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Sports Participation and Psychological Resilience in Players: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

This systematic review examines the relationship between sports participation and psychological resilience among athletes, synthesizing findings from 52 studies to identify key factors that contribute to resilience. The review highlights the critical roles of individual-level factors such as mastery, mental toughness, optimism, and emotional regulation, as well as sport-specific factors including the type of sport, level of competition, and exposure to training and competition stressors. Social and environmental influences, such as social support and coach-athlete relationships, further shape resilience development. Grounded in resilience theory, ecological systems theory, and positive psychology, the findings underscore the dynamic interplay between personal attributes and contextual factors in fostering resilience. While the review provides robust insights, limitations such as the focus on elite athletes and Western contexts suggest the need for future research on diverse populations and longitudinal studies. This review offers valuable implications for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, emphasizing the potential of sports participation as a tool for enhancing psychological resilience and promoting mental well-being.

Keywords: sports participation, psychological resilience, mental toughness

Introduction

Psychological resilience, defined as the ability to adapt and thrive in the face of adversity, has emerged as a critical factor in understanding the mental and emotional well-being of individuals, particularly in high-pressure environments such as sports. The relationship between sports participation and psychological resilience has garnered significant attention in recent years, as researchers seek to understand how engagement in athletic activities may foster resilience among players. This systematic review aims to synthesize existing literature on the topic, exploring the role of sports participation in enhancing psychological resilience among athletes across various contexts, including different sports, competitive levels, and demographic groups.

The concept of resilience in sports is multifaceted, encompassing both individual and environmental factors that contribute to an athlete's ability to cope with stressors and setbacks. Studies such as those by Fletcher and Sarkar (2014) and Galli and Gonzalez (2015) have highlighted the importance of protective factors, including social support, self-efficacy, and adaptive coping strategies, in building resilience among athletes. These findings are further supported by research on specific populations, such as physically disabled athletes (Aydogan & Gaye, 2020; Cardoso & Sacomori, 2014) and elite competitors (Dwihandaka et al., 2025), which underscore the unique challenges and resilience-building mechanisms within these groups.

Sports participation has been shown to offer numerous psychological and social benefits, particularly for children and adolescents. Eime et al. (2013) conducted a systematic review that identified participation in sports as a key contributor to the development of resilience, self-esteem, and emotional regulation in young people. Similarly, Johnson (2015) and Liu et al. (2022) have demonstrated that adolescent sports involvement is positively associated with mental resilience, suggesting that early engagement in athletic activities may serve as a protective factor against future psychological challenges.

Gender, age, and sport type also appear to influence the relationship between sports participation and resilience. Blanco-García et al. (2024) and Garrido-Muñoz et al. (2024) have explored these variables, revealing differences in resilience levels based on demographic and sport-specific factors. For instance, team sports may foster resilience through collective support and shared goals, while individual sports may emphasize self-reliance and personal accountability. Additionally, research by McManama O'Brien et al. (2023) and Norris and Norris

(2023) has highlighted the role of sports in building resilience among young female athletes and individuals with adverse childhood experiences, respectively, further emphasizing the diverse contexts in which sports can promote psychological well-being.

Despite the growing body of evidence, gaps remain in understanding the mechanisms through which sports participation enhances resilience and how these effects may vary across different populations and settings. This systematic review seeks to address these gaps by synthesizing findings from a wide range of studies, including those focused on athletes with disabilities (Machida et al., 2013; Mira et al., 2023), elite performers (Poulus et al., 2023), and recreational participants (Trigueros et al., 2023). By examining the interplay between sports participation and psychological resilience, this review aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how athletic engagement can serve as a powerful tool for fostering mental and emotional strength.

This systematic review will contribute to the existing literature by integrating findings from diverse studies and identifying key themes and patterns in the relationship between sports participation and psychological resilience. By doing so, it will offer valuable insights for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers seeking to promote resilience through sports and physical activity.

