

Exploring the lived experiences of female collegiate athletes: a basis for policy enhancement

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study explored the lived experiences of female collegiate athletes, focusing on challenges in balancing academic and athletic demands, gender stereotypes, and unique coping strategies like prayer and coffee consumption. Through semi-structured interviews with ten athletes from diverse sports, thematic analysis revealed disparities in resource allocation, the critical role of support systems, and the impact of gender biases on performance and well-being. This study highlights the complex and multifaceted experiences of female collegiate athletes, revealing both systemic challenges and personal resilience. Despite facing resource disparities, gender stereotypes, and the pressures of balancing academics and athletics, these athletes demonstrate remarkable strength, often drawing on support systems, mentorship, prayer, and coping strategies like coffee consumption to succeed. The findings call for institutional reforms aimed at promoting equity, well-being, and holistic support for female collegiate athletes, ensuring they have the resources and opportunities necessary to thrive both on and off the field.

KEYWORDS

Female Collegiate Athletes; Gender Equity; Academic-Athletic Balance; Spiritual Practices; Policy Enhancement

1. INTRODUCTION

Considering amount of studies were conducted examining the experiences of female collegiate athletes bringing issues like academic pressures, athletic demands, and gender-based disadvantages (Ojemaye et al., 2024; Sohn, 2016) all contribute to the complex array of difficulties faced by female collegiate athletes and due to strongly ingrained preconceptions, unequal access to resources, and limited opportunities for recognition, women in sports have historically been

marginalized. In collegiate sports, where athletes must juggle intense training and academic obligations, these difficulties are especially pronounced. Notwithstanding these challenges, female athletes show incredible fortitude and tenacity in their pursuit of success on and off the field.

Despite progress in promoting gender equity in sports, female collegiate athletes continue to face systemic barriers that hinder their athletic and academic achievements specially in during transition years (Saxe et al., 2017) . Issues such as unequal funding, inadequate access to quality training facilities, and underrepresentation in media coverage perpetuate disparities between male and female sports programs. These challenges not only affect performance but also impact the mental health and overall well-being of female athletes.

Moreover, female collegiate athletes face systemic barriers, including unequal resource allocation and gender stereotypes, which intensify the challenges of balancing academic and athletic responsibilities (Staurowsky et al., 2020). Drawing on feminist theory (Krane, 2001), this study examines how these structural inequities shape athletes' lived experiences and explores personal coping strategies, such as prayer and coffee consumption, that foster resilience. By investigating these dynamics, the study aims to inform institutional policies that promote equity and holistic well-being for female athletes.

2. METHODS

2.1. Study Design

This study used the thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and initial codes (e.g., "funding disparities," "prayer as coping") were generated through iterative reading. Codes were clustered into themes, such as "incentives and resources" and "personal coping strategies," using NVivo software. To ensure rigor, member checking involved sharing transcripts with participants for verification, while peer debriefing with a qualitative researcher validated the coding process.

2.2. Instrument

The primary data collection tool was a semi-structured interview guide designed to explore the multifaceted experiences of female collegiate athletes. The guide included open-ended questions focusing on access to resources, support systems, academic and athletic balance, mentorship, and personal coping strategies like prayer and coffee consumption. A demographic questionnaire was also used to gather basic participant information, while field notes captured non-verbal cues and

emotional responses during interviews. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent to ensure accurate transcription and analysis.

2.3. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the interview data, following a systematic process of coding and theme development. After transcribing the interviews verbatim, the researcher familiarized themselves with the data, generating initial codes based on recurring ideas and patterns. These codes were then clustered into broader themes aligned with the study's objectives, such as incentives and resources, support systems, balancing responsibilities, coaching and mentorship, and gender stereotypes. Subthemes, like the role of prayer and coffee consumption, also emerged. The themes were reviewed, refined, and cross-checked against the data to ensure accuracy and relevance. The final analysis provided a nuanced understanding of the challenges and coping strategies of female collegiate athletes, forming the basis for policy recommendations.

3. RESULTS

The analysis of the semi-structured interviews with ten female collegiate athletes revealed a range of lived experiences, highlighting both the challenges they face and the coping strategies they employ in managing their academic and athletic responsibilities. The findings are presented based on the key themes identified during the thematic analysis.

