



The effects of academic stress and psychological well-being on high school student-athletes' performance in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Academic stress and psychological pressures are known to affect students' well-being and performance, yet little is known about their influence on the athletic performance of Malaysian high school student-athletes. This study investigates this relationship and analyses how academic stress affects athletic performance, how student-athletes balance academic and athletic expectations, and the psychological effects of academic stress. Twelve 15–17-year-old high school student-athletes participated in semi-structured interviews as part of a qualitative phenomenology method. Thematic analysis revealed themes of limited athletic performance, dropout, and mental exhaustion. Academic expectations, tuition, and heavy workloads caused emotional distress, physical fatigue, and cognitive distraction, hindering athletic performance. Many student-athletes reported difficulty focusing during training and tournaments, while some considered dropping out to prioritise academics. Others managed both responsibilities through personal scheduling, with varying degrees of success. These findings enhance understanding of Malaysia's educational system and highlight the need for schools, coaches, parents, and policymakers to support student-athletes' psychological well-being while balancing academic and athletic demands.

Keywords: academic stress, psychological well-being, athletic performance, academic-athletic balance, high-school student-athletes, mental exhaustion

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1 INTRODUCTION

Student-athletes who compete while juggling academic obligations face unique challenges that may affect both academic and athletic performance. There is ample evidence of the advantages of athletics in secondary education, including enhanced social skills, emotional well-being, cognitive development, and self-esteem (Adelina & Suardika, 2024; Eather et al., 2023). However, juggling the competing demands of athletics and academics can cause the high school student-athletes to experience significant psychological strain and stress (Liu, 2024; Nazarudin et al., 2023).

Academic stress is defined as the mental distress caused by academic obligations such as tests, homework, and parental expectations (Aiman et al., 2020). In Malaysia, academic achievement is highly valued in the educational system, and these pressures are even more severe. Common stressors, including academic overload, grade competitiveness, and failure-related anxiety, can harm both academic and athletic performance by reducing energy levels, lowering sleep quality, and increasing susceptibility to illness (Aiman et al., 2020; Lopes Dos Santos et al., 2020).

Psychological well-being plays a significant role in managing stress and maintaining athletic performance. A fundamental aspect of mental health is psychological well-being, which includes hedonic (enjoyment, pleasure) and eudaimonic (meaning, fulfilment) happiness, as well as resilience, which includes coping skills and healthy problem-solving techniques (Tang et al., 2019). Researchers view it as a comprehensive state of health that goes beyond not being ill, encompassing aspects such as life satisfaction, personal development, and healthy social connections (Baniyadi & Salehian, 2021). Student-athletes often undergo stresses such as anxiety related to competition, performance pressure, and injury anxiety, all of which can reduce psychological well-being and impair focus (Nazarudin et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2024).

Additionally, since the demands of practice, training, and tournaments sometimes conflict with academic obligations, student-athletes need to develop efficient time management skills. Failure to maintain balance can lead to emotional exhaustion, academic underperformance and even athletic dropout (Ator & Ortizo, 2024; Woods et al., 2025). In Malaysia, this imbalance is particularly alarming, with youth sports participation dropping from 65.4% to 50.0% in 2021 and further to 48.0% in 2022 (Institute for Youth Research Malaysia, 2020, 2021, 2023). This trend highlights the need to investigate the conflicts between academic and athletic commitments faced by student-athletes. The declining rate of Malaysian athletes competing in the SEA Games and Olympics also underscores the urgent need to examine potential contributing factors, such as stress and psychological well-being. The Malaysian setting of this study allows for conclusions that are immediately relevant to the frameworks of current sports and education policies. To achieve this, the study set out the following objectives: (1) To explore the influence of academic stress on the athletic performance of high school student-athletes in Malaysia; (2) To examine how Malaysian high school student-athletes cope between academic demands and athletic training; (3) To explore the psychological challenges faced by Malaysian high school student-athletes as a result of academic pressure.

