

Motivation Behind the Recovery from Sports Injuries of Student-Athletes: A Descriptive Qualitative Research

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ABSTRACT

Low motivation to recover from injury is alarming. I explored recovery motivation among student-athletes. I used descriptive qualitative design and selected eight student-athletes purposively. Data were gathered through semi-structured interview and thematically analyzed. Findings revealed recovery motivation is shaped by achievement as source of motivation, affiliation as source of motivation, and power as source of motivation. I believe that coaches may motivate student-athletes through seminars to improve performance, support from family and peers to boost confidence, and team-building to strengthen performance. Future studies may use mediating and moderating roles of recovery processes and athlete profiles on injury recovery outcomes.

Keywords: motivation, behind the recover, sports, injuries, student-athletes, descriptive, qualitative research

Introduction

Motivation is a key determinant in the rehabilitation of student-athletes recovering from injuries. However, I noticed that many student-athletes experience low motivation on recovery from injuries. Globally, low level of motivation among athletes are increasingly recognized as a critical concern (Smith & Jones, 2023; Lee et al., 2024).

In the United States, I learned that student-athletes frequently experience low intrinsic motivation during injury rehabilitation (Brown et al., 2023). Similarly, in Canada, student-athletes experienced a significant decline in motivation during recovery (Wilson & Carter, 2024). Lastly, in Japan, student-athletes exhibited decreased motivation, which contributes to delayed recovery (Tanaka & Saito, 2023).

In the Philippines, low motivation in the recovery from injuries among Filipino student-athletes is increasingly recognized as a significant issue across both secondary and tertiary levels of sports participation (Reyes & Dela Cruz, 2024). Additionally, in the CALABARZON region, low motivation among student-athletes has also been identified as an emerging concern in sports and rehabilitation contexts (Dela Cruz et al., 2024).

Low motivation in the recovery from injuries among student-athletes are substantial and multifaceted (Smith & Jones, 2023). It may also contribute to decreased physical readiness upon return to sport, elevating the risk of re-injury and compromising athletic performance (Wilson & Carter, 2024). Additionally, low motivation can negatively affect the psychological well-being of student-athletes, including diminished confidence and increased anxiety related to returning to competition (Tanaka & Saito, 2023). Thus, these negative effects underscore the urgency of the study, which sought to address these concerns.

Statement of the Problem

In this study, I explored the motivation behind the recovery from sport injuries of student-athletes. I asked, what are the sources of motivations to recover from injuries among student-athletes?

Theoretical Lens

In doing this study, I was guided by the Learned Needs Theory (or Acquired Needs Theory), as proposed by McClelland (1987). Learned Needs Theory (LNT) states that an individual's motivation is driven by three key needs, such as achievement, affiliation, and power, that are learned and developed through life experiences, not innate.

Conceptual Framework

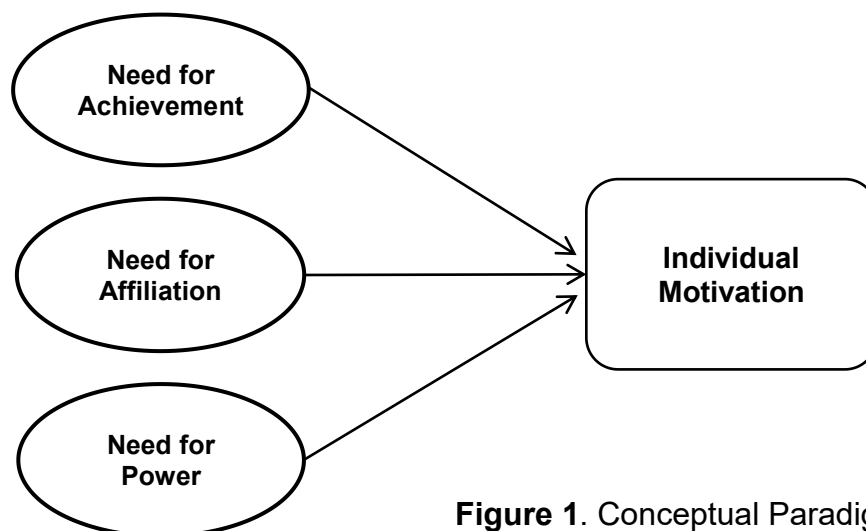


Figure 1. Conceptual Paradigm

Methods

In this study, I employed descriptive qualitative research design to provide a comprehensive account of the experiences of student-athletes during their recovery from injuries. This approach is appropriate for studies that aim to present a clear and detailed description of a phenomenon based on participants' perspectives, without extensive theoretical interpretation (Colorafi & Evans, 2020). Eight college student-athletes aged 18 years and above, enrolled during the school year 2024–2025, participated in the study. The participants included six females and two males from volleyball, badminton, baseball, and softball. Purposive sampling was utilized to select participants who had experienced injury recovery and could provide rich and relevant insights (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Saunders et al., 2023).

