

IMPACT OF SPORTS BULLYING ON MENTAL HEALTH OF UNIVERSITY ATHLETES IN SOUTH WESTERN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study determined whether experiences of bullying significantly influence athletes' mental health before, during and after competitions. Employing a descriptive survey design, the research targeted athletes from six Federal Universities (FUs), sampling four institutions through simple random sampling. A total of 320 athletes across various sports including ball, racket, stick, athletics, and gymnastics were selected using multi-stage sampling procedure. Convenient sampling technique was adopted for the study. A Self-structured and validated questionnaire entitled "Sports Bullying and Athletes' Mental Health-Survey" with reliability coefficient of 0.78 was used for data collection. Descriptive statistics, bar charts, means, and standard deviations and Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient (PMCC) statistic was used to test the hypothesis at 0.05 alpha level. Findings indicated a high prevalence of sports bullying, with 309 (96.6%) athletes reporting experiences of bullying; 178 (57.6%) were female. The study identified cyberbullying (mean = 29.74 ± 4.67), physical bullying (28.31 ± 4.02), verbal bullying (25.58 ± 3.45), and relational bullying (16.66 ± 1.08) as prevalent forms. Key risk factors included

intimidation (31.3%), limited friendships (23.0%), ethnicity (20.4%), and physical condition (13.6%). The mental health consequences associated with bullying comprised anger (17.8%), guilt (14.2%), compulsive behaviour (13.3%), depression (12.3%), excessive worry (11.9%), panic disorder (10.7%), and anxiety (9.7%). The study concluded that sports bullying is highly prevalent among university athletes in Southwestern Nigeria and is significantly associated with adverse mental health outcomes. The study recommends implementing periodic awareness campaigns, enforcing anti-bullying laws, and establishing clear codes of conduct to mitigate bullying and promote athletes' mental well-being.

Keywords: *Bullying, Bullied, Sports Bullying, Mental Health, University Athletes,*

Introduction

Athletes face series of competition stress; among these are provocation, augment and exposure to threat before, during and after sports tournament. Sports which ought to bring happiness, joy, positive emotions, and self-esteem are seen as mental health stressor in another viewpoint. For example, mental health is the foundation well-being of an individual including feelings of happiness, joy, positive emotions, self-esteem and resilience. In fact, it is the ability to live comfortably with ones-elf and others; and behave rationally (Fatiregun, 2024). World Health Organization (WHO, 2022), defined mental health as a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community. Therefore, mental health is ability to think clearly, act rationally and reason perfectly without negative interference. For some athletes sports is perceived as a threat to their mental health when they experience bullying or were bullied. Ideally, every university athlete has the right to participate in an environment that is fun, safe, healthy, and to be treated with respect, dignity and fairness; but bullying denies them from their rights which at time may result in feeling of disgrace, embarrassment, shame and intimidation.

Globally, Afshan, Sumira & Saba (2024), noted that bullying is rampant among university athletes. In sports, there are many occurrences that result to bullying and its effect on athletes is underestimated. Therefore, bullying is the exertion of dominance by an individual or group over someone perceived as less powerful, often through age, physical strength, or emotional advantage to destabilize others in the sports arena (Afshan, Sumira & Saba, 2024). Margaret (2018), describes it as the deliberate infliction of physical or emotional harm to control weaker athletes through threats, verbal abuse, or mockery. Similarly, the Cyber Bullying Research Centre (2020) defines it as aggressive behaviour involving force or coercion, typically marked by a power imbalance. Such acts can lead to low mood, loss of enjoyment, and diminished mental well-being.

