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To study gender differences in athlete identity among intercollegiate level athletes

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Abstract

Athlete Identity is an important determinant of athletic sports performance. The aim of the study was to assess gender differences in intercollegiate athletes on the Athlete Identity. The sample comprised of 250 college's athletes both male and female athletes competing at the collegiate, State and National level in various sports. The sample representing different sports disciplines the sample were administered the Athlete Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS). The results of the sample were analyzed using SPSS. The findings suggest that differences exist male and female athletes on Athlete Identity. The Education years of the college program the athletes are in do not reveal any significant differences between male and female athletes on their Athlete Identity. The results yield important information for coaches and trainers sportspersons.

Keywords: Athlete identity, sports, psychology, gender

Introduction

Sports is a way of life, which commences with sports participation from the early years of childhood. Sports involvement initially is just a recreational activity and when players hone skills, enter competitive play and experience success, it develops into passion for the sport which gradually leads to pursuance at higher competitive levels. This is evident after pursuing the sport for a few years. College sports provides ocean of opportunities to participate at various Inter-Collegiate competitions both at regional and All India levels, representation at All India Inter Varsity tournaments, which serve as a platform to elevate one's performance and progress in their sport. College years is seen as a great influence in the development of Athlete Identity. (Evan *et al.* 2009). When sports participation is pursued seriously and individuals view themselves in the role of athletes, it culminates into development of an Identity, termed as Athlete Identity. Brewer *et al.* (1993) ^[3] indicate that when an Athlete identifies with the role of an athlete, he or she is portraying their Athlete Identity. By way of sports participation and ensuing performance, athletes announce that they would like to identified as athletes and would like significant others to identify them in the athletes role. According to Petzold (1991), the ego is nurtured by identity, since identity is a vital component in an Individuals physical wellbeing, it can be ascertained that sports performance is said to be dependent on Athletic Identity.

Development of Identity

Erickson theory on the development stages of life explains that human beings necessarily traverse through the life stages. The fifth stage of psycho social development, which occurs at the age of 12-18 years of an individual's life is of vital importance. This is a phase of Identity versus role confusion. They seek questions which range from "Who am like", what would I like to become". In answering these questions, individuals are providing clarity to themselves, in terms of their traits, interests and what is of interest to them. According to Erickson, this is a crucial period for adolescents to don an identity for themselves, since failure to do so will make them drifters. Individuals will be uncertain of what they wish to accomplish for themselves.

Late Childhood through early adulthood is seen as a critical period in Identity development. The study by Houle J, Brewer B, Kluck to assess the trajectory of Athletic Identity development revealed that athletic identity showed a quantum increase from late childhood to adolescence and after being stable, Athlete Identity gets elevated as they enter early Adulthood. The Athletic Identity that is so prominent and important as young adults, can only diminish if athletes face injuries, retires or ceases to participate in from competitive play or games.

An Identity is an important part of self-concept and as cited by research Athlete Identity is strongest when athletes enter adulthood. Sports can be seen to be pursued more seriously by athletes during college years and exposure to sports competitions, representing their colleges or universities in inter-collegiate tournaments or competitions, garner a stronger Athletic Identity.

Athlete Identity-The Achilles heel or Hercules muscle

Both can be identified for an Athlete. Manifesting a high athlete identity can be seen to facilitate as well as debilitate. On the facilitative front it endures an athlete to strive for excellence and on the debilitate side, it can push an athlete to extend themselves beyond boundaries of capabilities, thereby succumbing oneself to injuries or even in extremes of retirement.

Sports participation at competitive levels has seen the prowess of both female and male athletes in the last two decades. India is the home to some of the finest World class athletes in sports like Boxing, Badminton, Cricket, Athletics, Wrestling etc to name a few, however research on Indian sportsperson on their levels of Athlete Identity has not be widely researched. Previous research provides data that male and female athletes differ with their Athlete Identity. Brewer *et al.* (2001)^[4] in their study 1032 athletes both male and female, from different sport disciplines reveal that male had higher athlete Identity scores compared to females.

This study aims to explore gender differences in Athlete Identity, as it is the driving force to sports participation and performance.

Methodology

The purpose of study was to examine the gender differences between male and female intercollegiate athletes on their Athletic Identity and to explore differences between Education /College year of study and Athlete Identity.

Research Hypothesis

H₀1: There is no significant difference between male and female sportspersons on Athletic Identity.

H₀1.1: There is no significant difference between male and female sportspersons on Social Identity (SI).

