


Journal of Contemporary Social Science and Education Studies
E-ISSN: 2785-8774
Vol 3, Issue 1 (2023)

What has happened during the pandemic? Scrutinizing the mental health effect on student-athletes within ASEAN Countries

***Razif Sazali¹ Nur Atika Sabrina Ibrahim¹, Farahiza Razali², Roestam Effendi Sijar² & Mohd Rushdan Mohd Jailani²,**

¹ Faculty of Sports Science and Recreation, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Negeri Sembilan Branch, Seremban Campus, 70300 Seremban, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia

² ASEAN University Sports Council, Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia

Article Info	ABSTRACT
<p>Article history: Received: 27 January 2023 Revised: 28 January 2023 Accepted: 15 February 2023 Published: 1 April 2023</p>	<p>Economic lockdown and social distancing have driven athletes worldwide to change their regular habits. Nevertheless, being a university student-athlete has already come with complex pressures, extraneous compared to normal student life. Hence, this study aims to identify the mental well-being during the pandemic of Covid-19 within the student-athletes group from ASEAN countries. The quantitative approach using an online questionnaire was administered to n=110 respondents consisting of 60 males and 50 females. Overall, through data analysis using SPSS version 28, the results showed that the student-athletes experienced sleep difficulties ($\mu=3.221$) throughout the pandemic lockdown and had difficulties in making human physical contact ($\mu=1.55$). Findings also indicated that the training process of the student-athlete group was affected, thus impacted to their mental health. In short, the pandemic has caused student-athlete to have a decline in motivation levels, increased stress, and induce a feeling of helplessness.</p>
<p>Keywords: Student-athletes Athlete dual career Pandemic covid-19</p> <p> OPEN ACCESS</p>	

Corresponding Author:

*Razif Sazali

Faculty of Sports Science and Recreation, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Negeri Sembilan Branch, Seremban Campus

Email: razifsazali@uitm.edu.my



INTRODUCTION

The prevalence of mental health challenges among university students is alarming, particularly when it comes to depression, anxiety, and stress (Abenza-Cano et al., 2020). While the "new normal" continues to evolve, social isolation could adversely impact an individual's mental health and well-being. Certainly, social isolation is a major concern in contemporary society that is considered not fulfilling basic human needs. Although this issue was recognized long before the Covid-19 pandemic, the consequences of isolation were particularly dominant during physical distancing measures that were needed to prevent the virus's spread. Researchers have been drawing attention to the significant threats to mental well-being during acute and chronic isolation as data about the effect of Covid-19 on mental health is in the evolving stage (Christensen et al., 2021). This fluctuating situation has changed an athlete's training routine, mental health, and probably their willingness to practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previously, the systematic review by Reardon & Factor (2010), indicated that mental health in athletes' mood disorders and anxiety disorders are critically understudied. Past research findings also showed university athletes find the duties and responsibilities of their dual roles (i.e., being a student and an athlete) require strenuous commitments. Although both roles are deeply integrated into individual identities, the need to continuously prioritize between academic commitment and sport could be one of the factors affecting their mental health (Xiao et al., 2020). That is why it is not surprising to see higher results of psychological problems continuously occurring in the student-athletes population than in non-athletes (Grasdalsmoen et al., 2022). Especially in the pandemic situation, student-athletes that are involved in academics and sports must bear the additional burden of managing the responsibility of both. In fact, the additional stressors or pressures resulting from sports and academic activities have adversely impacted student-athletes mental health (Abenza-Cano et al., 2020).

At the start of the pandemic era, sporting events have been postponed and social activities among university students have declined. The period of isolation has caused psychological effects such as anxiety due to consequences of changes in living conditions, decreased social and physical contact as well as separation from loved ones. Most importantly, the effects on mental health have been typically linked to college students and started in a developmental stage where depressive symptoms become more prevalent (Lundqvist et al., 2021). Indeed, collegiate student-athletes are a unique population within college settings as they are exposed to a higher risk of problems with mental health and perceived less willingness to seek help and support. Student-athletes also have much to "lose" regarding canceled competitive seasons that threaten their athletic careers as well as distancing measures that have limited their access to teammates who are a key source of social connectivity and assistance (Knowles et al., 2021).

METHODOLOGY

An online survey using google forms was utilized and priorly, a reliability test of the questionnaire has been conducted with a Cronbach alpha value as presented in Table 1. The survey was adopted and adapted from the National Collegiate Athletic Association (2020), which consisted of five sections that covered the demographic questionnaire (5 items), mental health concerns on the pandemic (10 items) and environmental situation (7 items). The data were collected among the student-athletes among ASEAN countries using convenience sampling which serve to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the factors contributing to the mental health of student-athletes during the pandemic?