This research is significant for several reasons. First, it clarifies how academic stress, psychological well-being, and athletic performance are interconnected. Secondly, it highlights the challenges student-athletes face in balancing a variety of obligations and provides information to support school- and sports-program-level support systems. Thirdly, it facilitates policy development by emphasising the importance of mental and emotional well-being for both academic and athletic achievement among student-athletes.

Academic stress creates a significant challenge for all students, often peaking during secondary school due to strict schedules and heavy parental expectations (Bindu & Happy, 2024). This stress occurs when students face demands that exceed their capabilities, leaving them feeling helpless and unable to reach their potential. Researchers define academic stress as a psychological state where constant social and self-imposed pressures in school deplete a student's mental resources (Barbayannis et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022). Factors such as workload, grading, and personal perceptions of ability drive this pressure, ultimately harming motivation, grades, and mental health.

High stress levels also impair physical performance and raise injury risks. Student-athletes deal with constant pressure to perform, the mental toll of injuries, and a sense of life satisfaction that depends entirely on winning (Singh et al., 2024). Demanding training schedules often lead to overtraining and burnout, while public scrutiny adds another layer of tension. These strains lower energy levels, disrupt sleep quality, and increase the likelihood of illness or injury, which eventually drain the athlete's performance and enjoyment (Lopes Dos Santos et al., 2020; Smith, 1990). Conversely, strong psychological well-being helps students perform better in both the classroom and the field. Mentally healthy students manage academic stress more effectively because they utilise social support, use better ways to handle pressure, and keep a positive outlook (Slykerman & Mitchell, 2021). However, chronic psychological distress ruins athletic performance by damaging cognitive capacity, breaking concentration, and slowing down motor skills (Abdul Latif et al., 2024).

This study integrates the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and the Maslach Burnout Model (1981) to analyse how academic stress and psychological well-being impact the athletic performance of Malaysian high school students. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) argue that stress arises from a specific "transaction" between an individual and their environment rather than from the environmental event itself. In this process, primary appraisal determines whether a situation, such as a heavy exam schedule, poses a threat, while secondary appraisal evaluates the resources available to manage it. Recent research by Akçakese et al. (2025) and Obbarius et al. (2021) confirms that an adolescent's personal perception of academic challenges directly triggers their stress response and anxiety levels. For Malaysian student-athletes, viewing a demanding workload as a threat that exceeds their coping capacity often impairs concentration and endurance during training, which directly addresses how these athletes navigate the tension between school and sport. To complement this process-oriented view, the Maslach Burnout Model (1981) identifies the psychological consequences that occur when students leave chronic stress unaddressed. Maslach and Jackson (1981) define burnout as a three-dimensional condition involving emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and reduced personal accomplishment. Malaysian student-athletes face a high risk of emotional exhaustion as they constantly strive for academic excellence while maintaining peak physical form. Obbarius et al.

(2021) note that prolonged exposure to these stressors without effective coping mechanisms disrupts a student's psychological balance. This fatigue leads to depersonalisation, where the athlete develops a cynical or detached attitude toward their sport, eventually resulting in a diminished sense of achievement. As Akçakese et al. (2025) note, the absence of positive interventions or support systems can turn academic pressure into serious psychological setbacks. By applying this model, the research clarifies how burnout symptoms manifest as a measurable decline in athletic performance. It is expected that high school student-athletes' performance is greatly impacted by their psychological well-being and academic stress. To better understand student-athletes' experiences in Malaysia and to offer suggestions for fostering their academic and athletic growth, this study examines these interrelationships.

2 METHODS

2.1 Design and Participants

This study used a phenomenological approach to explore how academic stress and psychological well-being affect athletic performance among Malaysian high school student-athletes. Through qualitative methods, it examined their lived experiences balancing academic and athletic responsibilities, including the impact of academic pressure, coping strategies, and related psychological challenges.

