

Gender and Emotional Regulation in Athletes and Non-Athletes

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ABSTRACT

This study examines emotional regulation strategies across gender identities (male, female, and transgender) and athletic statuses (athletes and non-athletes) in India, focusing on cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression. A cross-sectional design was employed, involving 240 participants (80 males, 80 females, and 80 transgender individuals). Data were collected using the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ) and Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS). Descriptive and inferential statistics were used for analysis. Athletes demonstrated significantly higher cognitive reappraisal ($M = 5.2, SD = 1.1$) than non-athletes ($M = 4.5, SD = 1.3, p < .001$). Gender differences showed females favoring cognitive reappraisal, while males exhibited higher expressive suppression. Transgender individuals displayed intermediate patterns. Cognitive reappraisal and athletic identity were positively correlated ($r = 0.42, p < .001$) and it underscores the psychological benefits of athletic engagement. Tailored mental health interventions are crucial to address these differences. Such programs focus on promoting adaptive regulation strategies, especially for non-athletes and transgender individuals, to enhance overall well-being. The findings underscore the psychological benefits of athletic engagement and the importance of inclusivity in mental health support frameworks.

Keywords: *Emotional Regulation, Athletes, Non-Athletes, Gender Differences, Athletic Identity*

The ability to identify, control, and modify emotional reactions is known as emotional regulation, and it is essential for psychological health and good performance in a variety of fields. Cognitive reappraisal, an adaptive strategy that reframes situations to reduce emotional impact, contrasts with expressive suppression, a less effective strategy focusing on concealing emotions (Gross, 2014).

Athletes operate in high-pressure environments, necessitating advanced emotional regulation strategies to optimize performance under stress (Beckmann & Kellmann, 2018). Non-athletes, lacking structured stress management contexts, often rely on suppression. Gender differences further shape emotional regulation, with females favoring reappraisal due to societal expectations, while males exhibit higher suppression (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2012). Transgender people deal with particular issues, such as discrimination and social stigma, which affect how they manage their emotions (Meyer, 2003).

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The Indian cultural context adds complexity. Collectivist norms emphasizing group harmony often discourage overt emotional expression, particularly in men. Despite the increasing recognition of gender diversity and sports inclusion in India, there is limited research exploring the intersection of gender identity, athletic status, and emotional regulation.

This study aims to bridge the gap in understanding how gender identity and athletic status influence emotional regulation strategies within the Indian cultural context. Specifically, it seeks to examine whether athletes exhibit a stronger preference for adaptive strategies like cognitive reappraisal compared to non-athletes, and how these strategies vary across gender identities, including males, females, and transgender individuals. Furthermore, the research explores the role of athletic identity in shaping emotional regulation patterns. It is anticipated that the results would highlight the significance of inclusivity in sports psychology and emotional well-being programs and offer insightful information for culturally appropriate mental health interventions.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Emotional Regulation Strategies in Athletes and Non-Athletes

Emotional regulation is a critical determinant of psychological resilience and coping capacity, particularly in high-pressure environments like sports. Athletes frequently rely on cognitive reappraisal, an adaptive strategy that allows them to reframe stressful situations positively, enabling focus and improved performance under stress (Lundqvist & Andersson, 2019). Conversely, non-athletes frequently employ expressive suppression, a tactic that entails hiding emotional reactions. Poorer psychological effects, like elevated stress and diminished well-being, have been linked to suppression (Beckmann & Kellmann, 2018).

In the Indian context, structured emotional regulation training is less common among non-athletes, as sports engagement is not uniformly emphasized in educational systems. This raises concerns about the emotional resilience of non-athletic populations and underscores the need for interventions that cultivate adaptive strategies beyond the athletic domain.

Gender Differences in Emotional Regulation

Research highlights distinct gender-based patterns in emotional regulation. Females are more likely to engage in cognitive reappraisal, reflecting societal norms encouraging emotional expression and reflection (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2012). Males, in contrast, often resort to expressive suppression, driven by traditional expectations of stoicism and emotional restraint (Tamres et al., 2021).

Transgender individuals experience unique emotional regulation challenges shaped by minority stress, including societal stigma and discrimination. Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 2003) explains how these stressors result in increased reliance on suppression as a protective mechanism. Studies in supportive environments demonstrate that transgender individuals can adopt adaptive strategies such as cognitive reappraisal when systemic barriers are addressed (Hargons et al., 2021).

