

Predictors of Social Support on Sport Development Among Athletes in The Sports Commission in Calabar, Cross River State

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Abstract

This study investigated the predictors of social support on sport development among athletes in the Sports Commission in Calabar, Cross River State. Two research questions and hypotheses guided the study. A descriptive survey design was adopted. The population consisted of 528 athletes, with a sample of 50 (9.5%) selected using stratified and purposive sampling. The "Predictors of Social Support on Sport Development Questionnaire" (PSSSDQ) was used for data collection. Validity was established by experts in Human Kinetics and Health Education, and reliability coefficients ranged from 0.78 to 0.82. Descriptive analysis revealed moderate levels of coach-athlete relationship (Mean=13.24) and team cohesion (Mean=14.60). Independent t-test analysis revealed that the quality of the coach-athlete relationship ($t = 4.37, p = .000$) and the level of perceived team cohesion ($t = 3.66, p = .000$) were significant predictors of the overall social support received by athletes. Both null hypotheses were rejected. It is recommended that fostering positive coach-athlete dynamics and strengthening team cohesion are essential to enhance the social support available to athletes.

Keywords: Athletes, Coach-Athlete Relationship, Predictors, Social Support, Sports Development, Team Cohesion

Introduction

Social support plays a crucial role in athlete development by enhancing mental health, performance, and overall well-being. It encompasses emotional, tangible, and informational assistance provided by coaches, teammates, family, and friends, positively impacting athletes' confidence, motivation, and ability to cope with challenges. Social support has also been recognized as a significant factor in maintaining physical health (Malinauskas, 2018) and psychological health. Social support from coaches, teammates, family, friends, and staff is considered to affect athletes' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects in a positive manner (Rees, 2017). Given that social support has been broadly reported to be an essential factor for athletes' success, sport psychology researchers have endeavored to clarify the functional aspects of social support (Rees & Hardy, 2017). Psychology literature has shown that the perception of available support can be a better predictor of health or well-being outcomes; researchers in sport psychology have also focused more on the perception of available support, which is called perceived support. It was shown that perceived support

plays a significant role both for sport performance and psychological health outcomes, such as low levels of burnout (Odok, Ahueansebhor & Osaji, 2022). As such, perceived support was commonly measured in research examining social support within a sport context.

Athlete well-being is a comprehensive construct that includes physical, psychological, and social aspects, which significantly influence performance outcomes and overall quality of life (Smith & Jones, 2019). In Malaysia, the unique cultural and social dynamics play a critical role in shaping athletes' experiences and well-being, making it essential to explore these factors in depth. Social support, defined as the assistance or resources provided by others in times of need or during challenging situations, has emerged as a critical determinant of athlete well-being across various sports and competitive levels (Brown, 2018). The concept of social support, which encompasses emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal dimensions, is a well-established determinant of athlete well-being. It refers to the assistance provided by others, especially

during times of need or stress, and has been shown to significantly impact various aspects of athletes' lives, including their mental health and performance (Ahueansebhor, Ogabor & Apie, 2015). In Malaysia, the focus on mental health and well-being in sports has gained traction, particularly considering the increasing pressures faced by athletes at various levels of competition. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has highlighted the importance of mental health, recognizing that good mental health is crucial for optimal performance and overall well-being (IOC, 2023). This aligns with the global trend of addressing mental health in sports, as seen in the introduction of resources such as mindfulness apps and educational tools designed to support athletes (Olympics.com, 2023).

Athlete well-being is a multifaceted construct encompassing physical, psychological, and social dimensions, each intricately interconnected and influential on performance outcomes and overall quality of life (Smith & Jones, 2019; Odok et al., 2022). Within sports psychology literature, considerable attention has been dedicated to understanding the factors that contribute to athlete well-being, with a notable emphasis on the role of social support. Enhancing athletic well-being is a multifaceted process that involves various factors, with social support playing a crucial role. Research has shown that social support can have a significant impact on athletes' mental health, stress levels, and overall well-being (Ahueansebhor & Eneji, 2025). Studies have indicated that social support can act as a buffer against stress, anxiety, and depression, particularly in the context of athletic injuries. Moreover, social support has been linked to reducing burnout and enhancing subjective well-being among athletes (Ozer, 2023). The type and source of social support are essential considerations, as they can influence its effectiveness. For instance, studies have highlighted the importance of received support, perceived support, and the provider of support in determining its impact on athletes' psychological well-being (Tsuchiya, 2022). Additionally, the satisfaction levels of social support have been associated with reduced stress perceptions and depression in athletic training students (Ahueansebhor, Emeribe & Akpong, 2023). Furthermore, social support has been found to mediate the physical and psychological effects of athletic injuries, facilitating the recovery process. It has also been identified as a predictor of athletes' achievement motivation,