However, athletes who are bullied often feel trapped in most cases and could take many different form; among these are physical threats or violence; name-calling and teasing; ostracism; and social attacks on someone's reputation; which could be direct or indirect forms. Owuamanam & Makinwa (2015), expressed that direct bullying involves a great deal of physical aggression which includes shoving and poking, throwing things, slapping, choking, punching and kicking, beating, stabbing, pulling hair, scratching, biting, scraping and pinching; while indirect bullying is a

social aggression attempting to socially isolate the athletes (Gautam, Jain, Chaudhary, Gautam, Gaur & Grover, 2024). This isolation is achieved through variety of techniques, including spreading gossip, refusing to socialize with other athletes. Charles (2017), affirmed that bullying could take the forms of physical abuse which causes physical harm such as hitting, kicking, biting, overworking to the point of physical damage and emotional abuse that leads to emotional distress. While social abuse deals with any act that creates isolation or exclusion from a group or social atmosphere of the victim(s). Apparently, Sterling and Kerr (2016), noted that athletes were facing relational bullying which occurs from coach to player, parent to player, player to player, or fan to player, either in person or via cyberbullying on social media platforms such as Snapchat, Facebook, or Twitter.

Bullying has been observed during training sessions when one athlete outperforms others; as a result, some athletes may resent the superior performance and eventually bully the high-performing athlete. United States Department of Education (2018), stated that 28 percent of United States athletes have experienced bullying or have felt bullied. In comparison, one in three youth athletes were the victim of an act of bullying either by their fellow athletes or their coaches (Lereya, Copeland, Costello & Wolke, 2015). Meanwhile, 40 percent of the Canadian universities athletes had been targeted of bullying and experienced bullying and victimization during and after training sessions (Evans, Adler, MacDonald & Cote, 2016). Beaumont Children's Hospital (2016), observed signs of sports bullying that often takes the form of making unreasonable performance; repeated threats to restrict or remove the target's privileges or opportunities; and blaming the target for his/her mistakes. In his submission, Chantal, Margaret and Wanda (2014), stated the symptoms of bullying developed from bullied athletes include excusing from training session such as feeling sick, has an injury, has too much work to do or talking about hating their sport; wants to be driven to training or matches instead of walking; alienated from social or shared activities; becomes uncharacteristically nervous, worried, shy or withdrawn; repeatedly loses money or possessions; and suddenly prone to lashing out at people either physically or verbally. In the context of sports performance, specific behaviours are intended either to include or exclude one athlete from game or training session such as not passing the ball, gossiping about one athlete's performance, and yelling at him/her in front of others. Among athletes, such behaviours were not unique to their team but were common in sports and happen all the time. At times, the behaviour of teammates may mentally and emotionally harmful which are detrimental to accomplishing team goals or individual target. Moreover, bullying in sports is done for selfish purposes; for instance, intimidating younger talented players may hinder performance and allow more senior athletes to have regular positions. (Chantal, Margaret and Wanda, 2014). Bullying of this type fails from the outset because of its invidious purpose; and is often overt and extremely in nature because its purpose is to humiliate and intimidate other athletes (Kevin-Cave, 2017).

Many university athletes in Nigeria performed poorly while other teammates may quit the team if bullying persists. As noted by Beaumont Children's Hospital (2016), the consequence of bullying on team performance reduces self-confidence and love for the competition. In contrary, [Kevin-Cave](#) (2017), noted that bullying in sports is often done for purposes of socializing team members to behave in ways that enhance team performance in at least three ways; first, sports require a certain level of

mental toughness which athletes need to enduring an atmosphere of bullying under mental readiness and enhance performance under pressure. Second, athletes must often consider the goals of the team above individual goals in order for the team to succeed; however, bullying in sports could strip an athlete of individuality and rebuild his/her identity based primarily on being a member of the team. Thirdly, performance is enhanced when athletes know they have to support the teammates in accomplishing a common goal; bullying here could expose those athletes who seek only individual accomplishment and are unwilling to make individual sacrifices for team improvement which in most cases those athletes faced with the choice of leaving the team or enduring while they are bullied.

Bullying can also affect an individual's athletic performance, level of enjoyment, work or school life, academic achievement and physical and mental health. Available evidences showed that bullying have resulted to arrogant, aggressive or impulsive; enjoy having power over others. In her finding, Margaret (2018), believed that some athletes deserve to be bullied as a result of their aggressive attitude either for training or other athletes. Kevin-cave (2017), noted that some athletes need to be bullied to correct their negative behaviour or means of paying-back their mistakes. Evidences showed that 3 out of 5 universities athletes have experienced bullying, with 23.7 percent having been bullied since they have started playing for their universities (Cyber Bullying Research Centre, 2016a). The impacts of bullying on health, self-esteem and performance are significant on university athletes as noted by [Kevin-Cave, \(2017\)](#). Also, 27 percent of those who have been bullied said it made them feel depressed and one out of four turned to self-harm as a coping mechanism.