Despite global advancements in understanding gender differences in emotional regulation, research on transgender individuals, particularly in India, remains limited. By investigating the relationship between gender identification and emotional regulation within a culturally specific framework, the current study aims to close this gap.

Cultural Influences on Emotional Regulation in India

Cultural norms significantly influence emotional regulation patterns. India's collectivist society prioritizes social harmony, often discouraging overt emotional expression to avoid conflict within groups (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). This cultural emphasis on restraint can perpetuate reliance on suppression strategies, especially among males, while females may experience greater freedom in expressing and reframing emotions.

The growing acceptance of gender diversity and mental health awareness in India provides an opportunity to explore how cultural shifts influence emotional regulation strategies. In order to create culturally aware solutions that meet the requirements of various groups, it is imperative to comprehend these dynamics.

Athletic Identity and Emotional Regulation

The degree to which a person identifies with the role of an athlete is known as their athletic identity. Given that athletes regularly face situations demanding rapid emotional adaptation and resilience, there has been a favorable correlation shown between the use of cognitive reappraisal and a strong athletic identity (Brewer & Cornelius, 2019). Conversely, disruptions to athletic identity, such as injuries or transitions out of competitive sports, can lead to maladaptive strategies, including increased reliance on suppression (Sinden, 2020).

Little emphasis has been placed on how athletic identity shapes emotional control in the Indian context. This study aims to investigate how athletic identity influences cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression among athletes and non-athletes, providing insights into the psychological benefits of sports engagement.

Gaps in the Literature

Although extensive research has explored emotional regulation, significant gaps remain:

- 1. Intersectionality:** Limited studies have examined the combined effects of gender identity, athletic status, and cultural context on emotional regulation strategies.
- 2. Transgender Representation:** Most studies focus on cisgender populations, with minimal representation of transgender individuals, particularly in India.
- 3. Cultural Relevance:** Few studies consider how collectivist norms and traditional gender roles influence emotional regulation in Indian society.

This study addresses these gaps by examining emotional regulation strategies across male, female, and transgender individuals in both athletic and non-athletic contexts, with a specific focus on India. By exploring these intersections, it seeks to inform culturally and gender-sensitive mental health interventions.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employed a quantitative cross-sectional research design and snowball sampling to examine differences in emotional regulation strategies across three gender identities (male, female, and transgender) and two athletic statuses (athletes and non-athletes). A cross-sectional approach was chosen for its ability to provide a snapshot of group differences and interaction effects, offering valuable insights into the relationships between gender identity, athletic status, and emotional regulation strategies.

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Objectives

1. To compare emotional regulation strategies (cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression) between athletes and non-athletes.
2. To analyze gender differences in emotional regulation strategies across males, females, and transgender individuals.
3. To explore the relationship between athletic identity and emotional regulation strategies.
4. To examine the interaction effects of gender identity and athletic status on emotional regulation.

Hypotheses

1. **H1:** Athletes will exhibit significantly greater use of cognitive reappraisal compared to non-athletes.
2. **H2:** Non-athletes will demonstrate higher levels of expressive suppression compared to athletes.
3. **H3:** Gender identity will significantly influence emotional regulation strategies, with females and transgender individuals favoring cognitive reappraisal and males exhibiting higher expressive suppression.
4. **H4:** Athletic identity will positively correlate with cognitive reappraisal and negatively correlate with expressive suppression.

Participants

The study included 240 participants, equally distributed across gender identities (80 males, 80 females, and 80 transgender individuals) and athletic statuses (120 athletes and 120 non-athletes).

- **Inclusion Criteria:**
 - Age: 18–24 years.
 - Gender Identity: Self-identified as male, female, or transgender.
 - Athletes: Engaged in structured physical training for 1-5 hours per day.
 - Non-athletes: No regular involvement in structured athletic activities.
- **Exclusion Criteria:**
 - Chronic physical or mental health conditions significantly affecting emotional regulation.
 - Inconsistent participation in athletic activities (for athletes).

Instruments

1. **Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ):**
 - Assesses two emotional regulation strategies: cognitive reappraisal (6 items) and expressive suppression (4 items). (Gross & John, 2017).
 - Responses recorded on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree). (Gross & John, 2017).
 - Demonstrates robust reliability and validity across diverse populations (Gross & John, 2017).
2. **Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS):**
 - Measures the degree of identification with an athletic role. (Brewer & Cornelius, 2019).

