

Social Support Challenges Among Malaysian Wheelchair Basketball Athletes: Impacts on Performance and Well-being

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Abstract: *This study aims to explore the challenges faced by elite wheelchair basketball athletes in Malaysia in obtaining social support and the impact on their performance and well-being. Utilizing a qualitative ethnographic approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with five elite athletes from the Paralympic Excellence Centre in Kg Pandan. The findings identified several key challenges, including limited support from family, friends, coaches, institutions, financial constraints, community engagement, and psychological services. Additional issues such as time constraints and social stigma further compounded these challenges. While athletes valued moral support such as encouragement and prayers from family and friends, practical assistance was often insufficient. Furthermore, a lack of institutional involvement post-contract posed significant difficulties for the athletes. These findings underscore the need for comprehensive and strategic social support frameworks that address financial, psychological, and community dimensions to promote sustainable athlete development and well-being. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the social dimensions in Paralympic sports and provides practical guidance for enhancing support policies and programs for disabled athletes.*

Keywords: Wheelchair basketball, Malaysia, social support, Paralympic athletes, social stigma, performance well-being

1. Introduction

Sports significantly contribute to physical health, psychological well-being, and social integration, especially for individuals with disabilities. Among adaptive sports, wheelchair basketball exemplifies inclusivity and athleticism, empowering athletes to overcome physical and societal barriers. It is a competitive sport that fosters resilience, confidence, and camaraderie, but elite wheelchair basketball athletes face unique challenges compared to their able-bodied counterparts. These challenges necessitate robust social support systems that are critical for enhancing their performance and psychological well-being.

Social support plays a multifaceted role in the lives of wheelchair basketball athletes. It includes emotional, material, and logistical assistance from family, friends, teammates, and the wider community. These forms of support are instrumental in improving mental health, fostering motivation, and ensuring access to vital resources such as specialized equipment and accessible training facilities. However, despite the significance of social support, many athletes encounter systemic, social, and financial barriers that undermine their ability to thrive in elite competition (Kean et al., 2017).

Wheelchair basketball athletes face several interconnected challenges in obtaining adequate social support. Structural barriers, such as inaccessible facilities and limited adaptive equipment, hinder their ability to train and compete effectively. Financial constraints further complicate the situation, as athletes often bear the costs of equipment, travel, and tournament participation. Moreover, social stigma remains a persistent issue, as discriminatory attitudes limit the development of supportive networks and discourage athletes from seeking assistance (Bates et al., 2019).

Structural barriers represent one of the most significant hurdles faced by wheelchair basketball athletes. Many training facilities are not designed to accommodate wheelchair users, limiting athletes' ability to access spaces suitable for rigorous practice. The lack of specialized coaching and adaptive equipment exacerbates these challenges, restricting opportunities for skill development and personal growth. Consequently, athletes often feel excluded from professional environments that are essential for their competitive advancement (Sarol & Polat, 2024).

Financial constraints are another critical barrier for wheelchair basketball athletes. Adaptive equipment, such as custom sports wheelchairs, is costly and often out of reach for many athletes. Additionally, the expense of traveling to competitions further limits their participation. Without adequate financial support from organizations or sponsors, athletes are forced to rely on personal resources or community funding, which is often insufficient. This financial strain not only reduces access to elite-level opportunities but also adds stress that can affect mental and physical performance (Pate & Bragale, 2019).

Social stigma also plays a major role in limiting the effectiveness of social support systems for these athletes. Societal attitudes often marginalize individuals with disabilities, reducing their access to community-based emotional and psychological support. Many athletes report experiencing discrimination or indifference, which diminishes their motivation and self-esteem. Athletes with disabilities often face social stigma that limits their access to necessary mental and social support. However, participation in adaptive sports can enhance resilience and access to social support, which in turn helps them integrate into society. Additionally, mental health literacy supported by strong social support systems has been shown to effectively reduce stigma, encouraging athletes to be more open in seeking help for their mental health needs (Mira et al., 2023; Bu et al., 2024).

