

Article

The Impacts of Burnout on Athletic Identity and Attitude towards Sport

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Abstract: Sports can be a positive experience for some. However, it can also lead to increased stress and ultimately result in burnout. Previous research has examined burnout in sports. Although, little research has been conducted on how experiencing burnout can affect other factors such as an athlete's view of their sport and their athletic identity. Collegiate athletes face many responsibilities: school, work, long hours of practice, physical, emotional, and social demands. An accumulation of these factors, combined with the inability to effectively cope with such demands, can lead an athlete to experience high levels of burnout. The purpose of this study was to examine the potential impacts that burnout could have on a collegiate athlete's attitude towards their sport and their athletic identity. A phenomenological approach was used to examine five participants who scored high on the Athlete Burnout Questionnaire. Participants underwent a 1 h interview that evaluated their attitude towards sport and athletic identity. It was found that there was a meaningful negative change in attitude towards sport; however, no meaningful or permanent change was prevalent when evaluating athletic identity.

Keywords: mental health; student athletes; coping



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1. Introduction

While participating in collegiate sports can be highly beneficial for student athletes, it can also lead to increased stress and, as a result, cause burnout [1]. Collegiate athletes face various responsibilities: school, work, long hours of practice, travel, physical demands, emotional, and social demands. An accumulation of these demands, combined with the inability to effectively cope with such demands, can lead an athlete to become physically and emotionally overworked and to experience high levels of burnout [2]. Burnout is a psychological syndrome that portrays emotional and physical exhaustion, reduced sense of accomplishment, and sport devaluation [1].

Athletes who experience burnout display symptoms in various ways: emotionally, psychologically, and behaviorally [2]. These can be divided into the following two broad themes: internal and external factors. A strong foundation has been established on the causes of burnout through various empirical works [2–5]. Some of these include direction and intensity of anxiety, along with trait and state anxiety [6,7]. Another possible cause of burnout is an athlete's coping sources. Coping sources can come from internal and external sources which comprise of sleep patterns, fitness level, nutrition, motivation, and time management, among others [3]. Social support is another aspect within collegiate athletics that can play an important role in the prevention of burnout [8]. When athletes feel like they have high-quality social support, and that they can rely on other people (e.g., teammates, coaches, coaching staff, parents, friends), they have lower indices of burnout [8]. These social interactions can structure an athlete's experience and influence how they cope with the stresses (physical and psychological) of sport participation [8].

1.1. External Factors

The athlete–coach relationship and leadership within the team is another aspect closely related to social support [9]. Different coaching styles can facilitate or debilitate athletes' performance, depending on an athlete's preferred style [5]. There are two main coaching styles: autonomy-supportive and controlling coaching. Autonomy-supportive coaches are characterized by their pro-social, approachable, and positive demeanor. They prioritize athletes' perspectives, acknowledge their emotions, and offer choices and information. Specific behaviors associated with this style include providing choices within set limits, explaining the reasoning behind tasks, and avoiding criticism or tangible rewards [10]. This coaching approach is linked to enhanced intrinsic and self-determined motivation in athletes [10]. In contrast, controlling coaches exhibit behaviors opposite to autonomy-supportive ones; they provide limited choices, often deliver negative feedback, and may employ power-assertive techniques, such as punishments for non-compliance or subpar performance [10]. Consequently, controlling coaching can have a detrimental impact on athlete motivation and performance due to its restrictive, negative, and coercive nature [10]. When the coaching style does not align with an athlete's preferred style, it is imperative to utilize other sources of social support [4,5]. Coaching styles can be a determinant of athlete burnout; a coaching style that does not align with an athlete's preference, may debilitate their performance and increase the chances of experiencing high levels of burnout.

Competing responsibilities, such as financial pressure, schoolwork, and part-time jobs, can significantly contribute to burnout among collegiate athletes. These athletes not only have to excel in their chosen sports but also balance the demands of academic coursework and, in many cases, the need to financially support themselves through part-time employment. The constant juggling act of training, studying, and working can lead to physical and mental exhaustion. The pressure to perform at a high level in both sports and academics, while also managing financial stress, can overwhelm athletes and erode their overall well-being. Consequently, without proper support and time management strategies, these competing responsibilities can increase the risk of burnout, negatively impacting their performance and long-term athletic careers [11].

1.2. Internal Factors

Motivation is another important factor that can have an influence on burnout. Athletes experience motivation to participate in their sport—whether it is extrinsic motivation or intrinsic motivation [12]. Athletes that portray higher intrinsic motivation will be less likely to experience high levels of burnout [12]. Therefore, it is understood that athletes seeking to learn and master new skills and are seeking pleasure from their sport (intrinsic motivation) will be less predisposed to burnout compared to athletes who participate to win prizes and social recognition (extrinsic motivation) [13]. Studies have shown that athletes who have higher intrinsic levels of motivation tend to overcome and endure the negative influences with more ease. When athletes endure events that bear negative influences on their participation in sport, such as their relationship with the coach, lack of social support, etc., they will become more predisposed to experience high levels of burnout, if they are more prominently extrinsically motivated [13].

Perfectionism may also be a contributing factor to burnout. Perfectionism can occur as maladaptive or adaptive [14]. The maladaptive perfectionist tends to be more negative and unrealistic regarding performance, whereas the adaptive perfectionist tends to be more mindful of their limitations and flexible regarding their performance standards. Maladaptive perfectionists are more likely to experience high levels of burnout than adaptive perfectionists [14].

