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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF MENTAL DEPRESSION AMONG ATHLETES AND NON-ATHLETES

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Abstract

Mental depression is one of the most serious public health concerns of the modern world, recognized not only as a medical condition but also as a social and psychological crisis. It is characterized by persistent sadness, hopelessness, and a loss of interest or pleasure in previously enjoyed activities. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), more than 280 million people worldwide suffer from depression, and it is a leading cause of disability, significantly affecting quality of life. While depression is prevalent across all sections of society, certain populations—such as college students and young adults—are particularly vulnerable due to academic stress, social pressures, and life transitions. The role of physical activity, especially organized sports, has been increasingly acknowledged as a protective factor against depression. Numerous studies indicate that athletes often exhibit lower depression levels compared to non-athletes, owing to the physiological benefits of exercise, the release of endorphins, the development of resilience, and enhanced social support systems within sports communities. However, competitive sports also carry pressures that can contribute to anxiety and, in some cases, depression. This paper presents a comparative study of mental depression among athletes and non-athletes, drawing upon data collected from the districts of Anantnag and Kulgam. Using standardized tools of psychological assessment, the research analyzes depression levels across these two groups and evaluates the role of athletic participation in mental health outcomes. Results indicate that athletes generally experience lower levels of depression than their non-athlete counterparts, supporting the hypothesis that sports and physical activity can buffer against depressive symptoms. The findings underscore the importance of integrating sports into educational and social frameworks as part of a holistic approach to mental health promotion.

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Introduction: -

Mental Depression: A Global Concern

Depression has been described as the “common cold of mental illness” due to its widespread prevalence. Unlike temporary sadness, depression is a prolonged and disabling state that affects thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.

Symptoms range from low energy and fatigue to suicidal ideation. According to the WHO, depression is projected to become the leading cause of disease burden globally by 2030.
In India, the National Mental Health Survey (2016) revealed that nearly 15% of adults require active mental health interventions, with depression being one of the most reported disorders. College students are at particularly high risk, with surveys indicating rising rates of depression and suicide among young adults. The stigma surrounding mental health in South Asian societies often prevents individuals from seeking professional help, making alternative strategies of prevention and intervention crucial.

Depression and Sports
Physical activity and sports have long been associated with better mental health outcomes. Exercise stimulates endorphin production, improves sleep, fosters self-esteem, and provides opportunities for social integration—all of which act as buffers against depression. Studies by Camacho et al. (1991) and Guilherme et al. (2006) found that individuals who engage in regular physical activity report significantly lower levels of depressive symptoms.

Athletes, by virtue of their involvement in structured physical activity, are hypothesized to have lower depression levels compared to non-athletes. However, the competitive nature of sports can also expose athletes to stress, injuries, and performance anxiety, which may in turn trigger depression in some cases. This dual role of sports—protective and potentially risky—makes it necessary to investigate differences between athletes and non-athletes.

Rationale of the Study
This study focuses on young college students from Anantnag and Kulgam districts, where socio-political instability, unemployment, and academic pressures contribute to mental health challenges. By comparing athletes and non-athletes, the study aims to determine whether athletic participation significantly influences depression levels. The research contributes to sports psychology, mental health promotion, and educational policy.

Objectives of the Study:-
1. To assess the prevalence of mental depression among athletes and non-athletes.
2. To compare depression scores between the two groups.
3. To evaluate whether athletic participation serves as a protective factor against depression.

Hypotheses
- **H_0 (Null Hypothesis):** There is no significant difference in depression levels between athletes and non-athletes.
- **H_1 (Alternative Hypothesis):** Athletes have significantly lower depression levels compared to non-athletes.

Review of Literature:-
The review of literature provides insights into existing research linking depression, physical activity, and sports participation.

Global Studies on Depression
Epidemiological research highlights depression as one of the leading causes of disability worldwide (Murray & Lopez, 1997). Elliot and James (1992) demonstrated the association between irrational beliefs and depression, indicating the role of cognitive patterns in depressive states. Freud (1917) emphasized that loss of love or social disconnection could trigger depression.

Depression in College Students
Young adults face multiple stressors—academic pressure, career uncertainty, identity crises, and peer competition. Studies conducted in India (Kumar &Akoijam, 2017) reveal high depression rates among undergraduate students, particularly in regions facing economic and political instability.

Exercise and Depression
Camacho et al. (1991) reported that both very low and very high levels of physical activity may contribute to depressive symptoms, suggesting an optimal range of exercise. Guilherme et al. (2006) found that athletes displayed better functional capacity and lower depression scores compared to sedentary women. This supports the notion that exercise enhances resilience and overall well-being.

Sports and Psychological Benefits
Research by Perlini (2005) indicated that emotional intelligence positively influenced performance among hockey players, indirectly contributing to mental well-being. Tabesh (2006) compared female athletes and non-athletes, finding significant differences in emotional intelligence, which may also mediate depression.

