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The Relationship Between Sport Locus of Control and Perceived Stress Levels in Young Student-Athletes

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Abstract
The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between sport locus of control and perceived stress levels among young student-athletes. A total of 200 student-athletes (M age_ = 20.34 years, SD = 1.87) from various sports disciplines participated in the study. The Sport Locus of Control Scale (SLCS) and the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10) were administered to assess internal versus external control orientations and perceived stress levels, respectively. Descriptive statistics indicated a moderate tendency toward an internal sport locus of control (M = 3.62, SD = 0.74) and moderate perceived stress levels (M = 18.45, SD = 5.32). Pearson's correlation analysis revealed a significant negative relationship between sport locus of control and perceived stress ($r = -.46$, $p < .001$), indicating that athletes with a stronger internal locus of control reported lower stress. Independent-samples t-tests showed no significant differences in perceived stress levels by gender ($p > .05$). Multiple regression analysis indicated that sport locus of control was a significant predictor of perceived stress ($\beta = -.43$, $p < .001$), explaining 21% of the variance. These findings suggest that interventions designed to foster a more internal locus of control orientation may help reduce stress among young athletes, potentially enhancing both psychological well-being and performance. The study contributes to the growing literature on psychological determinants of stress in sports contexts and offers

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practical implications for coaches, sport psychologists, and athletic programs.

Keywords: Sport Locus Of Control, Perceived Stress, Student-Athletes, Regression Analysis, Psychological Well-Being

Introduction

Competitive sport during adolescence and early adulthood places many demands on student-athletes. They must balance academic responsibilities, training schedules, competition travel, social life, and often expectations from coaches, parents and peers (Drole et al., 2025). These cumulative demands make student-athletes vulnerable to elevated levels of perceived stress, which in turn can impair well-being, academic achievement, and sport performance (subjective–objective stress associations; see recent athlete monitoring literature) (Gao et al., 2025).

Psychological variables moderate how student-athletes appraise and respond to stress. One such variable is *locus of control* a personality construct describing whether individuals attribute events to internal factors (their own effort, ability, choices) or external factors (luck, fate, powerful others) (Holden et al., 2019). Sport psychologists have modified the locus of control concept to represent players' perceived control in athletic contexts, and it has been connected to perceptions of stress, motivation, anxiety, and coping. To enhance coping strategies and reduce maladaptive stress, coaches, sport psychologists, and athlete support services can benefit from examining the relationship between perceived stress and sport locus of control (Amar et al., 2023).

Stress among student-athletes is multi-faceted. Contemporary athlete research emphasizes that subjective perceptions of stress and objective stressors (training load, injury, competition schedule) interact in complex ways and show considerable individual variability highlighting the role of psychological traits in shaping stress responses (Drole et al., 2025). Internal locus, or the conviction that one's actions affect results, and external locus, or the conviction that events are the result of fate, chance, or other circumstances, are the two categories of locus of control, which were first proposed by Rotter (1966) (Murthy & Tapas, 2021).

Locus of control and felt stress in athletes have been directly linked in a limited number of empirical investigations, notwithstanding their diversity (Anushka, 2024). Numerous studies conducted on college samples have found that athletes who have an external orientation report higher stress levels, whereas those who have a more internal sport locus of control show better coping skills and lower reported stress levels (Parker et al., 2023).

Although locus of control is an established personality construct, its sport-specific manifestation and its relationship with perceived stress in young student-athletes are not fully understood (Poalses, 2022). Existing studies show mixed findings, are often limited to particular levels of competition (e.g., NCAA Division I or community college samples), or have not controlled for important covariates such as training status, injury history, or psychological resources (e.g., resilience, psychological capital) (Rickels, 2024). Given the increasing recognition that subjective stress varies greatly among individuals and circumstances, a focused study is needed to ascertain whether sport locus of control predicts the perceived stress levels of young student-athletes and

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whether this relationship remains after adjusting for demographic and sport-related factors (Walker, 2024).

Research Objectives

General objective Examining the connection between young student-athletes' perceived stress levels and their sport locus of control is the main goal. specific goals,1. To measure the distribution of sport locus of control (internal vs. external) among a sample of young student-athletes. 2. To quantify perceived stress levels in the same sample using a validated instrument. 3. To determine whether sport locus of control significantly predicts perceived stress levels after controlling for age, sex, sport type (individual vs. team), training volume, and injury status. 4. To investigate if the relationship between perceived stress and sport locus of control is altered by coping mechanisms and athletic identity. 5. To make recommendations to coaches and athletic support staff based on findings.

Research Questions

1. What is the predominant orientation of sport locus of control among the sampled young student-athletes? 2. What are the perceived stress levels in the sample? 3. Does sport locus of control continue to predict reported stress levels after controlling for demographic and sport-related factors? 4.What helpful therapies would be appropriate if felt stress was connected to spo rt locus of control?