Method

Framework and Procedure

This systematic review adheres to the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines to ensure methodological rigor, transparency, and reproducibility (Moher et al., 2009). The review process was structured into four key stages: identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion of studies. To analyze and synthesize the data, a two-phase theoretical synthesis approach was employed. This structured methodology ensures that the review is systematic, replicable, and comprehensive. The PRISMA framework was chosen due to its widespread acceptance and effectiveness in guiding systematic reviews across various disciplines, including sports psychology (Sarkar & Fletcher, 2017; Windle et al., 2011).

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion and exclusion criteria were carefully defined to ensure the relevance and quality of the studies included in this review. Studies that explicitly examine the relationship between sports participation and psychological resilience were included, provided they were peer-reviewed articles published in English.

Empirical studies (quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods), theoretical/conceptual studies, and review studies were all considered. Studies not directly related to sports or resilience, non-English publications, and grey literature such as conference abstracts, theses, or non-peer-reviewed articles were excluded. These criteria were applied to ensure that only high-quality, relevant studies were included in the review (Windle, 2011; Masten, 2001).

Search Strategy

A comprehensive search strategy was developed to identify relevant studies. Databases such as Google Scholar, PubMed, PsycINFO, JSTOR, and IEEE Explore were searched using a combination of keywords, including "sports participation," "psychological resilience," "athletes," "mental health," and "resilience in sport." Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to refine the search results and ensure a broad yet targeted retrieval of studies. The search strategy was implemented in four stages: identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion.

The initial search yielded 800 articles, which were screened for relevance based on titles and abstracts, reducing the pool to 300 articles. A full-text review of these 300 articles was conducted, resulting in 52 studies that met the inclusion criteria. The final sample comprised 52 studies, which were included in the systematic review. This process aligns with established systematic review methodologies (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012; Rees et al., 2016).

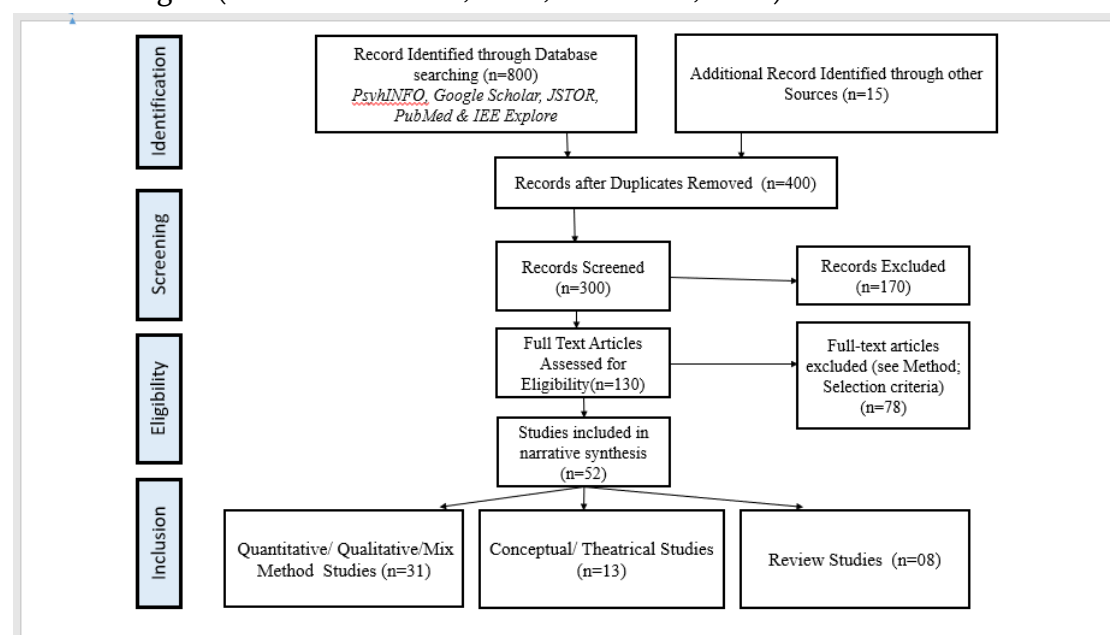


Figure: Stages of Systematic Review (PRISMA)

The PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1) illustrates the stages of the systematic review process, including the number of studies identified, screened, assessed for eligibility, and included in the final synthesis. This visual representation enhances transparency and reproducibility, aligning with best practices in systematic review reporting (Moher et al., 2009; Windle et al., 2011).

