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Article

## The Role of Academic and Social Support in Enhancing Mental Health among College Students and Athletes in China

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### Abstract

Mental health challenges among college students and athletes in China are increasingly prevalent, arising from academic pressures, social isolation, and the demands associated with sports participation. Despite growing recognition of the importance of academic and social support in enhancing mental well-being, there remains a limited understanding of the combined impact of these factors on Chinese students and athletes. The primary aim of this research is to investigate the impact of academic support and social support on the mental health of college students and athletes in China. The study sample comprises 518 participants from Chinese colleges, including 260 students and 258 athletes. A structured survey questionnaire was administered to assess academic support, social support, competition stress, time management, self-esteem, and mental health. The statistical analysis methods employed in this research include descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, multiple regression, and one-way ANOVA. The study demonstrated that there are strong positive relationships between academic and social support, time management, self-esteem, and mental health. Conversely, competition stress was found to have a negative impact on mental health. The research suggests that enhancing academic and social support, along with addressing competitive stress, significantly improves mental health outcomes among college students and athletes. It underscores the importance of these factors in promoting better mental health.

### Keywords

Academic Support, Social Support, Competition Stress, Time Management, Self-Esteem, Mental Health.

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## Introduction

Mental health (MH) refers to an individual's psychological, emotional, and social well-being, influencing how people feel, think, and behave. It affects how individuals manage stress, relate to others, and make decisions (Gautam et al., 2024). Positive MH goes beyond the mere absence of mental disorders; it encompasses the ability to regulate emotions, navigate life's challenges, and foster positive relationships. MH is crucial at all stages of life, from childhood to adulthood, and is influenced by a variety of factors, including genetics, environment, lifestyle, and life experiences (Johnston et al., 2024). Understanding and maintaining good MH is essential for overall health and performance.

MH among college students and athletes is an escalating concern, as both groups encounter distinct pressures that influence their emotional and psychological well-being. College students face academic stress, social challenges, and the transition to adulthood, often leading to depression, anxiety, and other MH issues (Cheng et al., 2024). Athletes, in addition to these stressors, must contend with the intense physical demands of their sport, performance expectations, and the risk of injury, which can further exacerbate MH difficulties. Both groups also experience stigma surrounding the seeking of help, resulting in untreated conditions that can adversely affect their academic performance, personal relationships, and athletic achievements (Mansell et al., 2024). Recognising the importance of MH support and promoting a balanced lifestyle is crucial for fostering resilience and overall well-being within these populations. Figure 1 illustrates the significance of MH for students and athletes.

