

Beyond the Game: Examining Health Attitudes from a Collegiate Student-Athlete Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

Discussions about mental health in sports have begun to increase on social and institutional levels, leading to increased awareness about the additional stressors' collegiate student-athletes face in comparison to their non-athlete peers. Due to the inherently competitive nature of collegiate sports, scholars have suggested that many student-athletes have developed an ideology of mental toughness that is detrimental to their wellness. Stigmatizing attitudes stemming from various influential sources about mental health may impact help-seeking intentions and responses to wellness concerns. ^{1,2,3}

The mental wellbeing of collegiate student-athletes is often overlooked by the prioritization of physical health, which impacts athletes' perceptions of mental health. Previous studies have shown that mental health is underrepresented in athletics, however, questioning about mental health stigma from the student-athlete perspective has not been as widely documented in the field.

METHODS

I. Interview

Participants engaged in a semi-structured one-on-one interview with the researcher. Participants were given 4 scenarios depicting a hypothetical teammate needing to miss an important competition due to either a physical health concern or a mental health concern. The teammate was described as a top performer in 2 scenarios and as a valued athlete but not a significant influence on the team's overall outcome in the other 2 scenarios. The interviewer asked a follow-up question to gain insight into generic, potential stigma influences.

II. Thematic Analysis

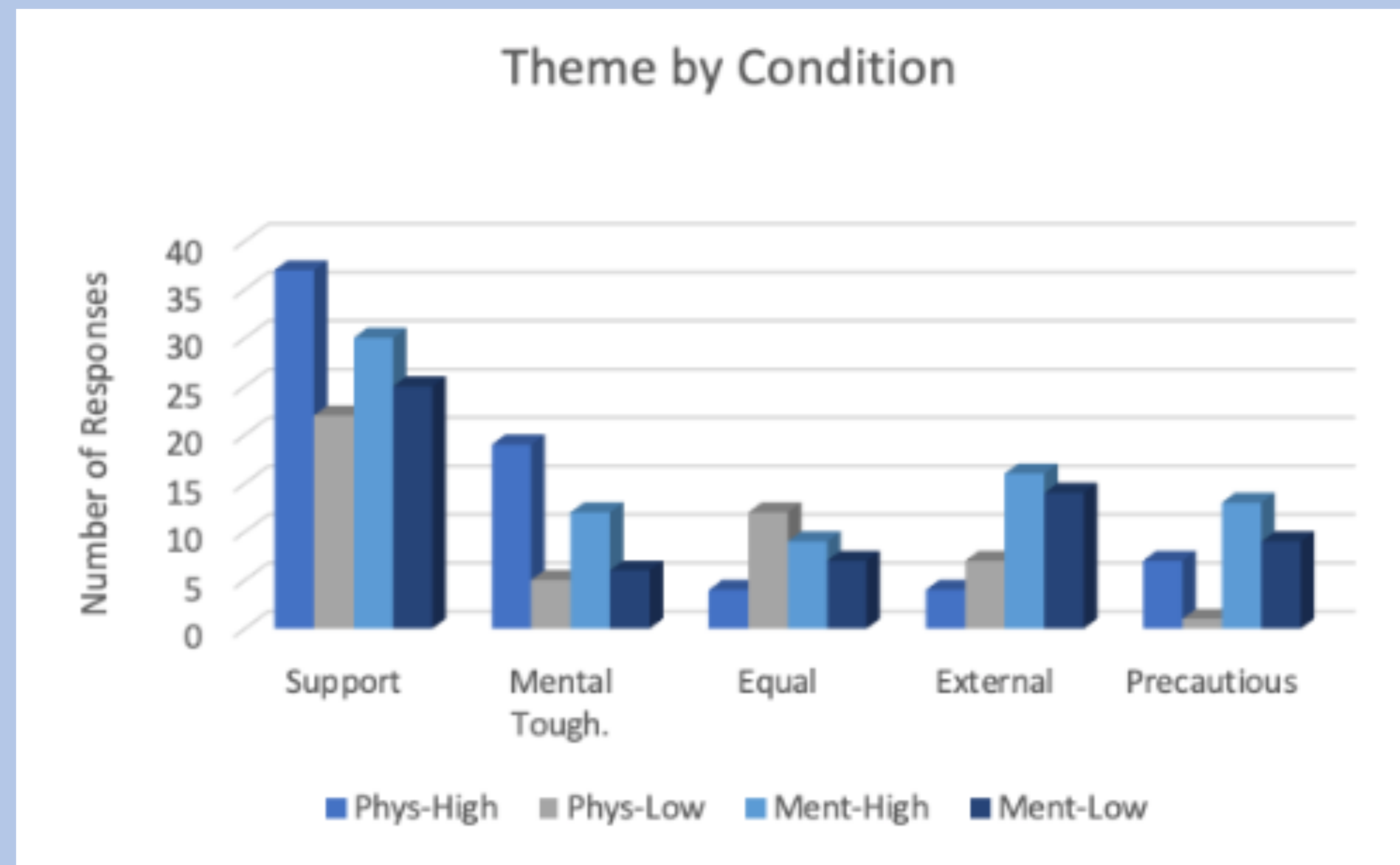
Each interview was reviewed twice to note themes that arose during the conversation. Participants reported coaches as a high potential source of influence, so further analysis to separate positive and negative experiences was conducted. To consolidate themes, higher-order categories were created for the four health conditions based on common phrases. The categories included support, mental toughness, equal, external, and precautionary.