A notable gap in professional support services also exists, further complicating the challenges faced by wheelchair basketball athletes. The high-pressure environment of elite competition often leads to stress and mental health concerns, yet access to psychological counseling and sports therapy is limited. These services are essential for helping athletes manage performance-related anxiety, build resilience, and maintain overall well-being. Addressing this gap could significantly enhance both the psychological and athletic outcomes of wheelchair basketball athletes (Campbell & Jones, 2002).

In conclusion, elite wheelchair basketball athletes face considerable challenges in securing the social support necessary for their success and well-being. Structural barriers, financial constraints, and social stigma remain significant hurdles that limit their opportunities and well-being. While teammates and close communities offer some level of emotional and logistical support, systemic changes are needed to provide comprehensive solutions. This study aims to investigate these barriers in-depth and propose actionable strategies to develop sustainable social support mechanisms for wheelchair basketball athletes.

2. Research Objectives

The research conducted aims to develop forms of social support for elite wheelchair basketball athletes to enhance their performance outcomes. The study objectives are as follows:

- To understand the challenges faced by elite wheelchair basketball athletes in obtaining social support.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach to investigate the life experiences of elite wheelchair basketball athletes at the Paralympic Excellence Centre in Kg Pandan along with the support systems provided for them. Some human communities were explored in their life experience and culture in the form of anthropological approach. This method allows the investigator to enter feeling states and experiences that reveal an inner landscape of the members whose lives are interpreted.

3.1 Study Informants and Sampling Technique

This research led to interviews with five notable wheelchair basketball players. The sample chosen meets the qualitative ethnographic research requirement that often only includes a limited number of informants (Creswell, 2013; 2014). The characteristics of informants chosen for this research are shown in Table 1. These characteristics are criteria for informant eligibility. The chosen criteria aim to highlight the difficulties pertaining to social support faced by competitive wheelchair basketball players. Before the interviews, the researcher assessed the informants' mental and psychological abilities deliver own a particular basis. This method respects the ethics of the study, by excluding informants who do not have the mental faculties to speak in an interview setting. It was also a mental and psychological competence to ensure adherence to established research ethics standards, the researcher cautioned.

Table 1: Inclusion Criteria for Elite Wheelchair Basketball Athlete Informants Participating in the Study
Elite Wheelchair Basketball Athlete Informants

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- (1) Has represented the country in wheelchair basketball.
 - (2) Actively involved in wheelchair basketball.
 - (3) Aged 18 years and above.
 - (4) Malaysian citizen.
-
- (1) Mentally and physically capable during the study period.
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3.2 Data Collection Procedures

The data would be collected using three main methods:

3.2.1 Prior to Data Collection

The investigator began the examination by creating structured questions. The questions were specifically structured on previous research concerning the challenges experienced by elite Paralympic wheelchair basketball red athlete Malaysia. We developed a detailed interview protocol. Many drafts were written and improved upon after receiving feedback from my supervisor. Then, the interview protocol was submitted to field specialists for assessment of its design that adequately aligned with the research objectives. Next, detect jump pages where the user is signaled to click on a top banner to go to another sign-up page.

3.2.2 During the Data Collection Phase

During an extensive time period in the field, several professional wheelchair basketball players who were considered eligible based on the criteria for informants in the study were identified by the researcher. Through voluntary activities, the researcher met 5 informants who were willing to provide information. The academic used a certain room in the university for interviews. Approval was received from the center to perform the study for safety and ethical concerns. After systematic consideration, semi-structured interview method was selected as the most suitable for data collection for this study. Semi-structured interviews: include important questions that guide your exploration of specific topic but more open ended which allow the researcher to adjust questions for better understanding or insight.

