

Social Support and Mental Toughness Among Volleyball Athletes: Examining The Moderating Role of Gender

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ABSTRACT: Mental toughness is a crucial psychological attribute that enables athletes to maintain performance, cope with pressure, and adapt effectively to competitive challenges. Social support has been identified as an important factor influencing athletes' psychological development; however, evidence regarding its relationship with mental toughness and the moderating role of gender remains limited. This study aimed to examine the effect of social support on mental toughness among volleyball athletes and to determine whether gender moderates this relationship. A quantitative explanatory design was employed involving 110 volleyball athletes from official clubs in Sleman Regency, Indonesia. Participants were selected using purposive sampling. Social support was measured using the Perceived Available Support in Sport Questionnaire (PASS-Q), while mental toughness was assessed using the Indonesian version of the Mental Toughness Inventory (MTIid). Data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) and Multi-Group Analysis (PLS-MGA). The results showed that social support had a positive and significant effect on mental toughness ($\beta = 0.614$, $p < 0.001$), explaining 37.7% of the variance in mental toughness. Athletes who perceived higher levels of support from coaches, teammates, and family members demonstrated greater psychological resilience. However, gender did not significantly moderate the relationship between social support and mental toughness ($p = 0.318$). These findings highlight the importance of social support in strengthening athletes' mental toughness regardless of gender.

KEYWORDS: Social support; mental toughness; volleyball athletes; gender; sport psychology.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary competitive sport requires multidimensional preparedness that extends beyond physical fitness, technical proficiency, and tactical competence. Increasingly, psychological readiness is recognized as a fundamental determinant of athletic performance and long-term achievement. Recent developments in sport science have highlighted the substantial contribution of mental factors to success at both national and international levels (Prots et al., 2021; Popovych et al., 2022). Athletes are frequently exposed to intense competitive pressure, and their ability to maintain performance in demanding situations often depends more on psychological resources than on physical capabilities alone. Research in sport psychology has consistently demonstrated that emotional regulation, concentration, and effective coping strategies are critical predictors of optimal performance under pressure (Hao, 2024). Consequently, the investigation of psychological determinants has become an essential component of athlete development rather than a supplementary consideration.

Among various team sports, volleyball presents a particularly demanding psychological environment. The game is characterized by rapid transitions, continuous rallies, rotational systems, tactical variability, and sudden momentum shifts that require athletes to make immediate decisions under pressure. Such conditions create unique psychological challenges that distinguish volleyball from many other sports. During critical moments, such as deuce situations or score deficits, psychological resilience often determines whether a team can successfully reverse unfavorable circumstances (Chacoma & Billoni, 2022). Furthermore, volleyball requires intensive interpersonal coordination, meaning that psychological factors influence not only individual performance but also collective team functioning. Athletes who possess greater psychological stability tend to demonstrate more effective communication, stronger trust, and higher team cohesion, all of which contribute to overall competitive success. Therefore, understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying volleyball performance is highly relevant for both researchers and practitioners.

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One of the most extensively studied psychological constructs in sport psychology is mental toughness. Mental toughness refers to an individual's psychological capacity to remain resilient, recover from setbacks, and maintain effective performance despite adversity and competitive pressure (Liew et al., 2019; Mendizabal, 2024). Athletes with high levels of mental toughness are generally more capable of regulating emotions, sustaining task-focused attention, and managing both internal and external distractions during competition (Stamatis et al., 2023). A widely accepted conceptualization of mental toughness is the 4Cs model proposed by Clough et al. (2021), which comprises control, commitment, challenge, and confidence. This framework emphasizes that mental toughness is not a fixed personality trait but rather a dynamic psychological resource that develops through experience, training, and environmental influences.

