

Female Swimmer-Athletes in Zamboanga City: Their Stories of Success and Challenges

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Abstract: *This study aimed to reveal the stories of success and challenges of female swimmer-athletes in Zamboanga City. The researchers utilized a descriptive-qualitative research design using an interview guide. There were 12 female swimmer-athletes who participated in the online interview. The responses were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings of this study showed that there were several factors motivating female swimmers to be an athlete. These are developing survival skills, bringing honor and pride to their families, school, and city, and being socially influenced by friends and parents. Female swimmer-athletes are preparing themselves for competition through mental and physical conditioning. Female swimmer-athletes encountered different challenges. These include social challenges (lack of time to socialize and difficulty to establish bonds with others), physical challenges (experiencing tiredness and body pain), academic aspects (academic pressure), and emotional aspects (anxiety and fear, emotionally tired and pressured and lastly, disappointment). To overcome the challenges encountered, the female swimmer-athletes used different coping strategies such as acceptance, development of positive virtues, and having a social support system.*

Keywords: Athletes, Challenges, Coping Strategies, Motivation, Preparation, Swimmers

1. INTRODUCTION

Sport is a competitive physical activity that aims to use, maintain or improve physical ability and skills while providing entertainment to the participants, and spectators. Sport is generally recognized as activities that are based on physical athleticism or physical dexterity, with the largest major competitions such as the Olympic Games.

There are several sports that exist that are being played in teams, in pairs, or individuals. In individual sports, there is only one player competing against themselves. One of these individual sports is swimming. Swimming is a sport that involves the use of the entire body to move through the water in pools or open water (e.g., in a sea or lake). Competitive swimming is one of the most popular Olympic sports, with varied distance events in butterfly, backstroke, breaststroke, freestyle, and individual medley (Bien, 2016).

Nonetheless, swimming is considered an underrated sport because it is being perceived as boring and will not generate revenues (Kaczor, 2021). However, swimmer athletes spend most of their time and efforts in training, since swimming is one of the most physically and mentally demanding sports. With the nature of this sport, this will be challenging for female swimmer-athletes. It was observed, that female swimmers undergo hard training since swimming requires full-body preparations. The training starts from 5:00 to 7:00 am and 5:00 to 7:00 pm.

In Zamboanga City, female swimmer-athletes brought recognitions and awards when competing in various swimming competitions. With these, the researchers aimed to reveal the stories of the success and challenges of female swimmer-athletes in Zamboanga City. Specifically, the researchers aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What motivates the female swimmers to be an athlete?
2. What are preparations undertaken by the female swimmer before a competition?
3. What are the challenges encountered by the female swimmers in terms of the aspects:
 - a. Physical
 - b. Mental
 - c. Social
 - d. Academic
4. What are the coping strategies used by the female swimmer-athletes to overcome those challenges?

2. METHODS

Research Design

In facilitating the gathering of data, methods will be used depending on the purpose and scope for which the study was undertaken. This study utilized a descriptive-qualitative research design using an interview guide to reveal the stories of success and challenges encountered by female swimmer-athletes.

Respondents of the Study

There were 12 female swimmer-athletes from Zamboanga City who participated in this study. They were selected through purposive sampling. These female swimmer-athletes won in various swimming competitions. Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the female swimmer-athletes.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of the Female Swimmers

Variables		Frequency	Percentage
Age	12-15	3	25%
	16-18	9	75%
Educational Attainment	Junior High School	3	25%
	Senior High School	4	33.33%
	College	5	41.6%
Types of Competitions Participated	City Level	2	16.6%
	Regional Level	7	58.3%
	National Level	3	25%

Research Instruments

The researchers utilized a semi-structured interview. An interview guide was used which contains 9 open-ended questions, to explore the motivations, preparations, and coping strategies of the female swimmer-athletes. The interview guide was validated by two experts.