3.2.3 Post Data Collection

Then, after successfully completing the data collection process, the researcher started transcribing. The researcher audio transcription to a Microsoft Word. Transcriptions for all the recordings with the five elite Paralympic wheelchair basketball athlete informants and the three professional informants were performed. The coding approach was applied, and data were then inputted into NVivo software. Then, we will analyze the data.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis is a key and challenging part of qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). These results are only as valid as the accuracy of this phase. Following each interview, the researcher began transcribing the recorded sessions. The transcription process included this closely detailed review and representation of interview data. This study followed a manual approach for transcription using Microsoft Word. During transcription of this technique, notes from the interviews were used. After completing transcription, the researcher started the coding process to analyze the transcribed data in light of themes, concepts, and ideas. Data Analysis is an ongoing process that involves recognizing emerging themes, key concepts, or units of meaning from the data collected, along with literature (Mohajan, 2018). Data analysis coding, categorisation, and categorisation of data were performed to deepen understanding of the information gained. The researcher used NVIVO software to improve the analysis process. They found and tagged relevant topics.

3.4 Validity and Reliability

In order to enhance the validity and reliability of the research data, this study employed a range of techniques, including triangulation, member checks, peer review, peer debriefing, prolonged field engagement and an audit trail. Triangulation was mainly used to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the data. Data triangulation was employed in this study for sufficient and validated results. Two different groups of informants were utilized to achieve the research goals. At its core, triangulation involves using different means to gather data. Following the frameworks by Othman (2017) and Merriam & Tisdell (2016), we undertook methodological triangulation and source triangulation. The data were collected through multiple methodologies (methodological triangulation): specifically, interviews, field notes and document analysis. The triangulation of sources was achieved by conducting interviews with two different groups of participants: five elite wheelchair basketball athletes and three people who served as coaches and team managers for these athletes. Triangulation in social sciences is the use and repetition of multiple different methods using multiple different models or concepts to investigate the same issue (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). This study used multiple informants to overcome limitations, biases, and challenges that may result from single-informant reliance.

4. Research Findings

This idea of experiences is split into two components regarding aspects of social support in the experiences of elite wheelchair basketball athletes. This segmentation guarantees a more organized discussion and allows a more transparent means of sharing the findings of elite wheelchair basketball athletes. Five elite wheelchair basketball players were interviewed in total. The analysis yielded four superordinate themes reflecting the experiences of elite wheelchair basketball athletes in relation to social support. The informants' names have been anonymized and substituted with pseudonyms. This step was important to maintain the integrity of research, ensuring that no pseudonyms used in the study could ever be traced back to the informants. All the superordinate themes and sub-themes derived by the researcher are compiled as:

Table 2: Summary of findings

Superordinate Theme	Sub-theme	Description	Quotation from Informant
Lack of Family Support	1a. Family Support as Hidden Support	Family support is often indirect, such as moral encouragement or prayers, but lacks practical assistance.	"Even though my family doesn't show it much, they still support me." (Johan)
	1b. Lack of Direct Family Involvement	Families are less involved in daily activities, including financial, emotional, and physical support.	"Even though my family doesn't show it much, they still support me." (Johan)
Limited Support from Friends	2a. Limited Assistance from Friends	Friends are present but provide limited help due to time constraints, work, and personal priorities.	"My friends help, but sometimes we need to handle small things on our own." (Supian)
Challenges in Support from Coaches	3a. Ineffective Communication	Coaches sometimes lack clear communication, causing confusion during training and team strategies.	"The coach helps a lot, but sometimes we have to ask directly for them to notice our problems." (Johan)
Institutional Support Challenges (MSN, ISN)	4a. Lack of Post-Contract Support	Institutional support often stops after contracts end, leaving athletes without career transition assistance.	"After the contract ends, it feels like being neglected. Support is lacking." (Lim)
Financial Support Limitations	5a. Insufficient Allowance for Daily Needs	Monthly allowances are inadequate for basic needs, causing financial stress.	"Our allowance depends on performance. If we don't win, the allowance might be reduced." (Muttu)
	5b. Performance-Based Financial Support	Performance-based support creates pressure to maintain high levels of performance.	"Our allowance depends on performance. If we don't win, the allowance might be reduced." (Muttu)