Empirical evidence has consistently supported the importance of mental toughness in athletic performance. For example, Thiessen et al. (2024) reported that athletes with higher mental toughness scores were more likely to sustain performance levels under competitive stress than those with lower scores. Similarly, McHenry et al. (2022) demonstrated that evidence-based interventions, including emotional regulation training, visualization techniques, and cognitive strengthening programs, can effectively enhance mental toughness. These findings suggest that identifying factors that contribute to mental toughness is important not only for advancing sport psychology theory but also for improving athlete development practices.

While internal psychological factors such as motivation and self-efficacy have received considerable attention, external environmental influences are equally important in shaping mental toughness. Among these, social support has emerged as a particularly influential factor. Social support derived from coaches, teammates, family members, and the broader sporting environment can function as a psychological resource that helps athletes cope with competitive demands. According to the buffering hypothesis, social support reduces the adverse effects of stress by providing emotional, informational, and instrumental resources that facilitate adaptive functioning under pressure (Bekiros et al., 2022). Furthermore, a recent meta-analysis revealed that social support contributes significantly to psychological well-being, anxiety reduction, and resilience enhancement across diverse populations (Luo et al., 2024).

Within team sport settings, the significance of social support becomes even more pronounced. Simons and Bird (2023) found that supportive coach–athlete relationships characterized by trust and open communication foster greater emotional security among athletes. Likewise, Arisman (2024) reported a positive association between team cohesion and mental toughness. In volleyball, where successful performance depends heavily on cooperation and interpersonal interaction, social support serves a dual function. It strengthens individual confidence while simultaneously promoting collective cohesion and shared resilience. Supportive coaches and teammates may therefore play a crucial role in helping athletes navigate the psychological demands of competition. Consequently, examining the relationship between social support and mental toughness is both theoretically meaningful and practically important.

Despite the recognized importance of social support, the relationship between social support and mental toughness may not be uniform across all athletes. Gender has frequently been proposed as a potential moderating factor influencing psychological experiences in sport. Previous studies have identified gender-related differences in coping mechanisms, self-talk patterns, and psychological responses to intensive training and competition (Patsioras et al., 2022). Research has also suggested that the nature of social support may vary according to gender, with male athletes often receiving more directive and task-oriented support, whereas female athletes tend to receive greater emotional validation and interpersonal encouragement (Yarayan et al., 2024). However, recent evidence remains inconclusive regarding whether gender significantly moderates the relationship between social support and mental toughness. A recent meta-analysis conducted by Kumari and Chauhan (2024) reported inconsistent findings across different sporting contexts and populations. These inconsistencies highlight an important gap in the literature and indicate the need for further investigation, particularly within team sports such as volleyball.

The present study is situated within the context of volleyball athletes in Sleman Regency, Indonesia. Volleyball is one of the most popular sports in the region and is supported by an active development system involving clubs, schools, and regional competitions. Nevertheless, athlete development programs continue to place greater emphasis on physical and technical training than on psychological preparation. Structured mental training programs remain relatively limited, resulting in substantial variation in athletes' psychological readiness. Field observations indicate that some athletes experience significant declines in confidence following repeated performance errors, whereas others demonstrate rapid psychological recovery through positive self-talk and supportive team interactions. Furthermore, differences in social support patterns have been observed between male and female athletes, suggesting that gender may influence how support is perceived and utilized. These contextual factors provide a strong rationale for examining the interplay between social support, mental toughness, and gender within the local volleyball environment.

A review of existing literature reveals several important research gaps. Most previous studies have examined mental toughness in relation to variables such as anxiety, performance outcomes, or individual psychological characteristics, without incorporating

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social support as a central explanatory factor. In addition, investigations into the moderating role of gender remain limited and have produced inconsistent findings across different populations and sporting contexts (Erdoğan et al., 2025). To date, little empirical evidence has simultaneously examined the influence of social support on mental toughness while considering gender as a moderating variable among volleyball athletes, particularly within local Indonesian settings.