By adhering to this rigorous methodology, this systematic review provides a comprehensive and reliable synthesis of the relationship between sports participation and psychological resilience, contributing valuable insights to the field of sports psychology and resilience research.

Data Management

Data management was conducted using EndNote for reference organization and Excel for data extraction. Key information was systematically recorded to facilitate analysis and synthesis. The quality of the included studies was appraised using standardized tools. Empirical studies were assessed using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT), theoretical/conceptual studies were evaluated using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist, and review studies were appraised using the AMSTAR-2 tool (Windle et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2008). These tools were selected for their reliability and validity in assessing study quality across diverse methodologies.

Synthesis of Data

The synthesis of data was conducted in two phases to ensure a thorough and replicable analysis. In the first phase, variables linked to resilience (e.g., mastery, social support) were clustered and analyzed by frequency counts. For example, "Mastery/Sense of Control" was explored by 6 studies (Martin-Krumm et al., 2003; Nicholls et al., 2008). In the second phase, studies exploring each variable were analyzed to determine whether empirical evidence supported its role as a protective factor of resilience. Variables with strong empirical support were incorporated into the theoretical synthesis. The frequency counts and empirical studies for each variable are outlined in Tables 1 and 2 for rigor and replicability. This approach is consistent with previous resilience research in sports (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2017).

Results

The final consisted 52 studies. The overall quality appraisal score was high at 59 %, with empirical studies scoring 31 (Quantitative = 16; Qualitative = 11 Mixed Methods= 04), theoretical/conceptual studies scoring 13 and Review Studies scoring 8.