The sample included 12 Malaysian student-athletes aged 15-16 years with at least 2 years of athletic involvement. This age range aligns with the "Indeks Budaya Sukan Malaysia" (Institute for Youth Research Malaysia, 2021, 2023), which identified adolescents aged 13-16 as the dominant age group participating in organised sports. While research ethics typically restrict the involvement of examination-year students (Ministry of Education, 2020), 17-year-olds were included, provided they were enrolled in Form 4. This adjustment accounts for post-COVID-19 shifts in the Malaysian academic calendar, specifically the 2024/2025 session (11 March 2024 - 17 January 2025), where delays to national examinations (Malaysiakini, 2020; Ministry of Education, 2024) resulted in 17-year-olds remaining in Form 4 rather than Form 5. Therefore, 17-year-old students were included in this study, provided they were officially enrolled in Form 4 at the time of data collection.

Participants were selected through purposive and snowballing sampling. A candidate who met the inclusion criteria was identified through school networks and later asked to refer to their friends and teammates. This strategy was successful in reaching high school student-athletes, a particularly hard-to-reach group, especially those juggling academics and competitive sports. The final sample supported the study's goal of in-depth understanding rather than statistical generalisation by offering rich, varied narratives of experiences across various sports, academic grades, and performance levels.

2.2 Research Location

The study was conducted in Malaysia due to its unique academic culture and the declining trends in youth sports participation. The research was conducted at various sites across Malaysia. Participants were recruited across four distinct states and federal territories: Selangor, Perak, the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur, and the Federal Territory of Putrajaya. Participation was subject to approval from the respective school authorities and parental consents.

2.3 Materials and Procedure

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method, with each session lasting 45 to 60 minutes. This duration allowed participants to share detailed personal experiences across four key areas: demographics, the influence of academic stress on performance, coping strategies for dual commitments, and associated psychological challenges.

All participants and their parents or guardians received an information letter outlining the research objectives, procedures, and ethical considerations. After obtaining formal parental consent and participant assent, the interviews proceeded on a strictly voluntary basis. All participants maintained the right to withdraw at any time without consequence. To protect the privacy of these minors, the study adhered to rigorous ethical guidelines to ensure complete confidentiality.

2.4 Data Analysis Technique

Thematic analysis was used to examine the verbatim transcriptions of the interview data. This method identifies and interprets recurring patterns or themes within qualitative data. Thematic analysis made it easier to organise vast amounts of material into logical categories that represented how student-athletes dealt with academic stress, their psychological well-being, and how this affected their athletic performance. The process of data analysis includes multiple readings of the transcriptions, initial coding, categorisation of codes into broader themes, and reviewing themes for relevance to the research questions. The findings were guaranteed to be based on the participants' answers and perspectives thanks to this iterative procedure. A flexible yet rigorous framework that complements the study's exploratory nature was further supported by thematic analysis.

3 RESULTS

The key findings from interviews with 12 Malaysian high school student-athletes are shown in this section. Six main themes emerged from the data analysis related to how student-athletes deal with conflicting obligations, the psychological challenges posed by academic pressure, and the impact of academic stress on athletic performance. The participants' quotes support each theme, emphasising their lived experiences. As summarised in Table 1, the research questions were analysed through six distinct themes, providing a conceptual framework that highlights how student-athletes navigate the conflict between their academic and athletic responsibilities.

3.1 Limiting Athletic Performance

The impact of academic responsibilities, including homework, tuition, and study load, on student-athletes' physical and mental abilities to compete in sports is one of the biggest obstacles they must overcome. According to three participants, their sports performance was directly impacted by academic stress.

"There is just so, so much homework, uhm, I, ahh, it is hard to finish it quickly and then hmm I still have to go to training too. Sometimes I cannot even finish everything, ahh, because there is just too much, and then when I get to training, I keep getting hmm, the coaches keep scolding me because I make a lot of mistakes. I do not like it when I cannot perform, the seniors and coaches will get mad, and hmm, they will think I am not serious even though I uhm already tried my best" (Participant 3)

Participant 3 describes how too much studying has left them physically and mentally exhausted. Feelings of shame increase stress about doing poorly in training and anxiety about coming across as unimportant.