RQ2: What is the situational environment of student-athletes faces during the pandemic?

Table 1: Reliability test

	Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha based on standardized item	N of items
Mental health concern	.944	.944	10
Environmental situation	.768	.768	7

Background of the respondents

A total of 110 student-athletes from ASEAN countries have been recruited as the respondents. The result showed that the distribution by gender is male at 54.5% (n=60) and female at 45.5% (n=50). Besides that, the mean age of the respondents is around 18 years old to 30 years old. The majority sport of athletes (Table 2) is from other sports which is 30.9% such as diving, board games, gymnastic, and hockey followed by athletics with 21.8% Meanwhile, the highest number of athletes have competed in SEA Games (35.5%) followed by ASEAN University Games with 31.8% as in Table 3.

Table 2: Type of sports played by the athletes

	Frequencies (n=110)	Percentage (%)	Cumulative Percent
Athletic	24	21.8%	21.8
Badminton	15	13.6%	35.5
Basketball	4	3.6%	39.1
Football	16	14.5%	53.6
Swimming	12	10.9%	64.5
Volleyball	3	2.7%	67.3
Table tennis	2	1.8%	69.1
Others	34	30.9%	100.0

Table 3: Highest championship participated by the athletes

	Frequencies (n=110)	Percentage (%)
SEA Games	39	35.5%
ASEAN University Games	35	31.8%
FISU World University Championship	14	12.7%
Olympic Games	8	7.3%
Asian University Championship	6	5.5%
Asia Games	6	5.5%
FISU World University Games	2	1.8%

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Factors that affect the athlete's mental health

The result as in Table 4 showed that most of the athletes experienced sleep difficulties with the highest mean score of 3.21 (SD=1.024). Additionally, the group tends to feel overwhelmed with the instant changes with 3.20 (SD=1.003). Also, the athlete felt mentally exhausted during the whole scenario of the situation of pandemic. This is consistent with the report presented by Panchal Nirmita et al., (2021) which also found that most adults experience specific adverse effects on their mental health and well-being, such as difficulty sleeping and worsening chronic diseases due to coronavirus worries and stress during the pandemic situation.

Table 4: Mean of the factors affecting athlete mental health

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Experienced sleep difficulties	110	3.21	1.024
Felt overwhelmed by all you had to do instantly	110	3.20	1.003
Felt mentally exhausted	110	3.19	.953
Felt sad	110	3.06	1.160
Felt very lonely	110	2.94	1.198

Felt a sense of loss	110	2.89	1.070
Felt things are hopeless	110	2.88	1.202
Feld overwhelming anxiety	110	2.84	1.105
Felt so depressed that it was difficult to function	110	2.77	1.131
Felt overwhelming anger	110	2.59	1.043
Valid N (listwise)	110		

The situational environment of student-athletes faces during the pandemic Covid-19

As shown in Table 5, the athlete needs to restrain themselves to be with their teammate and friends physically as they were unable to be with teammates or friends physically ($\mu = 1.55$), however, the group feels confident with their ability to manage exposure to covid-19 ($\mu = 1.29$) and have the capacity to access mental health support in their area ($\mu = 1.25$). In addition, having a stable internet connection is crucial for the athlete group ($\mu = 1.25$) for them during the covid-19 isolation period. Indirectly, elite student-athletes had to change both their preparation and their studies because of Covid-19's lockdowns as in exceptional cases, student-athletes stopped attending their training centers and needed to adjust to their home training facilities with very few resources (Toresdahl & Asif, 2020).

Table 5: Mean average of the scenario of the situational environment faced by the student-athlete during the pandemic Covid-19

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Unable to be with teammates or friends physically	110	1.55	.499
Feel confident my ability to manage my exposure to Covid-19.	110	1.29	.456
Know how to access mental health support in my area.	110	1.25	.438
Have stable internet connection.	110	1.23	.421
Healthy food options are reliably available to me.	110	1.21	.409
Able to access to a medical provider for physical health needs in my area.	110	1.17	.380
Have enough food to meet my needs each day.	110	1.07	.261
Valid N (listwise)	110		

