



The importance of social support in enhancing performance and well-being of Malaysia's Paralympic athletes

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to study the experiences of elite wheelchair basketball players in Malaysia in regard to the social support that they have received and its effect on performance and well-being. The approach of use was qualitative, which adopted ethnographic methods, including observations and in-depth interviews with five elite athletes from a Paralympic Sports Excellence Centre located in Kg Pandan. The research revealed four primary types of social support obtained by athletes: These types of support vary along emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal dimensions. Additionally, this study pointed to teammates, coaches, family, and sports organizations and preceded the important role they play in protecting mental stability and athletic achievement; however, it highlighted problems such as the lack of continuity in the care after the post-program. Enhancing social support systems through comprehensive post-program activities and higher levels of logistical subsidies is needed to achieve the long-term development of Paralympic athletes, according to this study. Theory is enriched, policy is informed, and social awareness of the importance of social support within Paralympic sports is increased with these findings.

Keywords: Physical activity psychology, Wheelchair basketball athlete, Social support, Ethnography, Athlete performance.

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INTRODUCTION

Wheelchair basketball in Malaysia is burgeoning as one of the prominent adaptive sports—good for the community of individuals with disabilities. Besides being one of the leisure activities, the sport acts as a means of promoting physical fitness, social networking, and building psychological resilience. Engaging in wheelchair basketball helps to change social views of disability, increase social acceptance, and increase individuals' and communities' well-being (Bates et al., 2019).

Malaysia also has wheelchair basketball recognized as a competitive sport; it frequents national initiatives and training programs. The development of technical and physical skills emphasized in these programs adheres to the international performance standards developed by the International Wheelchair Basketball Federation (IWBF) (Zacharakis et al., 2012).

Yet it has to do not only with technical elements but also with social support to athletes. According to Azmi & Khan (2024), social support has a very large impact on improving the performance, mental health, and resilience of Paralympic athletes, especially in wheelchair basketball. Additionally, supportive assistance that is detailed and ordered, as well as determined connections with coaches and the athletic community, will assist athletes in managing the trials of competition and the social stigma they frequently face (Mousavi et al., 2022). This study highlights their importance for the promotion of enhanced athletic performance in Paralympic athletes, which previous investigations (e.g., Cardoso et al., 2018) have already pointed out as being necessary conditions for sustainable development.

An ethnographic methodology is necessary for an in-depth qualitative investigation to gather personal perspectives from elite wheelchair basketball athletes rooted in their lived experiences. By focusing on the insights and viewpoints of these top athletes, you can better understand and comprehend their requirements and obstacles in gathering social support. The purpose of this study was to evaluate how elite wheelchair basketball athletes experience the various forms of social support that they receive.

Literature review

Social support networks encountered by elite athletes of wheelchair basketball interact in a complicated way with a strong impact on the athletes' personal and professional development. Team dynamics help to create a sense of identity, empowerment, and inclusion, and social context plays a big role in their experiences. Pakistani para athletes tend to develop an 'esprit de corps' in wheelchair basketball as athletes come to view their teammates as a surrogate family and are imbued with a strong emotional and psychological support network that serves to help them overcome barriers and excel in their sport (Hull, Garci & Mandich, 2005).

However, these processes can also produce social fissures in the larger disability community, for example, unintentionally isolating the non-athletes, rooting in the binary character of the empowering and divisive spaces afforded by disability (Berger, 2008). The social and physical environments significantly influence the athletes' progression. Access to superior coaching, readily available training facilities, and financial assistance for specialised equipment are essential enablers that assist athletes in attaining optimal performance (Kean et al., 2017).

Despite these resources, athletes encounter considerable stresses associated with pre-event anxieties, group dynamics, coaching methodologies, and social attitudes towards disability, all of which highlight the intricate obstacles inherent in their participation in elite sports (Campbell & Jones, 2002). The convergence of

gender, disability, and sport introduces additional complication, especially for female athletes who utilise sport as a tool for empowerment and defiance against societal preconceptions (Hardin, 2007).

Participation in wheelchair basketball increases the number of athletes' social inclusion and promotes the general welfare of the athletes. The 'enabling places' provided by the sport of engaging them indicate that it is a medium for social and emotional development with youth players experiencing increased self-identity and emotional support through the engagement (Bates et al., 2019). However, structural barriers and prevailing societal stigma remain ongoing obstacles to the service provided; however, the positive experience of camaraderie, empowerment, and personal development indicates that social support systems significantly impact elite wheelchair basketball athletes. Better comprehension, as well as further investigation of these interactions, would improve athlete support and increase inclusiveness in adaptive sports.

Research objectives

The aim of this study, therefore, was to conduct an analysis of types of social support received by elite wheelchair basketball players and how these affected performance outcomes. The research aims are outlined as follows:

To explore on elite wheelchair basketball athlete's experiences and the types of support received from their social environments.

METHODOLOGY

Using a qualitative methodology, this study investigated the experiences of elite wheelchair basketball athletes at the Paralympic Excellence Centre in Kg Pandan and the support in place for the athletes. An ethnographic method that focused on understanding the lived experiences and culture of specific communities was used. The advantage of this approach lies in the fact that the investigator can enter into the realm of feelings and experiences, which reveal the inner experiences of individuals whose personal narratives are being examined.