1.3. This Study

Athletes that experience burnout can endure long-term effects and consequences [12]. Due to athletes' year-round participation in sport, and intense schedule of games and practice, burnout levels can increase throughout their athletic career [15]. Interventions to

help monitor and alleviate the daily stressors of sport may aid in diminishing the symptoms of burnout and improving performance.

When developing personalized mental skills training interventions regarding burnout, it is pertinent to address gaps in the literature before implementation [2,6,16,17]. First, coaches and athletes should be educated on what burnout is, and its possible effects and consequences. The more those working in sport are educated about burnout, the easier it can be to recognize burnout in its early stage and monitor it before it becomes debilitating to the athlete. To do so, further research should be conducted to define early signs and symptoms of burnout.

Further, the link between experiencing burnout and an athlete's attitude towards their sport should be explored. According to Sánchez-Torres et al. [18], attitude is influenced by one's motivation, previous experiences, and perceived behavioral control. Attitude is important in the sport domain as it can determine an athlete's motivation and mitigate levels of burnout experienced during their athletic career. Understanding the effects of burnout on attitude may shed light on the long-term implications and consequences of experiencing burnout; thus, this allows coaches, mental performance consultants, and even teammates to be more knowledgeable of what an athlete is experiencing.

Moreover, the relationship between experiencing burnout and an athlete's athletic identity should be further evaluated. An understanding of whether athletes lose their sense of "being an athlete" when they experience burnout will be investigated. By understanding whether athletes lose their identity of being an athlete or not, researchers can begin to investigate further potential consequences of burnout in athletes' lives outside of sport. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to answer the following questions: (1) Does experiencing burnout impact an athlete's attitude towards their sport? (2) Does experiencing burnout impact athletic identity?

2. Methods

2.1. Design

In this study, a phenomenological qualitative approach was employed to delve into the experiences of burnout among collegiate athletes. Prior to the qualitative data collection, quantitative data were collected in the form of surveys to determine participant eligibility in the interview portion of this study. The aim of the study was to gain a deeper understanding of the intricate dynamics that contribute to athlete burnout.

Using a phenomenological approach to evaluate the impacts of burnout on athletic identity and attitude towards sport can be extremely beneficial for a number of reasons [19]. Firstly, a phenomenological approach seeks to understand the essence and meaning of lived experiences. By adopting this approach, researchers can delve deeply into the subjective experiences of athletes and gain a comprehensive understanding of how burnout impacts their athletic identity and attitude towards sport.

Secondly, burnout and its impacts on athletic identity and attitude can vary significantly from one athlete to another. A phenomenological approach recognizes the importance of individual experiences and their subjectivity [19]. By focusing on individual accounts, researchers can capture the unique perspectives and responses of athletes to burnout, which may not be apparent in quantitative or standardized assessments.

Finally, by adopting a phenomenological approach, researchers can place value on the human experience and highlight the significance of emotions, beliefs, and personal meanings. It allows researchers to explore the psychological and emotional dimensions that burnout may have on athletic identity and attitude towards sport [19]. This perspective helps in identifying not just the observable symptoms but also the underlying emotional and existential aspects of burnout. In addition, a phenomenological exploration of burnout and its impacts on athletic identity and attitude towards sport can generate new hypotheses and research questions. The findings from this approach can provide insights into less-explored aspects of burnout and athletic identity, which can then be further investigated using other research methods [19].

2.2. Participants

Overall, 95 participants completed the Athlete Burnout Questionnaire (ABQ) [1] and the average score was 39.55 ($SD = 12.34$). The lowest score on the ABQ was 19 and the highest score was 72. Participants consisted of female ($N = 61$) and male ($N = 34$) collegiate athletes currently enrolled in an NCAA Division I, Division II, Division III, or NAIA college/university at the time of this study. In order to participate in this study, one had to be a current member of an NCAA or NAIA athletic team at their school and be currently enrolled in a graduate or undergraduate program. To identify a wide range of burnout experiences, maximum variation sampling was used [20]. All participants completed an online survey; from those, purposeful sampling was used to select five participants with high levels of burnout to take part in a semi-structured interview (see Table 1).

Table 1. Participants' demographic.

	Age	Gender	Year in School	Division	Sport	Ethnicity	ABQ Scores
Participant 1	20	Female	Senior	II	Softball	White	72
Participant 2	19	Male	Junior	NAIA	Soccer	Hispanic	57
Participant 3	24	Male	Senior	NAIA	Soccer	Hispanic	61
Participant 4	20	Female	Sophomore	III	Golf	White	59
Participant 5	23	Female	Senior	II	Soccer	Hispanic	58

Participants that scored the highest in the ABQ and consented to being further contacted to participate in the interview were contacted with a request to participate in the semi-structured interview. The average score on the ABQ for the interviewed participants was 61.4 ($SD = 6.11$). The participants selected for the interview scored 56 or above (maximum score being 75) on the ABQ. Five interviews were conducted as the primary method of data collection for this research project. The average length of the interviews was 45.04 min. The principal investigator prepared an interview guide with 16 questions to be loosely followed during the interviews with probes and follow-up questions where necessary. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

2.3. Instrumentation

2.3.1. Athlete Burnout Questionnaire

Athletes answered an online version of the Athlete Burnout Questionnaire (ABQ) [1]. This self-reported questionnaire consists of 15 questions rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (almost never) to 5 (almost always). The questionnaire is divided into the following three sub-scales: reduced sense of accomplishment, emotional and physical exhaustion, and devaluation of sport. For example, a question illustrating a reduced sense of accomplishment is "I am not achieving much in my sport", while a question representing emotional and physical exhaustion is "I feel overly tired from my sport participation". Devaluation of sport is captured by questions such as "I am not as into my sport as I used to be". Each sub-scale has a score range of 5–25, with a total possible overall score ranging from 15–75. Test–retest reliability for each sub-scale was as follows: emotional/physical exhaustion ($R = 0.92$), reduced sense of accomplishment ($R = 0.86$), and sport devaluation ($R = 0.92$).