Previous studies also have shown that the role of the coach becomes important during the adult life of student-athletes, being the external factor with the greatest influence on their decision-making and prioritization. The absence of the coach during the lockdown may have affected their ability in battling social isolation. On that basis, coaching interventions are needed to create a positive impact on the dual career of elite student-athletes that is doable through the online platform during the pandemic. Through the online sessions, athletes may interact with their team staff, administrators, and technical staff as well as psychologists, physiotherapists, doctors, and sports nutritionists. Athletes can receive constructive feedback, get the necessary assistance through video conferences, and ensure their progress during this critical period (Goldman & Hedlund, 2020). Besides that, the global community in general also has quickly adapted to creating online content, from free social media teachings to extending meditation such as yoga, and dance courses to help boost mental health. Educational institutions also have provided students with online learning resources to follow at home (Knowles et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The following conclusion is drawn based on the results of the study whereby it can be concluded that athletes' life during the Covid-19 pandemic has been disrupted. The underlying reasons for enhancing mental distress were associated with a lack of resources and available training facilities. This modified lifestyle of the covid situation has a significant psychological effect because athletes priorly have no reference to this changing scenario. It is mandatory for athletes to follow a healthy and balanced lifestyle starting by having enough sleep hours. Within the context of the ongoing pandemic and potential isolation, the athlete can still be engaged through the online platform to find the optimal solution to maintain their physical, physiological, and psychological skills as closely as possible. This problem could inhibit student-athletes to experience decreased motivation levels, increased stress feelings, and feelings of helplessness.

It is important to note that this study does not only concern the mental health of athletes but also calls for the sports team to be proactive, maintain relations with its trainees, and provide them with the necessary guidance and motivation through the best use of online platforms. Although some country has loosened their restriction on covid-19 protocol control, sporting activities through online resources could be a key goal to maintaining athlete performance during the isolation period if it occurs. Nevertheless, low technology access is also to be found to be a gap when pursuing the online platform option(Christensen et al., 2021). Therefore, it is advisable to create a flexible but consistent daily routine with physical workouts between the athlete and support team daily to help with stress and maintain their mental health.

REFERENCES

- [1] Abenza-Cano, L., Leiva-Arcas, A., Vaquero-Cristóbal, R., García-Roca, J. A., Meroño, L., & Sánchez-Pato, A. (2020). Effect of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) on Elite Spanish Student-Athletes' Perception of the Dual Career. *Frontiers in Psychology, 11*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.620042>
- [2] Christensen, N., van Woerden, I., Aubuchon-Endsley, N. L., Fleckenstein, P., Olsen, J., & Blanton, C. (2021). Diet quality and mental health status among division 1 female collegiate athletes during the COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 18*(24). <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph182413377>
- [3] Goldman, M. M., & Hedlund, D. P. (2020). *Rebooting Content: Broadcasting Sport and Esports to Homes Rebooting Content: Broadcasting Sport and Esports to Homes During COVID-19 During COVID-19 Part of the Sports Management Commons*. <https://doi.org/10.1123/ijsc.2020-0227>
- [4] Grasdalsmoen, M., Clarsen, B., & Sivertsen, B. (2022). Mental Health in Elite Student Athletes: Exploring the Link Between Training Volume and Mental Health Problems in Norwegian College and University Students. *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living, 4*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.3389/FSPOR.2022.817757/BIBTEX>
- [5] Knowles, C., Shannon, S., Prentice, G., & Breslin, G. (2021). Comparing Mental Health of Athletes and Non-athletes as They Emerge From a COVID-19 Pandemic Lockdown. *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living, 3*, 125. <https://doi.org/10.3389/FSPOR.2021.612532/BIBTEX>

- [6] Lundqvist, C., Macdougall, H., Noguchi, Y., Malherbe, A., & Abejean, F. (2021). When COVID-19 Struck the World and Elite Sports: Psychological Challenges and Support Provision in Five Countries during the First Phase of the Pandemic. *Https://Doi.Org/10.1080/21520704.2021.1931594*, 13(2), 116–128. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21520704.2021.1931594>
- [7] National Collegiate Athletic Association. (2020). *NCAA Student-Athlete Well-Being Study - NCAA.org*. <https://www.ncaa.org/sports/2020/5/22/ncaa-student-athlete-well-being-study.aspx>
- [8] Panchal Nirmita, Kamal Rabah, Cox Cynthia, & Garfield Rachel. (2021). *The Implications of COVID-19 for Mental Health and Substance Use*. Kaiser Family Foundation. <https://www.kff.org/report-section/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use-issue-brief/>
- [9] Reardon, C. L., & Factor, R. M. (2010). Sport psychiatry: a systematic review of diagnosis and medical treatment of mental illness in athletes. *Sports Medicine (Auckland, N.Z.)*, 40(11), 961–980. <https://doi.org/10.2165/11536580-000000000-00000>
- [10] Toresdahl, B. G., & Asif, I. M. (2020). Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19): Considerations for the Competitive Athlete. *Sports Health*, 12(3), 221–224. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1941738120918876>
- [11] Xiao, H., Zhang, Y., Kong, D., Li, S., & Yang, N. (2020). Social Capital and Sleep Quality in Individuals Who Self-Isolated for 14 Days During the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Outbreak in January 2020 in China. *Medical Science Monitor : International Medical Journal of Experimental and Clinical Research*, 26. <https://doi.org/10.12659/MSM.923921>