Bullying remains a significant concern in Nigerian universities, with studies highlighting its prevalence among students. According to a study by Olatokun & Opesade (2022), approximately 43% of university students in Nigeria reported experiencing some form of bullying, including verbal, physical, and cyberbullying. The study noted that bullying often occurs in academic and social settings, with peer pressure and power imbalances being key contributing factors. While specific data on bullying among university athletes in Nigeria is scarce, research on athletes in other contexts suggests that bullying can be prevalent in sports environments. Also, a study by Owoeye & Adegbesan (2023) explored the experiences of athletes in Nigerian universities and found that 35% of respondents reported experiencing bullying or harassment, particularly from coaches or senior teammates. The study emphasized the cultural and hierarchical dynamics within sports teams as a contributing factor to such behaviours. Due to the aforementioned evidences, this calls for this study.

Statement of the Problem

Bullying behaviours are commonly accepted as part of the sport culture due to inherent traditions and aggression of some sports. Philippe, Eduarda, Antonino, Miguel & António (2021), discovered that most of the young athletes fighting for university jersey with uncertainty of securing the position were faced a lots of rejection. With this situation, previous findings established that sports bullying has led to several emotional and behavioural health problems including depression, low self-esteem, drug use, irrational behaviour among seasonal footballers (Owoeye & Adegbesan, 2023; Greco, Cataldi & Fischetti, 2019). This however may be characterized as a symptomatic condition that may lead to low sports performance. The core research problem is the lack of specific, evidence-based knowledge on this

issue within the specific context of South Western Nigeria. While research exists on bullying and mental health globally, there is a gap in the literature regarding its prevalence and specific effects on university-level athletes in this region. The study needs to fill this gap by exploring the direct relationship between different forms of sports bullying and various mental health outcomes within this particular population. Hence, this study.

Objectives of the Study

The study investigated the impact of sports bullying on mental health of university athletes in south western Nigeria. Specifically, the objectives of the study are to:

- i. examine the prevalence of sports bullying among university athletes in south western Nigeria;
- ii. investigate the forms of sports bullying experienced by universities athletes under this study;
- iii. investigate the risk factors of sports bullying among university athletes in study area; and
- iv. identify the effect of sports bullying on mental health of university athletes in study area.

Hypothesis

1. There is no significant correlation between sports bullying and mental health of university athletes in south western Nigeria

Methodology

Descriptive survey research design was employed for the study. The population comprised all university athletes in Southwestern Nigeria. A total of 320 university athletes were selected from four Federal universities in Southwestern Nigeria, namely Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU), Ile-Ife, the University of Ibadan, the Federal University of Technology Akure (FUTA), and the University of Lagos. The participants were chosen based on their consistent involvement in the Nigerian University Games Association (NUGA). Multi stage sampling procedure was employed. Out of 6 Federal Universities in Southwestern Nigeria, 4 were selected using simple random sampling technique. In each federal university sampled, 80 athletes were selected using convenient sampling technique. From each sport, 8 athletes were selected using simple sampling technique. The selection was carried out during training session and the selected sports were classified according to ball, racket, stick, athletics and gymnastics. The selected athletes must have represented the university in at least pre-NUGA competition. The instrument used for data collection was a self-designed and validated questionnaire tagged "Sports Bullying and Athletes' Mental Health - Survey (SBAMH-S)" with reliability coefficient of $r.78$ was used to gather information from the respondents. The instrument was divided into four sections. Section "A" dealt with demographic data of the respondents. Sections "B", "C" and "D" centred on forms, causes, and effect of sports bullying on mental health of university athletes. Collected data were analysed with percentage, mean and standard deviation, and graphical representation; while hypothesis was tested and analysed using Pearson Moment Correlations analysis at 0.05 alpha level.