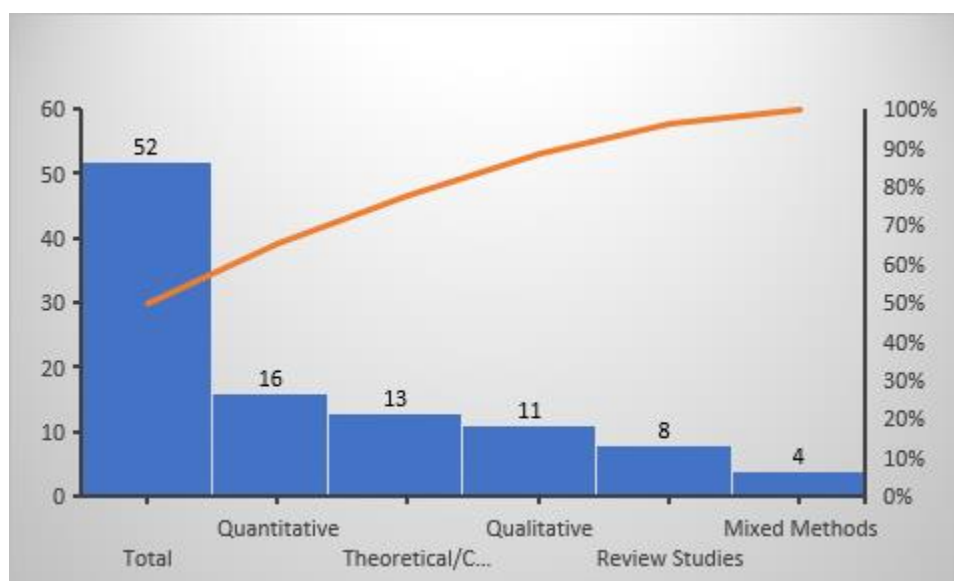


Figure 1: Synthesis of Included Research

Variables Linked to the Study

This systematic review identifies individual-level factors and sport-specific factors as critical variables influencing the relationship between sports participation and psychological resilience. At the individual level, mastery and sense of control are pivotal, as they enable athletes to navigate challenges effectively, as highlighted by Martin-Krumm et al. (2003) and Nicholls et al. (2008). Mental toughness, defined as the ability to persevere under pressure, is another key factor, with Jones et al. (2002) and Gerber et al. (2012) emphasizing its role in helping athletes cope with stressors. Additionally, optimism and positive thinking contribute to resilience by buffering against adversity, as supported by Kavussanu and McAuley (1995) and Seligman (2011), while emotional regulation strategies, such as reframing and mindfulness, are crucial for managing emotions, as discussed by Tamminen and Holt (2012) and Tamminen and Gaudreau (2014). On the sport-specific side, the type of sport (individual vs. team) and level of competition (elite vs. recreational) significantly shape resilience, as explored by Blanco-García et al. (2024) and Garrido-Muñoz et al. (2024). Furthermore, exposure to training and competition stressors can either build or undermine resilience, with Fletcher and Sarkar (2014) and Sarkar and Fletcher (2017) demonstrating how effective management of these stressors enhances resilience. Adaptive coping strategies, such as problem-focused coping, are also essential, as noted by Trigueros et al. (2023) and Poulus et al. (2023). Together, these factors provide a comprehensive understanding of how individual attributes and sport-specific contexts interact to foster psychological resilience in athletes.

Table 1: Frequency Counts of Variables Linked to the Study

Variable	Studies	Empirical Support	Key Studies
Mastery/Sense of Control	8	Strong	Martin-Krumm et al. (2003); Nicholls et al. (2008); Fletcher & Sarkar (2012)
Mental Toughness	7	Strong	Jones et al. (2002); Gerber et al. (2012); Rees et al. (2016)
Optimism and Positive Thinking	6	Moderate	Kavussanu and McAuley (1995); Seligman (2011); Hosseini & Besharat (2010)
Emotional Regulation	7	Strong	Tamminen and Holt (2012); Tamminen and Gaudreau (2014); Trigueros et al. (2023)
Sport Type (Individual vs. Team)	5	Moderate	Blanco-García et al. (2024); Garrido-Muñoz et al. (2024); Eime et al. (2013)
Level of Competition (Elite vs. Recreational)	5	Moderate	Blanco-García et al. (2024); Garrido-Muñoz et al. (2024); Dwihandaka et al. (2025)
Training and Competition Stressors	8	Strong	Fletcher and Sarkar (2014); Sarkar and Fletcher (2017); Poulus et al. (2023)
Coping Strategies	9	Strong	Trigueros et al. (2023); Poulus et al. (2023); Tamminen & Holt (2012)

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this systematic review is grounded in the resilience theory and its application to sports psychology. Resilience is conceptualized as a dynamic process that enables individuals to adapt and thrive in the face of adversity, influenced by a combination of individual-level factors, social and environmental factors, and sport-specific factors (Masten, 2001; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012). At the individual level, constructs such as mastery/sense of control (Martin-Krumm et al., 2003), mental toughness (Jones et al., 2002), and emotional regulation (Tamminen & Holt, 2012) are critical for fostering resilience. These factors are further supported by optimism and positive thinking (Kavussanu &

McAuley, 1995), which act as buffers against stress and setbacks. In the context of sports, resilience is shaped by sport-specific factors such as the type of sport (individual vs. team) and level of competition (elite vs. recreational), which influence the demands and stressors athletes face (Blanco-García et al., 2024; Garrido-Muñoz et al., 2024). Additionally, training and competition stressors (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2014) and adaptive coping strategies (Trigueros et al., 2023) play a pivotal role in resilience development. This framework integrates insights from ecological systems theory (Ungar, 2011), which emphasizes the interplay between individuals and their environments, and positive psychology (Seligman, 2011), which highlights the role of strengths and positive attributes in overcoming challenges. By synthesizing these perspectives, this review provides a comprehensive understanding of how sports participation contributes to psychological resilience, offering a robust foundation for future research and practical applications in sports psychology.