"Maybe, um, I was exhausted because I have to, I have to train every day, and when I come home, I have to go to tuition and all. I already have a lot of schoolwork. Then the next day I still need to go to training, and I really cannot perform at all" (Participant 12)

Participant 12 illustrates how fatigue and poor sports performance result from the accumulation of obligations, including training, tuition, and school.

"I am also tired when I need to finish up my notes. I really do not have time to finish it. I was nagged at that time. In the end, during the tournament, I got a red card and was immediately sent off" (Participant 7)

Lack of sleep and incomplete schoolwork caused Participant 7 to become agitated and make poor decisions, ultimately resulting in their exclusion from a competition.

3.2 Diminished Athletic Focus

Participants' capacity to focus during athletics was adversely affected by cognitive overload stemming from academic strain. According to three participants, their focus on education caused them to do poorly in sports.

"I cannot focus too. Like before this, I can easily detect where my teammates are, on the field, but now it is hard for me" (Participant 9)

According to Participant 9, academic stress impairs situational awareness and interferes with teamwork.

"Yes, I always feel that way. I will always think and be reminded of the examination, and then I will lose all focus" (Participant 1)

Participant 1 demonstrates how examination anxiety affects training, causing them to become disengaged from the present moment.

"It disturbs me like during training, I will always think about it, about study and the pressure and all, and it makes it hard for me to focus during training and tournaments" (Participant 5)

This worry is supported by Participant 5, who demonstrates how academic stress lingers in the background and impairs sports focus and performance.

3.3 Athletic Dropout

Overwhelming pressure led several student-athletes to quit sports completely. One participant reported dropping out completely from sports; another 2 reported planning to drop out of athletics to focus on academics, rather than finding a way to cope with both responsibilities.

"At the time, I really struggled with time management... Because of this, I became more worried about my academics and started to lose focus on both sides. I ended up having to give up one of them. So, I decided to stop doing sports and start to focus on academics" (Participant 11)

The decision to give up athletics in favour of academics was made due to a lack of control over time management, as Participant 11 explained.

"And I do not really have time to manage both. So, I think that is hard for me... Yes, this year I am going to focus on academics, and maybe, maybe I will drop netball because I want to focus on my exams, because my target is to get into the science school, like SBP or something else" (Participant 12)

Participant 12 states that she intends to give up athletics in the future to focus on her studies, especially to gain admission to a prestigious science boarding school.

"I choose to stop sports, because uhm, for me I feel like studying is more important. If I study properly, I can have a brighter future" (Participant 8)

When asked whether they would give up either one if the time management is unbearable or their burden overloads, or if they would find a practical way to manage it, Participant 8 stated that he chose to give up his athletics rather than finding a way to manage it better.

3.4 Scheduling as Strategy

To handle their dual responsibilities, several participants turned to systematic scheduling as a coping mechanism. Three participants reported using a personal schedule to manage their dual role demands.

"Usually, hmm, the schedule helps me to manage my time, but I do not really follow it every day. However, uhm, it helps me, ahh, stay on track with my studies, especially. Like I can enjoy playing sports, and when I go home, I can still have time to do my homework and sometimes uhm study" (Participant 1)

Even if the plan is not always adhered to, Participant 1 admits that it offers a structure that encourages harmony between academic and athletic.

"Yes, yes, I do make a schedule. A daily schedule. I follow it every day because, uh, it is easier to get things done when I stick to the schedule, and uh, I will be stressed if I do not follow the, what, the schedule" (Participant 2)

Participant 2 highlights the efficiency and emotional relief that come from rigorously adhering to a daily schedule.

"Yeah, yes. I do have a daily schedule. I have to follow it every day, and my mom checks on me daily, and if uh if I do not follow the, what, the schedule, she will get mad" (Participant 10)

Participant 10 emphasises how time management, discipline, and consistency are enforced by parental supervision.