Study informants and sampling technique

This study comprised interviews with five distinguished wheelchair basketball athletes. The chosen sample size conforms to the conventions of qualitative ethnographic research, which generally entails a limited number of informants (Creswell, 2013; 2014). Table 1 delineates the attributes of the informants chosen for this investigation. These attributes function as inclusion requirements for eligibility as an informant. The chosen criteria aim to clarify the issues associated with social support faced by professional wheelchair basketball athletes. The researcher performed personal observations of the informants' mental and psychological capacities before the interviews. This method guarantees compliance with study ethics by omitting informants who do not possess the mental capacity to engage in interviews. The researcher prioritised mental and psychological competence to ensure adherence to existing research ethics criteria.

Table 1. Inclusion criteria for elite wheelchair basketball athlete informants participating in the study.

| Elite wheelchair basketball athlete informants |
|--|
| Has represented the country in wheelchair basketball. |
| Actively involved in wheelchair basketball. |
| Aged 18 years and above. |
| Malaysian citizen. |
| Mentally and physically capable during the study period. |

Data collection procedures

Data will be gathered using three principal methodologies:

Prior to data collection

The researcher initiated the investigation by formulating structured questions. The questions were formulated based on prior research concerning the challenges encountered by Malaysian elite Paralympic wheelchair basketball participants. An interview protocol was meticulously developed. Multiple drafts were developed and enhanced in accordance with the supervisor's feedback. Thereafter, the interview protocol was presented to field specialists for evaluation to confirm its design adequately met the research objectives.

During the data collection phase

During an extensive period in the field, the researcher identified numerous elite wheelchair basketball athletes deemed appropriate for selection as informants for the study. The researcher met five informants willing to engage in the study through volunteer activities. The researcher utilised a designated room at the centre to conduct interviews. Permission was acquired from the centre to perform the study for safety and ethical reasons. After thorough consideration, the semi-structured interview method was determined to be the best suitable for this study. Semi-structured interviews comprise essential enquiries that direct the investigation of particular topics, while permitting the researcher to modify enquiries for enhanced understanding or insights.

Post data collection

However, after successful completion of the data-gathering process, the researcher embarked on transcription. The researcher turned the recorded audio into a Microsoft Word document. All recordings with the five elite Paralympic wheelchair basketball athlete informants and three professional informants were transcribed. The coding procedure was then performed, and data was then inputted into NVivo software. Afterwards, we shall interpret data.

Data analysis

Analysis of data is a key and painful part of qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The accuracy of these results relies on the precision of this phase. After each interview, the researcher then started transcription of the recorded sessions. Careful analysis and representation of interview data formed part of the transcription process. Manually, with Microsoft Word, the transcription method used in this study was performed. During the transcription of this procedure, notes from the interviews were integrated. After completing the transcription, the researcher initiated the coding process to analyse the transcribed data concerning themes, concepts, and ideas. Data analysis is a dynamic process involving the identification of emergent themes, significant concepts, or units of meaning, alongside materials obtained from the literature (Mohajan, 2018). The data analysis procedure involved coding, classifying, and categorising data to improve understanding of the acquired information. The researcher selected NVIVO software to improve the analysis process. Subsequently, pertinent concepts were identified and labelled.

Validity and reliability

In this study, several strategies were implemented to enhance the validity and reliability of the research data, including triangulation, member checks, peer review, peer debriefing, prolonged engagement in the field, and an audit trail. The initial approach utilised to enhance the validity and reliability of the data involved triangulation. This investigation employed data triangulation to guarantee well-rounded and substantiated results. Two different groups of informants were engaged to address the research objectives. In essence, triangulation involves employing multiple methods for data collection. Two forms of triangulation were conducted, following Othman (2017) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016): methodological triangulation and

source triangulation. Methodological triangulation encompassed the collection of data using various approaches, specifically interviews, field notes, and document analysis. In the course of the study, source triangulation involved conducting interviews with two distinct groups of participants: five elite wheelchair basketball athletes and three individuals who served as coaches and team managers for these athletes. In the field of social sciences, triangulation denotes the use and repetition of various research methods to examine the same phenomenon (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). By integrating various informants in the study, the aim was to tackle weaknesses or biases and challenges that could emerge from depending on just one informant.

RESULTS

The analysis of experiences the insights of elite wheelchair basketball athletes concerning the types of social support they obtain. This segmentation promotes a structured discussion and enables a more precise representation of the experiences of elite wheelchair basketball athletes.