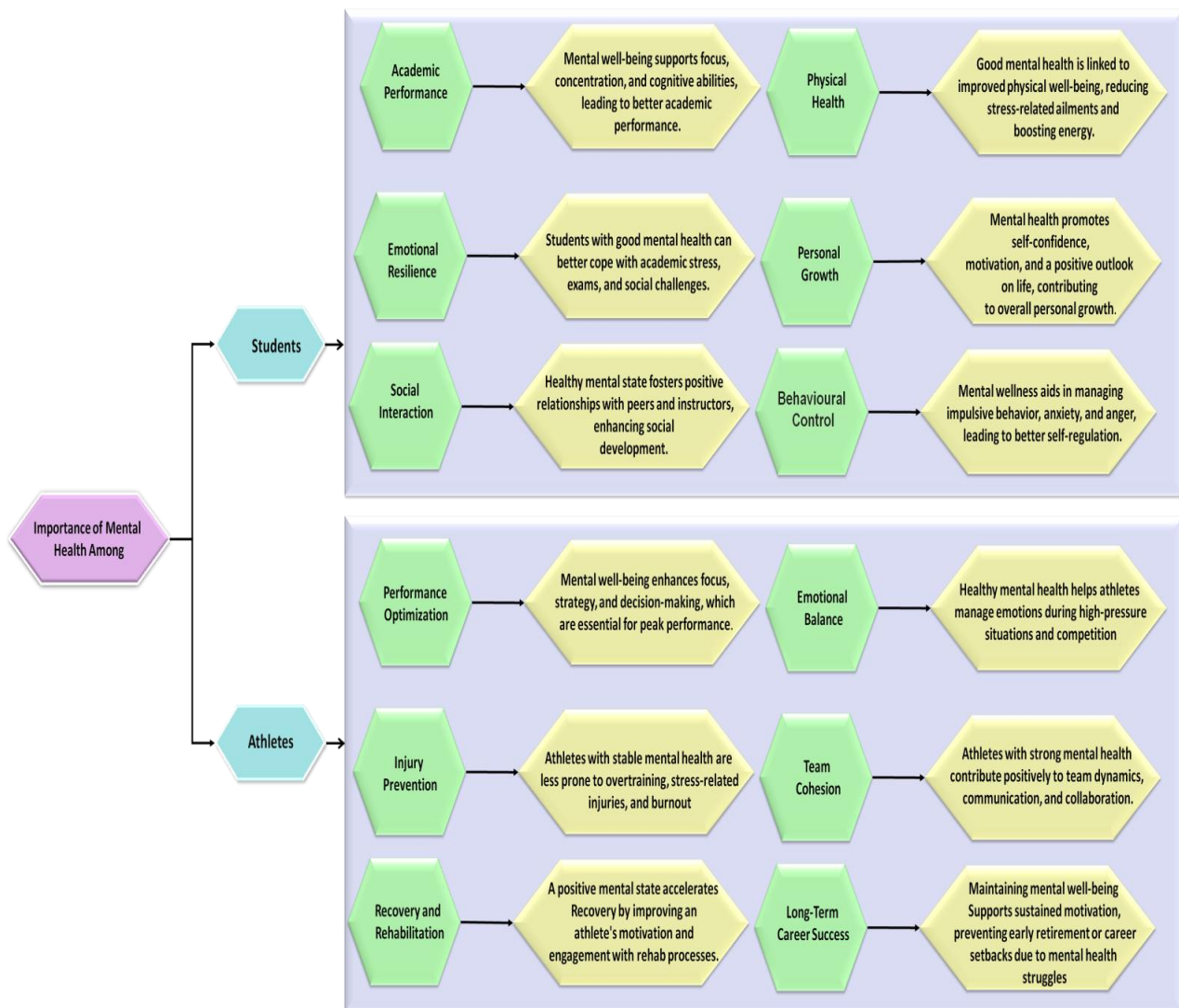


Figure 1: Importance of Mental Health (MH) for Students and Athletes.

Academic support is essential for the success of college students and athletes in both their academic and athletic endeavours. College students, particularly those engaged in sports, often face the challenge of balancing demanding academic workloads with the requirements of training, competition, and travel (Yukhymenko-Lescroart et al., 2024). Consequently, access to academic support services such as tutoring, mentoring, and study groups becomes critical in helping them manage these dual responsibilities. For athletes, academic support not only helps maintain eligibility but also enhances their overall college experience, promoting well-being and reducing stress (Ma et al., 2024). By offering resources and fostering an environment that values both academic achievement and athletic performance, universities can help students and athletes thrive, resulting in greater success both in the classroom and on the field (Andrin et al., 2024).

Social support is a vital factor in the well-being and performance of college students and athletes. For students, access to informational, emotional, and instrumental support from peers, family, and faculty can significantly impact academic success, mental health, and overall life satisfaction. Similarly, athletes benefit from social support in the form of encouragement, motivation, and guidance from coaches, teammates, and support staff, which can enhance both athletic performance and psychological resilience (Hanif, 2024). This support network fosters a sense of belonging and security, aiding individuals in coping with stress, navigating challenges, and maintaining a positive outlook in both academic and athletic environments (Frangieh et al., 2024). Thus, social support is an essential contributor to personal growth, performance improvement, and mental health for both groups. The primary aim of this investigation is to explore the impact of academic and social support on mental health, with a particular focus on college students and athletes.

The organisation of this research is as follows: Section 2 presents the literature review. Section 3 provides a detailed explanation of the materials and methods. The results of the research are displayed in Section 4. Section 5 contains the discussion, while Section 6 presents the conclusion of the study.