3.5 Emotional Distress

This theme highlights the emotional distress of student-athletes under intense academic pressure. One third of the total participants reported experiencing emotional distress due to academic pressure.

"Uhm, very uncomfortable. Moreover, at the time, I was not sure how to control it. So, I just ended up going on like a depressive episode, if I would say, which I have quite a lot of during these four years of high school" (Participant 11)

Participant 11 discusses the accumulated stress of school and athletics, leading to long-term emotional strain and depressive symptoms.

"I always uh-hm my friends, or not my friends, they always uh-hm bully me and laugh at me because I am not that smart. And ahh, who? Ahh, the teacher always asked me to stand and read the textbook or notes, especially in English, because, hmm, I am not very good at English. When I read, my classmates make fun of me and, uh, mock my pronunciation, but the teacher did not bother to stop them. Every time I, uh, want to study, I am reminded of these things. It makes me anxious, stressed, and very sad." (Participant 10)

Participant 10 highlighted the emotional toll of repeated academic bullying and inadequate teacher intervention, illustrating its negative impact on psychological well-being.

3.6 Mental Exhaustion

This theme effectively shows the psychological consequences associated with academic pressure overload, especially when it disturbs the recovery time and causes long-term emotional and mental exhaustion. From the data collection, three participants reported having mental exhaustion due to academic pressure.

"Maybe because I do not have enough time for myself, everything is about training, studies... Yes, it is very tiring because I do not get enough sleep" (Participant 12)

According to Participant 12, two of the main causes of feeling exhausted and unmotivated are sleep deprivation and a lack of personal time.

"A lot, it affected my sleep pattern a lot, especially when I just recently turned Form 4

But around that time, I was in Form 3, at the end of the year, I started to get more stressed about my academics because I was worried that I was not going to do well, and I could not get into the class that I wanted" (Participant 11)

Participant 11 discusses how academic pressure disrupted stress and sleep habits, especially during significant academic transitions.

"Even when I sleep enough, I uh I still feel like so ahh restless, tired. My parents keep asking me to take a medical course, but I do not even like Bio or Chem, ugh. I try to follow my schedule now, but uhh it is, you know, hard. It is like getting too much. I feel like giving up sometimes. The expectations? Haihh. I am very tired" (Participant 2)

Participant 2 describes how a combination of academic disappointment and external expectations, such as family pressure, causes ongoing emotional exhaustion and demotivation.

Table 1. Summary of research questions and corresponding themes.

Research question	Themes
How does academic stress influence the athletic performance of high school student-athletes in Malaysia?	(i) Limiting Athletic Performance (ii) Diminished Athletic Focus
How do Malaysian high school athletes cope with academic demands and athletic training?	(i) Athletic Dropout (ii) Scheduling as Strategy
What are the psychological challenges faced by Malaysian high school student-athletes as a result of academic pressure?	(i) Emotional Distress (ii) Mental Exhaustion

4 DISCUSSION

The current study examined the relationships among high school student-athletes' academic stress, psychological health, and athletic performance in Malaysia. The results showed that academic stress has a detrimental effect on students' psychological health, physical performance, and frequently results in emotional anguish and mental tiredness. Thematic analysis of qualitative data from in-depth interviews with 12 student-athletes aged 15-17 supports these findings.

4.1 Influence of Academic Stress on Athletic Performance

The results indicate that academic stress significantly limits athletic performance. Student-athletes described experiencing physical fatigue and reduced focus during training sessions and competitive events due to overwhelming academic workloads. Many student-athletes attributed their underperformance in sports to the emotional and cognitive strain caused by excessive tuition schedules, homework, and expectations from both school and parents. These experiences support previous literature indicating that academic overload can lead to both physical and psychological decline in athletes (Lopes Dos Santos et al., 2020; Nazarudin et al., 2023).