Results

Objective 1: examine the prevalence of sports bullying among university athletes in south western Nigeria

Table 1a: Descriptive analysis showing the prevalence of sports bullying among university athletes

S/No	Item	N = 309			
		Yes		No	
		F (N)	%	F (N)	%
1.	Have you experienced any kind of sports bullying as a university athlete?	309	(96.6)	11	(3.4)

Results from table 1a showed that out of 320 university athletes sampled for this study, as many as 309 (96.6%) of the respondents had experienced sports bullying against 11 (3.4%) who did not experience bullying. This indicates that there was high prevalence of sports bullying among university athletes in Southwestern Nigeria.

Table 1b: Descriptive analysis showing the prevalence of sports bullying among university athletes

S/No	Items	N = 309	
		F (N)	%
2.	Which gender recorded the highest rate of sports bullying?		
	(a) Male athletes	131	42.4
	(b) Female athletes	178	57.6
3.	When have you started experiencing sports bullying?		
	(a) Before I joined university team	107	34.6
	(b) The moment I joined university team	202	65.4
4.	Where did you experience sports bullying?		
	(a) At the hall of my residence	47	15.2
	(b) At the training session	71	23.0
	(c) During sports competition or tournament	59	19.1
	(d) After sports competition or tournament	97	31.4
	(e) In my lecture rooms or classes	35	11.3
5.	From whom did you experience sports bullying?		
	(a) Team mates	81	26.2
	(b) Spectators or audiences	96	31.1
	(c) Coaches	33	10.7
	(d) Opponents	99	32.0
6.	Which category of sport has the highest rating of sports bullying?		
	(a) Ball games	113	36.6
	(b) Racket games	37	12.0
	(c) Stick games	82	26.5
	(d) Athletics	29	9.4
	(e) Gymnastics	48	15.5

Results from table 1b revealed that out of 309 university athletes who had experienced sports bullying, 178 (57.6%) of the female respondents recorded highest rate of sports bullying against 131 (42.4%) of the male athletes who had lowest rate of sports bullying among university athletes. Also, 202 (65.4%) respondents experienced sports bullying the moment they joined university team against 107 (34.6%) respondents who experienced it before joining university team. 97 ((31.4%) of the respondents experienced sports bullying after sports competition or tournament; 71

(23.0%) respondents experienced sports bullying at the training session; 59 (19.1%) experienced it during sports competition or tournament; 47 (15.2%) respondents experienced it at their respective hall of their residences; and 35 (11.3%) experienced it in their prospective lecture rooms or classes. However, 99 (32.0%) of the respondents experienced sports bullying from the opponents, 96 (31.1%) experienced it from spectators or audiences, 81 (26.2%) from team mates, and 33 (10.7%) from coaches. Therefore, ball games 113 (36.6%), stick games 82 (26.5%), gymnastics 48 (15.5%), and racket games 37 (12.0%) recorded the highest rate of sports bullying while athletics 29 (9.4%) had the lowest rate of sports bullying among university athletes.

Objective 2: Forms of sports bullying experienced by universities athletes in south western Nigeria

Table 2: Mean and standard deviation scores showing the various forms of sports bullying

N = 309		
S/No	Items	$(\bar{x} \pm SD)$
5	Physical Bullying such as hitting, kicking, slapping, tripping, pushing, punching etc.	28.31 ± 4.02
6	Verbal Bullying like name calling, banter, threatening, teasing, yelling abuse and so on	25.58 ± 3.45
7	Relational Bullying such like preventing one athlete joining the team or social activity of the team	16.66 ± 1.08
8	Cyber Bullying such as spreading of falseful lies, fake rumours via social media platforms	29.74 ± 4.67
9	Extortion of money, training kits and other personal belongings	8.93 ± 0.51

Results from table 2 revealed that the mean and standard deviation scores of various forms of sports bullying among university athletes. Results noted that cyber bullying such as false lies, fake rumours (29.74 ± 4.67), physical bullying such as hitting, kicking, slapping, tripping, pushing, punching (28.31 ± 4.02), verbal bullying like name calling, banter, threatening, teasing, yelling abuse (25.58 ± 3.45), and relational bullying like preventing one athletes joining the team or social activity of the team (16.66 ± 1.08) were the major forms of sports bullying experienced by university athletes. Meanwhile, extortion of money, training kits and other personal belongings (8.93 ± 0.51) was the least form of sports bullying among university athletes in south western Nigeria.