2.3.2. Athletic Identity Measurement Scale

The Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) [21] is used to measure the degree to which an individual identifies with their athletic role. It consists of 10 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale. While the AIMS was not administered in its entirety, some questions from the AIMS were adapted for the semi-structured interviews to capture qualitative aspects of athletic identity among interviewees. Some of the questions integrated in the semi-structured interviews were "Do you have any goals related to your sport and performance?" and "What is your why? Why do you put all this time and effort into your sport?", among others.

2.3.3. Demographic Questionnaire

A brief demographic questionnaire was included to collect information on participants' age, ethnicity and race, year in school, sport played, and number of years playing that sport.

2.4. Procedure

Once this research study was approved by the IRB, a phenomenological qualitative approach was adopted. The researchers rigorously adhered to the ethical guidelines outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki, ensuring the protection of the participants' rights, well-being, and privacy throughout the entirety of this study.

NCAA and NAIA coaches were contacted via email by the principal investigator to forward a recruitment email to their athletes. The email sent to the coaches included an anonymous survey link for any athletes that volunteered to participate in this study. No coach was privy to who clicked or did not click the survey link (i.e., all information was blind to all but the principal investigator). Each participant voluntarily completed an informed consent, demographic questionnaire, and an online version of the ABQ. Further, participants were asked that if they qualify, would they consent to be contacted by the principal investigator to be interviewed (i.e., click "yes" or "no"). Once all initial data were collected, the ABQ was scored by the principal investigator to determine eligibility for the semi-structured interviews. At no point during this process were any of the questionnaires used to diagnose or treat participants. Participants with the highest scores on the ABQ were contacted and asked by the principal investigator if they would be willing to participate in a 1 h, semi-structured interview. Five participants agreed to participate in the interview. Following the completion of the interview, participants were encouraged to reach out to the counseling center at their institution if they needed assistance in managing their burnout symptoms.

During the interviews, participants were asked more in-depth questions regarding their participation in sport, sport history, (e.g., statistics and awards, family involvement, relationship with coaches), they were given the opportunity to expand upon questions from the ABQ, and were asked questions adapted from the AIMS [21]. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded by the principal investigator to find common themes and sub-themes. The athletes were reassured that the results would remain anonymous by using pseudonyms, as well as keeping their institution's identity confidential. The results were not shown to coaches and were not reported back to their institutions.

2.5. Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

A comprehensive approach was employed, including open, axial, and selective coding techniques, to systematically examine and interpret the data in order to address the research questions. Open coding involved a meticulous exploration of the data and assigning relevant codes to different segments to capture their underlying meaning. Axial coding was then utilized to establish connections and relationships between codes, facilitating the identification of overarching themes. Subsequently, selective coding was applied to refine and condense the data, extracting core sub-themes that encapsulated the key findings.

To ensure trustworthiness and rigor of this study, various strategies were implemented. Researcher triangulation was employed as a means of enhancing the reliability of the analysis. This involved the principal investigator conducting the initial coding and interpretation, which was then reviewed by the second author to validate the coding process and ensure the consistency and accuracy of the identified themes.

Member checks were conducted to bolster the credibility of the findings. The transcripts of the interviews were shared with the participants, providing them with the opportunity to review and validate the interpretations of their responses. Through this process, any misinterpretations were rectified, and additional insights or corrections were provided; thus, this ensured that the findings aligned with the participants' perspectives.

To maintain transparency throughout the research process, an audit trail was strictly maintained. This involved recording and documenting each step of the research process,

including data collection, analysis, and interpretation. By preserving a detailed record of the research activities, the data analysis process was made more transparent, enhancing the validity of this study. Additionally, this facilitates reproducibility and allows other researchers to evaluate and build upon the findings.

In acknowledgement of potential biases or assumptions, a subjectivity statement was included to elucidate the potential influence of the principal investigator's positionality. This statement openly recognizes the potential influence of the principal investigator's preconceived notions, biases, or personal experiences on the interpretation of the data. By explicitly addressing these subjective elements, readers are provided with insights into the lens through which the analysis was conducted, enabling them to interpret the findings in a nuanced and contextually appropriate manner.

3. Results

Analysis of participant interviews was conducted, and two main themes were found to explain how burnout was present among the participants regarding their attitude towards their sport. The first theme evaluated external factors, and was further divided into the following three sub-themes: (1) coaching ability and leadership, (2) competing responsibilities, and (3) external pressure and overinvolvement. The second theme evaluated internal factors and was further divided into the following three sub-themes: (1) expectation versus reality, (2) emotional resilience, and (3) perspective and change in priorities. Furthermore, the impacts of burnout on athletic identity were also examined.

