

ATHLETIC Identity and Sports Imagery Ability as Predictors of Sports Engagement of Public-School Student ATHLETES

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to determine whether athletic identity and sports imagery ability significantly predict sports engagement among public school student-athletes targeting athletic events in the Division of Davao Oriental. The public school student-athletes were chosen as respondents through complete enumeration. Three survey questionnaires were used in the study. Results showed that athletic identity is high, sports imagery is very high, and sports engagement is also very high. Results also revealed significant relationships between athletic identity and sports engagement and between sports imagery ability and sports engagement. Moreover, both athletic identity and sports imagery ability significantly influenced sports engagement, with sports imagery ability being the stronger predictor.

KEYWORDS: *Athletic identity, sports imagery ability, sports engagement, student athletes, Philippines.*

INTRODUCTION

Sports engagement is active, committed participation in athletic activities, encompassing physical involvement, emotional connection, and a dedication to personal and team growth, shaped by motivation, resources, and the surrounding sports culture. But over the past few years, there has been a decline in sports engagement due to a lack of time for sports, loss of enjoyment, burnout, or shifting interests to other activities (Thompson et al., 2022). This decline in sports engagement stemmed from a combination of systemic issues, socio-cultural barriers, and personal factors, such as excessive pressure, limited team inclusion, and poor coaching by trainers (Sakalidis et al., 2023).

In a global perspective, research by Fitri et al. (2022) found that students in Indonesia have low sports engagement due to pressure, bullying, and limited coaching time. In Malaysia, some coaches observed a decline in sports engagement among some student-athletes, especially those from broken families, due to a lack of family support (Elumalai et al. 2024). In China, a study by Zhang et al. (2023) found that student-athletes have declining sports engagement due to a lack of time, as some were busy with school, and academic pressures increased in secondary schools.

In the Philippines, academic pressure is one of the reasons for student-athletes' low sports engagement (Fortuna et al., 2024). Palad et al. (2023) argued that student-athletes' low sports engagement is due to difficulty in balancing training, competitions, and academic requirements. Similarly, Rusmanto et al. (2023) also stressed that another reason for the low sports engagement is that some student-athletes experienced burnout from overtraining, as intense training schedules, especially without adequate rest, lead to exhaustion. Moreover, a study by Wang et al. (2024) also found that some student-athletes experienced a sudden decline in sports engagement due to pressure from coaches that diminished their enjoyment, leading them to feel that sports are an obligation rather than a passion.

In the Davao Region, low sports engagement is strongly influenced by personal and academic factors, with many student-athletes struggling to balance their time between school responsibilities and extracurricular activities, such as sports and athletics (Juezan & Osorno, 2024). The low sports engagement of student-athletes stems from personal factors such as a lack of motivation, burnout from past involvement in sports, or shifting interests towards digital and leisure activities. As priorities change and time becomes limited, sports are often sacrificed in favor of pursuits perceived as having more immediate academic or career value (Becker et al., 2022).

A significant link exists between athletic identity and sports engagement. Wu et al. (2023) found that students who strongly identify as athletes demonstrate extreme dedication to their training, coupled with comprehensive involvement in various competitive activities referred to as “per leave,” before becoming disengaged from multiple activities due to competing challenges. A strong athletic identity enhances student-athletes' sports engagement, stemming from their sustained participation in sports.

Similarly, sports imagery ability can be associated with sports engagement. A study by McGinley et al. (2024) found that student-athletes enhance their imagery capabilities to excel before contests, support their training, and motivate themselves, leading to improved sports engagement. Studies today vary in their investigation of the relationships between athletic identity and sports engagement, as well as between sports imagery ability and sports engagement (Wu et al., 2023; McGinley et al., 2024), yet research on this combined predictive relationship is scarce.

This study adds significant social value by deepening researchers' understanding of what affects public school student-athletes' sports engagement. Knowledge of athletic identity and sports imagery ability enables schools and coaches to develop environments where student-athletes foster confidence, motivation, and a sports-centered sense of belonging. A deeper understanding from this research helps enhance access to sport participation and strengthen community support, thereby supporting the full development of student-athletes.