Data Gathering Procedure

The researchers sent an invitation letter to the identified female swimmer-athletes from different accredited swimming clubs in Zamboanga City. Only those female swimmer-athletes who responded were given informed consent and scheduled for an online interview. On the appointed date, the female swimmer-athletes were interviewed using an interview guide via Google meet. The interviews were recorded and the conversations were transcribed.

Analysis of Data

To analyze the responses of the respondents, the researchers utilized thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), as cited by Kiger and Varpio (2020), thematic analysis is a method used in identifying, analyzing, and reporting qualitative data. It is being applied to a set of texts, such as interview transcripts. The researchers closely examined the data to identify common themes – topics, ideas, and patterns of meaning that occurred repeatedly.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Motivation of Female Swimmers as Athletes

In sports, great motivation is usually regarded as a necessary condition for athletes to reach their full potential (Taylor, 2009). In this study, the female swimmers revealed their motivations for being an athlete. Below are the themes and some responses of the respondents:

Survival Skills

“I wanted to learn swimming for survival skills” – FR1

Female-swimmer is motivated to learn swimming because the respondent believes that it is an essential skill that can save lives. This finding concurs with the idea of Mael (1995), that swimming is a survival skill that needs to be reestablished in the public consciousness. Hence, swimming skills can save people from drowning (Ekanayaka, 2021).

Honor and Pride

"I wanted to bring honor and pride to the homeland" – FR2

"The things that motivate me is to bring honor to my homeland..." – FR4

"Bringing honor and pride to my family and my school..." – FR6

Female swimmers are also motivated to be an athlete because they want to bring honor and pride to their family, school, and to the city. Hence, bringing honor is more valuable than any material as perceived by national athletes like Hidilyn Diaz (Pabalate, 2021). Thus, honor and pride is powerful motivator for female swimmer-athletes to achieve more. In families, some parents felt a greater sense of pride when their child became successful in the chosen field (Kay, 2000). Further, bringing honor and pride to the school gives the athletes a sense of ownership because they contributed something to the school (Meador, 2020).

In terms of bringing honor and pride to the city, the local government gives incentives. For instance, in Zamboanga City, athletes who won in a competition receive the following incentives: a gold medal is equivalent to P1,000 cash, while silver and bronze medals are worth P700 and P500, respectively (Garcia, 2010). Grouios (2002) revealed that incentives are important for athletes to enhance their level of motivation towards sporting activities.

Social Influence

"I was just invited by my friend when I was in 3rd grade to learn swimming..." – FR6

"It all started at the Regency's Pool and I just got jealous of those people that know how to swim deep in the pool so after that I've started my swimming lessons." – FR5

"I being a swimmer wasn't planned, my parents just want me to learn how to swim..." – FR7

"I wanted to be a swimmer because I was encouraged by my mom..." – FR8

Lastly, female swimmers are motivated to be an athlete because they were socially influenced by their friends and parents. Parents greatly influence their children's involvement in sports. According to Fredrick (2004) as cited by Neely *et al.*, (2014) parents provide their children an opportunity to participate in sports programs. Further, friends can also motivate female swimmers to be an athlete because young individuals tend to be active in physical activities if they have companions (Salvy *et al.*, 2009).

Preparations of Female Swimmers before the Competition

In sports, preparation is an essential component because it prevents injury and makes athletes well-prepared for competitions (Johnson, 1998). Below shows the different preparations of female swimmer athletes.

Mental Conditioning

"Just think positive to avoid being nervous ..." – FR1

"I'm doing mental preparation by sleeping early ..." – FR5

"... practicing positive self, and lastly praying." – FR12

Female-swimmer athletes are preparing themselves mentally by having a positive mindset, sleeping early, and praying. A positive mindset can assist athletes in remaining motivated while avoiding the feeling of overwhelm and anxiety. Having a positive mindset, requires time, effort, and constant maintenance, but it helps an individual to perform well (Quinn, 2021). In terms on sleeping early, this kind of preparation aid athletes in memory development and contributes to the improvement of performance in the future when practicing new skills. Thus, this sleeping early is beneficial to female-swimmer athletes since swimming requires a high level of cognitive function, such as decision-making and adjusting to new situations (Rehman, 2021). Further, many athletes pray for their safety, success, and to show support for their team (Eke, 2019).