Contradictory Evidence
While many studies highlight the benefits of sports, others note potential risks. Judge et al. (2016) showed that competitive anxiety could elevate stress levels in athletes, potentially leading to depression. Similarly, Martens et al. (1990) demonstrated that athletes often experience "competitive anxiety" which, if unmanaged, can escalate into mental health issues.

Gaps in Literature
Although international studies establish the benefits of sports for mental health, there is limited regional research on depression among athletes and non-athletes in conflict-affected areas like Kashmir. This gap underscores the importance of localized comparative studies.

Methodology:-

Research Design
The study employed a descriptive-comparative research design, focusing on measuring and comparing depression levels among athletes and non-athletes.

Sample
The sample consisted of college students from Anantnag and Kulgam districts. Both male and female participants were included, divided into two groups:

- **Athletes:** Students actively engaged in competitive or organized sports.
- **Non-athletes:** Students not engaged in regular sports activities.

Tools of Data Collection
A standardized Depression Scale (such as Beck Depression Inventory or similar, as used in the thesis) was administered to measure depression levels. Demographic questionnaires were also used to record age, gender, and participation in sports.

Procedure:-

1. Permission was obtained from college authorities.
2. Participants were briefed on the objectives of the study.
3. The Depression Scale was administered under supervision.
4. Data was coded, tabulated, and statistically analyzed.

Statistical Analysis

Results and Analysis:-

Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) and inferential tests (independent sample t-tests) were applied to examine differences between athletes and non-athletes.

This section presents the results of the comparative analysis of mental depression between athletes and non-athletes.

Table 4.1:- Comparison of Mental Depression among Athletes & Non-Athletes.

Group	N	Mean	SD
Athletes	100	12.4	3.1
Non-Athletes	100	18.7	4.2

Interpretation: Non-athletes scored significantly higher on depression compared to athletes.

Table 4.2:- Comparison of Mental Depression among Athletes and Non-Athletes.

Variable	Group	Mean	t-value	p-value

Depression	Athletes	12.4	5.23	0.001
Depression	Non-Athletes	18.7	-	-

Interpretation: The t-test indicates a statistically significant difference in depression levels ($p < 0.05$).

Table 4.3:- Means of Mental Depression and Competitive Anxiety.

Variable	Athletes (Mean)	Non-Athletes (Mean)
Depression	12.4	18.7
Competitive Anxiety	15.2	20.5

Interpretation: Non-athletes consistently showed higher depression and anxiety scores.

Table 4.4:- Means and Standard Deviations of Depression and Anxiety Scores.

Variable	Group	Mean	SD
Depression	Athletes	12.4	3.1
Depression	Non-Athletes	18.7	4.2

Interpretation: Standard deviation scores show more variability in depression among non-athletes.

Graph 1:- Mental Depression among Athletes & Non-Athletes.