Incentives and Resources

Many participants expressed frustration over disparities in funding and access to resources between male and female sports teams. Athletes described situations where they had to fundraise or cover travel expenses out-of-pocket due to limited institutional support. For example, a volleyball player mentioned, "We often have to organize bake sales and car washes just to afford travel to away games, while the men's team has everything covered by the school." Similar concerns were raised about equipment quality, with tennis players highlighting the use of outdated gear that affected their training. Scholarship inequalities also emerged as a recurring issue, with some athletes receiving only partial scholarships, forcing them to take on part-time jobs to cover expenses. These disparities left many athletes feeling undervalued compared to their male counterparts.

Support Systems

Support systems, both formal and informal, played a crucial role in the athletes' ability to cope with the demands of collegiate sports. Family support was frequently mentioned as a motivating

factor, with many athletes expressing gratitude for parents and relatives who provided emotional and financial assistance. Peer relationships within teams also served as vital support networks, fostering a sense of camaraderie and shared purpose. One soccer player noted, "My teammates are like my second family. We lean on each other, especially during tough times." Mentorship from coaches varied, with some athletes describing positive, encouraging relationships, while others highlighted the lack of personal attention. Additionally, several athletes mentioned the role of spiritual practices, such as prayer, in helping them maintain focus and manage pre-competition anxiety. One runner shared, "I always say a prayer before every race—it calms my nerves and gives me strength."

Balancing Responsibilities

Balancing academic and athletic demands was a major challenge. Athletes reported sacrificing sleep and personal time, with Lana, a basketball player, stating, "I'm exhausted after practice and classes, but I still have homework." Coffee was a frequent coping mechanism, as Amy, a tennis player, noted, "Coffee keeps me going during long training days." Prayer provided emotional balance, with a runner informant, explaining, "A brief prayer helps me refocus when I'm overwhelmed."

Coaching and Mentorship

The role of coaching and mentorship varied across participants. Positive coaching experiences were characterized by constructive feedback, personal attention, and emotional support. Athletes with such coaches reported higher levels of motivation and performance. A track athlete shared, "My coach really believes in me. He pushes me to do my best but also understands when I need a break." Conversely, negative coaching experiences, including harsh criticism and a lack of empathy, led to decreased confidence and enthusiasm. One gymnast recounted, "My previous coach would yell at us constantly. It made me dread going to practice." The importance of one-on-one mentoring was also emphasized, with athletes valuing personalized guidance that addressed both athletic and academic challenges. Additionally, some coaches integrated mindfulness and prayer into team practices, fostering a more holistic approach to athlete development.

Gender Stereotypes

Gender stereotypes and biases were prevalent in the experiences of many athletes. Participants described feeling the need to constantly prove their abilities, particularly in male-dominated sports environments. A soccer player expressed frustration over the perception that

women's sports were less competitive: "People often say women's soccer isn't as exciting as men's. It's disheartening, but it also pushes me to work harder." Some athletes recounted sexist comments and dismissive attitudes from peers and spectators, which negatively impacted their confidence and motivation. However, others found empowerment through overcoming these stereotypes, using them as fuel to succeed. Spiritual practices, such as prayer, were mentioned as a source of strength in dealing with gender-based challenges. One basketball player explained, "I pray before games not just for success, but for the strength to face the criticism and stereotypes."