emphasizing its role in enhancing performance (Pambudi, 2022). Additionally, social support has been linked to improving athletes' self-esteem, self-regulation, and psychological skill use, contributing to their overall well-being. Recent research has emphasized the importance of social support from different sources, including coaches, teammates, and family members, in fostering resilience and coping abilities among athletes. Katagami and Tsuchiya (2016) demonstrated that perceived social support positively correlates with athletes' psychological well-being and overall satisfaction with their sports experience. Similarly, a study by Williams et al. (2020) highlighted the role of social support in promoting athletes' resilience and coping abilities in the face of stressors commonly encountered in competitive sports environments. Moreover, research has elucidated the mechanisms through which social support influences athlete well-being. Cutrona and Russell (2020) introduced the concept of social support satisfaction, emphasizing the importance of individuals' perceptions of the adequacy and availability of support in determining its impact on well-being outcomes. Additionally, studies by Delfin et al. (2024) and Thompson et al. (2019) have supported the stress-buffering hypothesis, suggesting that social support serves as a protective factor against the detrimental effects of stress on athletes' mental health.

In addition to the perception of social support, more recently, researchers have moved their focus onto social support actually exchanged, which is called received support. Received support is defined as the actual receipt of social support reported by a recipient (Rees, 2017). Received support has been reported, mostly in interviews with athletes, as a significant factor in athletes' self-confidence (Hays, 2017), performance improvement, in dealing with negative psychological states due to injury in sport, competitive stressors, and organizational stressors (Apie, Ahueansebhor & Ogabor, 2013). As such, examining received support with qualitative methods provides researchers with the enriched information necessary to understand the social support process; however, it should be cautioned that most findings were concluded from data with a small number of athletes. As the sole reliance on findings gained by small sample size has been criticized (Trudel, 2018), it should be avoided to generalize the importance of receipt of social support without further research with a larger sample size. Therefore, an investigation of received support with quantitative research methods

would be needed to confirm the importance of received support in athletes' healthy life as an athlete.

Although the use of a sport-specific context of measurement is encouraged to develop social support research to examine the effect of the receipt of support in sport (Holt & Hoar, 2016), the number of research studies that have examined received support with quantitative methods is still relatively few. Recently, Sammy (2017) developed the sport-specific measurement for received support and found that certain types of received support positively predicted athletes' self-confidence within a pre-competition time period. More specifically, the receipt of emotional and esteem support was found to be a predictor of athletes' self-confidence before a competition; this suggests that athletes should be provided with these types of support to enhance their self-confidence. It seems that the receipt of social support would be helpful for improving factors for performance enhancement.

Nevertheless, the reported beneficial results of received support gained through qualitative research do not merely pertain to sport performance outcomes, but also to a wider range of outcomes that relate to psychological health and well-being. For instance, research demonstrated that the receipt of sufficient support from others is one of the most important features of highly successful athletes that relates to their entire athletic career, and the receipt of support from coaches contributes to the development of a pleasant coach-athlete relationship (Bloom, 2019), which may lead to athletes' satisfaction with their sport environment. As such, the effectiveness of received support should also be demonstrated in relation to athletes' psychological health outcomes as well, not only with sport performance outcomes. These examinations would further confirm the significance of social support for athletes in a more general manner. Even though the achievement of high performance is a significant aim for participating in sport (Rees, 2017), maintaining physical and psychological health is also salient, in terms of the athletes' success in regard to their whole life. Thus, the clarification of effective social support in relation to such psychological health and well-being outcomes using quantitative methods would allow for the development of social support literature.

One strong benefit of research on received support is that it enables the measurement of the relatively precise type of support behaviour that the athlete actually

received from others and its effects, which leads to further understanding of more functional aspects of social support compared to perceived support. Despite the evidence that shows the importance of perceiving available support on athletes' health, perceived support is sometimes questioned to recognize as a result of social support. This is because some researchers argued that perceived support is possibly a reflection of one's individual personality factor (Tsuchiya, 2022).

