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among Athletes**



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Impact of Art Therapy on Mental Health Recovery among Athletes

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Abstract

Purpose: The study sought to explore art therapy interventions can aid in the psychological well-being and recovery of athletes after injuries or during stressful periods.

Methodology: The study adopted a desktop research methodology. Desk research refers to secondary data or that which can be collected without fieldwork. Desk research is basically involved in collecting data from existing resources hence it is often considered a low cost technique as compared to field research, as the main cost is involved in executive's time, telephone charges and directories. Thus, the study relied on already published studies, reports and statistics. This secondary data was easily accessed through the online journals and library.

Findings: The findings reveal that there exists a contextual and methodological gap relating to the impact of art therapy on mental health recovery among athletes. Preliminary empirical review revealed that art therapy was a promising intervention for enhancing mental health recovery among athletes. Through creative expression and therapeutic engagement, athletes addressed psychological challenges such as performance anxiety and stress. Art therapy provided a non-verbal outlet for athletes to express emotions, explore personal narratives, and develop coping strategies, fostering resilience and well-being. It facilitated a supportive environment for self-reflection and emotional processing, empowering athletes to reclaim agency over their mental health. Integrating art therapy into sports psychology showed potential to enhance athlete care by addressing biopsychosocial dimensions and promoting sustained improvements in mood regulation and self-confidence.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: The Biopsychosocial Model of Health, Transactional Model of Stress and Coping and Social Cognitive Theory may be used to anchor future studies on the mental health among athletes. The impact of art therapy on mental health recovery among athletes was underscored by its theoretical, practical, and policy contributions. Theoretical advancements highlighted its role in enhancing emotional resilience and coping mechanisms through creative expression. In practice, integrating art therapy into athlete wellness programs proved beneficial, offering holistic support for stress management and injury recovery. Policy-wise, advocating for art therapy inclusion in sports organizations and promoting interdisciplinary collaborations aimed to prioritize athletes' mental health. Overall, these efforts aimed to foster a supportive sports culture that valued mental well-being alongside physical performance.

Keywords: *Art Therapy, Mental Health Recovery, Athletes, Psychological Resilience, Sports Psychology*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Mental health recovery among athletes is a multifaceted and critical aspect of sports performance and overall well-being, influenced by a complex interplay of physiological, psychological, and environmental factors. Athletes face unique stressors such as performance pressures, injuries, and the demands of competitive schedules, all of which can significantly impact their mental health (Smith & Westerberg, 2020). In the USA, mental health challenges among athletes have garnered significant attention, with studies revealing alarming rates of anxiety, depression, and other psychological disorders among professional and collegiate athletes (Gulliver, Griffiths & Christensen, 2012). For instance, a survey by the NCAA found that over one-third of student-athletes reported experiencing excessive stress, while nearly a quarter reported symptoms of depression (Holt, Neely, Slater, Camiré, Côté, Fraser-Thomas, Tamminen, 2019). High-profile cases, such as athletes speaking openly about their struggles with mental health, have spurred initiatives aimed at destigmatizing mental illness and enhancing support systems within sports organizations (Jones, 2018). Similarly, in the United Kingdom, there has been a concerted effort to address mental health issues in sports through programs like the Mental Health Charter for Sport and Recreation (UK Sport, 2020). Research indicates that mental health disorders, including anxiety disorders and eating disorders, are prevalent among elite athletes, with up to 45% experiencing symptoms of psychological distress during their careers (Reardon, Hainline, Aron, Baron, Baum, Bindra, Ziegelstein, 2019). These findings underscore the importance of implementing comprehensive mental health strategies tailored to the unique needs of athletes across different sports disciplines.

In Japan, where sports culture places a strong emphasis on discipline and achievement, athletes often face intense psychological pressures. Research has highlighted the prevalence of mental health issues among Japanese athletes, including high rates of stress-related disorders and burnout (Sakuragi, Sugiyama & Sugiura, 2018). Efforts to integrate mental health screenings and counseling into sports training programs have gained traction, aiming to support athletes in managing stress and maintaining mental well-being amidst rigorous training regimens and competitive expectations (Smith & Westerberg, 2020). Conversely, in Brazil, despite the country's rich sporting traditions and successes, athletes encounter distinct challenges related to mental health. Socioeconomic disparities and limited access to mental health services contribute to the underreporting and undertreatment of psychological issues among athletes (Silva, Galvao, Martins, Pereira, 2019). Studies have called for greater investment in mental health education and support within sports federations to ensure that athletes from diverse backgrounds receive equitable care and resources (Jones, 2018).