## Literature Review

Li et al. (2022) examined the impact of academic stress on university students' mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings revealed that academic pressures were positively related to mental health but negatively affected self-identity, social interactions, and social well-being. Academic pressures were found to influence mental health through self-identity and social support. During the pandemic, work-related pressures were also significant. The study suggested that reducing workloads and enhancing social support could improve self-esteem and social well-being, thereby protecting mental health during the crisis. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Hagiwara et al. (2021) explored the relationship between Japanese student-athletes' mental health and their perceptions of social support from peers. Two studies were conducted, one in April 2020 and another in March 2021. The later study revealed significant correlations between social support, identity, and mental health, while the initial study identified significant links between identity, depression, and sports-related helplessness. Hu et al. (2022) aimed to investigate the relationship between social support and improved mental health, as well as the state and developmental trends of college students' positive mental health.

Fogaca (2021) aimed to develop teaching strategies to help college student-athletes cope with challenges, focusing on enhancing their social support from coaches and team captains, while simultaneously improving their athletic performance and mental health. The intervention group showed significantly better performance compared to the control group. The study suggested that interventions teaching student-athletes mental skills for performance could potentially enhance both their athletic coping abilities and mental health outcomes in various aspects of their lives. Sullivan et al. (2020) explored depression symptoms among collegiate athletes and examined the relationship between these symptoms and various types of social support. The research highlighted the importance of providing effective support, which can influence both performance and overall mental health. Liu et al. (2022) investigated the factors contributing to academic burnout in medical students engaged in online-based learning. They explored the positive inhibitory effects of supportive factors, such as social support, and the negative exacerbating impact of stress.

Zhu et al. (2021) investigated the effects of academic pressure on sleep and physical activity, and examined their implications for anxiety and depression. The findings strongly supported the hypothesis that reducing academic pressure among Chinese adolescents could lead to immediate improvements in mental health indicators. Additionally, promoting engagement in health-related behaviours such as physical exercise and

adequate sleep was identified as crucial for mental well-being. Cheng et al. (2020) examined whether social support and resilience decrease academic tiredness and depression in medical students. The study indicated that resilience and social support decreased depression, but intellectual weariness increased it. Social support buffered fatigue and sadness less than resilience. The study found that resilience and social support are crucial to preventing depression in college students, especially when academic tiredness is prevalent. Ye et al. (2021) evaluated the impact of social support on academic exhaustion and examined the mediating role of life satisfaction in the relationship between social support and academic exhaustion.

### Materials and Methods

The present research investigates the impact of academic support and social support on mental health in college students and athletes.

#### Study Participants

The present research includes two distinct categories: college students and athletes. The selection criteria for this study are outlined through inclusion and exclusion criteria.

#### Inclusion Criteria

- Students currently enrolled in universities, aged between 18 and 25 years.
- Both male and female students, with representation from all academic years.
- Athletes actively participating in university sports teams, including both individual and team sports.

#### Exclusion Criteria

- Individuals diagnosed with major mental health disorders that require specialized clinical treatment.
- Athletes who are not actively participating in university sports events at the time of the study.

#### Data Collection

Based on the selection criteria, a total of 518 valid samples were collected using a stratified random sampling technique, ensuring demographic diversity across gender, academic year, age group, study group, and experience in sports. Table 1 presents the demographic profiles for this research.

**Table 1: Demographic Profiles.**

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n=518)	Percentage (%)
<b>Gender</b>	Male	321	62.0
	Female	197	38.0
<b>Academic Year</b>	Freshman	124	23.9
	Sophomore	139	26.8
	Junior	148	28.6
	Senior	107	20.7
<b>Age Group</b>	18-20	204	39.4
	21-23	226	43.6
	24-25	88	17.0
<b>Study Group</b>	College Students	260	50.1
	Athletes	258	49.9
<b>Experience in Sports</b>	< 1 Year	95	18.3
	1-2 Years	112	21.6
	3+ Years	51	9.9
	No Experience	260	50.1

#### Variables

The variables for this research include Academic Support, Social Support, Mental Health, Competition Stress, Time Management, and Self-Esteem. Table 2 provides an explanation of these research variables.