Physical Conditioning

"I usually start it with heavy training to warm up my muscles ..." – FR2

"I practice my physical body most of the time..." – FR3

"I practice my physical body ..." – FR4

"We trained hard before the competition and prepare ourselves for it..." – FR6

"... we have preparations just like hard training..." – FR8

"I undergo hard training, cardio meals, balanced diet..." – FR7

Female-swimmer also prepares themselves physically by having hard training such as having warm-up, practicing cardio breathing techniques, and attending gym sessions. Warm-up is important because it helps female swimmer-athletes to avoid cramps when swimming. Further, practicing cardio breathing allow female-swimmer athletes to build composure. Female-swimmer athletes also attend gym sessions to build body muscles which is essential for arming and kicking. With these, female swimmer-athletes become more fit, and they will be able to swim longer and farther (Hassard, 2012).

Female-swimmer athletes also observed proper nutrition and diet such as eating healthy foods and drinking plenty of water. A balanced diet is a crucial and useful approach for swimmers to keep in shape during the season. Further, a healthy diet can supply the energy needed by swimmers to complete a race (Dunn, 2020).

Challenges Encountered by Female Swimmers in Different Aspects

Challenges refer to the difficulty encountered by athletes in preparation for competitions like swimming. Challenges can be encountered in terms of social, physical, academic, and emotional aspects. Social challenges pertain to the problems encountered by the female swimmer-athletes towards interacting with other people. Below are the social challenges encountered by the female swimmer-athletes:

Lack of Time to Socialize

"... I was not able to attend because I spend more time in practicing for upcoming competition" – FR1

"That would probably be having a short time to socialize with my friends and family" – FR2

"Limited amount to socialize with friends" – FR4

"... I couldn't hang out with my friends and I'm always absent to our gatherings..." – FR6

"I don't have time to socialize with other people..." – FR10

One of the challenges encountered by female swimmer athletes in terms of social aspects is the lack of time to socialize. Some female swimmer-athletes failed to attend family or friend gatherings due to limited time. Hence, they are having heavy training. According to Richards (1999) as cited by Griffith and Johnson (2002) being an athlete is considered to be the most time-consuming extracurricular activity. Further, Griffith & Johnson (2002) pointed out that athletes must sacrifice time with friends and other outside activities to practice and perform.

Difficulty to Establish Bonds with Others

"Hard to socialize with other competitors in competitions" – FR3

"Maybe the challenges I encountered... is that making new friends..." – FR8

"It is hard for me to socialize or to make new friends." – FR11

"As a swimmer, you will get to know a lot of people from different places so you will encounter different culture and you need to adjust to them to have social interaction" – FR7

One of the challenges that female swimmer-athletes encountered is the difficulty to establish bonds with others. Some female swimmer-athletes met new people during competitions from different cultures and it makes them difficult to adjust and socialize. Female swimmer-athletes must establish relationships with other people because sports also aimed to build camaraderie with one another. To achieve this, the differences among athletes must be addressed (Brown, 2017).

Female swimmer-athletes also encountered physical challenges. This kind of challenge pertains to the problem encountered in their body whenever they do hard training like fatigue, back pains, and exhaustion. Below are the physical challenges encountered by the female swimmer-athletes:

Tiredness

"I tend to suffer from lack of sleep and fatigue because of training" – FR1

"Because of intensive training, I suffer sore muscles and lack of sleeping time" – FR3

"My body is always exhausted after intense training" – FR4

"... I suffer sore muscles and lack of sleeping time" – FR3

One of the challenges encountered by female-swimmer athletes is tiredness. Female swimmer-athletes revealed that they experienced lack of sleep and fatigue because of training. The kind of training program had a significant impact on how much sleep they were able to get, and swimmers spent less time in bed and got less sleep on training days than they did on rest days (Sargent *et al.*, 2014). Athletes are exposed to a variety of loads throughout training, many of which are beyond their ability to handle. This causes fatigue to build up if there is no enough rest (Domenico & Railoa, 2021).