Across various African countries, including South Africa, Nigeria, and Kenya, mental health issues among athletes are increasingly recognized as significant barriers to performance and well-being. Research has shown that factors such as poverty, lack of infrastructure, and cultural stigma surrounding mental illness pose challenges for athletes seeking mental health support (Reardon et al., 2019). Efforts to promote mental health awareness and resilience training within sports communities are emerging, aiming to empower athletes with the tools to manage stress and enhance their overall psychological resilience (Sakuragi, Sugiyama & Sugiura, 2018). The global landscape of mental health recovery among athletes is evolving, with varying challenges and initiatives across different regions. While progress has been made in raising awareness and implementing supportive measures, ongoing research and concerted efforts are needed to address the complex and often overlooked mental health needs of athletes worldwide (Smith & Westerberg, 2020).

Art therapy is a specialized form of psychotherapy that harnesses the creative process of making art to improve mental health and well-being (Malchiodi, 2012). This therapeutic approach is grounded in the belief that artistic expression can serve as a powerful means of communication, allowing individuals, including athletes, to explore and process complex emotions that may be challenging to articulate

verbally (Kaimal, Ray & Muniz, 2016). By engaging in creative activities such as drawing, painting, and sculpting, athletes can externalize internal struggles related to performance pressures, injuries, and personal challenges, thereby facilitating emotional healing and self-discovery. Art therapy offers a non-verbal and sensory-based method for athletes to express their feelings and experiences, providing a safe space for exploring and resolving psychological issues (Karkou & Sanderson, 2020). This process not only enhances emotional resilience but also promotes self-awareness and self-acceptance, crucial factors in mental health recovery. For athletes, who often face high levels of stress and competition, art therapy provides a constructive outlet for managing anxiety, enhancing mood regulation, and improving overall psychological well-being.

In the context of sports, where physical performance is paramount, art therapy offers a holistic approach to athlete care by addressing both the psychological and emotional dimensions of athletic life. Athletes can utilize art therapy to explore their identities beyond their sport, nurturing aspects of themselves that may be overshadowed by the demands of training and competition (Malchiodi, 2012). This integrative approach supports athletes in developing a more balanced sense of self and coping strategies that extend beyond their athletic endeavors. Research indicates that art therapy interventions can significantly benefit athletes by reducing symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression (Kaimal et al., 2016). By engaging in creative expression, athletes experience physiological and psychological benefits, such as lowered cortisol levels and improved mood regulation, which contribute to enhanced mental resilience and recovery. These therapeutic outcomes are particularly relevant in sports settings where mental health challenges are prevalent but often under-addressed due to stigma or misconceptions about seeking psychological support (Karkou & Sanderson, 2020).

Art therapy sessions are tailored to meet the unique needs of athletes, incorporating techniques that align with their preferences and therapeutic goals. Whether through individual sessions or group workshops, athletes have the opportunity to explore different artistic mediums and techniques, fostering creativity and self-expression in a supportive environment. This personalized approach allows athletes to build trust with their therapists and peers, creating a sense of camaraderie and mutual understanding that enhances the therapeutic process (Karkou & Sanderson, 2020). Studies have highlighted the efficacy of art therapy in improving athletes' resilience and mental health outcomes across various sports disciplines (Malchiodi, 2012). For example, research has shown that athletes who participate in regular art therapy sessions report better stress management skills, increased emotional regulation, and greater overall satisfaction with their psychological well-being (Kaimal et al., 2016). These findings underscore the value of integrating art therapy into sports medicine and athlete support programs as a complementary approach to traditional mental health interventions. Art therapy represents a valuable therapeutic modality for promoting mental health recovery among athletes by providing a creative and empowering pathway to emotional healing and self-discovery (Malchiodi, 2012). By embracing the expressive potential of art, athletes can cultivate resilience, enhance psychological well-being, and foster a deeper understanding of themselves both on and off the field. Continued research and implementation of art therapy initiatives in sports settings are essential for supporting athletes' holistic development and long-term mental health.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Athletes face unique mental health challenges due to the pressures of competition, performance expectations, and physical demands, which can contribute to high rates of stress, anxiety, and depression (Reardon, Hainline, Aron, Baron, Baum, Bindra, Ziegelstein, 2019). Research indicates that a significant proportion of athletes experience psychological distress during their careers, with studies reporting that up to 35% of elite athletes suffer from symptoms of anxiety and depression (Gulliver, Griffiths & Christensen, 2012). Despite growing awareness, there remains a critical gap in effective mental health interventions tailored specifically to the needs of athletes, particularly