**Table 2: Description of Variables.**

Variables	Description
<b>Academic Support</b>	It refers to the resources, guidance, and help that students receive from academic institutions, professors, classmates, and academic support services. Academic support includes things like access to tutoring, mentorship from professors, feedback on assignments, and a positive learning environment. The academic support has been measured by students' perceptions of how well these resources are available as well as how supportive the academic environment is for their success and MH.
<b>Social Support</b>	It refers to the emotional, informational, as well as practical support that provided by friends, family, and the other social networks. It could be a crucial factor in MH, as strong social support helps individuals cope with stress, and maintain resilience, as well as improve their psychological health. Social support measured by the level of perceived assistance along with encouragement received from family, friends, and peers, as well as from social institutions.
<b>Mental Health (MH)</b>	It refers to the overall psychological health of participants. It includes aspects like emotional stability, the anxiety or depression absence, and general satisfaction with life. MH is assessed using a validated instrument to measure the emotional state of the participants along with understand how academic and social support impacts their MH outcomes.
<b>Competition Stress</b>	It refers to the stress and anxiety that individuals experience because of the academic or athletic competition. For college students and athletes, the pressure to perform academically or in sports lead to heightened stress levels, which potentially impacting their MH. It is measured by self-reported perceptions of stress related to performance expectations in academic as well as athletic contexts.
<b>Time Management</b>	It refers to an ability of the individuals to allocate and use their time effectively to balance academic, social, and extracurricular activities. Poor time management lead to increased stress and lower mental health, while effective time management is associated with better well-being and academic performance. This variable is assessed through a scale measuring how well students manage their time in balancing their responsibilities and personal lives.
<b>Self-Esteem</b>	It refers to an individual's perception of their worth and value. High self-esteem is associated with better mental health, higher resilience to stress, and better overall psychological functioning. In this study, self-esteem is measured to understand how students view themselves and how this perception interacts with other factors, such as academic and social support, to influence their MH outcomes.

### Data Collection Instrument

In this research, several validated scales were used to assess the variables. Each instrument is described in terms of its name, purpose, and scale format, as highlighted in [Table 3](#). A 5-point Likert scale was employed for all instruments.

**Table 3: Data Collection Instrument and Measurement Scale.**

Variable	Instrument Name	Description	Scale/Items
<b>Academic Support</b>	Academic Support Scale	Assesses students' perceptions of academic support from professors, peers, and university resources.	20 items (Likert scale)
<b>Social Support</b>	Social Support Scale	Measures perceived support from family, friends, and social networks.	10 items (Likert scale)
<b>Mental Health</b>	Mental Health Scale	Assesses psychological well-being, focusing on aspects such as emotional stability, anxiety, and depression.	38 items (Likert scale)
<b>Competition Stress</b>	Competition Stress Scale	Evaluates perceived stress levels due to academic and athletic competition.	12 items (Likert scale)
<b>Time Management</b>	Time Management Scale	Assesses students' ability to manage their academic, social, and extracurricular responsibilities effectively.	15 items (Likert scale)
<b>Self-Esteem</b>	Self-Esteem Scale	Measures individual self-esteem and self-worth.	10 items (Likert scale)

Note: 1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 3 = *Neutral*, 4 = *Agree*, 5 = *Strongly Agree*



### *Procedure*

Participants were selected from Chinese colleges and were required to complete a standardized questionnaire measuring academic support, social support, competition stress, time management, self-esteem, and mental health. The surveys were conducted both online and offline, according to the participants' preferences.

### *Statistical Analysis*

This study examines how academic and social assistance affect student mental health. The study analyses data with SPSS 28.0. Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, multiple regression, and one-way ANOVA were used to analyse survey data. The study's demographic characteristics were summarized using descriptive statistics. Multiple regression was used to determine how academic support, social support, competition stress, time management, and self-esteem affect mental health outcomes. Correlation analysis explored variable relationships. One-way ANOVA was used to examine these variables' mental health effects. All analyses used a statistical significance level of  $p$ -value  $< 0.05$ .

## **Results**

The present examination aims to assess the influence of academic support and social support on mental health in college students and athletes. This section presents the results of the following analyses: descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, multiple regression, one-way ANOVA, analysis of academic support, social support, and mental health scores for college students and athletes, as well as comparisons of variables between college students and athletes.

### *Descriptive Statistics*

The purpose of the descriptive statistics is to summarise the demographic variables, with standard deviation (SD) indicating variability, and the minimum (min) and maximum (max) values representing the range of data. Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics outcomes for the variables. The findings for each variable are as follows: gender (mean = 0.620, SD = 0.485, min = 0, max = 1), academic year (mean = 2.39, SD = 0.73, min = 1, max = 4), age group (mean = 2.16, SD = 0.71, min = 1, max = 3), study group (mean = 0.501, SD = 0.500, min = 0, max = 1), and experience in sports (mean = 0.183, SD = 0.387, min = 0, max = 1). These results highlight the importance of gender, academic year, age group, study group, and experience in sports as demographic variables in the research.