3.1. External Factors

The primary theme that impacted athletes' attitude towards their sport encompass external factors such as coaching ability and leadership, competing responsibilities, and external pressure and overinvolvement.

3.1.1. Coaching Ability and Leadership

The first sub-theme that impacted athletes' attitude towards their sport was coaching ability and leadership. For example, participants' inability to build a healthy relationship with their coaching staff and leaders on the team, dealing with coaching favoritism, and overall lack of communication (i.e., explanation within training and competitive settings) from the coaching staff and leaders on the team was prevalent in various interviews. These examples can assist in explaining the significance that coaches and leaders have on their athletes' experiences throughout collegiate athletics.

When asked about their coach-athlete relationships, the athletes talked about their perspective on the relationships they have with their coaching staff. Participant 1 stated, "my coach and I butt heads every day" and "I didn't talk to anyone on the coaching staff". This shows that her relationship with the coaching staff was not healthy as she could not even go to them to express her feelings and expectations. Participant 5 stated, "sometimes it's just difficult to compartmentalize the drama with soccer" and "how she (the coach) viewed me in the beginning was completely wrong". In addition to building a healthy relationship with the coach and leaders on the team, another aspect that highly affected athletes was coaches playing their favorites within the team. Participant 1 stated, "our coach played favorites too, he would treat the rest of us horribly and the favorites he would do anything for them". Participant 3 stated, "he doesn't play the athletes fairly on the field" and "the leaders and captains. . .you can see that they are coaches' favorites, but coach gives them preference and the other players don't get to play as much". These quotes confirm that athletes who felt that their coaches played favorites on the team had negative experiences within their sport, and consequently experienced a negative change in attitude towards their sport.

Another aspect that proved to affect athletes negatively was the lack of explanation and communication from the coaching staff and leaders to the players on the team. Participant 1 stated, "he would look at it as me defying him" and Participant 3 stated, "I feel here that

they, uhm. . . they just like, see how long did you run and how far can you shoot and stuff like that and that's not really the sport and that's not really what we need. So, some practice drills that we do, doesn't really make sense or if they make, coach doesn't explain why he put some guys to play that really nobody understands why he sits other guys and we never have a clear explanation why". These quotes provide evidence that when coaches and leaders do not communicate properly and effectively within the team—that is, explain the reasoning behind training sessions and drills, or do not implement open communication with athletes—the athletes will experience higher levels of burnout, and consequently they will experience a negative change in attitude towards their sport.

3.1.2. Competing Responsibilities

The second sub-theme that impacted athletes' attitudes towards their sport was competing responsibilities. For example, school and work overload, and financial responsibility (i.e., athletic scholarship and graduating debt-free) was prevalent in various interviews. These examples can assist in explaining the significance that coaches and leaders have on their athletes' experiences throughout collegiate athletics.

Participant 1 stated, "I always feel like it's a waste of my day. . . I'm wasting four hours of my day when I could be studying, doing my schoolwork". Participant 4 stated, "it really shows how kind of far behind you get academically" and continued, "I did have a job but I had to quit, because it was just too much with the school, the training, and then on weekends I would have tournaments, and it just wouldn't align with the scheduling so it was really hard to have a job, although it was somewhat necessary but I really had to focus more on my school and my sport, as that's what I am here for". In addition to this, Participant 5 stated, "I still have a lot, like a lot of schoolwork to get done, so I'm basically very busy all time" and "I had to figure out how to make those athletic training hours up, but it was difficult to coordinate with my coach", as well as saying, "it's difficult to focus on athletic training and being the best student I can be when I also have the job of keeping the team positive and motivated". These statements show that due to the high demand of schoolwork and other competing responsibilities, it is difficult for these athletes to coordinate between all responsibilities and perform at their best as an athlete and a student, which consequently leads them to experience high levels of burnout. Participant 5 continued to explain, "the issues of my program director and my coach kind of being on top of me, asking for such high marks, and I was getting pulled too much, it's very stressful". These quotes provide evidence that school and work overload can be a burden to juggle as a collegiate athlete due to high demand in every aspect of their life in addition to their athletic career. These demands can be straining for athletes as they can cause increased stress, and consequently lower efficiency and efficacy in being up-to-date with all their responsibilities.

In addition to school and work overload, financial responsibility was an aspect that proved to be very pertinent in athletes' collegiate experiences. Participant 1 stated, "It's something that I have to do, it's like a job" and "I am going to be debt-free when I graduate, so like I don't want to throw it all away". Participant 2 stated, "I mean I came here because of the scholarship, so I can't just let it go that easily".

3.1.3. External Pressure and Overinvolvement

The third sub-theme that affected athletes' attitudes towards their sport was external pressure and parental overinvolvement. For example, parental expectation in success in school and sport, and parental overinvolvement in the sport. These examples can assist in explaining the significance that external pressure and parental overinvolvement can have on their athlete's experience throughout collegiate athletics. Participant 2 stated, "my family is a good support too, but they want me to focus more on my studies than soccer" (120) and "they want me to prioritize my studies. . . so it gets tough when I try to ask them their opinions about my soccer". He continued to explain, "my parents kind of pushed me towards my studies more than soccer".