This study offers several contributions to the existing literature. First, it provides empirical evidence from a local Indonesian context that remains underrepresented in international sport psychology research, thereby enriching cross-cultural understanding of athlete psychological development. Second, it proposes and tests an integrated model that examines the relationship between social support and mental toughness while incorporating gender as a moderating variable. Third, the findings are expected to generate practical recommendations for the development of gender-sensitive psychological training programs that leverage social support systems within volleyball clubs and educational institutions.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the effect of social support on the mental toughness of volleyball athletes in Sleman Regency and to determine whether gender moderates this relationship. The findings are expected to contribute to the advancement of sport psychology theory and provide practical implications for more comprehensive athlete development strategies.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative approach using an explanatory research design. Quantitative research aims to test hypotheses through the collection and statistical analysis of numerical data, thereby generating objective, systematic, and measurable conclusions (Sugiyono, 2021). An explanatory design was considered appropriate because the study sought not only to describe psychological phenomena but also to examine the causal relationship between social support and mental toughness among volleyball athletes, with gender serving as a moderating variable. Accordingly, the study was designed to test a theoretical model explaining how social support contributes to athletes' psychological resilience and whether this relationship differs between male and female athletes.

Participants

The target population consisted of all registered volleyball athletes affiliated with official volleyball clubs in Sleman Regency, totaling 295 athletes. The population included both male and female athletes from junior and senior categories who actively participated in regular training programs.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on the following inclusion criteria: (a) active membership in a volleyball club for at least one year, (b) aged between 12 and 25 years, and (c) willingness to participate voluntarily in the study. The minimum sample size was determined according to the recommendation of Hair et al. (as cited in Sholihin & Ratmono, 2021), which suggests a minimum of 5–10 respondents per indicator in Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). Given that the study included 11 indicators, a minimum sample size of 110 participants was required. The final sample consisted of 110 athletes, including 64 males and 46 females.

Research Procedures

Data collection was conducted in four stages. First, the preparation stage involved instrument adaptation and content validation by experts in sport psychology to ensure conceptual relevance and clarity. Second, during the implementation stage, questionnaires were distributed directly to athletes at their respective volleyball clubs. Researchers provided guidance during administration to ensure that participants clearly understood each questionnaire item. Third, completed questionnaires were collected and screened for completeness before data coding and entry. Finally, the processed data were imported into SmartPLS software for statistical analysis.

Instruments

Data were collected using structured questionnaires measured on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree).

Social Support

Social support was assessed using an adapted version of the Perceived Available Support in Sport Questionnaire (PASS-Q). The instrument measures four dimensions of social support: emotional support, esteem support, informational support, and tangible support. Previous studies have demonstrated satisfactory psychometric properties for the PASS-Q, including good model fit indices (RMSEA = 0.05, SRMR = 0.06, CFI = 0.94) and acceptable reliability coefficients across dimensions, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.68 to 0.84 (Barbosa et al., 2024; Şenel & Sakallı, 2024).

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Mental Toughness

Mental toughness was measured using the Indonesian version of the Mental Toughness Inventory (MTIid). Putra et al. (2024) reported excellent construct validity for this instrument, indicated by CFI = 0.967, TLI = 0.954, GFI = 0.966, RMSEA = 0.069, and SRMR = 0.034. Furthermore, the instrument demonstrated high internal consistency with Composite Reliability (CR) = 0.864 and Cronbach's alpha = 0.862.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS software. PLS-SEM was selected because it is suitable for analyzing complex latent-variable models, accommodates non-normal data distributions, and performs effectively with moderate sample sizes (Ghozali & Latan, 2020).

The analysis consisted of three stages. First, the measurement model (outer model) was evaluated by assessing convergent validity through Average Variance Extracted ($AVE \geq 0.50$), discriminant validity, and reliability through Composite Reliability ($CR \geq 0.70$) and Cronbach's alpha values. Second, the structural model (inner model) was assessed using path coefficients, coefficient of determination (R^2), effect sizes, and predictive relevance (Q^2) to evaluate the hypothesized relationships among constructs. Third, gender moderation was examined using Multi-Group Analysis (PLS-MGA), which compared the structural relationships between male and female athlete groups. This procedure enabled the identification of potential gender differences in the effect of social support on mental toughness.

