

Assessment of the Psychological Wellbeing of Student-Athletes and Non-Athletes at the University of Ilorin, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study assessed the psychological wellbeing of student-athletes and non-athletes at the University of Ilorin, employing a descriptive research design. The population included all University's students, with 149 participants selected through a multi-stage sampling process. Stratified sampling categorised students into athletes (77) and non-athletes (72) chosen via random sampling. Data were collected using the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12), validated with Pearson's product-moment correlation reliability coefficient of .73. Descriptive statistics, including frequency counts and percentages, addressed research questions, while an independent samples *t* test at a .05 alpha level was used to test hypotheses. The findings revealed no significant difference in psychological wellbeing between student-athletes and non-athletes. Additionally, the perception of the impact of sport on psychological wellbeing did not differ between the groups. The study concluded that both student-athletes and non-athletes at the University of Ilorin exhibit similar psychological wellbeing, and their views on the influence of sport on wellbeing are consistent regardless of participation. These findings suggest that sport participation does not uniquely affect psychological wellbeing in this context, emphasising the importance of universal stress management practices for all students. To enhance psychological health, the study recommends that both groups engage in stress-reducing activities such as meditation, deep breathing, or yoga.

Keywords: psychological wellbeing, student-athlete, non-athlete, health status, University of Ilorin

1. INTRODUCTION

University life represents a pivotal transitional phase for young adults, characterised by academic demands, social adjustments, and personal growth. During this period, psychological wellbeing plays a critical role in shaping students' academic success, social integration, and overall quality of life. Psychological wellbeing

encompasses a range of dimensions, including emotional stability, stress management, self-esteem, and life satisfaction, all of which are essential for navigating the multifaceted challenges of higher education (Dhanabhakya et al., 2023). Students at the University of Ilorin face unique socio-economic and cultural pressures, thus understanding student-



athletes' and non-athletes' psychological wellbeing is vital for developing targeted interventions to support mental health and enhance student outcomes.

World Health Organization (2022) defines psychological wellbeing as a state in which individuals realise their abilities, cope effectively with life's stresses, work productively, and contribute meaningfully to their communities. This multidimensional construct includes psychological health (self-esteem and quality of life), emotional health (life satisfaction, happiness, and absence of loneliness), and social health (integration and contribution to society) (Eather et al., 2023). Psychological ill-being, conversely, encompasses pre-clinical states such as high stress, anxiety, or depressive symptoms, which can impair cognitive functioning and overall mental health (Parviainen et al., 2020). For university students, these components are particularly salient as they navigate academic pressures, social transitions, and personal development in highly dynamic environment.

Academic stress is a primary determinant of psychological wellbeing among university students. The demands of coursework, examinations, and deadlines can elevate stress levels, potentially leading to anxiety, depression, or burnout (Baik et al., 2019). A 2020 study by Pascoe et al. highlighted that academic stressors are particularly pronounced in resource-constrained settings, where students may lack access to robust mental health support systems. Social factors, such as peer relationships, social support, and campus integration, also significantly influence psychological wellbeing. For instance, Ruihua et al. (2025) stated that strong social networks foster resilience and life satisfaction among university students, mitigating the impact of academic and personal stressors. These personal factors, including self-esteem and coping strategies, further shape students' ability to manage challenges and maintain mental health (Abbas, 2023).

Student-athletes, defined as individuals participating in organised competitive sports sponsored by their educational institution, face unique challenges that may influence their psychological wellbeing differently from non-athletes who do not engage in such activities (Apaak & Sarpong, 2015). Student-athletes must balance the dual role of full-time academic study and competitive sports, which often involve rigorous training schedules, performance expectations, and physical demands (Kruger, 2025).