In the context of athletic training, student-athletes have reported feeling "mentally absent" and distracted. This phenomenon appears to indicate a breakdown in the transaction process, in which the academic pressures they face are perceived as overwhelming threats that surpass their available coping mechanisms (Akçakese et al., 2025; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This cognitive preoccupation creates a mental burden that directly affects both physical endurance and focus.

As a result, the observed lack of energy corresponds with the emotional exhaustion aspect of the Maslach Burnout Model (1981), indicating that prolonged exhaustion drains the athlete's resources. Obbarius et al. (2021) highlight that a lack of psychological balance results in diminished motivation and poor performance, demonstrating how academic overload can contribute to athletic burnout.

Dropping out of athletics was a startling result of this stress. Numerous respondents reported that they had decided to give up athletics entirely due to increasing tension between their training and academic responsibilities. This decision-making process can be understood through the lens of Secondary Appraisal (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984); when athletes perceive that their personal resources are insufficient to meet the dual demands of school and sport, they may choose to disengage from athletics as a survival strategy to protect their academic careers. These findings support previous studies demonstrating that student-athletes who experience ongoing academic stress often choose to focus on their academic careers rather than participate in athletics (Pisaniello et al., 2024; Sáez et al., 2021). In addition to student-athletes giving up their sports, the tendency to choose academics over sports may lead to fewer sports representatives for the country.

4.2 Coping Mechanism for Balancing Academic and Athletic Commitments

In exploring how student-athletes manage the dual responsibilities of academics and athletics, the study assessed a range of coping strategies. Scheduling became a crucial method. Student-athletes who successfully balanced both obligations stressed the need for rigorous time management and established routines. They often scheduled their study sessions, training, and downtime using planners or digital calendars. This result supports previous research highlighting the importance of time management for student-athletes (Ator & Ortizo, 2024; Liu & Taresh, 2024).

However, unforeseen academic assignments or changes in training schedules made it difficult for some individuals to maintain their routines, even with careful preparation. As a result, many student-athletes felt guilty and inadequate when they did not meet expectations in either area. Some student-athletes reported that their desire gradually declined, leading to reduced consistency in their athletic and academic performance.

Support systems were also crucial for striking a balance between obligations. Confidence and mental resilience were higher among student-athletes who had parental, teachers, or coaching support. Those without this help, on the other hand, spoke of increased stress, inefficient time management, and ultimately burnout. These results complement Sukumaran and Amat's (2024) study on the vital role that social support plays in preserving adolescents' psychological well-being.

On the other hand, some student-athletes reduced the intensity of their training or missed practice sessions to manage their academic load. Although this adaptive behaviour helps them maintain a balance between academics and sports, it disrupts their skills and long-term performance (Amaranto, 2025). The pattern of student-athletes shifting their focus to academics while ignoring their athletic participation is worrying. The findings corroborate past studies indicating that student-athletes prioritise academic responsibilities over their athletic commitments (Amaranto, 2025; De Maio et al., 2025; Santos & Sagas, 2022; Söker et al., 2025; Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2024).

4.3 Psychological Challenges Caused by Academic Pressure

Academic pressure took a heavy toll on participants' mental health. Student-athletes reported that feeling overburdened by schoolwork caused emotional distress, including anxiety, frustration, and sadness. These feelings worsened when mental exhaustion hindered their athletic performance, creating a cycle of rising stress and declining results. These findings align with research linking academic stress to psychological dysfunction, such as depression and burnout (Aziz et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2025).

Several athletes admitted to emotional breakdowns or crying episodes, especially during exams or when they failed to meet personal and external standards. Others struggled with low self-esteem, feeling inadequate in both arenas. This distress often spilt over into daily life, disrupting eating and sleep habits. Mental exhaustion, the loss of emotional and cognitive resources, emerged as a recurring theme. Participants described becoming forgetful, irritable, and disengaged from their responsibilities. This matches studies showing that continuous academic pressure leads to emotional exhaustion and reduced cognitive function (Xu et al., 2025).