Participant 4 stated, “I started so young because my father played too” and “My dad is like super involved, because he played golf too, so he calls to find out how my playing is going and talk about practice and tournaments. I know I can always talk to him about my golf performances but sometimes he gets too hard on me because of like small mistakes I made or whatever. . .he wants to know every detail of how I do plays and how I position my body. So, I get overwhelmed by my dad sometimes, I try not to talk to him too much about golf because I get upset a lot of the times when he pushes me too much”. Participant 4 also stated, “my dad really was a driving factor. . .he really pushed me. . .he really did put a pressure on me that at times it was bad”. This aids in explaining that parents have a very important role in an athlete’s life, whether it is a positive or negative role. This could consequently lead athletes to experience higher levels of burnout due to the demand they receive from family members and from the high expectations to perform.

3.2. Internal Factors

The second theme evaluated athletes’ attitudes towards their sport encompassing expectation versus reality, emotional resilience, and perspective and change in priorities.

3.2.1. Expectation vs. Reality

The first sub-theme evaluated athletes’ expectations within their sport, compared to what actually took place during their time participating in collegiate athletics, and role attribution and validation. When expressing the expectations athletes had during their participation in collegiate athletics, all participants explained that their expectations did not align with the reality of being on a team. Participant 1 stated, “I feel like I was doing good, and when I was actually doing well, it was never enough for him” and “I was worried about not having my friends around anymore and not sharing my time with them”. Participant 1 continued to explain, “every time that I don’t play it makes me sad”. These statements show that Participant 1 expected to be given more playing time as she felt as though she was performing at her best; when, in reality, her coach did not see it that way and did not give her more playing time. This, in turn, made her sad, which caused her to have an attitude change towards her sport. Participant 2 stated, “I guess they convinced me to focus more on my studying than soccer” and “you have to kind of put into perspective and be realistic to what is going to make you happy in the future, what is going to help you succeed”. This shows that Participant 2 had a change in expectation once he realized that his career in his sport might not be what his future holds for him.

Participant 3 stated, “I’m feeling that I don’t uhm. . .that I’m not receiving the opportunity that I deserve to show my best” and “I feel that no matter what I do in the time that I get on the field, coach doesn’t recognize what I do, especially compared to others”. Participant 3 continued to explain, “I don’t get much opportunity to play on the team, I can’t develop as much as I expected”. This statement shows that Participant 3 expected that he would get more opportunities in his sport to show his skills, and due to the coach’s decision-making process, he was not given that opportunity. Participant 5 confirms this by stating, “now being in college. . .I realize that you have to sacrifice a lot to play your sport and. . . it will test you in every which way”.

3.2.2. Emotional Resilience

The second sub-theme evaluated athletes’ emotional resilience and ability to deal with adversity and challenges within their sport. When talking about their experience with burnout, Participant 1 and Participant 2 mentioned that they were not doing very well emotionally and that they could not overcome their difficulties. Participant 1 stated, “I was mentally not okay. . .I was so out of it, I didn’t feel like myself. . .”. Participant 2 stated, “I get very aware that I’m not doing well and I just focus on that. . .and I can’t get it out of my head” and “I get really upset at myself. . . I get very frustrated and always tell myself that I need to do better or figure out a way of being better”. These statements provide insight

on athletes' emotional resilience and whether they possess that psychological flexibility to successfully overcome the hardships and challenges of participating in collegiate athletics.

Participant 4 stated, "It's very nerve wracking, so I really have to mentally prepare myself because it is a game that is not just against my, uhmm. . .my competitors. It is against me as well" and "the pressure is still there. . .it's always a competition with yourself and your past scores". Participant 4 continued to explain, "it was so nerve wrecking that it kind of like triggered me for the next one" and "that's a very tough psychological like, trigger. . .That has a toll". Participant 4 also stated, "I will shut down; my face will grow. I will just blank out and I'll be very focused on the thing that is driving me nuts, which is me not being able to do what I'm trying to do. . .and I take it very seriously. The anger sets me very seriously. And if I continue not to excel in what I'm trying to do, it hurts more. Because like, I get more angry at myself and I just kind of put myself down". This shows that Participant 4's emotional resilience levels and his experience were similar to Participant 1 and Participant 2's regarding overcoming hardships within the collegiate athlete world. Participant 5 stated that "it's mainly my mental that doesn't quite know how to deal with that much stress" and also said, "I get nervous, I get anxious, I can't sleep, I feel very unsettled". Participant 5 stated, "physically and mentally draining".

3.2.3. Perspective and Change in Priorities

The third sub-theme evaluated perspective within athletes' specific situations and the change in priority they faced due to their experience with burnout. Participant 1 stated, "I thought about transferring schools and continuing softball somewhere else, but I really just wanted to focus on school". Participant 2 stated, "for competitions, like games and tournaments I used to get very excited, nervous, I would get butterflies in my stomach, but now since I just travel with the team and don't get much playing time anymore, I get kind of pissed off" and "I don't really have a goal for soccer anymore. Like when I first got here, I really wanted to continue my studies and like go professional after completing undergrad, but like now, I don't see past this part with soccer. . .I don't want to do that anymore". Participant 2 continued to explain, "I might just focus on my studies and let it go", "I lost the passion to play" and also said, "I just kind of changed my goals. . .I just changed out I see it". These statements show that Participant 1 and Participant 2 had a change in their priorities once they accepted what their athletic career was really like. They mentioned that they started focusing on their academics and prioritizing their studies instead of their athletic career.