Data were collected through in-depth interviews using open-ended questions that allowed participants to freely share their experiences. The gathered data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2023). Thematic analysis framework, which involved familiarization with the data, coding, theme development, and refinement. Follow-up interviews were also conducted to validate interpretations and enhance the credibility of the findings.

Results

In this section of the study, I presented the actual conversations of my study participants.

Key Needs of Achievement, Affiliation, and Power: Sources of Motivations to Recover from Injuries

To explore the sources of motivations to recover from injuries, I conversed with student-athletes who have experienced injuries on this matter. Participant 1 emphasized how personal goals strengthened discipline during recovery:

My personal goal to... return to playing badminton and perform well in competitions pushed me to stay disciplined and committed during my recovery. I remained patient, consistent, and focused, even when the process was difficult, because I wanted to comeback stronger and better. P1-IDI-Pg-1

Personal goals strengthen the participant's discipline and commitment, helping stay focused and motivated during recovery to return stronger to sport. Participant 2 emphasized the importance of team success as a source of motivation:

My desire to continue playing volleyball is to win together with my teammates. I can see that they are also working hard to achieve the same goal. P2-IDI-Pg1

Similarly, Participant 3 described how her determination to return to sport influenced her commitment to physical therapy:

My main goal was to get back on the court and play at my best again. I treated my recovery exercise like a real badminton match because I wanted to win my health back. P3-IDI-Pg1

Participant 4 also shared a similar experience, highlighting how personal aspirations influenced her dedication:

My personal goals pushed me to stay focused and consistent during recovery. Knowing what I wanted to achieve kept me committed even when it was tough. P4-IDI-Pg1

Furthermore, beyond team leadership, the participant also connected her recovery to broader aspirations of representation. Participant 5 expressed a desire to represent her community in competitions:

So, kahit mahirap kailangan ko padin na e ayusin or gawin ng paraan na maayos agad yung injury ko tapos isang specific achievement ko is ako ay isa naga represent ng Cotabato province ng mag compete sa mga ibat ibang lugar at kaga ng sinasabi ko na isa yun sa mga achievement ko na gusto ko ulit na mag represent ng Cotabato province. So, kaya yun nag motivate sa akin na dapat araw araw na magling na ako at bumalik ng mas malakas. P5-IDI-Pg1

So, even though it was difficult, I still needed to take care of my injury and do everything I could to heal it properly. One specific achievement of mine is representing Cotabato Province in competitions in different places, and as I said, that is one of my achievements that I want to achieve again by representing Cotabato Province. That is why it motivated me to train every day and come back even stronger. P5-IDI-Pg1

Participant 6 expressed the same determination, emphasizing the desire to return stronger than before:

My personal goal is to return in volleyball stronger and better than before. I did not want my ankle injury to stop my dream. P6-IDI-Pg1

The participant demonstrated determination and a strong mindset, using the injury as motivation to recover and come back stronger rather than allowing it to define or limit personal goals. Participant 8 also described how his commitment to therapy was driven by the desire to return to sport:

My main goal was to get back on the field again at my best level... every therapy session was one step closer to returning to the game. P8-IDI-Pg1

Student-athletes achievement motivation in injury recovery is driven by personal goals, the desire to return to sport, represent their team or community, and become stronger, which sustains their discipline, commitment, and persistence throughout the rehabilitation process. As our conversation continued, one of the participants emphasized the importance of key needs of affiliation:

The support and encourage from my teammates, coaches, and family boosted my motivation and helped me stay positive. Their constant reminders and belief in me gave me strength and encouraged me to stay focused and determined to recover. P1-IDI-Pg2

It shows that the support and encouragement from teammates, coaches, and family played an important role in boosting motivation and helping the individual stay focused and determined. Similarly, Participant 3 emphasized how encouragement from others strengthened their determination to recover:

Having my teammates, coaches, and family cheer for me was a huge boost. Knowing they were waiting for me to come back made me want to work harder. P3-IDI-Pg2