Body Pain

"...I suffer from exhaustion, sore muscles and back pain" – FR2

"Actually none so far but sometimes body pains." – FR5

"... I am having body pains, sore muscles and I feel exhausted." – FR6

"...I've encountered a lot of sprains, backaches, and headaches during the competition." – FR7

Another physical challenge encountered by female swimmer-athletes is experiencing body pain. Since most of them engaged in heavy training, it is expected that they will experience back pain, sore muscles, headaches, and backaches. All strokes in swimming caused body pain and back pain. In contrast to breaststrokes, freestylers were more likely to experience shoulder soreness and sore muscles. Painful injuries can be induced by one-time microtraumas that eventually lead to an overuse injury. Swimmers should be carefully treated for conditions that contribute to overuse injuries so that they can return to swimming safely (Capaci, *et al.*, 2002).

Another challenge that the female swimmers encountered is academic challenges. This challenge pertains to the problem encountered in their academic performance. Below are the academic challenges encountered by female swimmer-athletes:

Unable to Balance Swimming with Studies

"... I have trouble complying on time because of training and I'm having trouble balancing the two." – FR1

"Tend to be left out with activities because of training I'm unable to balance studying with swimming" – FR2

"Having trouble to maintain high grades and to balance swimming and studies." – FR3

"We have to do requirements and we have to pass it on time and sometimes we are behind from our lessons so it's challenging for us as a swimmer and also a student." – FR8

"I experience behind in class especially when we are in training for an upcoming competition..." – FR9

One of the challenges encountered by female swimmer-athletes is unable to balance time. Female swimmer-athletes experienced that they are experiencing difficulty in balancing academics and training, leading to poor compliance of requirements. According to Gianna (2018) as cited by Billonid *et al.*, (2020), students who have sports careers find difficulty in managing and balancing their responsibility as student-athletes.

Academic Pressure

"It is really hard because I'm a consistent honor student since grade school so I have to balance my studies and swimming career." – FR5

"I need to balance my life as a student and as a swimmer since I'm learning and growing..." – FR12

Some female swimmer-athletes experienced academic pressure because they are academic achievers. Further, the female swimmer-athletes spend long and vigorous hours in training, at the same time, they need to perform academic tasks for them to obtain good grades. According to Herring (2018) as cited by Apaak *et al.*, (2015) This challenge is common to those who are student-athletes.

Lastly, female swimmer-athletes encountered emotional challenges. This kind of challenge pertains to the problem encountered in their emotions. Female swimmer-athletes experienced anxiety and fear about their opponent and they overthink a lot causing anxiety. Below are the emotional challenges encountered by female swimmer-athletes:

Anxiety and Fear

"Whenever there are competitions I feel anxious about my other opponents" – FR1

"I tend to build up different scenarios in winning and losing that I overthink often" – FR2

"Fear, because sometimes I'm overthinking..." – FR5

"... I tend to overthink and it's causing me anxiety...." – FR6

Female-swimmer athletes experienced anxiety and fear because of the exhaustion, body pains they experience, fear of losing in a competition or fear on not be able to perform their sport well. Fear of failure is an example of a stressor that any athletes face. Negative thoughts and concerns about failing in competitions rose as a result of their fear of failure. Thus, it will decrease the self-confidence and motivation of female-swimmer athletes.