Table 2: Definitional Clarity and Empirical Evidence of Components

Theoretical Framework	Definition	Evidence	Studies
Resilience Theory	A dynamic process enabling individuals to adapt and thrive in adversity.	Strong evidence linking resilience to sports participation and psychological outcomes.	Masten (2001); Fletcher & Sarkar (2012); Sarkar & Fletcher (2017)
Mastery/Sense of Control	The perception of control over one's environment and outcomes.	Strong evidence supporting its role in enhancing resilience.	Martin-Krumm et al. (2003); Nicholls et al. (2008); Fletcher & Sarkar (2012)
Mental Toughness	The ability to persevere and maintain focus under pressure.	Strong evidence for its impact on coping and performance.	Jones et al. (2002); Gerber et al. (2012); Rees et al. (2016)
Optimism and Positive Thinking	A positive outlook that buffers against stress and adversity.	Moderate evidence for its role in promoting resilience.	Kavussanu & McAuley (1995); Seligman (2011); Hosseini & Besharat (2010)

Theoretical Framework	Definition	Evidence	Studies
Emotional Regulation	The ability to manage and adapt emotions effectively.	Strong evidence for its role in stress management and resilience.	Tamminen & Holt (2012); Tamminen & Gaudreau (2014); Trigueros et al. (2023)
Sport (Individual vs. Team)	The influence of sport type vs. resilience development.	Moderate evidence for differences in resilience based on sport type.	Blanco-García et al. (2024); Garrido-Muñoz et al. (2024); Eime et al. (2013)
Level of Competition (Elite vs. Recreational)	The impact of competition level on resilience.	Moderate evidence for resilience variations across competition levels.	Blanco-García et al. (2024); Garrido-Muñoz et al. (2024); Dwihandaka et al. (2025)
Training and Competition Stressors	Stressors encountered during training and competition.	Strong evidence for their role in resilience development.	Fletcher & Sarkar (2014); Sarkar & Fletcher (2017); Poulus et al. (2023)
Coping Strategies	Adaptive strategies used to manage stress and adversity.	Strong evidence for their effectiveness in building resilience.	Trigueros et al. (2023); Poulus et al. (2023); Tamminen & Holt (2012)
Ecological Systems Theory	The interplay between individuals and their environments in shaping resilience.	Moderate evidence for environmental influences on resilience.	Ungar (2011); Masten (2001); Rutter (2006)
Positive Psychology	Focus on strengths and positive attributes to overcome challenges.	Strong evidence for the role of positive traits in resilience.	Seligman (2011); Fletcher & Sarkar (2012); Sarkar & Fletcher (2017)

Discussion

This systematic review explored the relationship between sports participation and psychological resilience among athletes, synthesizing findings from 52 studies to identify key individual-level and sport-specific factors that contribute to resilience. The findings highlight the multifaceted nature of resilience, emphasizing its dynamic interplay with personal attributes, social and environmental influences, and sport-specific contexts.

At the individual level, factors such as mastery/sense of control, mental toughness, optimism, and emotional regulation emerged as critical components of resilience. Mastery, or the perception of control over one's environment, was strongly linked to resilience, as it enables athletes to navigate challenges effectively (Martin-Krumm et al., 2003; Nicholls et al., 2008). Similarly, mental toughness, defined as the ability to persevere under pressure, was consistently associated with better coping and performance outcomes (Jones et al., 2002; Gerber et al., 2012). Optimism and positive thinking were also identified as protective factors, buffering athletes against stress and adversity (Kavussanu & McAuley, 1995; Seligman, 2011). Furthermore, emotional regulation strategies, such as reframing and mindfulness, were shown to enhance resilience by helping athletes manage stress and maintain focus (Tamminen & Holt, 2012; Tamminen & Gaudreau, 2014).