This dual role can lead to specific psychological challenges, including time management difficulties, role conflict, and pressure to perform both

academically and athletically (Bird et al., 2018). Apaak and Sarpong (2015) identified six distinctive challenges faced by student-athletes: balancing academic and athletic responsibilities, managing social activities alongside sport, coping with athletic successes or failures, maintaining physical health amidst injury risks, navigating relationships with coaches and teammates, and addressing the eventual termination of their athletic careers. These challenges can exacerbate stress and impact psychological wellbeing, particularly in settings with limited sport science resources, such as Nigerian universities.

In contrast, non-athletes, while free from the pressures of competitive sports, may face other stressors, such as academic overload or social isolation, which can similarly affect their mental health. Eather et al. (2023) noted that non-athletes may experience lower levels of structured social support compared to athletes who benefit from team dynamics and coaching relationships. However, non-athletes may engage in alternative extracurricular activities, such as academic clubs or religious organisations, which can provide comparable psychological benefits. The interplay between these factors underscores the need to compare the psychological wellbeing of student-athletes and non-athletes to identify specific needs and inform tailored interventions.

Sport participation is widely recognised for its potential to enhance psychological wellbeing. Physical activity, including sport, has been shown to reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety, improve mood, and enhance self-esteem through mechanisms such as endorphin release and social connectedness (Chekroud et al., 2018). Abbas (2023) found that university students who participate in sports report higher levels of life satisfaction and lower stress compared to their non-active peers, attributed to the structured nature of sport and the sense of achievement it provides. However, the high-pressure environment of competitive sports can also pose risks to mental health, particularly for student-athletes who face performance expectations and time constraints (Kruger, 2025). For instance, a 2016 study by Rice et al. highlighted that elite student-athletes are at risk of burnout and anxiety due to the intense demands of balancing academics and athletics, particularly in under-resourced settings.

In the Nigerian context, cultural and socio-economic factors further shape students' psychological wellbeing. The University of Ilorin, a prominent institution in Nigeria, operates within a context where students often face financial constraints,

limited access to mental health services, and cultural expectations to excel academically. It can be observed that, for student-athletes, these challenges are compounded by the physical and psychological demands of sport participation, which may lead to issues such as stress-related headaches, forgetfulness, or impaired motor coordination. Such symptoms, if unaddressed, can precipitate mental health disorders, including depression, anxiety, or eating disorders, and may contribute to academic underperformance or dropout (Parviainen et al., 2020). Non-athletes, while not subject to these athletic demands, may experience similar mental health challenges due to academic pressures or social isolation, highlighting the need for a comparative analysis.

Recent research underscores the importance of assessing psychological wellbeing in university settings to inform mental health interventions. Ahsan and Abualait (2025) emphasised that university-based sport programmes can serve as cost-effective tools for promoting mental health, particularly in resource-limited environments. However, the benefits of sport participation may vary depending on the intensity, frequency, and support systems available. For instance, a 2019 study by Biddle et al. found that team sports, such as football, foster greater social connectedness and self-esteem compared to individual activities, which may be particularly relevant for student-athletes at the University of Ilorin, where football is a cornerstone of the sport programme. Conversely, non-athletes may derive similar benefits from other structured activities, suggesting that the psychological advantages of sport may not be exclusive to athletes.

The psychological wellbeing of student-athletes and non-athletes is also influenced by their perception of the impact of sport on mental health. Tan (2025) stated that individuals who perceive sport as beneficial to mental health are more likely to engage in physical activity, even if not competitively, leading to improved wellbeing outcomes. This perception is shaped by cultural attitudes, peer influences, and institutional support for sports, all of which are relevant regarding the vibrant sport culture of the University of Ilorin. Understanding this perception can guide the development of programmes that encourage sport participation among non-athletes while addressing the unique mental health needs of student-athletes.

This study seeks to assess and compare the psychological wellbeing of student-athletes and non-athletes at the University of Ilorin, focusing on emotional stability, stress management, self-esteem, and life satisfaction. By examining these variables, the study

aims to identify the differences in mental health outcomes and the impact of sport on mental health, providing insights into how sport participation influences psychological wellbeing in a Nigerian university context. The findings are expected to contribute to the growing body of literature on student mental health and inform the development of targeted interventions to support both athletes and non-athletes in navigating the challenges of university life.

Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study were to:

- i. assess the psychological wellbeing status of student-athletes and non-athletes at the University of Ilorin; and
- ii. assess the students' perception of sport regarding the influence on their psychological wellbeing.

Research questions

The following research questions were raised:

1. What is the psychological wellbeing status of student-athletes and non-athletes at the University of Ilorin?
2. What is the perception of sport regarding psychological wellbeing among student-athletes and non-athletes at the University of Ilorin?

Hypotheses

- H₁: There is a significant difference between the psychological wellbeing status of student-athletes and non-athletes at the University of Ilorin.
- H₂: There is a significant difference of the perception of sport regarding psychological wellbeing among student-athletes and non-athletes at the University of Ilorin.

2. METHODS

Research design

Descriptive research design of survey type was used for this study.

Population and sampling

The population of the study comprised all students at the University of Ilorin. The target population was restricted to all-male undergraduate students between the ages of 18–25. A sample of 149 respondents was selected for this study through multi-stage sampling procedure. Stratified sampling technique was used to classify the students into two categories based on the University's Sport Unit

records, filtered to align with the abovementioned age bracket: athletes (actively involved in University-sponsored competitive sports) and non-athletes (not participating in University-sponsored competitive sports). Random sampling technique was used to select 77 male athletes and 72 male non-athletes within the stipulated age bracket.

Research instrument

The General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12), developed by Goldberg and Williams (1988), was adopted for this study and presented to the respondents using a 4-point Likert scale. The method of test-retest reliability was used and the results were analysed using Pearson's product-moment correlation reliability coefficient of 0.73, indicating high internal consistency of the instrument.

Procedure of data collection

The researcher obtained a signed informed consent statement from each respondent, indicating

voluntary participation in the study. The questionnaires were filled out by the respondents individually, with the help of two research assistants that were trained prior to data collection by the researcher, and prompt retrieval of the completed questionnaire was ensured.

Method of data analysis

Descriptive statistics of frequency and percentage were used to analyse the demographic characteristics of the respondents and to answer research questions. Inferential statistics of *t* test was used to test the formulated hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance.

3. RESULTS

Answers to the research questions

Research question one: What is the psychological wellbeing status of student-athletes and non-athletes at the University of Ilorin?

Table 1. Descriptive analysis of the psychological wellbeing status of student-athletes at the University of Ilorin

S/N	Item	Favourable response		Unfavourable response		Total
		Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	
1	I am always able to concentrate on whatever I am doing.	77	100	0	0	77
2	Over the past few weeks I have lost sleep due to worries.	1	1.3	76	98.7	77
3	I feel capable of making decisions about things.	77	100	0	0	77
4	I do not feel constantly under strain with the tasks I have to do.	70	90.9	7	9.1	77
5	I am bothered a lot with the feelings that I cannot overcome my difficulties.	3	3.9	74	96.1	77
6	I am lively and always able to enjoy my normal day-to-day activities.	76	98.7	1	1.3	77
7	I have no difficulty in rising up to my problems.	76	98.7	1	1.3	77
8	I have been feeling unhappy and depressed.	1	1.3	76	98.7	77
9	I have high confidence about myself in whatever I am doing.	77	100	0	0	77
10	I have been thinking of myself as a worthless person.	0	0	77	100	77

S/N	Item	Favourable response		Unfavourable response		Total
		Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	
11	Considering all things happening around me, I have been feeling reasonably happy.	77	100	0	0	77
12	I have a strong feeling of optimism about the future.	77	100	0	0	77
Total (Percentage)		612 (66.2)		312 (33.8)		924 (100.00)

Table 1 shows a descriptive analysis of the psychological wellbeing status of student-athletes at the University of Ilorin (n = 77). Out of the total response of 924, the favourable response was 612 (66.2%) (higher than the unfavourable response of 312; 33.8%). This indicates high psychological wellbeing of the athletes.