Participant 3 stated, "my goal was to play in the professional leagues, however. . .I don't know if this is a reality anymore" and "my priorities kind of changed. . .I'm focusing more on my studies", as well as saying, "I don't think now I'm focusing on getting to the professional level. . .I just don't want to go professional anymore". Participant 4 stated, "kind of get rid of golf in my head for a bit, get a break" and "it's good for me to like think about other things, focus on other stuff sometimes". Participant 4 continued to explain, "right now I don't really have any goals" and "I would see myself doing it more as a hobby. I do really like playing but I don't see myself professionally playing, because that is a full-time job, I am trying to pursue a degree" and added, "I'm prioritizing other things, putting more effort into school, and focusing on good stuff. I think I got to a point where I just go through the motions and that's it, done. I don't really think about golf as much than I used to". Participant 3 and Participant 4's experiences reflect the same feelings towards their sport as Participant 1 and Participant 2.

3.3. No Change in Athletic Identity

All participants reported that they still consider themselves athletes, even though they have experienced burnout. Although their levels of athletic identity could have varied or diminished during their experience with burnout, they have not experienced a decrease significant enough to affect their athletic identity completely. The following

statements provide evidence that even though these athletes experienced burnout due to their collegiate athletic involvement, their athletic identity did not change:

Participant 1 stated, “I can’t not do sports, you know? it’s a part of who I am, I value it so much” and “I still see myself as an athlete, just like an athlete with a limit of what can be dealt with at a time, you know?”. Participant 2 stated, “my entire life, my entire routine surrounded by soccer” and “I definitely do consider myself an athlete since I’ve been doing this my whole life” and continued, “I think I still am an athlete and will be no matter what happens” and “it’s a part of my personality”. Participant 3 mentioned, “it has become a part of my daily life, so I don’t want to be without it” and “sport has a big role in my life, I would say it was crucial for my development as a person”. Participant 4 stated, “I think I would consider myself an athlete. . .I’ve been playing sports forever”. Participant 5 stated, “yeah I think I do consider myself an athlete”. These statements portray little or no change in athletes’ athletic identity, regardless of their experience with burnout.

4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to answer the following research questions: (1) Does experiencing burnout affect an athlete’s attitude towards their sport? (2) Does experiencing burnout affect athletic identity? Results presented above show that athletic identity was not affected by burnout, and athletes’ attitudes towards their sport varied due to experiencing high levels of burnout. The following two main themes emerged: external and internal factors.

4.1. External Factors

Many stressors can lead athletes to experience burnout; however, one of the most prominent factors is coaching staff and their relationship with their players [9]. According to Judge et al. [12], positive coaching influence is associated with lower indices of burnout, whereas negative coaching influence is associated with higher indices of burnout. This research provides evidence that when coaches have a strained relationship with their athletes, they will most likely experience burnout. The participants in this research stated that they did not feel as though they were being given the opportunity to play as much as they deserved. Ultimately, playing time is the coach’s decision. Unfortunately, as seen in Gonzalez-Garcia and colleagues’ [9] research, favoritism is prominent in collegiate athletics. Favoritism within teams reflects poor coaching ability and links athlete burnout to the treatment received by athletes from coaches [9]. In contrast to this, one participant in this study stated that they had a good and healthy relationship with their coach. Democratic behavior from coaches, social support, and positive feedback are positively related to psychological well-being in athletes [8]. This participant did not experience burnout consequently from coaching behavior; however, due to burnout being a multidimensional construct, there were other factors that influenced their high indices of burnout.

Athletes often form social connections and friendships within their sport communities. Burnout may lead to decreased social interactions, as they may withdraw from teammates and coaches due to their emotional exhaustion and decreased interest in their sport. This further impacts their sense of belonging and attachment to their athletic identity [22]. The diminishing sense of belonging and attachment to their athletic identity can have far-reaching consequences. Athletes may begin to question their purpose and significance within their sport, leading to the feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt [22]. The loss of their social connections within the sports community can exacerbate the feelings of isolation, making it even more challenging to navigate the complexities of burnout [22].

Early specialization in sports refers to the practice of young athletes focusing intensely on a single sport at a very young age, often at the expense of participating in other sports or activities [23]; therefore, consideration of how early specialization contributes to burnout should be considered. While this approach may seem beneficial for developing high-level skills in that particular sport, it can also lead to burnout and negative consequences in the long run. According to Baker [23], there is a wealth of evidence supporting early

specialization, which maintains the development of expertise in sport. However, there are a number of consequences that stem from early specialization, including potential burnout and/or dropout from sport. In this study, all participants partook in early specialization in their sport, having all started between the ages of 5 and 9 years, and all of them experienced burnout, or considered dropping out of their sport during their collegiate career.

Another explanation of these results can be found using the entrapment view, which explains that athletes who perceive that they have no way out of their athletic career due to too much invested and no other attractive alternatives, will be likely candidates to experience burnout [2]. Similar to Wiggins et al. [7], who found that athletes who maintain sport participation when experiencing the feelings of entrapment do so due to high cost and low reward, the participants in this study reported feeling like they had no way out mainly due to financial responsibilities. Many athletes who participate in collegiate athletics receive financial aid or scholarships. According to the NCAA, more than 180,000 athletes receive scholarships for Division I and Division II programs totaling close to USD 4 billion annually in athletic scholarships across the United States [24]. This can lead athletes to feel entrapped due to the need for scholarships and financial aid to complete college, in contrast to wanting to continue their participation in the sport for their own enjoyment. Therefore, coping strategies to alleviate the adverse impact of the feelings of entrapment is vital for any athlete experiencing symptoms of burnout [3].