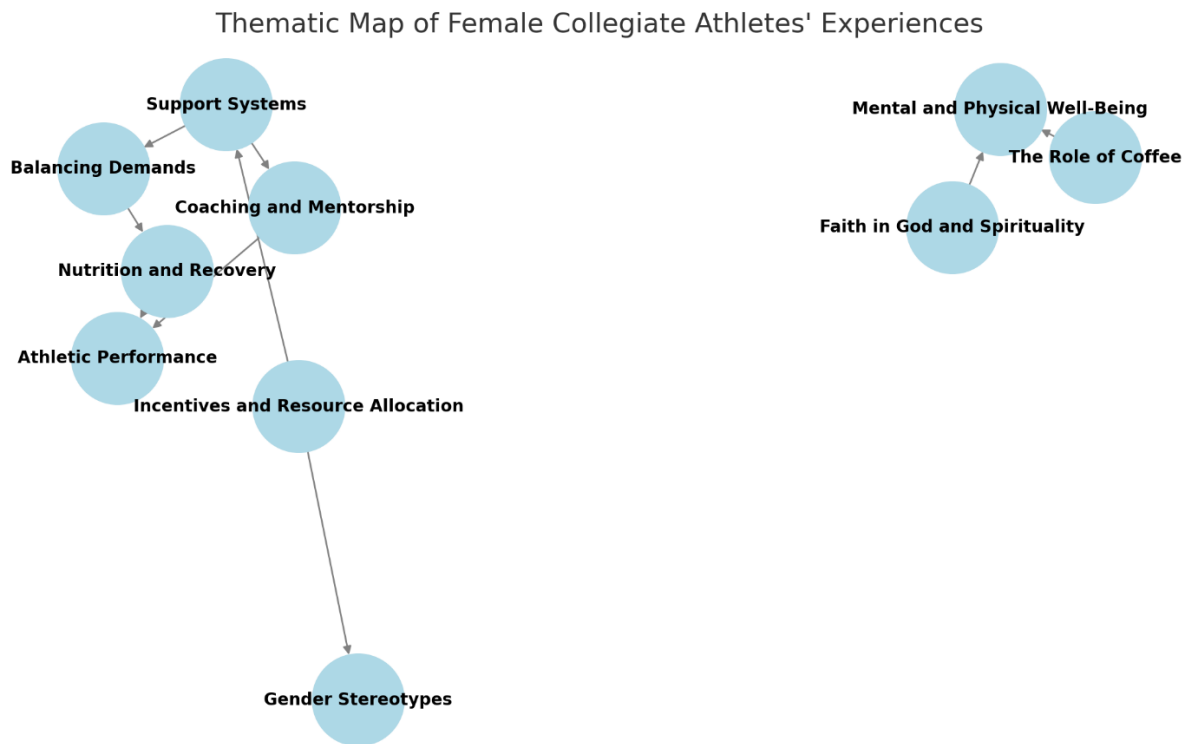


Figure 1. Thematic map of female collegiate athletes' experiences

3.1. Narratives and Thematic Analysis

Resources and Incentives

According to the accounts, female athletes frequently experience notable differences in incentives and resources as compared to their male counterparts. Julia, a volleyball player, revealed that her team's lack of finance forced them to pay for trip out of pocket. "We often fundraise just to get to tournaments, while the men's team has everything covered."

Basketball player saw that the men's team had greater media attention and better training facilities. "Our games aren't even televised, while the men's games always have full coverage," she said. Tennis player observed that her team's performance suffered from a lack of proper equipment.

"We are forced to play with shabby tennis balls that hardly bounce. It influences our training and, eventually, our performance in competition.

A Track athlete talked about her encounters with scholarship disparities. "My partial scholarship barely covers my tuition, while male athletes were given full scholarships. To make ends meet, I've had to take on part-time jobs.

The dearth of sponsorship options for women's sports teams was brought to light by Emma, a soccer player. "Sports with a male preponderance appear to attract sponsors more. We hardly ever receive new travel gear or jerseys. Other Stories:

Absence of Travel Assistance: A Softball player talked about the challenges of attending games without official assistance. "For long-distance games, we've had to use our own vehicles. It wears us out and detracts from our performance.

Health Resource Inequalities: a swimmer, observed that the men's squad had first dibs on physiotherapists. "I've had injuries that took weeks to get treated because the facilities were always booked by the men's teams."

Systems of Support

Support networks were essential for maintaining athletes' wellbeing and motivation. Sophia, a swimmer, highlighted how her parents' support helped her stay grounded when things were tough. "Every time I feel like giving up, my mom reminds me of how far I've come."

Diana, who plays soccer, talked about how her team has a great sense of oneness. We are akin to a family. We challenge one another to be our best selves. I couldn't have made it through some of the most difficult training sessions without their help."

Track athlete Evelyn emphasized the value of her coach's mentoring. "My coach not only gives me training advice but also helps me manage my academic workload."

Long-distance runner Elise talked about how praying helped her feel at ease before competitions. "Before each run, I say a brief prayer. It helps me focus on the here and now and clears my head." In a similar vein, volleyball player Kelly stated, "I am strengthened by my faith. Before games, my team and I pray, and it keeps us inspired and unified.

Other Stories:

Peer Support: Gymnast athlete described how her teammates served as her emotional support system. "They have supported me during my personal hardships and injuries. We encourage one another.

Resources for Mental Health: Basketball player Laura emphasized the value of in-school counseling programs. "Accessing mental health support helped me manage the pressure of balancing school and sports."

Coffee Culture: Basketball player Allison said that going for a coffee run after practice had become customary. "After morning practices, we connect over coffee. It's a minor but crucial aspect of our daily schedule.

Equilibrium of Duties

A common issue was the difficulty of juggling obligations to both sports and academics. Gymnast explained how she fell behind in her coursework because she competed so often. "I occasionally skip class to compete. Catching up is an ongoing battle. Basketball player Lana revealed that she experienced anxiety attacks as a result of the pressure to perform well in both her scholastic and athletic endeavors. "The strain can be too much to handle. I've had panic episodes prior to major competitions. Tennis player Amy clarified that she didn't have much time for relaxation because of her schedule. "There are days when I go from class straight to practice, and by the time I finish, it's late at night."