Table 2. Descriptive analysis of the psychological wellbeing status of non-athlete students at the University of Ilorin

S/N	Item	Favourable response		Unfavourable response		Total
		Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	
1	I am always able to concentrate on whatever I am doing.	72	100	0	0	72
2	Over the past few weeks I have lost sleep due to worries.	9	12.5	63	87.5	72
3	I feel capable of making decisions about things.	71	98.6	1	1.4	72
4	I do not feel constantly under strain with the tasks I have to do.	59	81.9	13	18.1	72
5	I am bothered a lot with the feelings that I cannot overcome my difficulties.	6	8.3	66	91.7	72
6	I am lively and always able to enjoy my normal day-to-day activities.	71	98.6	1	1.4	72
7	I have no difficulty in rising up to my problems.	71	98.6	1	1.4	72
8	I have been feeling unhappy and depressed.	0	0	72	100	72
9	I have high confidence about myself in whatever I am doing.	72	100	0	0	72
10	I have been thinking of myself as a worthless person.	1	1.4	71	98.6	72
11	Considering all things happening around me, I have been feeling reasonably happy.	72	100	0	0	72

S/N	Item	Favourable response		Unfavourable response		Total
		Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	
12	I have a strong feeling of optimism about the future.	72	100	0	0	72
Total (Percentage)		576 (66.7)		288 (33.3)		864 (100.00)

Table 2 shows a descriptive analysis of the psychological wellbeing status of non-athlete students at the University of Ilorin (n = 72). Out of the total response of 864, the favourable response was 576 (66.7%) (higher than the unfavourable response of 288; 33.3%). This indicates high psychological

wellbeing of the non-athletes.

Research question two: What is the perception of sport regarding psychological wellbeing among student-athletes and non-athletes at the University of Ilorin?

Table 3. Perception of sport regarding psychological wellbeing among student-athletes and non-athletes at the University of Ilorin

Perception level	Frequency	Percent
High	138	92.6
Moderate	11	7.4
Total	149	100.0

Table 3 shows a descriptive analysis on the perception of sport regarding psychological wellbeing among student-athletes and non-athletes at the University of Ilorin. Out of 149 possible responses, the majority of the students (138; 92.6%) had a high perception level, meanwhile 11 students (7.4%) had moderate perception regarding the impact of participation in sport on their psychological wellbeing.

Hypotheses testing

H₁: There is a significant difference between the psychological wellbeing status of student-athletes and non-athletes at the University of Ilorin.

Table 4. Independent samples *t* test showing difference between the psychological wellbeing status of student-athletes and non-athletes at the University of Ilorin

Groups	n	Mean ± SD	MD	SED	Df	<i>t</i>	Sig.
Athletes	77	39.97 ± 1.33	0.2	0.2	147	0.7	0.5
Non-athletes	72	39.82 ± 1.52					

Note: $p \geq 0.05$.

Table 4 shows an independent samples *t* test analysis on the difference between the psychological wellbeing status of athlete and non-athlete students at the University of Ilorin (n = 149). The results revealed no significant difference $t(147) = 0.7$, $p = 0.5$. This implies that the psychological wellbeing of the students at the University of Ilorin does not vary between athletes and non-athletes.

Therefore, the stated hypothesis is rejected.

H₂: There is a significant difference of the perception of sport regarding psychological wellbeing among student-athletes and non-athletes at the University of Ilorin.

Table 5. Independent samples *t* test showing the difference of the perception of sport regarding psychological wellbeing among student-athletes and non-athletes at the University of Ilorin

Groups	n	Mean $\pm$ SD	MD	SED	Df	<i>t</i>	Sig.
Athletes	77	14.99 $\pm$ 1.18	0.04	0.2	147	0.2	0.8
Non-athletes	72	15.02 $\pm$ 1.29					

Note: $p \geq 0.05$.