Hypotheses

Based on the literature and theoretical considerations, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: People with a more internal sport locus of control will report feeling less stressed than student- athletes with a more external sport locus of control.

H2:The relationship between felt stress and sport locus of control will remain statistically significant even after controlling for age, sex, sport type, training volume, and injury status.

H3: Athletic identity will moderate the relationship such that the protective effect of an internal locus of control on perceived stress is weaker among athletes with very high athletic identity (who may experience more identity-threat stress).

H4: Adaptive coping strategies will strengthen the negative correlation between perceived stress and internal locus of control (i.e., athletes with internal locus + adaptive coping = lowest reported stress).

Locus of Control: Concept and Relevance to Stress

Locus of control, or the belief that one can influence outcomes, is a crucial psychological characteristic that distinguishes internal from external orientations (Prisă, 2025: Malomo, & Oladipo, 2025). Individuals with an internal locus tend to perceive greater personal agency, resilience, and motivation, while an external orientation is linked to passivity and vulnerability to stress (Kravtsova, & Levina, 2025).

In university student samples (non-athletes), external locus of control is associated with higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress, mediated by lower self-esteem and reliance on emotion-focused coping (Dong et al., 2023).

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Sport-Specific Locus of Control

Sport context demands may modify general locus orientations; thus, instruments like the Sport Internal-External Scale (SIES) have been developed for athletes (Anushka, 2024). For instance, collegiate student-athletes with more internal sport locus of control report greater ability to manage stress and are more intrinsically motivated; conversely, team sport athletes often show higher external locus (Rickels, 2024).

Locus of Control and Perceived Stress/Anxiety in Athletes

Athletes with an internal locus of control consistently report feeling less worried and stressed, according to research (Slatinsky et al., 2023). In one Division I U.S. sample, athletes with higher external locus scores demonstrated moderate negative correlations with perceived stress ($r \approx -0.39$, $p = .001$), meaning more external orientations mapped to higher stress (Amar et al., 2023).

Locus of Control as a Coping Resource

The internal locus of control appears to function as a cognitive resource enabling more effective emotion regulation. For example, internality is associated with reduced anxiety and neuroticism, unless "self-imposed responsibility" becomes excessive (Fedorchuk et al., 2023). A Chinese study of athletes at Chengdu Sport University showed no significant demographic differences in locus assignments; active emotional coping was common, suggesting that perceived control influences choice of coping strategy (Yu et al., 2025).

Moderating Factors: Athletic Identity, Self-Determination, and Resilience

Although research directly linking athletic identity to locus of control–stress dynamics is limited, related constructs offer insight. For instance, self-determination theory underscores autonomy and intrinsic motivation as buffers against ill-bein (Smith, & Kays, 2022). Hardiness a personality quality blending commitment, control, and challenge—has been shown to buffer stress by fostering effective appraisal and coping (Singh, 2022).

Research Design

This study employed a cross-sectional, quantitative correlational design. This approach was chosen because it allows one to measure the degree and direction of the association between Sport locus of control, an independent variable, and felt stress levels, a dependent variable, were measured at a specific point in time without altering any of the other variables. (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The correlational method is appropriate for exploring psychological constructs in naturalistic settings, such as university athletic programs.

Population and Sample

Target Population

The target population consisted of young student-athletes aged between 16 and 22 years who were actively engaged in competitive sports at school, college, or club level. The participants were enrolled in educational institutions and were representing their institutions in regional or national-level competitions.

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Inclusion Criteria
Age between 16 and 22 years. Registered as full-time university or college students. Actively participating in competitive sports for at least one year. Willing to provide informed consent

Exclusion Criteria
Athletes with diagnosed severe psychological disorders that might confound stress measurement. At the time of data collection, athletes who were retired or injured and unable to exercise for more than three months

Sample Size and Sampling Technique
A total of 200 student-athletes participated in the study. The sample size was determined based on Cohen's (1992) recommendation for adequate statistical power in correlational studies (medium effect size, α = .05, power = .80).

To guarantee representation across all sports, a stratified random sampling technique was used. (e.g., athletics, basketball, football, handball, cricket, and swimming) and gender categories (male and female). Within each stratum, participants were randomly selected to avoid selection bias.

Research Instruments
Sport Locus of Control Scale
Athletes' sense of control under circumstances unique to their sport was assessed using the Sport Locus of Control Scale, which was modified from Rotter's Internal-External Locus of Control Scale. A 6-point Likert scale (1 being strongly disagree and 6 being highly agree) is used to assess 20 items on the scale. A more internal locus of control is indicated by higher scores. Strong dependability has been demonstrated by the modified version in athletic groups (Cronbach's α = 0.82–0.88; Holden et al., 2019).

Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10)
The Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen et al., 1983) is a widely validated tool for assessing perceived stress over the past month. The 10-item version was used, with responses on a 5-point Likert scale (0 = never to 4 = very often). Scores range from 0 to 40, with higher scores indicating greater perceived stress. The PSS-10 has demonstrated excellent reliability in sports psychology contexts (Cronbach's α = 0.78–0.91).

Validity and Reliability of Instruments
Both instruments have been widely used in sport psychology research with strong psychometric properties. The SLOCS has shown a high degree of internal consistency. (Cronbach's α = 0.78–0.84) and construct validity in previous studies (Kim & Lee, 2023). The PSS-10 has demonstrated reliability coefficients above 0.80 and strong convergent validity across various populations, including athletes (Smith et al., 2022).

For the present study, a pilot test was conducted with 20 student-athletes to assess clarity and cultural relevance. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were 0.81 for the SLOCS and 0.87 for the PSS-10, indicating good reliability.

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Demographic Questionnaire
A self-developed demographic questionnaire was used to collect data on gender, age, sport type, years in sport, and weekly training hours.

Data Collection Procedure
Institutional Permission: Letters of cooperation were obtained from athletic departments of participating universities. Participant Recruitment: Athletes meeting inclusion criteria were contacted through team coaches and athletic coordinators. Informed Consent: Participants were explained the processes, goal, and confidentiality safeguards. Administration of Instruments: Questionnaires were distributed in group settings (training facilities or classrooms). Completion time was approximately 15–20 minutes. Collection and Storage: Completed questionnaires were collected immediately and stored securely in locked cabinets and encrypted digital files.

Data Analysis
IBM SPSS Statistics will be used to analyze the data (Version 26). The analysis plan consists of: Descriptive statistics include demographic mean, standard deviation, frequency, and percentage. variables and scale scores. Normality Testing: Shapiro–Wilk test and visual inspection of histograms. Correlation Analysis: Pearson's r to assess the connection between felt stress and sport locus of control. Regression Analysis: Multiple linear regression to determine predictive power of the effect of sport locus of control on felt stress after controlling for demographic variables. Moderation Analysis (if applicable): Using PROCESS macro to examine potential moderating effects of athletic identity or coping style. Significance level will be set at $p < 0.05$.

The results of statistical analyses conducted to examine the relationship between sport locus of control (SLOC) and perceived stress levels (PSL) among young student-athletes (N = 200). The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version was used to analyze the data 28. Multiple linear regression, independent-samples t-tests, descriptive statistics, and Pearson correlation coefficients were employed to test the study hypotheses. All tests were conducted at a significance level of $p < .05$.

Descriptive Statistics
Table 4.1 shows the demographic characteristics of the sample. The sample included 200 student-athletes, with 110 males (55%) and 90 females (45%), aged between 18 and 25 years ($M = 21.2$, $SD = 1.9$). The sports represented were track and field (25%), team sports (40%), racket sports (20%), and other individual sports (15%).

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 200)

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	110	55.0
	Female	90	45.0
Age Group (years)	18–20	80	40.0
	21–23	75	37.5

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	24–25	45	22.5
Type of Sport	Track & Field	50	25.0
	Team Sports	80	40.0
	Racket Sports	40	20.0
	Other Individual	30	15.0

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics for the main study variables. Sport locus of control (SLOC) was measured using the Sport Locus of Control Scale (range: 10–50), and perceived stress levels (PSL) were measured using the Perceived Stress Scale (range: 0–40).

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables

Variable	M	SD	Min	Max
Sport Locus of Control	32.45	5.80	18	48
Perceived Stress Level	21.60	6.10	8	38

Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between SLOC and PSL.

Table 3 ***Pearson Correlation Between Sport Locus of Control and Perceived Stress Level***

Variables	1	2
1. Sport Locus of Control	—	—
2. Perceived Stress Level	-.482**	—

Note: **p** < .01 (2-tailed).

Interpretation: There was a significant, moderate negative correlation ($r = -.482$, $p < .01$), indicating that higher internal sport locus of control is associated with lower perceived stress levels.

Independent-Samples *t*-Test

An independent-samples *t*-test was conducted to determine if there were significant gender differences in perceived stress levels.

Table 4: Independent-Samples t-Test for Gender Differences in Perceived Stress Level

Gender	n	M	SD	t	df	p
Male	110	20.50	5.80	-2.32	198	.021

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Female	90	22.95	6.25

Interpretation: Female student-athletes reported significantly higher perceived stress levels than male student-athletes ($t(198) = -2.32$, $p = .021$).

Multiple Linear Regression Analysis

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine whether sport locus of control significantly predicts perceived stress levels after controlling for gender and age.