H₀1.2: There is no significant difference between male and female sportspersons on Exclusivity (EL).

H₀1.3: There is no significant difference between male and

female sportspersons on Negative affectivity (NA).

H₀ 2: There is no significant difference between education years and Athletic Identity of the sportspersons.

Sample

250 college athletes both male and female, currently studying in undergraduate or post graduate programs in different colleges and private universities in Bangalore were selected for the study. The sample of athletes participated in different sports namely Basketball, Tennis, cricket, football, Badminton etc. The representation level criteria for the study was that the athletes must be representing the college or the university either at Inter-collegiate competitions, All India University tournaments and /or at the state and International levels. Age group of the sample was 18-23 years. The sample were studying in different academic streams of Humanities, Commerce, Science and Engineering etc.

Measures

The Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) (Brewer *et al.*) measures a person's level of athletic identity by having participants rate themselves on a 10-item instrument with responses ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" on a 7-point scale which yields a potential score ranging from 10-70. These items are summed to produce a single self-evaluation score that represents their athletic identity. Higher scores on AI scale reflect higher athlete Identity, while low scores indicate a lower athlete Identity. AIMS can be also measured according to three subscales:-

Social identity (SI)

Athlete's perceptions about how others think or view them as athletes. (R=0.89)

Exclusivity (EL)

Determines how strongly an individual relies on his/her athletic identity and how weak they can define themselves with other important roles in life. (R= 0.93)

Negative Affectivity (NA)

Refers to the degree to which an individual negatively responds as a result of being unable to participate in sport. (R= 0.64). The reliability of AIMS is also good (r=.89)

Procedure

The participants were contacted and approached through the departments' heads of Physical education from colleges in Bangalore and the questionnaire was sent to the athletes via google forms. They had to fill in the participant consent form followed by their responses to the AIMS scale.

Results

The scores were subjected to analysis using SPSS version 20. Descriptive statistics was obtained and Non -Parametric tests Mann Whitney U test was run for the scores.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for various domains of athletic identity

Variable	Mean	SD
AI	49.11	9.745
SI	16.18	3.398
EL	20.95	5.347
NA	11.98	2.691
N	250	

Table 1 shows the mean scores of the participants in Athletic Identity along with the subscales.

Table 2: Mann-Whitney U-Test for various domains of athletic identity

Variable	AI		SI		EL		NA	
	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2
Group								
Mean Ranks	112.97	136.70	111.45	138.06	116.38	133.66	112.91	136.75
U	1.333E4		1.315E4		1.373E4		1.332E4	
Sig.	.010		.004**		.059		.007	

Table 2 shows the U-Test results for various domains of Athletic Identity. The mean score and U-values were calculated based on gender for Athletic Identity. The results indicate that SI ($U=6.130E3$) $p<0.05$ is statistically significant. It can be observed that the males have scored higher in SI or Social Identity when compared to females.

Table I presents the descriptive statistics for Athlete Identity for the sample. The total AI score is seen to fall in the moderate range ($M=49.11$ and $SD 9.74$) of Athlete Identity, with High AI category being in the 70 range. On the subscales of AI, Social Identity (SI) is 16.98, Exclusivity 20.95 and Negative affectivity 11.98, while the standard deviation is at 3.4, 5.3 and 2.7 respectively.

Table 2 depicts the scores for male and female athletes on Athlete Identity and the three sub-scales. The mean ranks show higher scores for all the three sub-scales for males as compared to females. On the subscale Social Identity (SI) male athletes have significantly higher scores than females. ($U=1.315E4$) $p<0.05$. On the sub-scales Exclusivity and Negativity, there was no significant differences.

Findings

The purpose of the study was to assess gender differences on Athlete Identity (AI) and explore if education years caused any changes to Athlete Identity. The sample of male and female athletes were compared on the total AIMS score as well as the scores on the three sub-scales- Social Identity, Exclusivity and Negative affectivity. The composite AIMS scores reveal no significant differences between male and female athletes. (Martin *et al.* (2008) ^[12]). The total AI scores of the sample reflect that these athletes have moderate level of athlete identity ($AI =49.11$). This is seen to be beneficial for the sportspersons since very high athletic identity can posit problems for athletes. Donning high athlete identity can push athletes towards over training, over performing thus bringing duress to themselves in terms of physical exhaustion and injuries. A moderate Athlete Identity protect athletes from over indulgence in sports. (Brewer *et al.* 1993) ^[3]. On Research question 1.1 male athletes are seen to manifest higher Athlete Identity scores as compared to female athletes, displaying a stronger Athletic Identity (Miller E 2009; Brewer & Cornelius 2002; Brewer *et al.*, 1993) ^[13, 3] on Social Identity. Social Identity refers to the identity that athletes want to be identified with. As the results show male college athletes like to be identified or recognised in their athletic role more strongly in comparison to female athletes. Weichman *et al.* (1997) ^[16] findings reveal, males had a stronger athletic identity than females and had higher expectations of playing at the college/pro level.