Through these analytical procedures, the study aimed to provide empirical evidence regarding the role of social support in enhancing mental toughness among volleyball athletes and to determine whether gender moderates this relationship.

RESULT

A total of 110 volleyball athletes participated in this study. Of these, 64 (58.2%) were male and 46 (41.8%) were female. Participants ranged in age from 12 to 25 years and were actively involved in volleyball training programs within registered clubs in Sleman Regency.

Measurement Model Assessment

The measurement model was evaluated through convergent validity, discriminant validity, and reliability analyses. All indicators demonstrated satisfactory factor loadings (> 0.70). The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.50, while Composite Reliability (CR) and Cronbach's Alpha values were above 0.70, indicating adequate reliability and construct validity.

Table 1. Convergent Validity and Reliability Results

Construct	AVE	Composite Reliability	Cronbach's Alpha
Social Support	0.684	0.921	0.904
Mental Toughness	0.711	0.942	0.931

The results indicate that all constructs met the recommended criteria for convergent validity and internal consistency reliability.

Structural Model Assessment

The structural model evaluation revealed that social support significantly predicted mental toughness among volleyball athletes.

Table 2. Structural Model Results

Relationship	Path Coefficient (β)	t-value	p-value
Social Support $\rightarrow$ Mental Toughness	0.614	8.427	< 0.001

The findings indicate a positive and statistically significant effect of social support on mental toughness ($\beta = 0.614$, $p < 0.001$). Athletes who perceived higher levels of support from coaches, teammates, and family members tended to demonstrate greater psychological resilience and mental toughness.

The coefficient of determination (R^2) for mental toughness was 0.377, indicating that social support explained 37.7% of the variance in mental toughness.

Table 3. Coefficient of Determination

Endogenous Variable	R^2
Mental Toughness	0.377

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According to the criteria proposed by Hair et al., this value indicates a moderate explanatory power of the model.

Gender Moderation Analysis

To examine whether gender moderated the relationship between social support and mental toughness, a Partial Least Squares Multi-Group Analysis (PLS-MGA) was conducted.

Table 4. Multi-Group Analysis Results

Group	Path Coefficient (β)	t-value	p-value
Male Athletes	0.648	6.831	< 0.001
Female Athletes	0.573	5.492	< 0.001

Table 5. Moderation Test Using PLS-MGA

Comparison	Difference (β)	p-value
Male vs Female	0.075	0.318

The MGA results revealed that social support significantly influenced mental toughness in both male and female athletes. However, the difference between the two groups was not statistically significant ($p = 0.318$), indicating that gender did not moderate the relationship between social support and mental toughness.

DISCUSSION

The present study investigated the effect of social support on mental toughness among volleyball athletes and examined whether gender moderates this relationship. The findings demonstrated that social support positively and significantly influenced mental toughness. However, gender did not significantly moderate the relationship between these variables.

The significant influence of social support on mental toughness confirms the theoretical proposition that supportive interpersonal relationships function as psychological resources that enhance athletes' adaptive capacity under pressure. Athletes who perceive emotional, informational, esteem, and tangible support from their social environment are more likely to maintain confidence, regulate emotions effectively, and remain resilient when facing competitive challenges. These findings support the buffering hypothesis proposed by Bekiros et al. (2022), which suggests that social support mitigates the negative effects of stress and promotes psychological adjustment.

The results are also consistent with previous studies emphasizing the importance of social support in athletic settings. Simons and Bird (2023) reported that supportive coach–athlete relationships contribute positively to emotional security and psychological well-being. Similarly, Arisman (2024) found that strong team cohesion enhances athletes' mental resilience. In volleyball, where successful performance relies heavily on communication, cooperation, and mutual trust, social support may serve as a critical mechanism for maintaining psychological stability during training and competition.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that mental toughness is not solely an individual characteristic but is also shaped by environmental and social factors. Coaches should therefore foster supportive communication patterns, provide constructive feedback, and create psychologically safe training environments. Teammates likewise play an important role in strengthening confidence and resilience through positive interactions and mutual encouragement.