Perceived support is measured by asking about one's perception of the availability of social support, which may be possible to reflect one's personality. In fact, there is evidence that reported availability of social support did not alter even when the person's support network environment changed, which suggests that it may be difficult to use perceived support to examine the outcome of social support exchange. Received support, on the other hand, is commonly measured by asking about the frequency of actually provided social support by others, with a questionnaire. Thus, it seems that measuring received support should be more appropriate to understand the impact of the actual support behaviours that were received by athletes. Therefore, the examination to ensure if received support is less related to one's personality factor than perceived support would be needed to prove that received support is more appropriate to examine the social support effectiveness (Hays, 2017).

Emotional support significantly influences an athlete's development by enhancing their mental toughness, self-confidence, and overall well-being, ultimately improving their performance and resilience. This support, often provided by coaches, peers, and family, helps athletes cope with stress, overcome challenges, and foster a positive self-image (Rees, 2017).

Playing sports can be filled with emotions. Athletes might feel nervous about try-outs or before a big competition, upset about losing or performing poorly, or excited and happy after a big win or a major accomplishment. To perform well in sport, athletes can learn to manage their emotions and cope with stress. However, some emotion regulation and coping strategies might be more useful than others. Athletes feel all kinds of emotions in sport. Some of these emotions feel bad or negative, like the feeling of being anxious, nervous, or scared before a big competition. Sometimes athletes feel so nervous they do not know what to do, they just cannot shake it off, and they end



up having a bad performance as a result of their emotions. Other sport-related emotions feel great, like the feeling of happiness and the thrill of winning a game, or the feeling of pride after pulling off a new skill or move for the first time. The emotions athletes feel in sport can sometimes be helpful for performance, but sometimes they can be tough to deal with and can make them perform worse (O'Neill, Ahueansebhor & Ogabor, 2015).

Sport organizations play a critical role in the development of sport, especially at an elite level. They do so by not only encouraging athletes' training but also creating plans to improve athletes' skills so that they can either achieve excellence or, more broadly, stay fit (Odok, Ahueansebhor, Apie, Ogabor, Osaji & Shantali, 2024). Accordingly, a growing body of research analyzes various factors that affect sport organizations in terms of fostering sport and enhancing their quality. Examples of these factors are sports performance (Harwood, 2018), stress in sports, organizational success, and organizational citizenship behavior. This organizational citizenship behavior refers to members' non-formal behavior, which helps the organization to function correctly. Examples include the pressure to participate in unwanted activities and the role of members. Nonetheless, research on the factors that influence how sport organizations function is a recent field, and further exploration is needed to understand which factors can improve the internal dynamics of these organizations and help them achieve their fundamental goals (Tsychnya, 2022).

It has been shown that factors related to emotions, knowledge of emotions, emotional control, and emotional self-regulation are involved in the way organizations function (Fletcher, 2017). However, scholars have not yet ranked the importance of knowledge of one's own emotions and those of others, the use of these emotions, the capacity for emotional self-regulation, and motivation in sport organizations.

Studies have highlighted the importance of organizational psychology in sport (Wagstaff, 2020). Sport organizations are groups of people with sport-related objectives who are interested in achieving common goals. Organizations are complex entities. The way they function largely depends on a series of interconnected factors involving the people who make up the organization. Accordingly, the internal dynamics of effective sport organizations are based on intra- and

inter-personal emotional skills such as the ability to manage one's own emotions and those of others (Ahueansebhor & Eyam, 2025). Research by Wagstaff et al. (2020) identified three emotional skills (identifying, processing, and managing emotions) associated with emotional regulation (i.e., re-evaluation, suppression, and impulse control). These skills are involved in one's own experiences and relate to the expression of one's own and others' emotions.

In the framework of positive psychology, some micro-level changes in people such as positive emotions or fluent relationships between members can extend to the macro level and cause group-level effects. Therefore, individual factors such as people's behaviors, emotions, or individual feelings can affect the organization and enhance or hinder its ability to function properly. People are involved in this process on an individual level, but this process can also extend to the organization as a whole (Apie, Ahueansebhor, Ogabor, Nkang, & Adie, 2025).