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- Includes 7 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating stronger athletic identity. (Brewer & Cornelius, 2019).
- Validated in sports psychology research (Brewer & Cornelius, 2019).

3. Demographic Questionnaire:

- Collected information on participant age, gender identity, athletic status, training hours, and self-reported health.

Procedure

1. Recruitment:

- Participants were recruited through university sports programs, student organizations, and online platforms.
- Efforts were made to ensure inclusivity, particularly among transgender participants.

2. Informed Consent:

- Participants were provided with detailed information about the study's objectives, risks, and benefits.
- Written informed consent was obtained prior to participation.

3. Data Collection:

- Data were collected using an online survey platform to ensure anonymity and accessibility.
- Participants completed the demographic questionnaire, ERQ, and AIMS in sequence, taking approximately 20 minutes.

4. Data Screening:

- Responses were screened for completeness and consistency. Incomplete or invalid responses were excluded from analysis.

Data Analysis

1. Descriptive Statistics:

- Each variable's mean, standard deviation, and frequency were determined.

2. Independent Samples t-tests:

- Compared emotional regulation strategies between athletes and non-athletes.

3. Two-Way ANOVA:

- Examined interaction effects of gender identity and athletic status on emotional regulation strategies.

4. Pearson Correlation Analysis:

- Explored relationships between athletic identity and emotional regulation strategies.

5. Statistical Significance:

- Results were considered statistically significant at $p < .05$.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical guidelines for human research. Key measures included:

- Maintaining participant anonymity and confidentiality.
- Ensuring voluntary participation with the option to withdraw at any time without repercussions.
- Securely storing data for research purposes only.

RESULTS

Table 1 Reliability of Scales Used in the Study

Instrument	Subscale	Cronbach's Alpha
Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ)	Cognitive Reappraisal	0.82
	Expressive Suppression	0.79
Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS)	Athletic Identity	0.85

Note. Cronbach's alpha values indicate acceptable to good internal consistency for all subscales, calculated based on responses from 240 participants.

Table 2 Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Group	Males (n = 80)	Females (n = 80)	Transgender (n = 80)	Total (n = 240)
Athletes	40	40	40	120
Non-athletes	40	40	40	120
Age (M, SD)	21.2, 1.9	21.3, 1.8	21.1, 1.7	21.2, 1.8

Note. Age values are reported as mean (M) and standard deviation (SD). Males, females, and transgender participants are equally distributed between athletes and non-athletes.

Descriptive Statistics

The sample consisted of 240 participants equally distributed across gender identities (80 males, 80 females, and 80 transgender individuals) and athletic statuses (120 athletes and 120 non-athletes). The mean age of participants was 21.2 years (SD = 1.8).

Table 3 Descriptive Statistics for Emotional Regulation Strategies by Athletic Status

Emotional Regulation Strategy	Group	M (SD)	t(238)	p-value	Cohen's d
Cognitive Reappraisal	Athletes	5.2 (1.1)	4.82	< .001	0.62
	Non-athletes	4.5 (1.3)			
Expressive Suppression	Athletes	4.1 (1.2)	-4.35	< .001	0.56
	Non-athletes	4.8 (1.4)			

Note. The values are reported as means (M) and standard deviations (SD). t-values and p-values are from independent samples t-tests comparing athletes and non-athletes. Significant differences were found for both cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression.

Emotional Regulation Strategies

Athletes demonstrated significantly higher scores for cognitive reappraisal (M = 5.2, SD = 1.1) compared to non-athletes (M = 4.5, SD = 1.3), $t(238) = 4.82, p < .001$, with a medium effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.62$). Conversely, non-athletes exhibited higher scores for expressive

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suppression ($M = 4.8$, $SD = 1.4$) than athletes ($M = 4.1$, $SD = 1.2$), $t(238) = -4.35$, $p < .001$, with a medium effect size ($d = 0.56$).

Table 4 Gender Differences in Emotional Regulation Strategies

Emotional Regulation Strategy	Group	M (SD)	F(2, 237)	p-value	η^2
Cognitive Reappraisal	Males	4.5 (1.2)	5.02	.008	0.04
	Females	5.1 (1.0)			
	Transgender	4.7 (1.3)			
Expressive Suppression	Males	4.9 (1.3)	4.32	.015	0.03
	Females	4.3 (1.2)			
	Transgender	4.7 (1.4)			

Note. The values are reported as means (M) and standard deviations (SD). F-values, p-values, and partial eta squared (η^2) are from a two-way ANOVA. Significant differences are noted for both cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression.