Furthermore, some student-athletes internalised their stress and avoided seeking help to avoid appearing weak. Cultural expectations regarding academic success and mental toughness likely fuel this hesitancy, creating a stigma that blocks early intervention. Conversely, a few individuals used constructive methods like mindfulness and journaling to maintain emotional balance. However, most lacked formal stress-management training, revealing a gap in mental health literacy within school sports programs.

This study reveals the significant influence of academic stress on both the athletic performance and psychological well-being of Malaysian high school student-athletes. The findings underscore the difficulties of maintaining performance levels under significant pressure in academic and athletic settings. The findings underscore the importance of implementing effective time management strategies, establishing robust support systems, and providing mental health education to facilitate student-athletes' success in both domains. The findings presented here provide a crucial basis for reevaluating how academic and athletic frameworks can better support student-athletes in Malaysia, promoting a comprehensive strategy that equally prioritises mental and physical well-being.

4.4 Limitations and Implications

A significant limitation of this study is its exclusive focus on student-athletes aged 15 to 17. This developmental stage is characterised by heightened academic pressure, which is influenced by identity formation and future-oriented expectations. Consequently, distinguishing stress that arises specifically from academic pressures from that associated with the adolescent developmental stage presents a significant challenge. Furthermore, the research fails to distinguish among various categories of sports, even though training intensity, competition frequency, and performance pressure differ significantly across individual and team sports, as well as between recreational and elite-level athletes. A further limitation identified in this study is the broad exploration of academic

stress, which lacks a connection to specific academic structures such as examination periods, tuition schedules, or school performance ranking systems. These factors may yield distinct patterns of stress that warrant further investigation—the phenomenon of athletic disengagement.

While acknowledging these limitations, the results provide valuable insights into academic stress, psychological well-being, and athletic performance. The study offers qualitative evidence supporting contemporary frameworks such as Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (1984) and the Maslach Burnout Model (1981). Prolonged academic pressure, when appraised cognitively as a "threat," can negatively affect mental health (Akçakese et al., 2025). Themes such as diminished athletic focus, reduced performance, and mental exhaustion highlight the link between academic stress and emotional exhaustion, framing these challenges as aspects of burnout rather than temporary fatigue. Findings indicate that excessive academic demands disrupt psychological equilibrium, leading to decreased athletic performance (Obbarius et al., 2021). Future research should adopt process-oriented frameworks that account for individual evaluations and specific burnout symptoms, using mixed-method or longitudinal designs to explore causal relationships and long-term effects. Practically, schools, parents, coaches, and policymakers should support student-athletes' well-being through academic flexibility, psychological monitoring, open communication, and strategies to manage pressure, while recognising the consequences of excessive academic expectations.

5 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study finds that the relationship between academic stress and athletic performance is characterised by a complicated psychological transaction rather than simple physical exhaustion. Based on the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping and the Maslach Burnout Model, the results show three important things: first, academic stress is a cognitive threat that takes away the mental focus needed for sports; second, long-term pressure leads to emotional exhaustion, which hurts well-being; and third, this stress often forces a choice based on survival, which makes many people quit sports altogether. The data suggest that current academic pressures lead to 'silent burnout' among student-athletes. This research indicates that these students are not merely fatigued. They are mentally overstretched to the extent that they have to give up their passion for athletics merely to endure the classroom. If we do not change this high-pressure academic atmosphere and start giving actual structural assistance, we are not only losing future national athletes, but we are also hurting the mental health and joy of a whole generation of students who feel like they can no longer afford to play.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The first author was responsible for conceptualisation, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, project administration, and writing the original draft of the manuscript. The second author contributed to conceptualisation, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, provided resources and supervision, and was involved in the review and editing of the manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data are available on request to the authors.

ETHICAL STATEMENT

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the APU Research Ethics Committee at Asia Pacific University of Technology and Innovation and the Ministry of Education Malaysia. Additionally, all participants were provided with a consent form that highlights their voluntary participation, how the data will be used in the research and how their confidentiality will be maintained during and after the study.

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