Participant 4 also emphasized how team belongingness influenced her determination to recover:

Feeling like I belonged to the team made me want to recover faster so I could be part of the group again. P4-IDI-Pg2

Participant 5 also described the motivational effect of social support during moments of discouragement:

Their visits and messages served as motivation for me to recover. Even when I wanted to give up, they told me that I could do it. P5-IDI-Pg2

It shows how consistent support and encouragement from others can play a powerful role in helping someone stay resilient and committed to recovery. Participant 7 shared a similar experience, stating:

They checked on me and were very supportive during my recovery. I felt valued and not forgotten. P7-IDI-Pg2

Participant 8 also explained how anticipation of returning to the team influenced her discipline:

Iniisip ko palagi na babalik din ako sa paglalaro kasama ang mga teammates ko. P8-IDI-Pg3

I always think that I will return to playing with my teammates again. P8-IDI-Pg3

Student-athletes' recovery motivation is strengthened by affiliation through social support and belonging, and by power through leadership, responsibility, and the drive to regain control and prove resilience. As our conversation continued, Participant 1 highlighted how her identity as a future educator and role model influenced their motivation:

As a BPED student and future educator, I understand the importance of being a role model. This motivated me to stay disciplined and positive during my recovery so I could set a good example for my teammates and future students. P1-IDI-Pg3

Participant 3 reflected on how her recovery experience strengthened her inner resilience:

Coming back from a tough injury made me feel very strong inside. It showed me that I can handle hard times. P3-IDI-Pg3

The participant's experience of overcoming a difficult injury contributed to the development of inner strength and demonstrated the ability to cope with challenging situations. Similarly, Participant 4 described how the expectations of teammates influenced their determination to recover:

Knowing that my teammates looked up to me made me want to recover as quickly as possible. I felt responsible to stay strong and show determination. P4-IDI-Pg3

Participant 5, who served as a team captain, described the weight of leadership responsibility:

So, bilang isang team leader o nagagabagay sa team ko, ito yung nagmo-motivate sa akin na ma-overcome yung injury ko. At sabi nga nila kailangan ako, at bilang isang leader nararamdaman ko din na mabigat yung responsibilidad na bumalik at gabayan ang aking mga teammates. P5-IDI-Pg4

As a leader, I felt the heavy responsibility to come back and guide my teammates. They need to see a leader who fights and shows resilience in the midst of challenges.” P5-IDI-Pg4

Participant 7 also emphasized the importance of leadership during injury recovery:

As a volleyball captain, I felt responsible to show resilience. I wanted to set an example that injury can be overcome. P7-IDI-Pg4

Similarly, Participant 8 reflected on the feeling of losing control over their performance:

The injury made me feel like I lost control over my body and performance. I wanted to prove to myself and others that I could recover and still perform well. P8-IDI-Pg4

Going back to our conversation, I could feel that it was a safe space for my participants to share their injuries recovery experiences. As they shared their stories, I noticed a common pattern in the way they spoke they were honest and reflective, and surprisingly, they even laughed at certain memories despite the pain they went through, which made the atmosphere lighter and more natural. Some of them even pointed to or showed me their injured areas, and in those moments their experiences felt more real and personal, allowing me to clearly understand how serious and challenging their situations were.

As the conversation went on, it became clear that most of them were strongly motivated to recover so they could return to their sport and represent their school again, showing how deeply their identity as student-athletes is tied to playing. I also noticed that their motivation was not just personal, but also came

from their teammates, family support, and their sense of duty as athletes and leaders. While listening to them, I felt a mix of admiration, empathy, and inspiration I was touched by their determination, and at the same time I felt a bit sensitive whenever they described or showed their injuries, but I felt grateful to witness their stories. Through this experience, I realized that their recovery journey is not just physical healing, but also emotional and mental growth, and that their motivation rooted in achievement, connection, and responsibility helps them push through difficulties and work toward returning to the game they love.

Discussion

In this section, I discussed the findings of my study. Likewise, I established the implication for practice and future direction.

The Inner Drive to Rise Again: Motivational Forces in Injury Recovery

My finding emphasized that achievement is source of motivation to recover from injury. This finding aligns with Cruz and Kim (2023), who specified that athletic identity and self-determined goals significantly enhance rehabilitation adherence. Similarly, my study supports the finding of Bennett and Zhang (2023), emphasizing that structured goal-setting and progress monitoring strengthen persistence and emotional regulation during recovery, reinforcing that achievement functions as both a psychological and behavioral anchor in sports injury rehabilitation.