Table 5 shows an independent samples *t* test analysis of the perception of sport regarding the psychological wellbeing among athletes and non-athletes at the University of Ilorin ($n = 149$). The result revealed no significant difference $t(147) = 0.2$, $p = 0.8$. This implies that the students' perception of the influence of sport on psychological wellbeing at the University of Ilorin does not vary between those who participate in sports and those who do not participate in sports. Therefore, the stated hypothesis is rejected.

4. DISCUSSION

Psychological wellbeing status of athletes and non-athletes

In Nigeria, students generally enter the university between the ages of 16 and 20, following the completion of secondary education, making the 18–25 years age range representative of the average student characteristics, which in turn reflects the core student population, encapsulating a stage where academic, social, and athletic pressures are most defined. The 18–25 years age range aligns with the developmental stage of 'emerging adulthood', defined by significant psychological and sociological changes, as students face academic demands, social adjustments, and the added pressure of balancing sport alongside as athletes.

The descriptive analysis of psychological wellbeing (Tables 1 and 2) revealed that both athletes ($n = 77$) and non-athletes ($n = 72$) at the University of Ilorin reported high levels of psychological wellbeing, with favourable responses accounting for 66.2% and 66.7% of total responses, respectively. Favourable responses indicate agreement with the positive statements and disagreement with the negative statements, and unfavourable responses indicate agreement with the negative statements and disagreement with the positive statements; these conclusions were reached after evaluating the aggregate of the responses. Key indicators, such as the ability to concentrate, confidence in decision-making, and optimism about the future, received 100% favourable responses in both groups, suggesting

robust mental health across the sample. These findings are particularly notable given the challenging academic and social pressures often faced by university students, which can impact mental wellbeing.

The high psychological wellbeing scores align with recent research highlighting the resilience of university students in resource-constrained environments. Eather et al. (2023) found that individuals who engage in structured activities like sport often report higher levels of psychological wellbeing due to social support and the sense of purpose provided by these activities. The favourable responses to items such as "I am lively and always able to enjoy my normal day-to-day activities." (98.7% for athletes, 98.6% for non-athletes) and "I have a strong feeling of optimism about the future." (100% for both groups) suggest that students at the University of Ilorin benefit from a supportive campus environment, which may buffer against stressors like academic workload or financial constraints.

However, some differences in specific items warrant attention. For example, athletes reported slightly lower levels of strain (9.1% unfavourable responses to "I do not feel constantly under strain with the tasks I have to do.") compared to non-athletes (18.1% unfavourable responses to the aforementioned item). Similarly, fewer athletes (1.3%) reported sleep loss due to worry compared to non-athletes (12.5%). These differences, though not statistically significant, align with the reports from Martín-Rodríguez et al. (2024), which demonstrated that athletes often experience lower perceived stress due to the psychological benefits of physical activity, such as reduced cortisol levels and enhanced mood regulation. The structured nature of sport participation, including regular training and team interactions, may provide athletes with a coping mechanism for managing stress, as supported by Abbas (2023) who found that physical activity enhances resilience in university students.

The independent samples *t* test (Table 4) confirmed no significant difference in psychological wellbeing between athletes and non-athletes ($t(147) = 0.7$, $p = .5$), leading to the rejection of the hypothesis (H_1). This result is consistent with the

findings of Hamafyelto et al. (2016), who noted no significant difference in the overall environmental stress levels between athletes and non-athletes at the University of Maiduguri, suggesting that the baseline levels of resilience may be high across Nigerian student population due to cultural and socioeconomic factors. The finding contrasts with some studies that suggest athletes typically exhibit higher psychological wellbeing due to the mental health benefits of sport participation, with Adegoju and Abon (2021) highlighting significant differences between student-athletes and non-athletes in Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria, stating that student-athletes showcased better mental health outcomes in terms of reduced depression and anxiety when compared to non-athletes.