Table 2. Superordinate themes and sub-themes under study.

| Superordinate theme | Subordinate theme | Supporting quotations |
|---------------------------------|--|--|
| 1a: Emotional Support | - Teammates: Emotional and practical support. Strengthens team cohesion. | "We support each other... in life, we are always close to each other." (Lim) "If there's a problem, anyone will come to help." (Supian) |
| | - Coach: Technical guidance and emotional encouragement. | "Coach Lim gives a lot of support... motivational words." (Lokman) "If teammates don't, the coach will always provide support." (Muttu) |
| | - Family: Hidden emotional and material support. | "They must be proud to have a child with a disability who represents the country." (Supian) "I became an athlete because of family support." (Muttu) |
| | - Psychological Institutions (MSN/ISN): Formal psychological support through classes and structured programs. | "MSN provides support in terms of emotions, psychology classes, and nutrition." (Supian) |
| 1b: Instrumental Support | - Institutional support: Training allowances, accommodation, medical facilities, and sports equipment. | "MSN pays training allowances, accommodation, and everything." (Lim) "Wheelchairs and spare parts are all provided by MSN and the association." (Supian) |
| | - Concerns about program sustainability: Uncertainty of financial support after program termination. | "We are no longer with MSN... previously, finances were well-supported." (Supian) |
| 1c: Informational Support | - Technical Information: Strategies, updated techniques, and performance analysis provided by coaches. | "The coach provides plans and strategies. We follow." (Lim) "The coach makes an effort to teach us no matter how slow we are." (Johan) |
| | - Social Experience Through Sports: Opportunities for global networking and meaningful social benefits. | "I have friends even in Europe." (Lim) |
| 1d: Esteem Support | - Life Transformation Through Sports: Builds discipline, mental resilience, and self-confidence. | "After joining basketball... I no longer feel embarrassed about anything." (Muttu) "Social support positively impacts communication skills and self-confidence." (Johan) |
| | - Future Expectations: Inclusive societal support, OKU-friendly facilities, and increased athlete participation. | "I hope society will be more attentive and supportive." (Lokman) "I was new to being OKU... stayed home without friends." (Lim) |

Five elite wheelchair basketball athletes were interviewed in total. All informants' identities have been kept confidential and substituted with pseudonyms. This action was implemented to safeguard the identity of the informants and uphold research ethics, ensuring that none of the pseudonyms employed in the study can be linked to the informants. The analysis identified four overarching themes concerning the experiences of elite wheelchair basketball athletes in relation to the types of social support they received. The researcher has included all the superordinate themes and sub-themes in Table 2.

DISCUSSION

This study highlights the intricate aspects of social support experienced by individuals with disabilities engaged in sports activities. Four primary categories of social support have been identified: emotional, instrumental, informational, and esteem support.

Emotional support is important for creating team unity because teammates and coaches help out with practical actions and encouragement that promote motivation and unity. Families are complicated, and most of the time serve as the material and emotional backbone for athletes in their journeys. For example, MSN and ISN deliver organized psychological support initiatives geared toward developing emotional strength and physical stamina.

Tangible resources such as training allowances, housing, sports equipment, and medical facilities fall under instrumental support. However, this assistance is key for athletes to have the essentials to be able to achieve. However, there are concerns about its long-term sustainability as well as about resource distribution in these programs.

They mainly offer informational assistance by giving technical advice, strategy frameworks, and performance evaluations. Support in this way enables athletes to do better in their sports and to build social links and cultural bonding too, making these experiences so much more than sporting competition. It also makes clear that the power that sports have to influence a person's feelings of self is strong. Individuals promoting healthy nutrition through their sport show that discipline, mental strength, and self-assurance can help people overcome the social stigma and imagine a freer mankind.

The participants stress the importance of societal awareness and support towards people with disabilities, in the hopes of more inclusivity and better infrastructure. This investigation constructs that social support is a complex and multidimensional factor necessary for the complete development of disabled athletes. The results reinforce the need for ongoing work from all parties to make sure these people succeed not only athletically but also personally and socially.

CONCLUSIONS

The main contributions of this study have focused on three issues:

Contribution to knowledge and inquiry

This study augments the existing social support literature related to Paralympic athletes overall, specifically relating to wheelchair basketball. By looking at the components of emotional, informational, and instrumental support, the understanding of how each type of support impacts athletes' performance and well-being is enhanced. In particular, the study highlights the great importance of interpersonal relationships and the impact coaches have, both of which have received rather little attention in previous studies. The findings of

the current study serve as a basis for further research towards the development of a comprehensive model of social support for Paralympic athletes.

Impact on policy and practice

This study's findings offer important insights for policymakers and sports organisations, including the National Sports Council (NSC) and Paralympic sports associations. This study highlights challenges like insufficient post-program support and logistical expenses, providing actionable recommendations to improve current support systems. Proposals like enhancing travel subsidies and implementing post-contract support programs can bolster the support framework for Paralympic athletes, guaranteeing their ongoing involvement in the success of national sports.

Impact on society

This study holds considerable social implications by enhancing public understanding of the essential role that social support plays in the success and well-being of Paralympic athletes. The results may foster increased community backing for the Paralympic community, potentially transforming views on the abilities and prospects of individuals with disabilities. This study aims to enhance efforts towards fostering equality and acceptance in both sports and daily life through more inclusive and integrated support.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

This study was conceptualized and designed by Khyairany Nur Erma Md Azmi, who also led the data collection and primary analysis. Thariq Khan Bin Azizuddin Khan contributed significantly to the theoretical framework, literature review, and manuscript writing. The author was responsible for methodology development, data processing, and result interpretation. All authors reviewed, revised, and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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