Furthermore, my study emphasized that affiliation is also source of motivation to recover from injury. I found that student-athletes emphasized that encouragement from coaches, teammates, and family members provided emotional strength and accountability throughout their rehabilitation journey. They also expressed a strong desire to return to their team environment, highlighting belongingness as a key driver of perseverance. This aligns with Lopez et al. (2024), who noted that social support significantly improves resilience and psychological well-being among injured athletes, while Cruz and Kim (2023) further noted that strong social identity within teams enhances motivation to comply with recovery programs.

Moreover, my finding highlighted that the power is source of motivation to recover from injury. Recovery was viewed as an opportunity to re-establish control and show competence after injury-induced vulnerability. My study aligns with Singh and Patel (2023), who mentioned that athletes who frame recovery as a process of regaining control and competence exhibit stronger psychological engagement and adaptive coping strategies. Additionally, my study supports Bennett and Zhang (2023), who expressed that perceived mastery over rehabilitation tasks contributes to increased confidence and sustained motivation. Together, these findings suggest that power-related motivation reflects not dominance over others, but mastery over oneself and one's recovery journey.

Conclusion

This study revealed that the motivation behind the recovery from sports injuries among student-athletes is primarily driven by three key sources: achievement, affiliation, and power. Achievement motivates student-athletes through their desire to meet recovery goals, rebuild confidence, and eventually return to their sport. Furthermore, affiliation plays an important role as well, as support from teammates, coaches, family, and friends helps them feel encouraged, valued, and connected during the rehabilitation process. Finally, power also emerged as a motivating factor, reflected in their need to regain control, responsibility, competence, recognition, and a sense of personal strength as athletes.

The finding showed that these motivational sources are essential in helping student-athletes stay committed, resilient, and emotionally strong throughout their recovery journey. In addition, the results of this study affirm David McClelland's Learned Needs Theory (1987), as the experiences of the participants clearly reflected the presence of the needs for achievement, affiliation, and power. These needs were found to significantly influence their motivation, perseverance, and engagement in recovering from sports injuries.

Implication for Practice

Educational leaders and coaches may promote student-athletes' motivation by addressing three key sources: achievement, affiliation, and power. Achievement motivation can be strengthened through orientations and seminars that help student-athletes improve focus, set clear goals, and develop strategies for better performance, fostering a mindset of growth and excellence. Additionally, affiliation motivation can be promoted by encouraging family and peer involvement, such as attending games and providing support, which builds a sense of belonging and enhances confidence and emotional stability. Finally, power motivation can be developed through team-building activities that foster leadership, responsibility, and unity among teammates, ultimately leading to stronger collaboration and improved team performance.

Future Directions

Future studies may explore the mediating role of recovery processes in the relationship between the sources of motivation (achievement, affiliation, and power) and injury recovery outcomes. This may help clarify how motivational needs translate into actual recovery behaviors and results. Additionally, researchers may investigate the moderating effects of athlete profiles on the relationship between these needs and recovery, determining whether certain groups benefit more strongly from specific motivational drivers.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide Questions

Research Title: Motivation Behind the Recovery from Sports Injuries of Student-Athletes: A Descriptive Qualitative Research

Research Question	Main Question	Probing Questions
What are the sources of motivations to recover from injuries among student-athletes?	What is your achievement as source of motivation for recovery from injuries in terms of achievement?	Need for Achievement 1. Describe how your personal goals or desire to succeed influenced your effort and commitment during your recovery from injury? 2. What specific achievements or milestones motivated you to continue with your rehabilitation process despite difficulties? 3. How did your sense of accomplishment or progress impact your confidence and

		determination to return to your sport?
	What is your affiliation as source of motivation for recovery from injuries in terms of achievement?	Need for Affiliation 1. How did the support or encouragement from your teammates, coaches, or family affect your motivation to recover? 2. In what ways did your connection or sense of belonging to your team influence your recovery journey? 3. How did the desire to reconnect and play again with your peers shape your mindset and actions during rehabilitation?
	What is your power as source of motivation for	Need for Power 1. How did your role or influence as an athlete

	recovery from injuries in terms of achievement?	or team leader motivate you to overcome your injury? 2. In what ways did your desire to regain control, respect, or recognition drive your recovery efforts? 3. How did your experience of injury and recovery shape your sense of personal strength and empowerment as an athlete?
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