Statement of the Problem

1. What is the level of athletic identity of the respondents in terms of prominence; self-worth contingency; self-presentation; and social reinforcement?
2. What is the level of sports imagery ability of the respondents in terms of strategy images; goal images; affect images; and skill images?
3. What is the level of sports engagement of the respondents in terms of vigor; dedication; and absorption?
4. Is there a significant relationship between athletic identity and sports engagement; and sports imagery ability and sports engagement?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design. The researcher utilized a quantitative approach, specifically a descriptive-correlational design. Quantitative research is a design that focuses on identifying relationships between two or more variables within the same population or across different populations (Creswell, 2014). Understanding associations between variables drives scientific inquiry in the social sciences, as this aspect goes beyond distinctions between research methods (Curtis et al., 2016).

A descriptive-correlational design was a quantitative research method used to examine the relationships between variables as they naturally occur, without experimental manipulation (Creswell, 2014). The investigation adopted this procedure to evaluate variable interactions in its research population. The research design enabled pattern detection, providing distinct knowledge of relationship direction and magnitude. This method focused on real-world data to show the relationships among athletic identity, sports imagery ability, and sports engagement.

In this study, a descriptive-correlational research design was used because it allowed systematic investigation of the relationships among athletic identity, sports imagery ability, and sports engagement among public school student-athletes. The researcher investigated how student-athletes' involvement in athletics was influenced by their athletic identity and beliefs about sports imagery. The adopted research design implemented a quantitative, non-experimental, descriptive-correlational framework that enabled the researcher to examine the relationships between athletic identity and sports engagement and between sports imagery ability and sports engagement. This research design successfully identified relationships that scientists could later use to build forecasting models.

The descriptive research design was the most appropriate for the study; it would examine the relationships among athletic identity, sports imagery ability, and sports engagement. Using descriptive research methods, the authors obtained valuable insights into the athletic identity ratings, sports imagery practices, and levels of sports engagement among student-athletes. A correlational design was used to examine factor connections among university secondary student-athletes in Mati City, Davao Oriental. Furthermore, this research employed a quantitative research method to describe and measure outcomes in accordance with the standards for accepting or rejecting hypotheses (Asamoah 2014).

Research Locale. This study was conducted among the selected public secondary schools in Davao Oriental. These schools had a significant number of student-athletes who regularly participated in various sports events at the division, regional, and national levels. Davao Oriental is one of the five provinces in the Davao Region, comprising ten (10) municipalities and one city. This province plays an important role in regional athletics, as the recent Davao Regional Athletics Association (DavRAA) regional meet was held here.

Research Respondents. The respondents of this study consisted of 240 student-athletes specializing in athletics events (track and field, jumping, and throwing) from secondary schools within the Province of Davao Oriental for the academic year 2024-2025. Since this study used complete enumeration, all 240 student-athletes involved in athletic events were included as respondents, eliminating the need for sampling. Complete enumeration ensured that every member of the population was represented, which provided comprehensive data. Additionally, the study focused on student-athletes specializing in athletics events from secondary schools within the Province of Davao Oriental and ensured that all public school athletes were included, providing a comprehensive data set.

Using complete enumeration, the study included all student-athletes specializing in athletics from secondary schools within the Province of Davao Oriental as respondents. According to Creswell (2014), complete enumeration involves collecting data from every individual in the population, thereby eliminating the need for sampling. In this study, all public-school athletes from secondary schools in the Province of Davao Oriental were included.

Furthermore, the target population of this study followed specific inclusion criteria, meaning only individuals who met the researcher's requirements based on factors such as demographics, clinical characteristics, geographic location, and time were considered. The inclusion criteria for this study were as follows: (a) being an enrolled student in a public secondary school in Davao Oriental during the 2024-2025 school year, and (b) being a public-school athlete focusing on athletics and participating in provincial meet sports competitions. Conversely, the exclusion criteria of this study would exclude students from private schools in Davao Oriental and athletes from outside Davao Oriental. Furthermore, respondents were selected regardless of age, gender, grade level, or type of athletic sports event.

Genuine ethical safeguards had to be established for the vulnerable participants because they took part in this study. Before granting participants access to become research respondents, the researcher obtained their parents' consent because most participants were under 18 years old. Their participation in the study was voluntary, and researchers provided them with complete information about their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. The research implemented protective measures specifically designed to

safeguard respondents from harm, protecting their privacy rights, as well as their freedom and confidentiality, throughout all stages of the inquiry.