Objective 3: Investigate the risk factors of sports bullying among university athletes in south western Nigeria

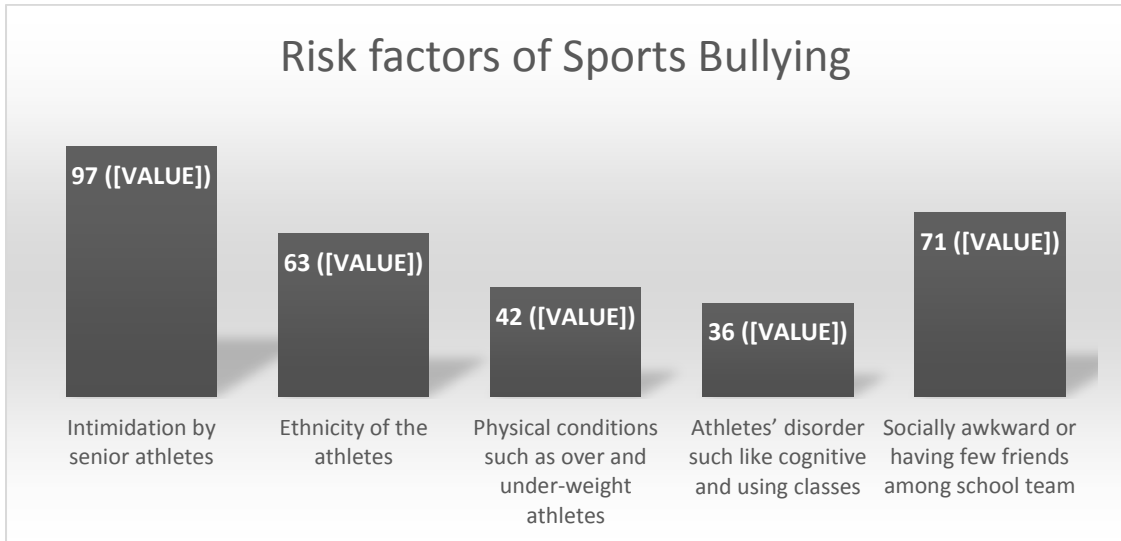


Fig 1: Bar chart showing the risk factors of sports bullying among university athletes

Results from figure one showed that out of 309 university athletes who experienced sports bullying, as many as 97 (31.3%) respondents revealed intimidation by the senior athletes, 71 (23.0%) noted socially awkward or having few friends in the school team, 63 (20.4%) said ethnicity of the athletes, and 42 (13.6%) discovered physical conditions such as over and under-weight athletes were the major risk factors of sports bullying among university athletes. Whereas, 36 (11.7%) of the respondents noted that athletes' disorders was the least risk factor of sport bullying among university athletes in south western Nigeria.

Objective 4: identify the effect of sports bullying on mental health of university athletes in study area