Furthermore, Chekroud et al. (2018) reported that regular physical activity, including sport, is associated with lower rates of depression and anxiety among young adults. The lack of significant difference in this study may reflect the high baseline wellbeing of the non-athlete group, possibly due to other extracurricular or social activities that provide similar psychological benefits. In a review given by Luo et al. (2025), social relationships and support systems, whether through sport or other communal activities, were stated as critical mechanisms for enhancing psychological wellbeing, a perspective that may explain the comparable mental health outcomes observed in this study.

Perception of the influence of sport on psychological wellbeing

The descriptive analysis of perception (Table 3) revealed that 92.6% of students (both athletes and non-athletes) had a high perception of the positive impact of sport on psychological wellbeing, with only 7.4% reporting moderate perception. This overwhelmingly positive view underscores the widespread recognition of sport as a valuable tool for mental health promotion among university students. The independent samples *t* test (Table 5) further confirmed no significant difference in the perception between athletes and non-athletes ($t(147) = 0.2, p = .8$), leading to the rejection of the hypothesis (H_2). This suggests that both groups equally value the psychological benefits of sport, regardless of their participation status.

These findings align with recent literature emphasising the perceived mental health benefits of sport. Singh et al. (2024) highlighted that sport is widely recognised for fostering mental resilience, improving mood, and reducing stress, even among

individuals who do not actively participate. The high perception scores in this study may reflect cultural or institutional factors at the University of Ilorin, where sport is a prominent part of campus life, potentially shaping positive attitudes among non-athletes as well. Tan (2025) found that individuals exposed to sport culture, even indirectly, report higher appreciation for its mental health benefits due to social modelling and community engagement.

The lack of difference in perception between athletes and non-athletes is particularly noteworthy. While athletes directly experience the benefits of sport through participation, non-athletes' positive perception may stem from observing peers or engaging in informal physical activities. Biddle et al. (2019) noted that vicarious exposure to sport, such as watching university teams or participating in recreational activities, can foster positive attitudes towards the mental health benefits of physical activity. This may explain why non-athletes in this study reported perception comparable to those of athletes, suggesting that the University's sport culture promotes a shared belief in the psychological value of sport.

In the Nigerian context, Hamafyelto et al. (2016) reported that while student-athletes perceived greater benefits from sport-related coping mechanisms, non-athletes also acknowledged the potential of physical activity for stress management. However, Adegoju and Abon (2021) shared a contrasting opinion, reporting that the perception of sport benefits was heightened among athletes due to direct experiential situations of reduced anxiety and depression patterns.

Further research could explore the expansion of the population under study to include diverse universities across the country, taking account of genders, sport type, and socioeconomic status, making for a more robust sample and increased generalisability of the findings. Furthermore, carrying out a longitudinal study to track wellbeing over a period of time could evoke possible intervention practices, which could enhance wellbeing across varying levels.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the conclusions below were drawn:

1. Psychological wellbeing of students at the University of Ilorin does not vary between athletes and non-athletes.
2. Students' perception of the influence of sport on psychological wellbeing at the University of Ilorin does not vary between

those who participate in sports and those who do not participate in sports.

Recommendations

The findings suggest several practical recommendations for enhancing psychological wellbeing at the University of Ilorin and similar institutions:

- i. Institutions should promote recreational sport programmes, given the high perception of the mental health benefits of sport.
- ii. Institutions should integrate mental health education into sport and academic programmes to reinforce the link between physical activity and psychological wellbeing.
- iii. Institutions should enhance social support systems through strengthening campus-wide support networks, such as peer mentoring or student organisations, to sustain high levels of psychological wellbeing.
- iv. Regular wellbeing assessments should be conducted at the institutions by implementing periodic surveys to monitor students' psychological wellbeing and perception of sport, enabling targeted interventions.
- v. Cross-disciplinary studies should be encouraged to further investigate the specific mechanisms (e.g. social support, self-efficacy) underlying the high psychological wellbeing.

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