Insufficient Psychological and Mental Support	6a. Inadequate Psychological Support	Counseling programs for wheelchair athletes are limited, resulting in insufficient psychological assistance.	"Sometimes we need psychological support, not just physical." (Supian)
	6b. Lack of Attention to Mental Health	Stress, anxiety, and mental health are rarely given serious attention by institutions.	"Sometimes we need psychological support, not just physical." (Supian)
Time Constraints and Other Commitments	7a. Sacrificing Family Time	Athletes must sacrifice time with family due to rigorous training and competition schedules.	"Sacrificing time with family during holidays and fasting periods is one of the biggest challenges." (Johan)
	7b. Difficulty Taking Leave for Family Events	Requests for leave for family events are often denied, creating conflicts between responsibilities and family roles.	"Sacrificing time with family during holidays and fasting periods is one of the biggest challenges." (Johan)
Community Support Challenges	8a. Lack of General Community Support	Public support for the achievements of athletes is minimal, limiting opportunities and recognition.	"I hope the public can better understand and support us." (Lokman)
	8b. Stigma Against Disabled Athletes	Negative perceptions of disabled athletes reduce acceptance and recognition in the community.	"I hope the public can better understand and support us." (Lokman)

5. Result

Elite wheelchair basketball athletes encounter diverse social support challenges on the basis of family, friends, coaches, institutions, finances, psychology, time, and community. Such issues affect their health and also generate a lack of motivation and difficulty in standing up and keeping up the performance in the sport.

Athletes frequently face a lack of familial support, which often manifests in indirect and concealed forms. While moral encouragement, such as prayers and motivation, is valued, tangible assistance like financial aid or physical involvement is equally crucial for athletes to achieve their aspirations. Limited family involvement in daily activities adds to their mental burden, making it harder to overcome challenges and highlighting the need for more robust familial support systems. Similarly, inadequate support from friends is a common concern. Although colleagues and friends are present, their practical engagement is often limited by professional and personal obligations, leaving athletes to navigate emotional and physical challenges on their own. This lack of consistent emotional support affects their overall well-being.

Coaches play a pivotal role in athlete development, yet communication gaps often hinder progress. Insufficient feedback, unclear training objectives, and a lack of guidance beyond the regular season restrict athletes from reaching their full potential. A more comprehensive and

continuous coaching approach is essential to foster their growth. Institutional support, such as from MSN or ISN, also presents challenges, particularly after athletes' contracts expire. The abrupt termination of assistance leaves them unprepared for life transitions, causing financial strain, uncertainty, and mental health issues. Comprehensive post-contract programs are needed to address these gaps and ensure smoother transitions.

Financial constraints further complicate the lives of athletes, as monthly stipends often fail to cover basic necessities like food, housing, and transportation. Many athletes are forced to seek additional income sources, while performance-based financial systems create immense psychological pressure to maintain consistently high levels of achievement. Psychological and mental support is another critical area of neglect. The absence of on-site psychiatrists or counselling services during championships leaves athletes without adequate resources to manage stress and societal perceptions of disability, increasing the risk of burnout and long-term mental health issues.

Time constraints and other commitments also take a toll on athletes, as they often sacrifice family time for rigorous training schedules. This results in guilt, stress, and strained family relationships, adversely affecting their emotional well-being. Furthermore, community support is lacking, with minimal public recognition of wheelchair basketball athletes' achievements. Persistent stigma against disabled athletes hampers their social integration and access to funding or moral support, leaving them feeling marginalised and demotivated. Addressing these interconnected challenges is vital to ensure a more supportive environment for athletes to thrive.

In conclusion, elite wheelchair basketball athletes face a multifaceted web of challenges stemming from insufficient support across family, friends, coaches, institutions, finances, psychology, time, and community. These issues collectively impact their physical and mental well-being, diminish their motivation, and hinder their ability to perform at their best. Addressing these barriers requires a holistic approach, including fostering stronger familial and social networks, improving coach communication and institutional policies, ensuring financial stability, providing accessible psychological support, and cultivating greater community recognition and integration. By prioritizing these areas, a more inclusive and empowering environment can be created, enabling athletes to achieve their full potential both on and off the court.