4.2. Internal Factors

Self-Determination Theory is a theory of human behavior and personality development that identifies motivation as a continuum of controlled to autonomous motivation [25]. Deci and Ryan [25] proposed that autonomous motivation is achieved by having three basic psychological needs met as follows: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. When an athlete has these three needs met, they are more likely to be motivated for intrinsic reasons, such as for pleasure and skill mastery versus for reward and compensation [26]. Therefore, athletes have a higher probability of experiencing burnout when the three psychological needs are not met in their sport [27]. These results showed that the participants were unable to achieve their self-determination needs whilst participating in their sport; as a result, participants experienced a negative change in attitude towards their sport and heightened levels of burnout. This consequently led to the athletes considering terminating participation in their sport.

Athletes who are unable to cope with the challenges they encounter within their sport in a healthy and effective manner are more likely to suffer from burnout [3]. Coping abilities consist of internal sources, such as sleeping patterns, fitness level, and nutrition, as well as external sources such as perceived social support [3]. Internal coping sources are more imperative to prevent burnout compared to external coping sources [28]. Consequently, athletes who perceive that they possess high internal coping ability, will be able to shield themselves from experiencing severe burnout. All five participants in this study demonstrated that they do not possess high levels of internal coping ability through the lack of emotional resilience, which could explain why the demands of their sport had become too much for them to endure.

Burnout can also lead to a reevaluation of an athlete's priorities in life. Initially, being an athlete may have been at the forefront of their identity; however, burnout can shift their focus towards other aspects of life, such as education, relationships, or other hobbies [22]. While this shift can be healthy, it may also create a sense of loss if the athlete has heavily identified with being an athlete for a long time.

4.3. No Change in Athletic Identity

Erik Erikson stated that an individual's identity is fully developed by the time they reach their early 20's [29]. Individuals undergo a series of stages in which their athletic identity can be developed [29]. Brewer et al. [30] defined athletic identity as the degree to which an individual associates with their athlete role. This definition justifies why athletic

identity did not change in athletes who experienced burnout in this research. Collegiate athletes are usually between the ages of 18 and 25 years, which means that their identity will already be fully developed by this stage. According to Guerrero and Martin [31], athletic identity is developed based on the following two factors: cognitive structure and social role. From a cognitive structure perspective, athletic identity provides a framework for processing, coping, and behavior. Conversely, from a social role perspective, athletic identity is influenced by the degree to which others attribute the athletic role to the individual [31]. This means that even though athletes endure burnout, their athletic identity levels will not undergo a substantial change due to the importance athletics have within their cognitive processes and social attributions. In this study, participants stated that they still consider themselves athletes regardless of their experience with burnout, that their sport has an important role in their lives, and that playing sports is part of who they are.

Burnout can have significant effects on an athlete's identity and attitude towards sport. Athletic identity is a crucial aspect of an athlete's self-concept. It is often formed over years of dedication and hard work in their sport, and it becomes a significant part of who they are. Research shows that burnout can cause identity confusion [29] as athletes may start to question their role as an athlete. They may struggle to reconcile the idea of being an athlete with the exhaustion and negative emotions experienced by symptoms of burnout. This confusion can lead to the feelings of self-doubt and loss of a sense of purpose [29].

For some athletes, their self-worth and self-esteem may become heavily tied to their athletic achievements and performance. When burnout affects their ability to perform at their usual level or when they start losing interest in the sport, they may perceive it as a personal failure. The decline in performance and motivation can lead to a decrease in self-worth, causing athletes to feel inadequate and unfulfilled [29].

Many athletes initially engage in sports because of their passion for it. However, burnout can disconnect athletes from that initial spark, causing them to lose sight of the reasons why they loved the sport in the first place [29]. As a result, they may struggle to find enjoyment in training and competition, leading to decreased motivation to participate.

4.4. Limitations and Future Research

Some limitations of this study should be mentioned. First, the sample size of 5 participants in the qualitative portion of this study was low. The COVID-19 pandemic affected recruitment for this study when "Zoom fatigue" was at a high point, resulting in a low sample size due to athletes lacking interest in additional virtual meetings. Replicating this study with more participants will provide a better understanding of how attitude about one's sport is impacted by burnout. Another modification that could improve this study is to conduct a longitudinal study that examines the impact burnout has on athletic identity and attitude over time. The participants in this study were evaluated while experiencing burnout using a single interview, which may not reflect an accurate change in their athletic identity. Thirdly, recruiting more participants from a variety of sports may be necessary to evaluate if there is a trend within specific sports.

In addition, there were cultural limitations as most of the participants in this study were international students. Cultural differences, along with differences in values, language differences, and socioeconomic status were not taken into consideration when analyzing the data. It should also be noted that international students usually receive scholarships, which can have an impact on their level of dedication and the feelings of obligation to participate in their sport. This should be explored further. Researchers should also consider focusing on potentially quantifying psychological flexibility and emotional resilience to differentiate positive versus negative psychological flexibility and emotional resilience. Researchers should focus on researching preventive methods for burnout to help athletes increase the quality of their collegiate athletics experience. Finally, future research should focus on a longitudinal approach to evaluate what influence early specialization has on burnout in athletic careers.

4.5. Applications

The purpose of this research was to investigate burnout and its potential effects on athletic identity and athletes' attitudes towards their sport. By understanding how burnout can affect these facets, coaches, parents, sport psychology consultants, and athletes themselves, we can understand what to do to prevent or mitigate the feelings of burnout. Based on the findings provided above, several practical applications and interventions can be implemented to address, prevent, and mitigate the feelings of burnout among collegiate athletes.