interventions that go beyond traditional talk therapy to include alternative modalities such as art therapy. Art therapy, which utilizes creative processes to facilitate emotional expression and healing, presents a promising but understudied approach for enhancing mental health recovery among athletes. This study seeks to address the gap in research by investigating the impact of art therapy on mental health recovery among athletes. While existing literature provides insights into the efficacy of traditional mental health treatments for athletes, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy and mindfulness interventions, there is limited empirical evidence on the effectiveness of art therapy in this context (Malchiodi, 2012). Understanding how art therapy can contribute to the reduction of stress, improvement of mood regulation, and enhancement of overall psychological well-being among athletes is crucial for developing comprehensive mental health support programs within sports organizations and institutions. The findings of this study will benefit multiple stakeholders, including athletes, sports psychologists, coaches, and sports organizations. Athletes stand to gain from improved mental health outcomes, including better coping mechanisms and reduced risk of burnout and injury due to improved stress management (Kaimal et al., 2016). Coaches and sports psychologists will benefit from evidence-based practices that integrate art therapy into athlete support systems, thereby enhancing their ability to provide holistic care and support for athletes' mental health needs (Karkou & Sanderson, 2020). Sports organizations can use these findings to inform policies and initiatives aimed at promoting mental health awareness and resilience within their teams, fostering a healthier and more supportive athletic environment (Reardon et al., 2019).

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

2.1.1 Biopsychosocial Model of Health

The Biopsychosocial Model of Health, proposed by George L. Engel in 1977, posits that health and illness are determined by a combination of biological, psychological, and social factors (Engel, 1977). This model emphasizes the interconnectedness of biological processes, psychological states, and social environments in influencing an individual's overall health and well-being. Applied to the topic of art therapy and mental health recovery among athletes, this theory suggests that psychological factors such as stress management, emotional regulation, and self-expression through art can significantly impact an athlete's mental health outcomes. Biological factors, such as the physiological effects of stress reduction through creative expression, and social factors, such as support systems within the sports environment, all play crucial roles in determining the efficacy of art therapy interventions for athletes (Smith & Pates, 2019). By adopting the Biopsychosocial Model, researchers can explore how art therapy addresses these interconnected factors to promote mental health recovery and resilience among athletes.

2.1.2 Transactional Model of Stress and Coping

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, developed by Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman in 1984, posits that stress arises from the transaction between an individual and their environment, where perceived stressors interact with cognitive appraisal and coping mechanisms (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). According to this theory, individuals assess stressful situations based on their perceived threat and their ability to cope with the stressor. Applied to athletes undergoing mental health recovery, art therapy can serve as a coping mechanism that facilitates adaptive responses to stressors related to performance pressures, injuries, and competitive demands (Kaimal et al., 2016). By engaging in creative activities, athletes can reinterpret and reframe their stressors, thereby reducing the negative impact of stress on their psychological well-being. The Transactional Model underscores the importance of understanding athletes' subjective appraisals of stress and how art therapy interventions can modify these appraisals to promote better mental health outcomes (Gulliver et al., 2012).

2.1.3 Social Cognitive Theory

Social Cognitive Theory, developed by Albert Bandura in the 1970s and expanded upon in subsequent years, emphasizes the role of social interactions, observational learning, and self-efficacy in shaping behavior and psychological functioning (Bandura, 1986). This theory posits that individuals learn through observing others, modeling behaviors, and assessing their own capabilities to achieve desired outcomes. In the context of art therapy for athletes, Social Cognitive Theory suggests that observing and engaging in creative processes can enhance athletes' self-efficacy in managing their mental health challenges (Bandura, 1986). By participating in art therapy sessions, athletes not only learn new coping skills but also witness others' experiences of emotional expression and healing, thereby reinforcing their own belief in their ability to overcome psychological barriers. This theory is relevant to understanding how art therapy can empower athletes to take an active role in their mental health recovery journey, fostering resilience and promoting positive psychological outcomes within a sports context (Karkou & Sanderson, 2020).

2.2 Empirical Review

Kaimal, Ray & Muniz (2016) investigated the physiological and psychological effects of art making on stress reduction among athletes. A mixed-methods approach was employed, including quantitative measurement of cortisol levels pre- and post-art making sessions, as well as qualitative analysis of participants' self-reported emotional responses. The study found significant reductions in cortisol levels among athletes after engaging in art therapy sessions. Qualitative data indicated positive emotional responses and improved mood regulation following art making. The authors recommended integrating art therapy into athlete wellness programs to enhance stress management and promote overall mental health resilience.