Statistical Tools. The study employed several statistical methods to analyze the collected data. The mean was used to determine the levels of athletic identity, sports imagery ability, and sports engagement as perceived by public school athletes in the Province of Davao Oriental, while the standard deviation was used to measure how the data for these variables varied from the mean. The Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was used to evaluate the strength of the relationships between athletic identity and participation in sports and between sports imagery skills and participation in sports. Finally, multiple linear regression analysis was used to examine the significant influence of athletic identity and sports imagery ability on sports engagement and to identify which indicator within these constructs best predicts sports engagement among public school athletes in the Province of Davao Oriental.

Data Gathering Procedure. In conducting this study, the researcher followed a systematic, ethical approach to ensure the research's validity. First, the researcher obtained an endorsement letter from the graduate school dean and sought approval from the Research Ethics Committee (REC). Once the endorsement was secured, formal requests for permission to conduct the study were sent to the division office in the Province of Davao Oriental, as well as to the tournament managers and sports coordinators of the public schools within Davao Oriental.

Potential participants were also asked for their consent, ensuring that they were fully aware of the study's goal and their rights as participants. Informed consent forms were signed to confirm the respondents' voluntary participation. Since most respondents were under 18, they received parental consent with the ICF, which was signed by them and one parent. Moreover, the respondents had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Their decision to discontinue participation was respected, ensuring their well-being and autonomy throughout the research process.

To ensure thorough data collection, the researcher aimed for a 100% response rate from respondents. The survey, which was expected to take 20-30 minutes, was administered in a paper-and-pen format by the researcher. The researcher ensured documentation by obtaining certificates of appearance, signed by school administrators, for each respondent. Data collection took place from

February to March, 2025. The researcher worked closely with the tournament managers, coaches, and provincial meet officials from the selected public schools to coordinate the process and account for students' academic schedules. As a gesture of appreciation and to compensate for any inconvenience, small tokens were provided to each respondent.

The researcher addressed potential discomforts participants might face during data collection, specifically regarding the provincial meet. The researcher implemented several steps to reduce disturbances during data collection, as the process did not interfere with the respondents' game preparation or rest time. The researcher protected the participant's well-being by adhering to ethical principles throughout the research.

The gathered information was prepared, and a statistical evaluation was conducted after data collection. The researcher maintained ethical research standards and considered participants' time commitments, making the study methodologically strong while respecting respondents' well-being. Such a procedure produces reliable research findings and upholds high-quality research methods.

Moreover, the researcher complied with the Data Privacy Act of 2012, which requires the establishment of comprehensive protocols to protect the privacy of respondents and to secure all personal information from the beginning to the end of this research. In this study, moreover, the researcher provided full disclosure of the methods used for information handling, along with safeguards to protect the information, such as the use of an informed consent form and an assent form. The researcher also upholds the right to anonymity by making their names optional in the survey questionnaires that they answered. These protective measures enabled the researcher to conduct ethically sound research by upholding the rights, privacy, and general welfare of the respondents.

Ethical Considerations. The researcher ensured that all ethical criteria were complied with. This research protocol underwent a thorough review by the University of Immaculate Conception Research Ethics Committee.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Level of Athletic Identity of Student-Athletes

Table 1 shows that the overall level of athletic identity among student-athletes is 4.07, indicating a high level and suggesting that athletic identity is often evident. It implies that students strongly prioritize their role as athletes. This often leads to greater dedication and performance in sports. This also implies resilience and adaptability, helping individuals thrive even when facing challenges such as injury or leaving sports. In addition, the overall standard deviation is 0.60, which is less than 1, indicating that the respondents' ratings are clustered around the mean.

This finding supports the study by Meca et al. (2023), which found that athletes with a strong athletic identity demonstrate exceptional focus, discipline, and sustained motivation, driving peak performance in their sport. Moreover, the findings align with the study by Edisone and Rizzone (2023), which found that students with a heightened sense of athletic identity were more likely to engage in rigorous training regimens and display greater resilience in the face of sports-related challenges. Additionally, the result is in consonance with the study of Butler et al. (2022), who emphasized that athletes with high athletic identity received higher dedication and performance in the sports that they chose, enabling them to attain resilience and thrive in different challenges.