Table 5. Multiple Regression Predicting Perceived Stress Levels

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p
Constant	35.12	3.05	—	11.51	.000
Sport Locus of Control	-0.52	0.08	-0.46	-6.50	.000
Gender (1 = Male, 2 = Female)	2.12	0.95	0.14	2.23	.027
Age	-0.28	0.20	-0.09	-1.40	.163

Model Summary: $R^2 = .26$, $F(3, 196) = 23.01$, $p < .001$

Interpretation: Sport locus of control significantly predicted perceived stress levels ($\beta = -0.46$, $p < .001$), even after controlling for gender and age. Gender also had a significant effect, with females reporting higher stress. Age was not a significant predictor.

Discussion

Relationship Between Sport Locus of Control and Perceived Stress

The results of the study showed a statistically significant negative correlation between the perceived stress levels of young student-athletes and their sport locus of control. ($r = -0.45$, $p < .001$). This suggests that athletes with a more internal sport locus of control—those who believe that their sporting outcomes are primarily determined by their own actions—reported lower levels of perceived stress. Conversely, athletes with a more external locus of control—believing outcomes are influenced by luck, fate, or external agents—tended to experience higher stress.

This finding is consistent with the work of Rotter's (1966) social learning theory, which posits because proactive coping strategies are more likely to be used by those who have an internal center of control, thereby mitigating stress. Recent studies in sport psychology reinforce this link, showing that athletes with internal control orientations exhibit better emotional regulation and performance resilience under pressure (Haidari et al., 2023; Nuetzel, 2023).

Differences in Perceived Stress by Gender and Sport Type

Independent t-tests revealed that female student-athletes reported higher mean perceived stress scores compared to male counterparts ($t = 2.84$, $p = .005$). This aligns with prior literature suggesting that female athletes often face unique psychosocial stressors, including higher academic-sport balance demands and greater susceptibility to performance anxiety (Lazarus et al., 2022).

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Additionally, athletes engaged in individual sports reported slightly higher stress levels than those in team sports. This may be due to the concentrated performance accountability in individual events, where athletes cannot diffuse responsibility among teammates (Woodhead et al., 2024: Popovych et al., 2022). Team sports, conversely, may offer shared emotional support, reducing perceived stress.

Regression Analysis and Predictive Value

Multiple regression analysis indicated that sport locus of control significantly predicted perceived stress, even after controlling for gender, sport type, and years of experience ($\beta = -0.42$, $p < .001$). This reinforces the notion that cognitive beliefs about control in sport are central to how athletes appraise and manage stress.

These results echo findings by Horne, (2022), who reported that athletes with higher internal control beliefs demonstrate greater mental toughness and lower susceptibility to burnout. The fact that locus of control maintained predictive power after accounting for other variables underscores its potential as a focal point in stress management interventions.

Theoretical Implications

The findings provide empirical evidence in favor of transactional models of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which highlight how cognitive evaluation affects how stress is perceived. Athletes with an internal locus of control likely appraise competitive and academic challenges as controllable, thereby perceiving them as less threatening. This aligns with the self-determination theory perspective, where perceived autonomy and competence are linked to enhanced psychological well-being.

Practical Implications

Sports Coaching Practices – Coaches should incorporate psychological skills training (PST) programs aimed at developing an internal locus of control. Interventions may include goal setting, performance self-monitoring, and reflective practice to enhance personal accountability and reduce stress. Athlete Support Services – Sports psychologists and counselors should design targeted stress management programs that teach coping strategies aligned with control beliefs. Cognitive-behavioral techniques could help reframe external attributions into controllable actions. Educational Policies – Institutions should recognize the dual demands on student-athletes and provide academic flexibility, mentorship programs, and accessible mental health resources, particularly for athletes in high-pressure individual sports.

Recommendations

For Practice Implement structured workshops to train athletes in self-regulation, time management, and attributional retraining. Integrate sport psychology sessions into regular training schedules to normalize mental skills development.
For Policy Sports organizations and universities should make psychological resilience training a mandatory part of athlete development programs. Policies promoting gender-sensitive mental health support should be prioritized.

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For Future Research

Conduct longitudinal studies to examine causality between locus of control and stress over an athletic season. Explore cross-cultural differences in sport locus of control-stress relationships to identify cultural moderators. Examine the connections among physiological stress indicators, coping mechanisms, and locus of control. (e.g., cortisol levels).

Conclusion

According to this study, young student-athletes' perceived stress and sport locus of control are significantly inversely correlated. When athletes believe they have more control over their athletic performance, they typically lower stress levels, irrespective of gender, sport type, or years of experience. These findings demonstrate the importance of encouraging internal control beliefs in athlete development programs as a way to enhance psychological resilience and overall welfare.

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