On the sport-specific side, the type of sport (individual vs. team) and level of competition (elite vs. recreational) were found to significantly influence resilience. For instance, team sports often foster resilience through collective support and shared goals, while individual sports emphasize self-reliance and personal accountability (Blanco-García et al., 2024; Garrido-Muñoz et al., 2024). Additionally, exposure to training and competition stressors was shown to build resilience when athletes effectively managed these challenges (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2014; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2017). Adaptive coping strategies, such as problem-focused coping and seeking social support, were also critical for resilience development, particularly in high-pressure environments (Trigueros et al., 2023; Poulus et al., 2023).

The findings align with resilience theory, which posits that resilience is a dynamic process shaped by the interaction of individual and environmental factors (Masten, 2001; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012). They also support ecological systems theory, which emphasizes the role of social and environmental contexts in resilience development (Ungar, 2011; Rutter, 2006). Furthermore, the role

of positive psychology in fostering resilience was evident, as positive traits such as optimism and mental toughness were consistently linked to better outcomes (Seligman, 2011; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012).

This review also highlights the importance of social support and coach-athlete relationships in building resilience. Studies such as Fletcher and Sarkar (2012) and Rees et al. (2016) underscore how supportive relationships provide emotional and practical assistance, enabling athletes to overcome adversity. Similarly, family influence was identified as a key factor, particularly for young athletes, as family encouragement and involvement were shown to enhance resilience (Caldarella et al., 2015; Norris & Norris, 2023).

Despite the robust findings, several limitations should be noted. First, the majority of studies focused on elite athletes, limiting the generalizability of findings to recreational or amateur athletes. Second, cultural and contextual differences in resilience were not fully explored, as most studies were conducted in Western contexts. Future research should address these gaps by examining resilience across diverse populations and settings.

In conclusion, this systematic review provides a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between sports participation and psychological resilience, highlighting the critical roles of individual-level and sport-specific factors. By integrating insights from resilience theory, ecological systems theory, and positive psychology, this review offers valuable implications for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers seeking to promote resilience through sports and physical activity.

Conclusion

This systematic review has provided a comprehensive synthesis of the relationship between sports participation and psychological resilience, drawing on 52 studies to identify key individual-level and sport-specific factors that contribute to resilience. The findings underscore the dynamic and multifaceted nature of resilience, highlighting its dependence on personal attributes such as mastery, mental toughness, optimism, and emotional regulation, as well as sport-specific factors like the type of sport, level of competition, and exposure to training and competition stressors. These factors interact within broader social and environmental contexts, including social support, coach-athlete relationships, and family influence, to shape resilience development.

The review aligns with resilience theory (Masten, 2001; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012), emphasizing resilience as a dynamic process influenced by both internal and

external factors. It also supports ecological systems theory (Ungar, 2011; Rutter, 2006), which highlights the role of environmental contexts in resilience, and positive psychology (Seligman, 2011), which underscores the importance of positive traits and strengths in overcoming adversity.

Despite the robust findings, limitations such as the focus on elite athletes and Western contexts suggest the need for further research on diverse populations and settings. Future studies should explore cultural variations in resilience and examine the long-term effects of sports participation on resilience development.

In conclusion, this review offers valuable insights for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, demonstrating how sports participation can serve as a powerful tool for fostering psychological resilience. By integrating these findings into practice, stakeholders can develop targeted interventions to enhance resilience and promote mental well-being among athletes across all levels and contexts.

Future Directions

Future research can work on exploring cross-cultural and contextual differences in resilience to better understand its global applicability. One can also conduct longitudinal studies to track how resilience develops over time in athletes, and additionally. In addition to the above, one can focus on including recreational and amateur athletes to create resilience-building strategies that benefit a wider range of athletic populations.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this systematic review. No financial or personal relationships influenced the design, execution, analysis, or interpretation of the study. All authors contributed impartially to the research process.

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