Soccer player described being burned out by the demands of her job. "There were times when I felt like I was at my breaking point. I even thought about giving up sports completely. As a swimmer, she stressed the value of time management. "I needed to pick up time management techniques fast. If not, I would have failed in both my academic and athletic endeavors. Other Stories:

Caffeine Dependency: Tennis player talked about how coffee became essential. "It's not ideal to rely on caffeine, but sometimes it's the only thing that keeps me going during long training days."

Prayer for Balance: athlete four talked about how prayer kept her centered. "I take a moment to pray when I'm feeling stressed. It provides me strength and serves as a reminder of why I'm doing this.

Academic Flexibility: According to a volleyball player, several instructors were accommodating to her schedule. "A few of my professors offered flexible deadlines during tournaments, which made a huge difference."

Mentoring and coaching

The dual effects of both positive and negative coaching experiences were explained by athletes. Runner commended her coach for striking a balance between emotional support and strict standards. "He knows how to push us without breaking our spirits." Gymnast, on the other hand, described how she was adversely impacted by a former coach's strict methods. "He would shout at us all the time. It harmed my performance and made me dread practicing.

Diver highlighted how she was inspired by constructive criticism. "Hearing my coach say, 'You can do this' during a tough session gave me the energy to keep pushing forward." Sprinter talked about how having a female coach empowered her. "Having someone who can relate to what I'm going through is empowering. Her advice is the greatest. One-on-One Mentorship: Volleyball player described the benefits of one-on-one mentoring sessions. "The individual attention helped me refine my technique and boosted my confidence." Spiritual Mentorship: Runner reported that her coach used mindfulness exercises. "We take a minute to ponder or pray before beginning and ending each practice. It keeps us rooted.

Stereotypes about gender

Numerous athletes voiced their displeasure with enduring gender stereotypes. As a soccer player, experienced pressure to impress male sportsmen. "They believe that simply because we are female, we are inferior. I have to disprove them all the time." Track athlete talked about how her self-esteem was impacted by sexist remarks. "Women's sports aren't legitimate, according to someone. Although it was painful, it strengthened my resolve. Basketball player overcome unfavorable opinions by concentrating on her own development. "I stopped caring about what others thought and focused on being the best version of myself." Other Stories:

"I couldn't keep up, but I outperformed many of them." Stereotypes in Contact Sports: Rugby player discussed how the general public's image of her sport hindered its support. "Some claim that women's rugby is too violent. We train equally as hard, so it's annoying a soccer player, talked about how prayer gave her the confidence she needed to face her self-doubt. "I pray before every game to boost my confidence and remind myself of my worth."

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study offer deep insights into the multifaceted lived experiences of female collegiate athletes, highlighting the interplay between structural challenges, social dynamics, personal resilience, and coping strategies. Through the thematic analysis, it became evident that while female athletes display remarkable dedication and adaptability, they continue to face systemic barriers that impact their overall well-being and performance.

The issue of unequal distribution of resources emerged as a significant challenge for female collegiate athletes. Consistent with previous research (Coakley, 2021), participants reported disparities in funding, access to quality equipment, travel support, and scholarship opportunities compared to their male counterparts. These inequalities not only affect the quality of training and competition but also contribute to feelings of undervaluation among female athletes. The findings suggest that institutions must critically examine their resource allocation policies to ensure equitable support for all athletes, regardless of gender which is also a consideration for improved policy making (Caasi, 2022; Kizito & Ed, 2014). Equitable access to funding, travel accommodations, and scholarships is crucial for fostering an inclusive and fair athletic environment including monetary incentives (Jones & Jones, 2018).

Support systems played a pivotal role in shaping the experiences of the athletes. Family support, peer relationships, and mentorship were essential for emotional and psychological well-being specially the elite ones where their wellbeing is one of the main considerations (Noguchi, 2022). Athletes who had strong familial backing and team camaraderie reported higher levels of motivation and resilience. This aligns with previous studies indicating the positive impact of social support on athlete performance and mental health (Hodes et al., n.d.; *Th 3 1*, 2018) (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Notably, spiritual practices such as prayer also emerged as an important source of strength and coping. Athletes who engaged in pre-competition prayers or mindfulness practices reported reduced anxiety and enhanced focus, highlighting the role of spirituality in sports as a form of emotional regulation and stress management which supported that use of prayer and religious observances for sport psychology consultancy, it may also provide useful information for coaches, managers and even parents who want to assist the religious athletes in their sporting lives. (Watson & Czech, 2005)

Balancing the dual demands of academics and athletics was universally cited as a major source of stress and burnout. The intense schedules, marked by early morning practices, full academic workloads, and late-night study sessions, often led to sleep deprivation and mental fatigue.