**Table 4:** Findings of Descriptive Statistics.

<b>Demographic Variable</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Min</b>	<b>Max</b>
<b>Gender</b>	0.620	0.485	0	1
<b>Academic Year</b>	2.39	0.73	1	4
<b>Age Group</b>	2.16	0.71	1	3
<b>Study Group</b>	0.501	0.500	0	1
<b>Experience in Sports</b>	0.183	0.387	0	1

### *Correlation Analysis*

The purpose of correlation analysis is to evaluate the relationships among the variables, including academic support, social support, competition stress, time management, self-esteem, and mental health, to identify essential predictors and interactions. Figure 2 displays the outcomes of the correlation analysis. The results indicate strong positive correlations between academic support, social support, self-esteem, and mental health, suggesting that support systems and self-esteem play a crucial role in promoting mental well-being. The  $p$ -value for all correlations is  $< 0.01$ , indicating statistical significance in these relationships.

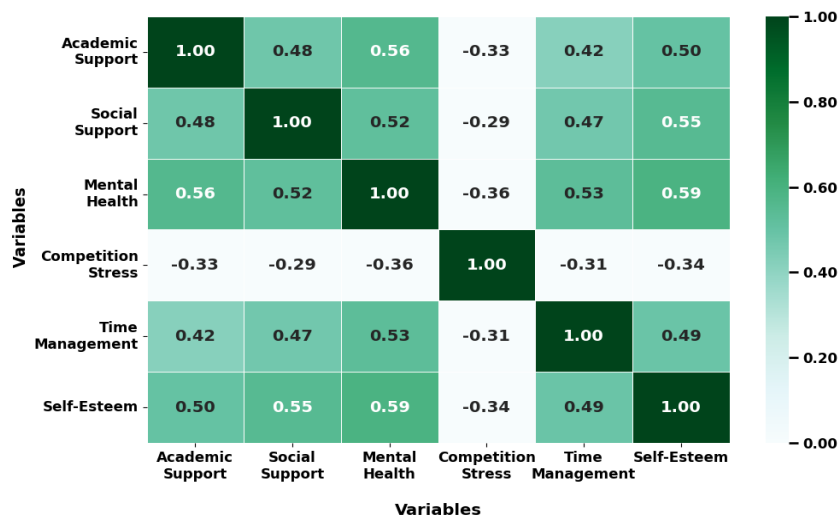


Figure 2: Correlation Analysis Multiple Regressions.

The analysis aimed to assess the impact of academic support, social support, competition stress, time management, and self-esteem on mental health. The results from the multiple regression analysis revealed that academic support ( $\beta = 0.21$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ), social support ( $\beta = 0.18$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ), time management ( $\beta = 0.16$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ), and self-esteem ( $\beta = 0.23$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ) all positively influenced mental health, while competition stress ( $\beta = -0.25$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ) had a negative effect. These findings highlight the importance of supportive systems, self-esteem, and time management in promoting better mental well-being, while the negative impact of competition stress suggests the need to address stressors in academic and athletic environments to protect mental health.

Table 5: Findings of Multiple Regressions on Mental Health.

Predictor	$\beta$	SE	T – Value	P – Value
Academic Support	0.21	0.05	4.20	0.000
Social Support	0.18	0.05	3.60	0.000
Competition Stress	-0.25	0.07	-3.53	0.001
Time Management	0.16	0.06	2.61	0.009
Self-Esteem	0.23	0.06	4.05	0.000

**One-Way ANOVA**

Table 6 presents the results of the One-way ANOVA analysis, which aimed to assess the impact of academic support, social support, competition stress, time management, and self-esteem on mental health. The outcomes reveal that all variables significantly influence mental health, with academic support ( $F = 18.21$ ), social support ( $F = 22.37$ ), competition stress ( $F = 14.58$ ), time management ( $F = 16.43$ ), and self-esteem ( $F = 20.19$ ) showing strong positive effects. These findings suggest that each of these factors plays a significant role in shaping mental well-being, with social support exhibiting the most pronounced impact on mental health.