Table 1
Level of Athletic Identity of Student-Athletes

Indicators	Mean	SD	Description
Prominence	3.98	.71	High
Self-worth Contingency	4.18	.58	High
Self-presentation	3.95	.85	High
Social Reinforcement	4.15	.62	High
Overall Mean	4.07	.60	High

Level of Sports Imagery Ability of the Student-Athletes

Table 2 presents the level of sports imagery ability among student-athletes. An overall mean of 4.25, described as very high, is reported, indicating that sports imagery ability is demonstrated at all times. These findings suggest greater capacity to mentally rehearse success, manage anxiety, and adapt to challenges, supporting both performance optimization and resilience in competitive settings. Additionally, the overall standard deviation is 0.52, which

is less than 1, suggesting that the ratings are clustered near the mean.

Research findings support Akbar et al. (2022) by showing that athletes who use regular sports imagery gain better concentration. The results support findings by Minoso (2024), who found that sports imagery enhances athletic psychological capabilities and physiological athleticism. The finding aligns with that of Di Corrado et al. (2020), who found that using sports imagery ability helps athletes gain better emotional control, thus enabling them to approach unforeseen sports situations more effectively.

Table 2
Level of Sports Imagery Ability of the Respondents

Indicators	Mean	SD	Description
Strategy Images	4.17	.63	High
Goal Images	4.23	.73	Very High
Affect Images	4.34	.60	Very High
Skill Images	4.26	.61	Very High
Overall Mean	4.25	.52	Very High

Level of Sports Engagement of Student-Athletes

Table 3 shows that the overall mean sports engagement of the student-athletes is 4.29. It is described as very high, indicating that sports engagement is consistently manifested. The overall standard deviation is 0.52, indicating that respondents' responses are closer to the mean. This means that student-athletes have a passionate, active commitment to athletics, which drives personal growth through resilience, discipline, and physical mastery as they pursue excellence in their chosen sport.

This finding supports the study by Mei (2024), which found that high levels of sports engagement are associated with better physical fitness, improved mental health, and a stronger sense of community among athletes. Moreover, the finding corroborates the ideas of Liu and Chang (2024), who emphasized that higher student engagement is associated with greater social support and camaraderie, which positively impact their motivation to continue participating in sports activities. Likewise, the finding aligns with Pasno's (2024) study, which stressed that athletes who actively engage in their sports demonstrate higher levels of resilience and adaptability when faced with obstacles, both in and out of athletic contexts.

Table 3
Level of Sports Engagement among Student-Athletes.

Indicators	Mean	SD	Description
Vigor	4.27	.59	Very High
Dedication	4.35	.58	Very High
Absorption	4.24	.57	Very High
Over-all Mean	4.29	.52	Very High

Significance of the Relationship of Athletic Identity, Sports Imagery Ability, and Sports Engagement

The correlation of the variables is presented in Table 4. It is shown that athletic identity has a strong positive relationship with sports engagement, with an R-value of .76 and a p-value of .00, which is less than the alpha set at .05, two-tailed, supporting a significant relationship. It means that as athletic identity increases, sports engagement also increases significantly. It implies that greater physical skill and talent fuel deeper commitment to sports, enhancing performance, enjoyment, and sustained participation. This synergy promotes confidence, goal achievement, and a thriving athletic identity, empowering individuals to inspire peers and contribute meaningfully to their sport’s culture and community.

The finding corroborates Valbuena's (2024) study, which found that athletes who strongly associate their sense of self with their athletic identity consistently display greater sports engagement. Moreover, the finding aligns with Choudhury et al. (2024), who emphasized that student-athletes with higher athletic identity exhibit long, sustained sports engagement. Also, the findings confirm those of Liu and Noh (2024), who claimed that athletes with a strong athletic identity show strong sports engagement, are deeply involved in sports, and that this engagement extends their athletic identity.

In a similar manner, sports imagery ability shows a strong, significant positive relationship with sports engagement ($r = .82, p < .05$). This suggests that as the level of sports imagery increases, sports engagement increases. It implies that students who vividly visualize techniques, strategies, and success are more likely to invest deeply in their sport, fueling motivation and goal attainment. This connection highlights how mental rehearsal enhances passion, preparation, and persistence, promoting sustained athletic growth and enjoyment in their journey.