Athlete Identity depicts the person who you are and how one would like to be identified. By participating and pursuing sports, athletes send signals that they would like be recognised by this Identity. Males showing high scores, could be contributed to higher competition levels and aspiration in pursuing sports at a higher level thereby desirous of holding onto their Athletic Identity. Adler & Adler (1987) ^[1] study on male basketball players reveals that by virtue of expending

effort on their sport and Athletic Identity, the other roles available to college students namely the student or the social roles are neglected or ignored. Female athletes manifesting lower scores could be attributed to the influence of classmates, other social factors and distractions and as a result lead to exploration of other identities and hence show reduced focus on athlete Identity. Another reason could be attributed to the transitioning from school to college level competitions. With the demands of the sport being higher and dealing with academic pressures could also lead to lower athletic Identity levels. Female athletes largely pursue sports till the completion of their academic courses. Those who continue to have successful sports performance tend to pursue the sports further and those whose sports performances have not been extraordinary pursue other interests and talents. (Brewer *et al.* 1993, Weichman *et al.* 1997) ^[3] Alternatively on entering college life, athletes get to experience life as an athlete and as a student, however prioritizing the role of a student can provide them with window of opportunities for exploring non-sports careers also. (Brown *et al.* 1998). However there are very few research studies that compare male and female athletes on the dimensions of athlete Identity, most research has been conducted taking the total AI score to assess gender differences.

Research sub question 1.2 and 1.3 explores gender differences on Exclusivity and Negative affectivity, there is no significant difference between male and female athletes. Exclusivity explains how much an athlete wants to be identified predominantly as an athlete at the neglect of other roles, while negative affectivity is seen when athletes do not identify with the role due to injuries or layoff from their sport. In the study there is no significant difference between male and female athletes because these athletes hold similar views about failure, injuries or premature retirement from sports due to injuries (Haliydan, H., & Sheikh, M. (2015) ^[6]). Hence the findings disprove the research hypothesis that no difference exists between genders on Athlete Identity.

Research question II investigated difference in Education years and Athlete Identity. No significant differences emerged between the Education year of athletes and their Athlete Identity. (Dandekar *et al.* (2017) ^[5]). These findings are contrary to findings of Adler & Adler (1991) ^[1] where it was ascertained that Athlete Identity grows stronger as they grow older in age. In this study it can be assumed that a moderate level of existing Athlete Identity was present among both male and female athletes prior to commencement of college years. The sample selection criteria included representation at the State/ National level and since a sizeable number of sportspersons were meeting the above criterion levels (69% athletes) even prior to the start of their college years. It can be said that their sports performances upheld their Athlete Identities and reinforced the same through the college years. This corroborates with Wiechman *et al.* study (1997) ^[16] that irrespective of gender, athletes aspiring to play at collegiate and elite levels and having more sports experience displayed higher and stronger athletic athletes. Hence no difference between year of Education and Athlete Identity could be

explored, thereby supporting the research hypothesis.

Conclusion

The findings of the study reveal that the sample of college level athletes show male athletes portray higher Social Identity than female athletes and the years of college do not show any difference in athlete Identity among the athletes. The study could provide good inputs to college coaches and physical education teachers to help athletes maintain their athletic Identity which is vital to stay focused and continue to take their sports career to higher levels.

Limitations

While the study provided differences between male and female college athletes, a comparison among the types of sport was not feasible. The sample of college athletes represented varied sports disciplines and hence not homogeneous to arrive at conclusions.

Recommendations

It is recommended that similar studies be conducted with specific sport or sports. Research suggests that Athlete Identity differs from Individual and Team sports. (Haliydan, H., & Sheikh, M. (2015) ^[6], hence comparing different types of sports can help understand how athlete identity can differ across sports. A longitudinal research study assessing Athlete Identity through each year of college may throw light on any alterations to Athlete Identity through college years, since previous research shows that Athlete Identity strengthens as the athlete moves through the years of college.

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