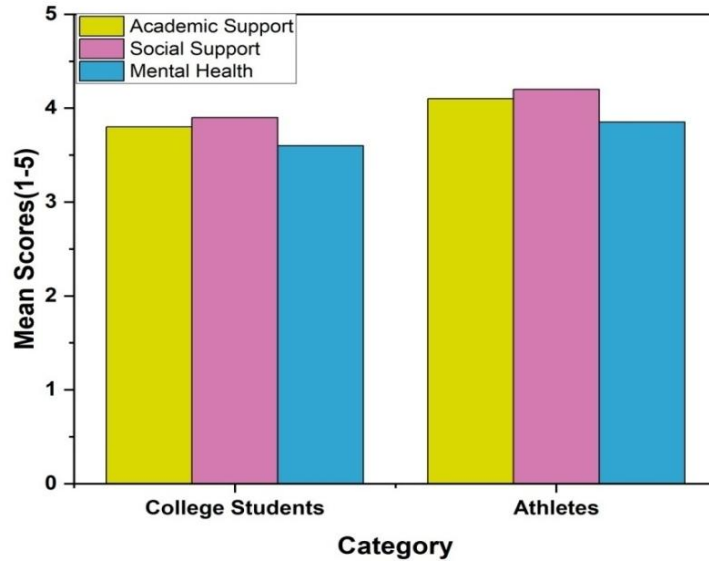
Table 6: One-Way ANOVA Outcomes for Variables Influencing Mental Health.

Variable	F – Value	P – Value
Academic Support	18.21	
Social Support	22.37	
Competition Stress	14.58	0.000
Time Management	16.43	
Self-Esteem	20.19	

**Analysis of Academic Support, Social Support, and Mental Health Scores for College Students and Athletes**

Figure 3 compares the mean scores (1-5) of academic support, social support, and mental health among college students and athletes. The results show that college students have mean scores of academic support (3.80),

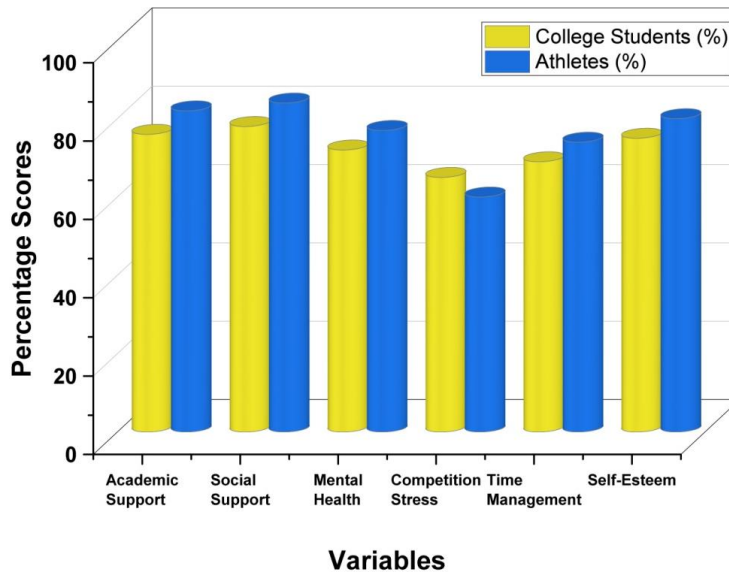
social support (3.90), and mental health (3.60). In contrast, athletes exhibit higher mean scores with academic support (4.10), social support (4.20), and mental health (3.85). These findings indicate that athletes experience higher levels of academic and social support, which are associated with better mental health outcomes compared to their non-athlete counterparts.



**Figure 3:** Graphical Illustration of Academic Support, Social Support, and Mental Health for College Students and Athletes.

**Comparison of Variables among College Students and Athletes**

The purpose of Figure 4 is to compare the percentage scores of variables among college students and athletes. The results for college students are as follows: Academic Support (76.0%), Social Support (78.0%), Mental Health (72.0%), Competition Stress (65.0%), Time Management (69.0%), and Self-Esteem (75.0%). The results for athletes are: Academic Support (82.0%), Social Support (84.0%), Mental Health (77.0%), Competition Stress (60.0%), Time Management (74.0%), and Self-Esteem (80.0%). The findings indicate that athletes report higher levels of academic and social support, mental health, time management, and self-esteem, while college students experience higher levels of competition stress compared to athletes.