Gender Differences in Emotional Regulation

A two-way ANOVA revealed significant main effects for both gender identity and athletic status on emotional regulation strategies. Interaction effects between gender identity and athletic status were also analyzed. For cognitive reappraisal, females scored the highest ($M = 5.1$, $SD = 1.0$), followed by transgender individuals ($M = 4.7$, $SD = 1.3$), and males ($M = 4.5$, $SD = 1.2$). The main effect of gender identity was significant, $F(2, 237) = 5.02$, $p = .008$, $\eta^2 = 0.04$. Post-hoc analyses using Tukey's HSD revealed significant differences between females and males ($p = .007$), but no significant differences between transgender individuals and either group ($p = .235$ and $p = .489$). For expressive suppression, males scored the highest ($M = 4.9$, $SD = 1.3$), followed by transgender individuals ($M = 4.7$, $SD = 1.4$), and females ($M = 4.3$, $SD = 1.2$). The main effect of gender identity was significant, $F(2, 237) = 4.32$, $p = .015$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$. Post-hoc analyses indicated significant differences between males and females ($p = .006$), while transgender individuals did not differ significantly from either group ($p = .712$ and $p = .130$).

Table 5 Pearson Correlations Between Athletic Identity and Emotional Regulation Strategies

Variable	Cognitive Reappraisal	Expressive Suppression
Athletic Identity	0.42**	-0.38**

Note. Values are Pearson correlation coefficients (r). $p < .001$ for both correlations.

Correlations Between Athletic Identity and Emotional Regulation

Pearson correlation analyses revealed a significant positive relationship between athletic identity and cognitive reappraisal ($r = 0.42$, $p < .001$), suggesting that individuals with a stronger athletic identity are more likely to use adaptive strategies. Conversely, athletic identity

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was negatively correlated with expressive suppression ($r = -0.38, p < .001$), indicating that a stronger athletic identity reduces reliance on suppression.

Summary of Findings

1. Athletes exhibited higher cognitive reappraisal and lower expressive suppression compared to non-athletes.
2. Gender differences revealed that females and transgender individuals favor cognitive reappraisal, while males rely more on expressive suppression.
3. Strong athletic identity has a negative correlation with expressive repression and a positive correlation with cognitive reappraisal.

DISCUSSION

This study investigated emotional regulation strategies across athletes and non-athletes, focusing on gender identity (male, female, and transgender) and athletic identity. The results provide significant insights into the interplay of athletic status, gender identity, and emotional regulation strategies, with implications for mental health interventions and sports psychology (Beckmann & Kellmann, 2018; Brewer & Cornelius, 2019).

Key Findings and Interpretation

Athletes vs. Non-Athletes

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, athletes scored significantly higher on cognitive reappraisal compared to non-athletes. This aligns with previous research suggesting that structured, high-pressure environments in sports foster adaptive strategies like cognitive reappraisal (Lundqvist & Andersson, 2019). Athletes often face performance-related stress, which requires them to reframe challenging situations to maintain focus and resilience (Sinden, 2020).

In contrast, non-athletes, who encounter less structured stressors, demonstrated a greater reliance on expressive suppression, confirming Hypothesis 2. Suppression, while offering temporary control over emotional expressions, has been linked to adverse psychological outcomes, including increased stress and reduced well-being (Gross, 2014; Tamres, Janicki, & Helgeson, 2021). These findings suggest that participation in structured physical activities can promote adaptive emotional regulation strategies, even in non-athletic populations (Beckmann & Kellmann, 2018).