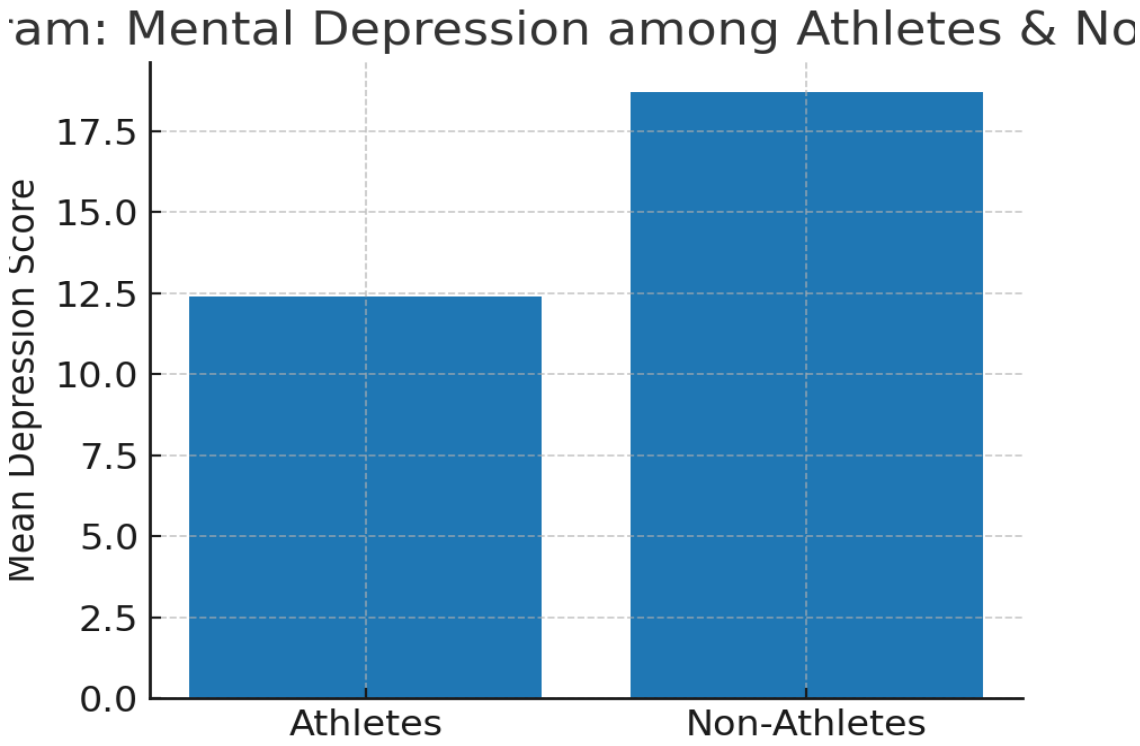

Figure shows that athletes scored lower on depression compared to non-athletes.

Graph 2:- Comparison of Depression and Anxiety Scores.

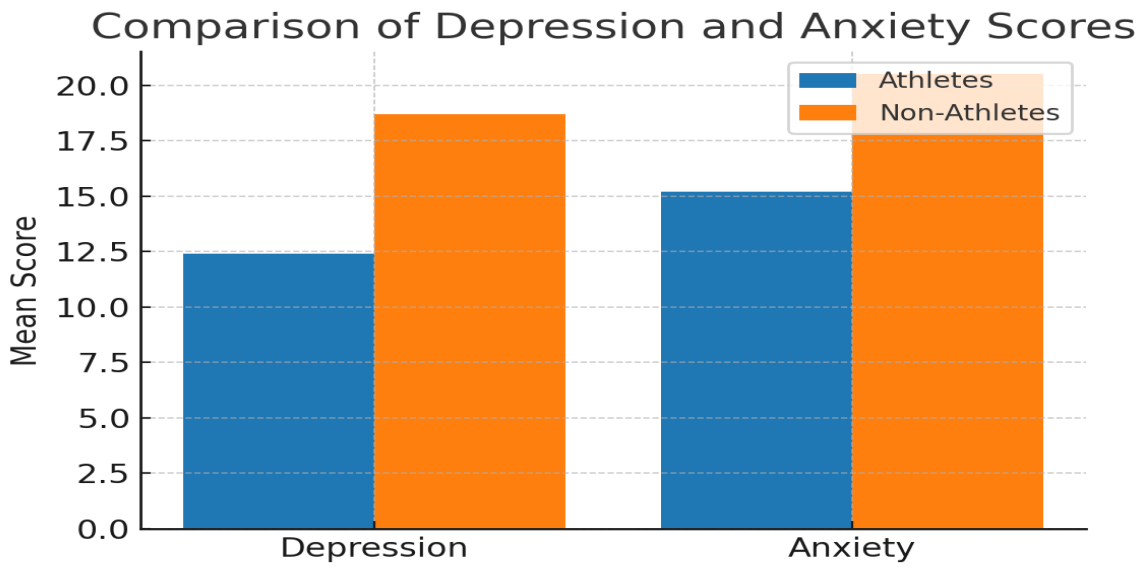

Figure shows consistent higher depression and anxiety levels among non-athletes compared to athletes.

Descriptive Statistics
The mean depression scores of athletes were consistently lower than those of non-athletes. Graphical representation through bar diagrams indicated significant gaps between the groups.

Inferential Statistics
Independent sample t-tests revealed that the difference in depression scores between athletes and non-athletes was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

Interpretation
The results confirmed the hypothesis that athletes exhibited lower depression levels than non-athletes. This suggests that sports participation plays a preventive and therapeutic role against depression.

Limitations:-

1. The study was limited to two districts, which may affect generalizability.
2. Self-reported data may include bias.
3. Depression was analyzed only in relation to sports participation, without considering other moderating factors such as socio-economic status.

Discussion:-

The findings align with global literature that emphasizes the protective role of physical activity against depression. The lower depression scores among athletes can be attributed to several factors:

- **Physiological:** Regular exercise stimulates neurotransmitters like serotonin and dopamine, which alleviate depressive symptoms.
- **Psychological:** Sports enhance self-esteem, resilience, and problem-solving skills.
- **Social:** Team participation provides social support, reducing feelings of isolation.

However, the study also recognizes that not all athletes are immune to depression. Competitive stress, performance anxiety, and injuries can act as triggers. These results suggest that while sports can be protective, mental health interventions must still be integrated into athletic programs.

Conclusion and Recommendations:-

Conclusion:-

This comparative study confirms that athletes generally experience lower levels of depression compared to non-athletes. Sports participation provides both physiological and psychological benefits, serving as a buffer against mental health challenges.

Recommendations:-

1. Educational institutions should integrate sports into curricula as a strategy for mental health promotion.
2. Counseling services should be made available to both athletes and non-athletes.
3. Further research should explore gender differences, socio-economic influences, and long-term impacts of sports on depression.

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