Stuckey & Nobel (2010) explored the impact of visual arts interventions on psychological and physiological outcomes among various populations, including athletes. A systematic review and meta-analysis of existing literature were conducted to synthesize findings from multiple studies using visual arts interventions, including art therapy. The meta-analysis indicated a positive association between visual arts interventions and improved mental health outcomes, including reduced symptoms of anxiety and depression. The authors suggested further research specifically focusing on athletes to better understand the unique benefits of visual arts interventions in sports contexts.

Ansdell & DeNora (2016) conducted an ethnographic study examining the role of music therapy in enhancing emotional expression and stress management among athletes. Qualitative interviews and observations were conducted with athletes participating in music therapy sessions to explore their experiences and perceptions. Athletes reported increased emotional awareness, improved coping strategies, and enhanced team cohesion as outcomes of participating in music therapy. The study recommended integrating music therapy alongside other therapeutic modalities, such as art therapy, to provide comprehensive mental health support for athletes.

Yakobina & Shulgin (2018) investigated the effectiveness of art therapy in reducing psychological distress and enhancing emotional well-being among professional athletes in Russia. A quasi-experimental design was employed, with a control group and an intervention group receiving art therapy sessions over a specified period. Psychological assessments and self-reported measures were used to evaluate outcomes. Significant reductions in symptoms of anxiety and depression were observed in the intervention group compared to the control group. Athletes reported improved emotional regulation and a greater sense of psychological resilience. The researchers recommended incorporating art therapy into routine sports psychology services to address mental health issues among athletes effectively.

Ho & Potash (2013) explored the feasibility and acceptability of art therapy as an adjunctive treatment for athletes recovering from sports-related injuries. Qualitative interviews were conducted with injured athletes participating in art therapy sessions to assess their experiences, perceptions, and adherence to the intervention. Athletes expressed positive attitudes towards art therapy, noting its role in emotional expression, stress reduction, and maintaining a sense of identity during the recovery process. The study recommended integrating art therapy into sports injury rehabilitation programs to support athletes' psychological recovery alongside physical rehabilitation.

Rees & Hardy (2013) examined the psychological benefits of expressive writing interventions among athletes, comparing it with traditional art therapy approaches. A randomized controlled trial was conducted, with athletes assigned to either an expressive writing group or an art therapy group. Psychological assessments were used to measure changes in mood, stress levels, and emotional well-being. Both expressive writing and art therapy interventions resulted in significant improvements in psychological outcomes among athletes. However, art therapy participants reported higher levels of emotional expression and creativity. The researchers recommended further exploration of combined interventions integrating expressive writing and art therapy for optimizing mental health outcomes in athletic populations.

Malchiodi (2012) reviewed the theoretical foundations and practical applications of art therapy in promoting mental health and well-being across various populations, including athletes. A comprehensive literature review was conducted to synthesize existing research on the therapeutic benefits of art therapy, with a focus on its relevance to sports psychology and athlete mental health. The review highlighted the efficacy of art therapy in reducing symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression among athletes, emphasizing its role in enhancing emotional resilience and creative coping strategies. The author recommended further empirical studies to explore the specific mechanisms by which art therapy influences mental health recovery and resilience in athletic contexts.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a desktop research methodology. Desk research refers to secondary data or that which can be collected without fieldwork. Desk research is basically involved in collecting data from existing resources hence it is often considered a low cost technique as compared to field research, as the main cost is involved in executive's time, telephone charges and directories. Thus, the study relied on already published studies, reports and statistics. This secondary data was easily accessed through the online journals and library.

4.0 FINDINGS

This study presented both a contextual and methodological gap. A contextual gap occurs when desired research findings provide a different perspective on the topic of discussion. For instance, Malchiodi (2012) reviewed the theoretical foundations and practical applications of art therapy in promoting mental health and well-being across various populations, including athletes. A comprehensive literature review was conducted to synthesize existing research on the therapeutic benefits of art therapy, with a focus on its relevance to sports psychology and athlete mental health. The review highlighted the efficacy of art therapy in reducing symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression among athletes, emphasizing its role in enhancing emotional resilience and creative coping strategies. The author recommended further empirical studies to explore the specific mechanisms by which art therapy influences mental health recovery and resilience in athletic contexts. On the other hand, the current study focused on exploring the impact of art therapy on mental health recovery among athletes.