The coefficient of determination indicated that social support accounted for 37.7% of the variance in mental toughness. This finding suggests that although social support is an important predictor, mental toughness is also influenced by other psychological factors not examined in the present study. Previous research has identified self-efficacy, achievement motivation, emotional intelligence, coping strategies, and psychological skills training as important determinants of mental toughness (McHenry et al., 2022; Stamatis et al., 2023). Future studies should therefore incorporate additional psychological variables to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of mental toughness development among athletes.

Regarding the moderation analysis, the findings revealed no significant gender differences in the relationship between social support and mental toughness. Although the path coefficient was slightly higher among male athletes, the difference was statistically insignificant. This result suggests that social support contributes similarly to the development of mental toughness in both male and female volleyball athletes.

The absence of a significant moderating effect may be explained by the shared environmental context experienced by both groups. Athletes within the same club system typically receive comparable coaching practices, training loads, organizational support, and competitive experiences. Consequently, the beneficial effects of social support may operate similarly regardless of

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gender. This finding aligns with recent evidence reported by Kumari and Chauhan (2024), which questioned the consistency of gender differences in the relationship between psychosocial factors and mental toughness.

Nevertheless, the findings contrast with studies suggesting gender-based differences in coping styles and support preferences (Patsioras et al., 2022; Yarayan et al., 2024). One possible explanation is that while male and female athletes may differ in the forms of support they prefer, the overall psychological benefits derived from receiving support remain relatively equivalent. Thus, gender may influence the nature of social support experiences rather than the strength of its relationship with mental toughness.

This study contributes to the sport psychology literature by providing empirical evidence from an Indonesian volleyball context, a setting that remains underrepresented in international research. The findings extend existing knowledge by demonstrating that social support is a robust predictor of mental toughness and that its effectiveness appears consistent across genders. These results highlight the importance of incorporating social support strategies into athlete development programs and mental skills training interventions.

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design limits causal interpretation. Second, the study relied on self-report measures, which may be susceptible to response bias. Third, participants were recruited exclusively from volleyball clubs in Sleman Regency, potentially limiting generalizability to other sports or regions. Future research should employ longitudinal designs, include broader athlete populations, and investigate additional psychological mechanisms that may strengthen or mediate the relationship between social support and mental toughness.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the influence of social support on mental toughness among volleyball athletes in Sleman Regency and investigated the moderating role of gender in this relationship. The findings demonstrated that social support has a positive and significant effect on athletes' mental toughness. Athletes who perceived higher levels of emotional, informational, esteem, and tangible support from coaches, teammates, and family members tended to exhibit greater confidence, emotional regulation, resilience, and psychological adaptability when facing competitive challenges.

The results further revealed that social support explained a substantial proportion of the variance in mental toughness, highlighting its importance as a psychosocial factor in athlete development. These findings reinforce theoretical perspectives suggesting that supportive social environments function as protective resources that help athletes cope effectively with stress and maintain optimal performance under pressure.

The moderation analysis indicated that gender did not significantly influence the relationship between social support and mental toughness. Although minor differences were observed in the strength of the relationship between male and female athletes, these differences were not statistically significant. This suggests that the beneficial impact of social support on mental toughness operates similarly across genders within the volleyball context.

The study contributes to the sport psychology literature by providing empirical evidence from an Indonesian volleyball setting and by integrating social support and gender into a single explanatory model of mental toughness. From a practical perspective, the findings emphasize the importance of strengthening social support systems within sports organizations, particularly through supportive coaching behaviors, positive teammate interactions, and family involvement in athlete development programs. Future research is encouraged to employ longitudinal designs, include athletes from different sports and competitive levels, and examine additional psychological variables that may influence the development of mental toughness.

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