Emotionally Tired and Pressured

"I suffer from stress because of multitasking multiple things" – FR4

"I'm tired emotionally because of training" – FR10

One of the challenges in terms of emotions, encountered by female-swimmer athletes is being emotionally tired and pressured. Hence, female-swimmer athletes revealed that they performed multitasking activities and are exposed to training. The mental power of an athlete in the sport of swimming is critical because they are fighting not only against other swimmers in the water but also against themselves and on their own. In the physical sense, when an athlete competes alone, they depend solely on their ability and lack the backing of a team. As a result, to cope with the stress of training and competitions, swimmers must be mentally strong (Sorna, 2016).

Disappointment

"...whenever I didn't win any medals I tend to be sad and emotional..." – FR7

"... it is also pressuring me because my parents are expecting too much from me." – FR11

The female-swimmer athletes also pointed out that being disappointed is a challenge encountered by them. In some instances, female swimmer-athletes undergo high levels of sadness, due to parental and coach pressure. Many athletes are disappointed because they failed to meet the expectations of their coaches and parents (Gilbert *et al.*, 2007). The idolization of their achievements can lead to extreme and persistent worry about criticism and rejection.

Coping Strategies of Female Swimmers used to Overcome the Challenges

Coping strategies are behavioral and cognitive tactics used to manage crises, conditions, and demands that are appraised as distressing (Rubinlicht, 2011). Different existing coping strategies can be used to overcome challenges (Blum, 2012). Below are the coping strategies used by the female swimmer-athletes to overcome their challenges:

Acceptance

"...I accept that there will be challenges along the way" – FR1

"The coping styles I use is that to lower my expectation..." – FR8

One of the coping strategies used by female-swimmer athletes is acceptance. Female-swimmer athletes accept their losses and lower their expectations. Accepting things and lowering expectations will make athletes happier. Further, acceptance and lowering of expectations serve as steps to achieve desired goals (Cho & Cho, 2018).

Development of Positive Virtues

"...to have a positive mindset and to boost my self-esteem" – FR2

"Having a positive mindset, raising my self-esteem and having a time management." – FR6

"I just need to have a positive mind..." – FR7

"I just trust myself and my gut feeling, and just be happy." – FR9

"...I believed in myself and I'm cheering myself and I need to work hard..." – FR11

"...I lower my expectations and taking responsibility and lastly I pray." – FR12

Another coping strategy used by female-swimmer athletes is to develop virtues such as maintaining a positive mind set, boosting self-esteem, making time management, being faithful, and being motivated. Having positive virtues is an important component to increase and enhance the self-efficacy and behavior of athletes (Shahbazzadegan, *et al.*, 2013).

Social Support System

“Have a circle of friends that support you and encourage you to keep going” – FR3

“...I did pursue swimming because of my parents and friends...” – FR5

Another coping strategy used by female swimmer-athletes is having a social support system. Female-swimmer athletes experienced support from their families and friends. Parents who support the involvement of their children in sports and allow them to have an active role in their own decisions gave a positive influence on their children's sports development. Meanwhile, peer support is one of the main reasons why athletes participate in organized and unorganized sports, motivated to practice their sports and have development (Coutinho, *et al.*, 2021). According to Paul (2014) as cited by Collins *et al* (n.d) sports participation of the athletes is more likely to increase when they receive informational, appreciable, emotional, and fix support from their parents and peers. Family and peer support to the athletes in sports participation like encouragement, praise, and joint participation (Eime *et al.*, 2013).

4. CONCLUSION

There were several factors motivating female swimmer to be an athletes. These are developing survival skills, bringing honor and pride, and social influence. Female swimmer-athletes are preparing themselves for competition in terms on mental and physical aspects. Female swimmer-athletes encountered different challenges in terms of social aspect (lack of time to socialize and difficult to establish bonds with others), physical aspect (experiencing tiredness and body pain), academic aspect (academic pressure), and emotional aspect (anxiety and fear, emotionally tired and pressured, and disappointment). The coping strategies used by female swimmer-athletes are acceptance, development of positive virtues and to have social support system.

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