A mental skills training program should be developed and implemented among teams and individual athletes. By developing a comprehensive mental skills training program, athletes can learn the skills necessary to prevent burnout and apply them to situations they may encounter during the season and offseason. This mental skills training program should include components such as education and awareness, individualized support, group or team support, collaboration with coaches and support staff, and integration into athletic programs.

First and foremost, the main focus of this mental skills training program should be education and awareness. Education is a very important component of a training program as it will contribute to athletes understanding what burnout is, what it looks like in different athletes, and how athletes may feel if they are experiencing symptoms of burnout. In addition to this, the mental skills training program should include individualized athlete support, along with group or team support. Individualized support is an essential component to the appropriate delivery of a successful mental skills training program. This type of support should include open and transparent discussions, where no judgment is present. By establishing athlete support services within the athletic department, such as mental performance consultants and counselors, this type of intervention could help athletes navigate the challenges of burnout, to develop coping mechanisms, and to enhance their mental well-being. This support should be confidential and readily accessible to athletes seeking assistance.

The mental skills training program should also include group or team support. By providing group or team support within this program, athletes cannot only benefit individually but also experience a sense of belonging and support from their teammates. When athletes experience greater feelings of relatedness they are more likely to have greater intrinsic motivation [13], which may help to decrease symptoms of burnout. This collective approach can enhance team dynamics, resilience, and overall well-being within an athletic team. Some activities to enhance group or team support can include team-building activities, team accountability, group workshops and discussions, increased peer support networks, group feedback and reflection, and creating team rituals and traditions.

Collaboration with coaches and support staff is also an important aspect that should be considered when implementing mental skills training programs. By fostering collaboration and communication between coaches, support staff, and athletes, coaches and support staff will be better educated about the importance of athlete well-being, burnout prevention, and the role of mental skills training. When coaches and support staff are properly educated about burnout, its symptoms, and its effects, they can encourage a supportive team culture, involve athletes in decision-making, and monitor training load to prevent excessive stress.

The integration of mental skills programs with athletic programs can help foster an environment that values and supports athletes' development. By integrating mental skills training, burnout prevention strategies, and promoting positive athletic attitude and healthy athletic identity, athletes can have more structured support from the athletic department as well. This can include incorporating mental skills training sessions into team practices and providing resources and materials to athletes.

It is essential to tailor these applications to the unique needs and context of collegiate athletes and specific sport programs. Collaboration among athletes, coaches, and support staff is crucial for successful implementation. By implementing these strategies, collegiate athletic departments can proactively address burnout, promote mental well-

being, and facilitate the development of a positive athletic attitude and a healthy identity among athletes.

5. Conclusions

The results of this study shed light on the complex interplay of external and internal factors contributing to burnout among collegiate athletes and its impact on their attitude towards their sport. This study identified two main themes, each with sub-themes, that helped to explain the experiences of burnout in this context.

The first theme, external factors, encompassed coaching ability and leadership, competing responsibilities, and external pressure and overinvolvement. Athletes' relationships with their coaches and leaders, coaching favoritism, and the lack of effective communication were found to extensively impact their experiences and contribute to burnout. Competing responsibilities, such as academic demands and financial pressure, added to the stress and strain experienced by athletes, further exacerbating burnout. External pressure from parents and their expectations in both academics and sports also played an important role in influencing athletes' attitudes towards their sport.

The second theme, internal factors, explored athletes' attitudes in terms of expectation versus reality, emotional resilience, and changes in priorities. Athletes often had high expectations for their collegiate athletic experience, but when these expectations were not met, it led to disappointment and a shift in attitude. Emotional resilience, or the ability to cope with adversity, varied among athletes and was linked to their ability to withstand burnout. Lastly, athletes' priorities and perspectives shifted as they experienced burnout, with many choosing to prioritize academics and other aspects of their lives over their athletic careers.

The research findings highlight that athletic identity remains relatively stable even in the face of burnout. Erik Erikson's [29] developmental framework suggests that identity formation is largely complete by early adulthood, which aligns with the age range of collegiate athletes. Brewer et al.'s [30] definition of athletic identity as the degree of association with the athlete role further supports this notion, emphasizing that the deep-rooted cognitive and social aspects of athletic identity are less prone to substantial changes. While burnout can affect an athlete's attitude towards their sport and can introduce identity confusion and self-doubt, it appears that the fundamental sense of being an athlete endures, demonstrating the enduring meaning and importance of athletics in shaping their self-concept and social roles.

These findings underscore the importance of recognizing and addressing the multifaceted nature of burnout among collegiate athletes. Strategies to prevent and mitigate burnout should consider both external and internal factors, including coaching relationships, academic support, and mental health resources. Furthermore, understanding the resilience and identity of athletes can inform interventions aimed at promoting their overall well-being and fostering a more positive and constructive experience within collegiate athletics.

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Subjectivity Statement: The principal investigator conducting this study participated in collegiate athletics at a DII school in Florida and played soccer for two years. Her experience with soccer was very influential in her collegiate athletic career, in which she experienced severe burnout. Considering this, the researcher is aware that she might present biases when interpreting the data collected in the interviews and conducted researcher triangulation and peer debriefing, member checks, and an audit trail to ensure objectivity and to minimize biases.

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