6. Discussion

This study explores social support issues among elite wheelchair basketball athletes including family, friends, coaches, institutions, financial, psychological, time, and community support issues. As family support is concerned, even though we do find moral support like prayers and encouragement but it is more like a few words and is not helpful in practical terms. In addition, families are less engaged in their athletes' day-to-day activities leaving athletes to feel lonely and overwhelmed when it comes to navigating these challenges. This highlights the importance of more definitive family support to meet the emotional and physical needs of athletes.

Talking about friends support as each team member is physically available for daily reporting once in a while but cannot offer a top-notch level of support due to a number of reasons such as time flexibility and work priorities. Athletes tend to endure epoch-long disintegration in solitude, rendering friends less effective. When it comes to coaches, one of the biggest problems is ineffective communication between coaches and athletes. However, the absence

of clear feedback and direction can lead to confusion relating to training objectives, team strategies, etc., which, over time, can become detrimental to athletes' performance.

Also criticized are institutions like MSN and ISN for failing to support athletes once contracts expire, long term. This scenario leads to financial insecurity and mental anxiety at a time when the athletes are transitioning to the post-sport era without enough preparation. The allowance for athletes in most cases does not cover their daily needs, which means that financial support is still another main challenge. Moreover, performance-based financial support brings psychological stress, as the athletes need to achieve higher performance levels to keep the support they receive.

The challenges of psychological and mental support also set a high bar, with almost no counseling programs and very little focus on the mental health of elite wheelchair basketball athletes. Athletes go through a lot of stress including rigorous training and pressure from society about their performance. Inadequate attention to mental health issues worsens the risk of long-term well-being, including burnout and struggling to make a transition to life beyond sports. Moreover, rigid training schedules and time constraints impose on athletes to spend less time with their families, resulting in feelings of guilt and psychological pressure. It also affects emotional balance and family relations adversely.

The public support for elite wheelchair basketball sports is low, with little recognition of their achievements, from a community perspective. Athletes with disabilities often face stigma that makes it even harder for them to get the moral and material support they require. That overly negative perception impacts athletes' desire to continue being active and engaged in sports as well as restricting opportunities for more general social integration. Overall, the challenges reported among elite wheelchair basketball athletes highlight the importance of a more holistic and strategic approach to social support (i.e. through family members, live-in caregivers, service dogs, etc.). The findings could, therefore, strengthen the sustainable development of wheelchair basketball, by enhancing support frameworks for not only the difficulties athletes encounter.

7. Contributions of the study

The study sheds light on the unique challenges faced by elite wheelchair basketball athletes, emphasizing deficiencies in social support from family, friends, coaches, and institutions. This perspective expands the understanding of social dimensions that influence the well-being and performance of athletes with disabilities, a topic that remains underexplored in sports literature. Furthermore, it underscores the need for a holistic approach to support by addressing financial, psychological, and time-related challenges. These insights can assist institutions like MSN and ISN in designing inclusive and sustainable programs tailored to the specific needs of these athletes.

The findings also provide valuable guidance for improving sports policies and programs, particularly regarding the lack of post-contract support and mental health initiatives. By focusing on long-term support, stakeholders can better prepare athletes for transitions beyond their sports careers. Additionally, the study highlights the critical role of community support in addressing stigma and increasing recognition for the achievements of athletes with disabilities. Raising public awareness can foster greater community engagement, creating a more inclusive and supportive environment.

Families and friends are recognized as pivotal contributors to the emotional and psychological well-being of athletes. This study offers actionable insights to educate them on providing more effective and meaningful support. Moreover, it encourages further research in the domain of social support for athletes with disabilities, paving the way for exploring strategies to address these challenges or broadening the scope to other sports.

Lastly, the study significantly contributes to the development of Paralympic sports by advocating for better support systems for elite wheelchair basketball athletes. These findings not only promote excellence and equality within Paralympic sports but also enhance their reputation as a platform for inclusivity and empowerment.

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