**Figure 4:** Graphical Representation of Variables among College Students and Athletes.



The present research examines the impact of academic support and social support on mental health in students. Table 5 shows the t-values for the variables: 4.20 for Academic Support, 3.60 for Social Support, -3.53 for competition stress, 2.61 for Time Management, and 4.05 for Self-Esteem. The corresponding  $p$ -values are 0.000 for Academic Support, 0.000 for Social Support, 0.001 for competition stress, 0.009 for Time Management, and 0.000 for Self-Esteem. All  $p$ -values are statistically significant at  $<0.05$ , indicating strong relationships between the variables. The findings suggest that academic and social support, time management, and self-esteem are positively related to mental health, whereas competition stress has a negative impact. The present research findings provide valuable insights into the impact of academic and social support on mental health among college students and athletes in China. Several key findings emerge:

1. **Academic and Social Support Positively Impact Mental Health:** Both academic and social support are crucial factors influencing mental health among students. Academic support, which includes tutoring, mentorship, and study materials, alongside social support from friends, family, and the community, plays a significant role. The strong positive correlations identified suggest that students who perceive greater support in these areas are likely to report better mental health. This highlights the importance of developing comprehensive support systems within educational institutions, such as improving counselling services and fostering a supportive environment.
2. **Athletes Demonstrate Better Outcomes:** The results indicate that athletes tend to benefit from higher levels of support and engagement in sports, which contribute to their better mental health outcomes. Athletes enjoy advantages like coaching, professional experiences, and formal team activities, which non-athletes may not have access to. The disparity in mental health outcomes between athletes and non-athletes raises questions about the potential role of athletic involvement in fostering psychological resilience. Future studies could explore how athletic participation influences stress management and mental hardiness.
3. **Competition Stress Negatively Impacts Mental Health:** Competition stress, though reduced among athletes, was identified as a significant negative factor affecting mental health. The findings suggest that high levels of academic and athletic performance can lead to stress, which negatively impacts students' well-being. This underscores the need for interventions focused on stress management, such as workshops on coping strategies, mindfulness training, and mental health resources, particularly during peak periods like exams or championship seasons.
4. **Time Management and Self-Esteem are Essential Factors:** Effective time management allows students to balance their academic and personal lives, enhancing productivity and reducing stress. Similarly, self-esteem plays a critical role in shaping students' perceptions of themselves and their abilities, influencing both their academic and social lives. Institutional programs aimed at developing these skills, such as time management workshops and initiatives to boost self-esteem, could further enhance students' mental health and overall well-being.
5. **A Multifaceted Approach is Needed:** The significant impact of all the variables on mental health supports the need for a multifaceted approach to addressing students' mental health issues. No single solution can effectively address the range of challenges students face. Educational institutions should adopt comprehensive models that integrate academic support, student affairs, and personal development programs to promote overall well-being. Establishing wellness care centres that offer therapy, recreational facilities, and support services would help create a more holistic approach to student health.

These findings emphasize the importance of addressing both academic and social factors to enhance mental health in students, particularly in the context of higher education and athletic programs in China. Broadening existing educational and academic tutoring services, promoting positive interpersonal interactions, and focusing on stress management and personal growth could significantly benefit students' mental health. Special attention may be needed for non-athlete students, particularly those with lower levels of support and mental health. A limitation of this study is its cross-sectional design, which restricts the ability to make causal conclusions. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported measures could result in socially desirable responses. To advance knowledge in this area, future studies should incorporate longitudinal designs to examine changes in support and mental health over time, as well as qualitative research to complement the quantitative findings by providing deeper insights into students' experiences.

## Conclusion

The study primarily focused on the impact of academic and social support on mental health among college students and athletes in China. A structured survey questionnaire was administered to assess academic

support, social support, competition stress, time management, self-esteem, and mental health. The results achieved statistical significance with a p-value of  $<0.05$ . The study revealed positive relationships between academic support, social support, time management, self-esteem, and mental health, while competition stress had a negative impact. The research suggests that increasing academic and social support, along with addressing competition stress, significantly improves mental health outcomes for both college students and athletes, emphasizing the importance of mental well-being. Future research should explore the long-term effects of academic and social support on mental health and consider cultural factors in this context.

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