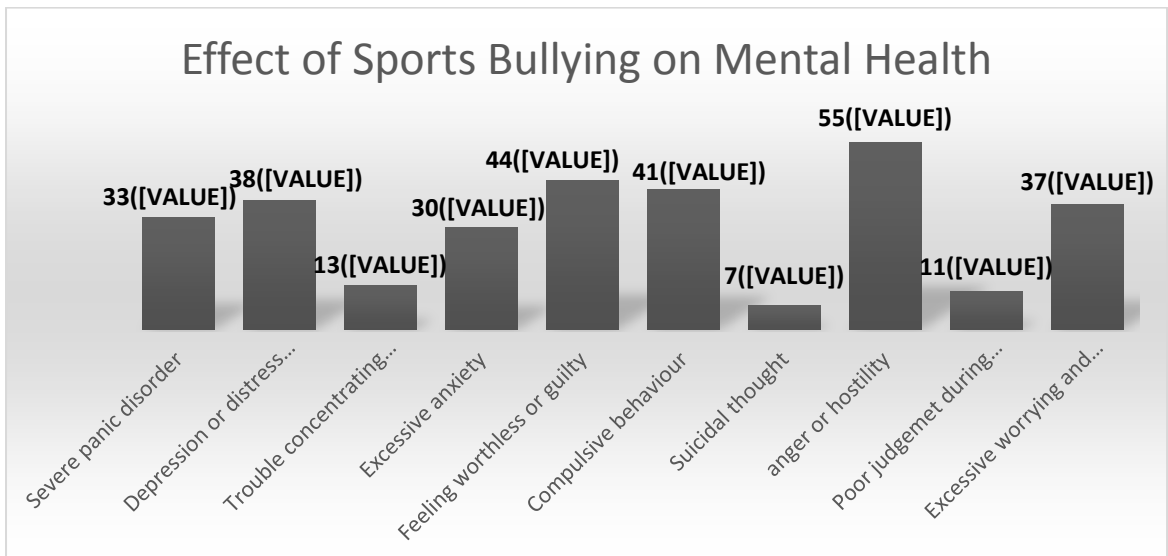


Fig 2: Bar chart showing the effect of sports bullying on mental health of university athletes

Results from figure two showed that anger or hostility 55 (17.8%), feeling worthless or guilty 44 (14.2%), compulsive behaviour 41 (13.3%), depression or distress before training and tournament 38 (12.3%), excessive worrying and fear 37

(11.9%), severe panic disorder 33 (10.7%) and excessive anxiety 30 (9.7%) were recorded as major effect of sports bullying on mental health of university athletes. While, trouble concentrating with daily tasks 13 (4.2%), poor judgement during and after training, and suicidal thought 7 (2.3%) were recorded as the least effect of sports bullying on mental health among university athletes in south western Nigeria.

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant correlation between sports bullying and mental health of university athletes in south western Nigeria.

Table 3: Summary of Pearson Moment Correlations Coefficient Analysis showing correlation between sports bullying and mental health of university athletes in south western Nigeria

Correlations		Mental health of university athletes	
		Sports bullying	athletes
Sports bullying	Pearson Correlation	2	
	Sig. (2-tailed)		
	N	307	
Mental health of university athletes	Pearson Correlation	-.861**	2
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	307	2

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Results from table 3 showed the correlation between sports bullying and mental health of university athletes. Results revealed that there was significant correlation between sports bullying and mental health of university athletes ($r = -0.861^{**}$, $p < .05$) in Southwestern Nigeria. Therefore, the hypothesis which states that there is no significant correlation between sports bullying and mental health among university athletes in Southwestern Nigeria was rejected. However, there was significant correlation between sports bullying and mental health of university athletes in Southwestern Nigeria.

Discussion of Findings

The results from table 1 revealed a high prevalence of sports bullying across gender and various sporting categories particularly ball games, stick games, gymnastics, and racket games among university athletes in Southwestern Nigeria. This pattern aligns with the findings of Philippe, Eduarda, Antonino, Miguel, and António (2021), who similarly reported that bullying behaviours are widespread among university athletes across different sports and gender. Consistent with their observation, the present study also found that female athletes experienced a higher prevalence of sports bullying than their male counterparts, suggesting that gender remains a significant factor in the vulnerability of athletes to bullying within competitive environments. Furthermore, the current results indicated that university athletes were subjected to bullying not only by opponents but also by spectators, teammates, and coaches. This supports the work of Evans, Adler, MacDonald, and Côté (2016), who documented that young athletes frequently experience intimidation, verbal abuse, and other forms of harassment from multiple sources including opponents, audiences, and coaching staff both during and after competitions. Such findings highlighted the complex social dynamics of university sports, where power imbalances and competitive pressures can create opportunities for bullying from within and outside the team. Collectively, these findings underscore the need for

comprehensive anti-bullying policies that address not only peer-to-peer interactions but also the roles of spectators and coaching personnel in fostering safe and respectful sporting environments.