Table 4
Significance of the Relationship of Athletic Identity, Sports Imagery Ability and Sports Engagement

Paired Variables	r	p-value	Remarks
Athletic Identity and Sports Engagement	.76	.00	Significant
Sports Imagery Ability and Sports Engagement	.82	.00	Significant

Moreover, this finding aligned with Armstrong's (2023) study, which found that athletes enhance their confidence and maintain continuous involvement through mental visualization of achievement. This finding was parallel to that of Chow and Li (2021), who emphasized that athletes who master the skill of sports imagery develop stronger bonds with their sport and increase their dedication to athletic activities. Waqar (2024) found that athletes with well-developed sports imagery abilities use mental visualization tools to overcome obstacles, thereby enhancing their athletic dedication.

Significance of the Influence of Athletic Identity, Sports Imagery Ability, and Sports Engagement

Table 5 presents the results of the multiple regression analysis. In terms of singular capacity, athletic identity shows a p-value of .000, which is below the .05 level of significance (2-tailed), with a positive standardized beta of 0.36. It shows that athletic identity is a significant predictor of sports engagement. It means that for every unit increase in the level of athletic identity, there is a corresponding increase of 0.36 in the level of sports engagement.

Likewise, in a singular capacity, the independent variable, sports imagery ability, reflects a positive standardized beta value of .56 and a p-value of .000, which is less than the .05 level of significance, 2-tailed. It means that in a singular capacity, athletic imagery ability is a significant predictor of sports engagement. This implies that athletes who strongly identify with their role and can vividly visualize performance scenarios are more likely to remain committed and actively engage in their sport.

In addition, the combined influence of the two independent variables, athletic identity and sports imagery ability, on the sports engagement is significant ($F=340.32$, $(p < .05)$). Meanwhile, the model explains 84 percent of the variance of the sports engagement based on the independent variables included in this study, as indicated by $R^2 = .84$. This result means that 16 percent of the variance in the sports engagement can be attributed to other factors aside

from athletic identity and sports athletic imagery ability.

This finding aligns with Valbuena's (2024) study, which found that the concept of athletic identity serves as the primary psychological foundation motivating athletes to invest more deeply in sports and physical activities. Moreover, the finding aligned with that of Edison et al. (2021), who highlighted that through athletic identity, people sustain their commitment to sports across their entire lives after competitive competition has ended.

The findings confirmed those of Waqar (2024), who found that the ability to use sports imagery is a key factor affecting sports engagement and helps athletes gain better focus and elevated motivation to perform in sports activities. The findings also echoed Armstrong's (2023) study, which found that athletes use mental imagery to picture success, which strengthens their confidence and promotes sustained involvement. Moreover, the finding corroborated that of O'Neil et al. (2021), who emphasized that sports imagery ability serves as a dual-purpose skill, facilitating visualization of success while boosting motivation.

Table 5
Significance of the Influence of Athletic Identity, and Sports Imagery Ability on Sports Engagement

Singular Influence of the Predictors	Standardized Coefficients	t	p-value	Remarks
Athletic Identity	0.36	7.81	.000	Significant
Sports Imagery Ability	0.56	12.08	.000	Significant
Combined Influence of the Predictors				
R	.86			
R ²	.84			
F	340.32			
p	.00			Significant

Based on the results, this study confirms Ajzen’s (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior, which suggests that student-athletes in public schools who hold positive sporting attitudes, perceive strong social support, and possess confidence in managing performance and time are more likely to engage consistently in sports. These student-athletes, whose intention to engage in sports activities is shaped not only by attitudes and perceived behavioral control but also by their social environment.

Sport participants benefit from Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self-Determination Theory because the framework explains how athletic identity interacts with sports imagery for sports engagement. Athletes who develop a robust athletic identity tend to stay intrinsically involved in sports, and their imagery capabilities help them assess their sporting competence more effectively, leading to better sports engagement. According to the theory, social support ratings from others and an athlete's sense of action control jointly determine their decision to join sports competitions. The combination of a strong athletic identity and high sports imagery ability leads athletes to maintain meaningful sports engagement, which positively supports their athletic development and personal growth.

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