III. Sentiment Analysis

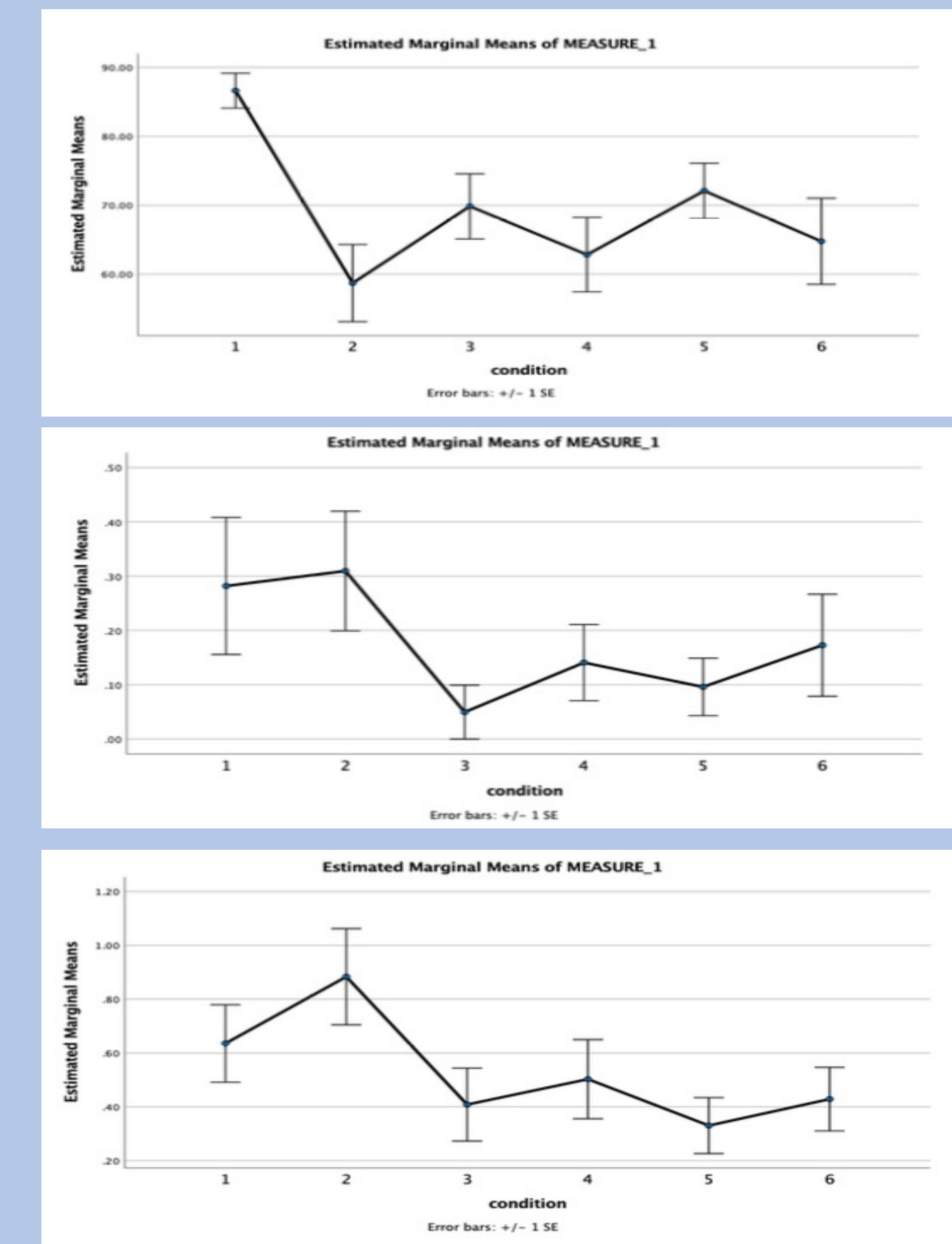
After transcribing responses, participant dialogue was coded quantitatively using the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) program. The interviews were uploaded to LIWC, and categories were generated relating to the overall themes of each condition. From the categories, the themes shown in Table 2 were chosen for analysis in SPSS. Each theme was analyzed in SPSS using descriptive statistics and repeated measures ANOVAs.

RESULTS

Thematic Analysis: Higher Order Categories



Sentiment Analysis: Authenticity, Negative Emotion, Anxiety



DISCUSSION

Thematic analysis found that student-athletes express high levels of support to their teammates, regardless of skill level or health concern. Teammates and coaches were reported as the highest potential sources of influence, with coaching experiences approximately equal between positive and negative. Sentiment analysis suggests that student-athletes' responses vary depending on the athlete's skill level and the type of health concern.

Student-athletes responded with the highest levels of Authenticity towards the study condition portraying low-skilled athletes with either physical or mental health concerns. Student-athletes responded with the highest levels of Negative Emotion towards their high-skilled teammate with a physical health concern. Student-athletes responded with the highest levels of Anxiety towards their high-skilled teammate with a physical health concern.

These results highlight the importance of talking about mental health in athletics to decrease stigma, as shown through variation and uncertainty in participants' responses when health concerns directly impact their team.

FUTURE DIRECTION

The results from the current lay a foundation for future research regarding mental and physical health parity in a sporting context. The current research could be used to influence future NCAA protocols and policies related to the mental wellbeing of their athletes, in addition to raising awareness of mental and physical parity in the NCAA.

Future studies could exam how the media and general population respond to mental health concerns from an elite athlete perspective, which would provide context for mental and physical health parity in the sporting context. Additionally, studies can be conducted to expand to minority populations, as these groups are underrepresented in athletics.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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