The findings of this study revealed that university athletes in Southwestern Nigeria are exposed to multiple forms of sports bullying, with cyberbullying emerging as the most prevalent. Specifically, cyberbullying practices such as spreading false lies and fake rumours recorded the highest mean score, indicating that online platforms have become a dominant channel for athlete victimization. This aligns with recent Nigerian studies showing that social media and digital communication have intensified opportunities for peer aggression in higher education settings (Ifon, 2022; Sarfo et al., 2024). Physical bullying, which includes behaviours such as hitting, kicking, slapping, tripping, pushing, and punching, followed closely. This finding corroborates earlier research documenting the persistence of physical aggression in sports environments where competition and physical dominance are emphasized (Ríos et al., 2022). Verbal bullying manifested through name calling, banter, threats, teasing, and yelling abuse also featured prominently, echoing evidence that verbal harassment remains a common tactic for exerting power among athletes (Ighaede-Edwards et al., 2023). Relational bullying, such as excluding athletes from team activities or social events, though lower in mean score, still represents a significant form of psychological victimization that undermines team cohesion and individual well-being (Ríos et al., 2022). Interestingly, extortion of money, training kits, or personal belongings was reported as the least frequent form of bullying. While less common, this behaviour still indicates the presence of exploitative dynamics that can erode trust within sports teams. Collectively, these results underscore the multifaceted nature of sports bullying and highlight the urgent need for preventive interventions within university athletic programmes (Ifon, 2022; Sarfo et al., 2024).

Results from figure one showed that intimidation from the senior athletes, socially awkward or having few friends in the school team, ethnicity of the athletes, and physical conditions such as over and under-weight athletes were the major risk factors of sports bullying among university athletes. These results supported the previous findings of Cyber Bullying Research Center, (2016b), whose results revealed that intimidation, having fewer friends in the team, ethnicity of the athletes were noted by university athletes as causes of sports bullying. This was also in line with the findings of Sterling and Kerr, (2016) and Margaret, (2018) that ethnicity, physical conditions and social awkward are root causes of sports bullying among University athletes.

Results from figure 2 showed that anger or hostility, feeling worthless or guilty, depression or distress before training and tournament, excessive worrying and fear, severe panic disorder and excessive anxiety were recorded as major effect of sports bullying on mental health of university athletes. These collaborated with the findings of Fisher and Dzikus (2017), whose results revealed that excessive fear and worried, aggressive personality, thought of worthless and guilty, distress on and after tournament are the negative impacts of sports bullying among college athletes. These current findings also agreed with the results of Greco, Cataldi and Fischetti (2019), whose findings noted that sports bullying exacerbates the aggression, anxiety and severe panic among collegiate students.

Results from table 3 showed that there was significant correlation between sports bullying and mental health of university athletes in south western Nigeria was in line with the findings of Charles (2018), United States Department of Education, (2013), Greco, Cataldi and Fischetti (2019), and Escury and Dudinkl (2010), that sports bullying had significant correlation with aggression, anxiety, depression and other mental health issues among university and college students.

Conclusion

This study concluded that sports bullying is highly prevalent among university athletes in Southwestern Nigeria, cutting across gender and a wide range of sporting activities, including ball games, stick games, gymnastics, and racket sports. Female athletes were found to be particularly vulnerable, experiencing higher rates of bullying than their male counterparts. The study also concluded that anger or hostility, feelings of worthlessness or guilt, compulsive behaviours, depression, excessive worry, severe panic disorder, and heightened anxiety were frequently reported effects of sports bullying on university athletes.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were suggested:

1. Anti-bullying legislation should be legalized by the university sports council and offenders should be severely punished.
2. There should be intensive campaign and seminars on the effect of sports bullying among university athletes.
3. University sports managers should be able to prevent sports bullying by giving equal opportunity to both the senior and junior athletes to explore their skills.
4. University sports Administrators should develop Codes of Conduct for athletes and Coaches to address bullying behaviours, such as discrimination and harassment.

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