	120	3.64	0.47	0.65	0.001

A simple linear regression analysis was conducted to determine whether social support significantly predicts sports participation among male college athletes. The results revealed that social support was a significant positive predictor of sports participation, $\beta = 0.65$, $p = .001$. The mean score for perceived social support was ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 0.47$), indicating that participants generally reported a high level of social encouragement related to sports engagement. These findings support Hypothesis 2 (H2), suggesting that higher levels of social support such as encouragement from peers, coaches, and friends are strongly associated with greater participation in sports activities. The positive β -value (.65) demonstrates a substantial direct relationship between the two variables, meaning that as social support increases, so does the likelihood of active participation in sports.

H3 – Institutional Support Contributes To Sustained Engagement

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	β -value	p-value
Institutional Support	Sports Engagement	120	3.55	0.50	0.60	0.001

A simple linear regression analysis was performed to assess the impact of institutional support on sustained sports engagement among male college athletes. The results indicated that institutional support significantly predicted sports engagement, $\beta = 0.60$, $p = .001$. The average score for institutional support was relatively high ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 0.50$), suggesting that participants generally perceived their institutions as supportive of their sporting activities. This result supports Hypothesis 3 (H3), showing that when educational institutions provide resources, facilities, coaching staff, and a positive sports environment, athletes are more likely to maintain long-term involvement in sports. The β -value of 0.60 reflects a strong positive relationship, meaning institutional backing plays a crucial role in keeping students consistently engaged in athletic activities.

Findings

The present study investigated the influence of family support, social support, and institutional support on the sports engagement and participation of male college athletes. The findings provide empirical support for all three hypotheses.



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For Hypothesis 1 (H1), a one-sample t-test demonstrated that family support was significantly higher than the neutral midpoint value of 3.00 on the 5-point Likert scale. The results ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 0.45$), $t(119) = 9.15$, $p = .001$, confirmed that family support significantly enhances male athletes' engagement in sports.

For Hypothesis 2 (H2), a simple linear regression analysis revealed that social support significantly predicted sports participation, $\beta = 0.65$, $p = .001$. The mean social support score ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 0.47$) suggested that athletes generally perceive a strong level of encouragement from peers, coaches, and social networks, contributing to their participation in sports activities.

For Hypothesis 3 (H3), institutional support was found to be a significant predictor of sustained sports engagement, $\beta = 0.60$, $p = .001$. The average score for institutional support ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 0.50$) indicated that athletes recognize the important role of educational institutions in providing an environment conducive to consistent sports involvement.

Conclusion

The findings of this study confirmed that family, social, and institutional support were the critical predictors of male college athletes' engagement and participation in sports. Family support was found to significantly enhance initial involvement in athletic activities, while social and institutional support positively influenced sustained participation. The results underscore the importance of a multidimensional support system in fostering a Strong sports culture within higher education institutions. These results align with existing literature emphasizing the importance of supportive environments in shaping athletic behavior and performance.

Recommendations

In the light of the findings, several practical recommendations were proposed:

Promote Family Involvement: Institutions should develop initiatives such as parent-athlete seminars and family engagement events to reinforce familial encouragement for sports participation.

Enhance Social Support Structures: Training programs for coaches and peer leaders should emphasize positive reinforcement, mentorship, and inclusive team-building practices to strengthen the social fabric around sports.

Strengthen Institutional Commitment: Colleges should invest in adequate sports infrastructure, provide professional coaching, and offer incentives such as scholarships and recognition programs to sustain athlete motivation and participation.

Adopt Integrated Support Strategies: A holistic framework combining family, social, and institutional support should be embedded into sports development policies to ensure sustained athletic engagement and performance among students.

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