Athletes frequently resorted to coffee and caffeine-based drinks to sustain energy levels, which while effective short-term, may contribute to long-term health issues. Despite the physical and mental strain, some athletes found balance through personal practices like prayer and mindfulness, which helped them manage stress and stay focused. The findings underscore the need for institutions to provide academic flexibility, time management training, and wellness programs tailored to the unique needs of student-athletes and related to teachers' support for high performance athletes like flexibility, relationship, and support as mentioned by (Denyce & Diakun, 2015)

The quality of coaching and mentorship significantly influenced athletes' experiences and performance. Positive coaching relationships, characterized by constructive feedback and emotional support, fostered athlete confidence and motivation. Conversely, negative coaching experiences, involving harsh criticism and a lack of empathy, led to reduced self-esteem and disengagement from the sport. The findings highlight the importance of coach education programs that emphasize holistic coaching practices—focusing not only on performance but also on the mental and emotional well-being of athletes. Furthermore, mentorship programs that provide one-on-one support can play a vital role in helping athletes navigate the challenges of collegiate sports and academics.

Gender stereotypes and biases continue to pervade the athletic environment, impacting female athletes' confidence and sense of belonging. Participants described the need to constantly prove their competence, combat sexist comments, and overcome societal perceptions that devalue women's sports. These experiences are consistent with broader research on gender inequality in athletics (Donnelly & Kidd, 2019). However, many athletes demonstrated resilience by using these challenges as motivation to excel. Prayer and spiritual practices also emerged as coping mechanisms, helping athletes build inner strength and maintain self-worth in the face of external biases. The findings underscore the importance of institutional initiatives aimed at combating gender stereotypes through awareness campaigns, inclusive training, and equitable media coverage since even simple comments can affect female athletes' moods and performance (Hively & El-alayli, 2014; Wilde, n.d.)

An interesting aspect of this study was the role of personal practices like prayer and coffee consumption in athletes' daily routines. Prayer emerged as a significant emotional and psychological anchor for many athletes, providing a sense of calm, focus, and resilience in high-pressure situations. For some, prayer was a team ritual that fostered unity and collective motivation. Coffee consumption, on the other hand, was primarily used as a coping strategy to manage the demanding schedules and physical exhaustion inherent in collegiate athletics. While effective in boosting short-term energy levels, the reliance on caffeine raises concerns about potential long-term health effects, suggesting

the need for nutritional education tailored to athletes' needs. The reliance on prayer as a coping strategy aligns with Watson and Nesti's (2005) findings on spirituality in sports, suggesting that spiritual practices enhance emotional regulation under pressure. This study extends this literature by highlighting prayer's role in fostering team unity among female athletes. Conversely, frequent coffee consumption to combat fatigue raises concerns about long-term health risks, necessitating nutritional education programs (Grgic et al., 2019). These findings underscore the need for policies that integrate mindfulness training and address caffeine dependency to support athlete well-being.

4.1. Implications for Practice

The findings of this study have important implications for institutional policy and practice. Universities should strive for equitable resource distribution, ensuring that female athletes have access to the same quality of equipment, funding, and travel accommodations as their male counterparts. Academic flexibility policies, including adjusted deadlines and tutoring support, can alleviate the pressures of balancing academics and athletics. Mental health services tailored to the unique challenges of student-athletes should be made readily available, along with wellness programs that emphasize holistic well-being.

Coaching education programs should prioritize athlete-centered coaching approaches, focusing on constructive feedback, emotional support, and mentorship. Institutions should also implement initiatives to combat gender stereotypes, such as awareness campaigns and increased media coverage for women's sports. Recognizing and supporting personal coping strategies, such as prayer and mindfulness, can further enhance athlete well-being.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study highlights the complex and multifaceted experiences of female collegiate athletes, revealing both systemic challenges and personal resilience. Despite facing resource disparities, gender stereotypes, and the pressures of balancing academics and athletics, these athletes demonstrate remarkable strength, often drawing on support systems, mentorship, prayer, and coping strategies like coffee consumption to succeed. The findings call for institutional reforms aimed at promoting equity, well-being, and holistic support for female collegiate athletes, ensuring they have the resources and opportunities necessary to thrive both on and off the field.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct and intellectual contribution to the work, and approved it for publication.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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