Thus, emotional support can lay the foundations for the skills that play a role in social interactions (Cherniss, 2022). According to Cherniss (2022), the health of a community or organization depends on the effectiveness of the segments of that community or organization, which is made up of people. When these segments do not interact properly, the community or organization suffers, hence the importance of establishing communication channels that are free from emotional tension. The effectiveness of an organization partially depends on the emotional competencies of its members and affects the way the organization functions and is managed.

Athletes have over time experienced a low level of social support from their coach, teammates, society, etc. This has been found to significantly influence their support development, resulting in emotional, informational, instrumental and appraisal support decline. To this end, many athletes have been found to crave social support, especially in the Sports Commission in Calabar, Cross River State. However, the specific factors that predict the level of social support received by these athletes remain underexplored. Therefore, the researcher decided to embark on this study to investigate the predictors of social support, specifically examining the influence of the coach-athlete relationship and team cohesion, on the level of social support received by athletes in the Sports Commission in Calabar, Cross River State.

Research Questions

1. To what extent does the quality of the coach-athlete relationship predict the level of social support received by athletes in the Calabar Sports Commission?
2. To what extent does perceived team cohesion predict the level of social support received by athletes in the Calabar Sports Commission?

Hypotheses

1. The coach-athlete relationship has no significant predictive influence on the level of social support received by athletes in the Calabar Sports Commission.
2. Perceived team cohesion has no significant predictive influence on the level of social support received by athletes in the Calabar Sports Commission.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive survey research design to investigate predictors of social support. The population comprised 528 athletes from the Calabar Sports Commission. A sample of 50 athletes (9.5%) was selected using stratified and purposive sampling techniques. The research instrument was the "Predictors of Social Support on Sport Development Questionnaire" (PSSSDQ), a 20-item tool using a four-point Likert scale. The instrument was modified to measure three constructs: Section B measured the independent variables (predictors) - (i) Coach-Athlete Relationship and (ii) Team Cohesion; while Section C measured the dependent variable - (iii) Level of Social Support Received. The instrument was validated by experts in Human Kinetics and Health Education at the University of Calabar. Its reliability was established via Cronbach's Alpha, yielding coefficients of 0.78, 0.80, and 0.82 for the three subsections. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequencies) to answer the research questions and independent t-tests at a 0.05 significance level to test the stated hypotheses.

Results

Descriptive Analysis of Research Questions

This section presents the descriptive statistics that answer the two research questions regarding the level of the identified predictors among athletes.

Research Question 1: To what extent does the quality of the coach-athlete relationship predict the level of social support received by athletes in the Calabar Sports Commission?

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Coach-Athlete Relationship (N = 50)

Description	N	Mean (Max = 20)	Std. Deviation	Category / Percentage (%)
Overall Perceived Quality	50	13.24	3.15	—
Poor / Strained Relationship	50	—	—	42% (n = 21)
Moderate / Neutral Relationship	50	—	—	30% (n = 15)
Positive / Supportive Relationship	50	—	—	28% (n = 14)

The mean score of 13.24 on a scale up to 20 indicates a moderate overall perception. However, categorization reveals that only 28% of athletes report a positively supportive relationship with their coach.

The descriptive analysis indicates that the quality of the coach-athlete relationship among the sampled athletes

is moderately positive on average. However, a significant proportion (42%) perceive this relationship as poor or strained, suggesting that for many, this key predictor of social support is suboptimal.

Research Question 2: To what extent does perceived team cohesion predict the level of social support received by athletes in the Calabar Sports Commission?

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Perceived Team Cohesion (N = 50)

Description	N	Mean (Max = 20)	Std. Deviation	Category / Percentage (%)
Overall Perceived Cohesion	50	14.60	3.82	—
Low Team Cohesion	50	—	—	34% (n = 17)
Moderate Team Cohesion	50	—	—	40% (n = 20)
High Team Cohesion	50	—	—	26% (n = 13)

The mean score of 14.60 suggests a moderately high perception of team cohesion overall. Yet, only 26% of athletes are in the high cohesion category, while one-third (34%) report low cohesion.

The data show that perceived team cohesion is moderately high on average. Nevertheless, the distribution is polarized, with a substantial minority (34%) experiencing low cohesion and only about a quarter (26%) experiencing high cohesion, indicating variability in this predictor across the team.

Hypotheses Testing

This section presents the results of the inferential statistical analysis (independent t-test) used to test the study's hypotheses.