Gender Differences in Emotional Regulation

Gender significantly influenced emotional regulation strategies, supporting Hypothesis 3. Females exhibited the highest use of cognitive reappraisal, aligning with societal norms encouraging emotional reflection and expression (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2012). These patterns are consistent across cultures but may be particularly pronounced in collectivist societies like India, where emotional expression is more acceptable for women (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Males, in contrast, scored higher on expressive suppression, reflecting traditional gender roles emphasizing emotional restraint and stoicism (Tamres, Janicki, & Helgeson, 2021). Suppression strategies have been linked to societal expectations for males to exhibit emotional resilience and control in high-stress scenarios (Gross & John, 2017). Interestingly, transgender individuals displayed intermediate scores for both strategies, highlighting the unique stressors they face, such as societal stigma and discrimination (Meyer, 2003; Hargons, Ramsey, & Wickham, 2021). While these stressors may necessitate suppression as a coping mechanism, supportive environments could enable transgender individuals to adopt adaptive strategies like cognitive reappraisal (Jones et al., 2017).

Athletic Identity and Emotional Regulation

The positive correlation between athletic identity and cognitive reappraisal, and the negative correlation with expressive suppression, confirm Hypothesis 4. These findings are consistent with Brewer and Cornelius (2019), who emphasized the psychological benefits of a strong athletic identity. Athletes with a clear sense of identity often demonstrate greater resilience and adaptability, essential for managing competitive stress (Sinden, 2020; Beckmann & Kellmann, 2018).

These results suggest that fostering athletic identity, even among non-athletes, could enhance the adoption of adaptive emotional regulation strategies. Initiatives such as mindfulness training, resilience-building programs, or participation in team-based activities may promote the psychological benefits of athletic identity (Lundqvist & Andersson, 2019).

Practical Implications

- **For Athletes:** Sports programs can integrate emotional regulation training into their curriculum to build on athletes' strengths in cognitive reappraisal (Brewer & Cornelius, 2019). Such programs could further enhance resilience, focus, and performance under stress (Lundqvist & Andersson, 2019).
- **For Non-Athletes:** Non-athletes may benefit from structured interventions like stress management workshops, mindfulness training, or simulated high-pressure scenarios to develop adaptive coping mechanisms (Gross, 2014). Encouraging participation in recreational sports or physical activities could also promote emotional resilience (Beckmann & Kellmann, 2018).
- **For Transgender Individuals:** The findings highlight the need for gender-sensitive mental health interventions tailored to the unique stressors faced by transgender individuals (Meyer, 2003; Hargons, Ramsey, & Wickham, 2021). Inclusive environments that reduce stigma and discrimination can enable transgender individuals to shift from suppression to more adaptive strategies (Jones et al., 2017).

Theoretical Contributions

By combining the aspects of gender identity, athletic identity, and athletic status in the Indian context, this study adds to the expanding corpus of research on emotional regulation. By exploring these intersections, it expands our understanding of how cultural, societal, and individual factors shape emotional regulation patterns.

Limitations

The study's design makes it difficult to determine the causal links between gender identity, emotional control techniques, and athletic status. Longitudinal studies are needed to explore changes in these strategies over time.

Self-Reported Data: Reliance on self-reported measures may introduce social desirability bias. Future research could incorporate physiological or behavioral assessments to validate findings.

Sample Characteristics: The study focused exclusively on university students aged 18–24, which may limit the generalizability of findings to other age groups or professional athletes.

Future Directions

- **Longitudinal Research:** Future studies could examine how emotional regulation strategies evolve over time, particularly during transitions such as injury recovery or gender affirmation processes for transgender individuals.
- **Cultural Contexts:** Comparative studies across different cultural settings can provide deeper insights into how societal norms influence emotional regulation.
- **Intersectionality:** Exploring additional factors, such as socioeconomic status, family dynamics, or personality traits, could offer a more nuanced understanding of emotional regulation in diverse populations.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated emotional regulation strategies among athletes and non-athletes, focusing on the influence of gender identity and athletic identity in the Indian context. The findings revealed that athletes are more likely to use adaptive strategies such as cognitive reappraisal, while non-athletes tend to rely on expressive suppression, a less effective coping mechanism. Gender differences indicated that females and transgender individuals favor cognitive reappraisal, while males demonstrate a higher reliance on expressive suppression. Additionally, a strong athletic identity positively correlated with adaptive emotional regulation strategies, underscoring its psychological benefits.

The findings highlight the necessity of focused mental health treatments that are adapted to the particular requirements of various communities in terms of emotional regulation. For athletes, resilience training can further enhance their strengths in cognitive reappraisal. Non-athletes may benefit from structured programs that promote adaptive coping mechanisms. Transgender individuals require inclusive and supportive environments to mitigate the impact of societal stigma and discrimination on their emotional regulation patterns.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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