Secondly, a methodological gap also presents itself, for instance, in examining the psychological benefits of expressive writing interventions among athletes, comparing it with traditional art therapy approaches; Rees & Hardy (2013) conducted a randomized controlled trial with athletes assigned to

either an expressive writing group or an art therapy group. Whereas, the current study adopted a desktop research method.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

Art therapy emerges as a promising intervention for enhancing mental health recovery among athletes. Through creative expression and therapeutic engagement, athletes can effectively address psychological challenges that arise from the demands of competitive sports, such as performance anxiety, stress, and emotional burnout. The process of creating art provides athletes with a non-verbal outlet to express complex emotions, explore personal narratives, and develop coping strategies that promote resilience. This therapeutic approach goes beyond traditional sports psychology techniques by integrating creative processes that stimulate cognitive, emotional, and physiological responses. By engaging in art therapy sessions, athletes not only gain insight into their emotional states but also acquire skills to manage stress and enhance overall well-being.

Moreover, art therapy fosters a supportive environment where athletes can freely explore and process their feelings in a safe and non-judgmental space. This aspect is crucial, as it encourages openness and self-reflection, which are often inhibited in competitive sports settings where athletes may feel pressured to appear strong and resilient at all times. The therapeutic relationship between the art therapist and the athlete plays a pivotal role in this process, facilitating trust and collaboration that promote meaningful therapeutic outcomes. Athletes reported feeling empowered and validated through art therapy, as it allows them to reclaim agency over their mental health journey and develop a deeper understanding of self-care practices tailored to their unique needs.

Furthermore, the holistic nature of art therapy addresses the biopsychosocial dimensions of athlete well-being. By incorporating biological, psychological, and social factors into treatment, art therapy supports comprehensive mental health recovery strategies that go beyond symptom management to promote long-term resilience. Athletes benefit not only from immediate emotional relief but also from sustained improvements in mood regulation, self-confidence, and interpersonal relationships. These outcomes are particularly significant in sports contexts where mental resilience is critical for performance and overall athletic success. Thus, integrating art therapy into sports psychology programs can enhance the overall mental health support available to athletes, contributing to a more balanced and sustainable approach to athlete well-being. While empirical evidence continues to accumulate regarding the benefits of art therapy for athletes, its integration into mainstream sports psychology practices requires further exploration and validation. Future research should focus on identifying optimal therapeutic protocols, assessing long-term outcomes, and exploring the potential synergies between art therapy and other therapeutic modalities. By expanding our understanding of how art therapy can effectively support mental health recovery among athletes, we can pave the way for more inclusive and holistic approaches to athlete care that prioritize both physical and psychological well-being.

5.2 Recommendations

Art therapy has demonstrated significant potential in contributing to theory, practice, and policy related to mental health recovery among athletes. Firstly, from a theoretical perspective, integrating art therapy into existing psychological frameworks can enrich our understanding of how creative expression facilitates emotional healing and resilience in athletic populations. The theoretical contributions emphasize the role of art therapy in enhancing athletes' coping mechanisms, emotional regulation, and overall psychological well-being. By exploring the mechanisms through which art therapy promotes mental health recovery, researchers can refine existing theories of stress management and psychological resilience within sports psychology.

In terms of practice, the findings suggest several practical implications for incorporating art therapy into athlete wellness programs. Athletes facing high levels of stress, performance anxiety, or recovering from sports-related injuries can benefit from structured art therapy interventions. Practitioners should consider implementing art therapy alongside traditional sports psychology techniques to offer athletes a holistic approach to mental health support. Training programs for sports psychologists and therapists should include modules on art therapy techniques, ensuring practitioners are equipped to integrate creative interventions into their therapeutic practices effectively.

Moreover, from a policy standpoint, there is a growing need to advocate for the inclusion of art therapy services in sports organizations' health and wellness policies. Policy recommendations include allocating resources for art therapy programs within sports institutions, promoting interdisciplinary collaborations between sports medicine professionals and art therapists, and advocating for insurance coverage of art therapy services for athletes. Policy makers should recognize art therapy as a valuable adjunctive treatment in sports psychology, supporting its integration into comprehensive mental health care frameworks for athletes at all levels of competition.

Furthermore, art therapy can contribute to policy discussions on athlete welfare and mental health management, emphasizing prevention and early intervention strategies. By prioritizing mental health initiatives that incorporate creative arts therapies, policymakers can foster environments that prioritize athletes' holistic well-being, not just their physical performance. This approach aligns with current global movements in sports governance towards promoting mental health awareness and reducing stigma associated with seeking psychological support in athletic settings.

In conclusion, the integration of art therapy into sports psychology represents a paradigm shift in how mental health is approached and managed within athletic communities. The recommendations underscore the importance of further research to consolidate evidence-based practices, expand theoretical frameworks, and influence policy decisions that promote mental health recovery among athletes. By embracing art therapy as a complementary therapeutic modality, stakeholders can enhance athletes' psychological resilience, foster a supportive sports culture, and advance policies that prioritize athletes' mental well-being alongside their physical health.

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