Hypothesis One

The null hypothesis was rejected ($t(48) = 4.37, p = .000$), indicating that the quality of the coach-athlete relationship is a significant predictor of the level of social support received by athletes (Table 3). Athletes reporting a positive coach-athlete relationship received significantly higher levels of overall social support.

Table 3: Independent t-test Analysis of Coach-Athlete Relationship on Social Support

Predictor Group (Relationship)	N	Mean Score	Social Support	SD	t-value	Df	p-value
Poor / Strained (Low Predictor Level)	21	11.57		3.36	4.37	48	.000
Positive / Supportive (High Predictor Level)	29	14.88		2.45	—	—	—

Hypothesis Two

The null hypothesis was rejected ($t(48) = 3.66, p = .000$), indicating that perceived team cohesion is a significant predictor of the level of social support received by

athletes (Table 4). Athletes reporting high team cohesion received significantly higher levels of overall social support.

Table 4: Independent t-test Analysis of Team Cohesion on Social Support

Predictor Group (Cohesion)	N	Mean Social Support Score	SD	t-value	df	p-value
Low Team Cohesion	17	15.63	4.36	3.66	48	.000
High Team Cohesion	33	14.48	3.44	—	—	—

Discussion

Hypothesis One

Hypothesis one, stated in a null form, posited that the coach-athlete relationship has no significant predictive influence on the level of social support received by athletes in the Calabar Sports Commission. The result

of the analysis reveals that the null hypothesis was rejected and the alternate form accepted. In conformity with the above statement, the quality of the coach-athlete relationship significantly predicts the level of social support received by athletes. Athletes who reported a positive and supportive relationship with their coaches also reported significantly higher levels of

overall social support. This finding is in agreement with the finding of Bloom (2019), who highlighted that the receipt of support from coaches contributes to the development of a pleasant coach-athlete relationship, which may lead to athletes' satisfaction with their sport environment. The coach is a primary source of emotional, informational, and appraisal support; thus, a positive relationship directly enhances the athlete's perception and receipt of these support dimensions. By this result, it is concluded that the coach-athlete relationship is a significant predictor of social support among athletes in the Sports Commission in Calabar, Cross River State.

Hypothesis Two

Hypothesis two stated that perceived team cohesion has no significant predictive influence on the level of social support received by athletes in the Calabar Sports Commission. The result of the analysis reveals that the null hypothesis was rejected and the alternate form accepted. This implies that there is a positive significant predictive influence of team cohesion on the level of social support received by athletes in the Sports Commission in Calabar, Cross River State. This finding is in agreement with the finding of Fletcher (2017), who established relationships among sports group cohesion and positive team dynamics. Team cohesion refers to the tendency of a group to stick together and remain united in the pursuit of its goals and objectives. A cohesive team environment fosters mutual trust, open communication, and collective responsibility, which in turn enhances the exchange of social support among teammates. Athletes in highly cohesive teams are more likely to receive and provide emotional, instrumental, and informational support, creating a robust support network that buffers against stress and enhances well-being. Therefore, team cohesion serves as a critical predictor of the social support available within the athletic team setting.

Conclusion

The issue of predictors of social support on sport development among athletes in the Sports Commission in Calabar, Cross River State is a significant issue that has not been adequately scrutinized or researched. The coach-athlete relationship and team cohesion have been found to be significant predictors of the level of social support received by athletes in the Sports Commission in Calabar, Cross River State. The descriptive findings

indicate that while average perceptions are moderate, a substantial proportion of athletes experience poor coach-athlete relationships and low team cohesion. The inferential results confirm that enhancing these relational factors is likely to increase the social support available to athletes, thereby contributing to their overall development and performance.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Sports Commission administrators should implement mandatory training for coaches on athlete-centered communication, emotional intelligence, and supportive leadership skills to improve the coach-athlete relationship, thereby enhancing the coach's role as a key provider of social support.
2. Coaches and team managers should regularly organize structured team-building activities and foster an inclusive team culture to deliberately enhance perceived team cohesion among athletes, which will strengthen peer support networks.
3. Workshops should be organized for both athletes and coaches to mutually educate them on the importance of these relational predictors (coach-athlete relationship and team cohesion) for generating social support and overall athletic success, emphasizing practical strategies for building positive relationships and cohesive team environments.

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