



Media portrayal of mental health at the 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games

Jennifer Keal¹, Thomas McCabe^{2,3}, Jade Wright⁴, and Patrick Renshaw⁵

¹ Berkshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust, Prospect Park Hospital, Reading, UK

² NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, Gartnavel General Hospital, Glasgow, UK

³ School of Medicine, Dentistry & Nursing, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK

⁴ Barnet, Enfield and Haringey Mental Health Trust, St Ann's Hospital, London, UK

⁵ South Health and Social Care Trust, Craigavon Hospital, Craigavon, UK

Abstract: *Introduction:* The media coverage of high-profile sporting events can bring increased pressure to athletes' psychological wellbeing. There may be speculation regarding athletes' mental state before, during and after competition potentially impacting on both the athlete's wellbeing and public perception of the individual if a negative tone is attached to an article. As mental health understanding and literacy develop, media reporting of elite athlete mental health may contribute to shaping of opinions and help seeking behaviour. Thus, we have aimed to understand and analyse the tone and content of media reporting on a high-profile sporting event using qualitative methods to explore key aspects of the articles sampled. *Methods:* We selected two UK broadsheet newspapers available online (The Guardian and The Telegraph) and identified all text articles including the terms "Mental Health" and "Olympics" or "Paralympics" published between 23rd July 2019 and 30th November 2021. We selected articles relevant to the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games and including mental health as a subject. Relevant articles were read in full, and we conducted a thematic analysis to explore how mental health was portrayed. *Results:* 581 results were generated from our initial search. Following screening and removal of irrelevant articles, we had 95 articles for analysis. We identified four themes relating to portrayal of mental health: Pressure, impact of COVID, Lack of specific diagnostic terms, and athletes as humans. *Conclusion:* Media portrayal of mental health at the Tokyo Games was generally positive and portrayed athletes as relatable, inspiring, and "human" rather than superhuman. Reporting particularly focused on athlete-specific factors in mental health conditions and the pressures of high-level competition.

Keywords: Olympics, Paralympics, elite athletes, mental health, media

Introduction

Coverage of mental health issues within the sports medicine literature is becoming increasingly prominent [1, 2, 3, 4], partly driven by high profile disclosure of athletes' psychological challenges within traditional and social media outlets. Elite athletes face particular challenges associated with sports participation including competition related physical injury and rehabilitation, financial uncertainty, sports related brain injury, team dynamics, dietary requirements, and travel for competition or training [3, 4]. The impact of these factors isn't routinely disclosed to the public for fear of stigma associated with perceived weakness.

Media outlets can positively influence the perception of mental health by using direct quotes from those with mental health problems or including experiences of recovery and rehabilitation. However, newspaper reporting of mental health problems appears to be less frequent than of physical problems, with the majority of reports being negative in

tone [5, 6]. Stuart suggests some of the psychological damage this can cause – including adversely affecting health seeking behaviour and impairment to overall recovery-recommending a focus on cultivating a more positive media narrative [7].

The Olympic and Paralympic Games are viewed as the pinnacle of sporting achievement with over 200 countries competing in 55 sports. The Tokyo Games were delayed for 12 months because of COVID-19 resulting in disruption of 'four-year plans' and training schedules. Quarantine requirements and immunisation decision-making further contributed to uncertainty in the lead-up, competition and post-competition periods.

The media coverage of high-profile sporting events such as the Olympic Games can apply increased pressure on athletes' psychological wellbeing. There may be speculation regarding athletes' mental state before, during and after competition. This has the potential to impact upon both the athlete's wellbeing and public perception of the

individual if a negative tone is attached to an article. As mental health understanding develops and literacy improves, media reporting of mental health issues in elite athletes may contribute to shaping of opinions and help seeking behaviour for others. Thus, we have aimed to understand and analyse the tone and content of media reporting on a high-profile sporting event using qualitative methods to explore the key aspects of the articles sampled.

Methods

Our study researched two UK national newspapers available to read online. We chose broadsheet newspapers as articles tend to be longer, more detailed, and factual in nature when compared with tabloid media. We selected *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph*, two newspapers with relatively high UK circulation. We sought to maintain a balance between left- and right-leaning socio-political ideologies; with the Guardian and Telegraph newspapers providing moderate leanings to each of these respectively. Additionally, The Guardian was freely available online and The Telegraph was selected as an equivalent paper with a small paywall fee. We limited this study to published articles, not including social media posts of these outlets which tended to be short and generally linked back to the published articles.

We conducted searches of The Guardian and The Telegraph websites. Using a Google “advanced search”, we sought articles containing the terms “Mental Health” and “Olympics” or “Paralympics”. We included all articles published between 23rd July 2019 and 30th November 2021 to include articles published in the year preceding the original Tokyo Games before their postponement to 2021 due to the coronavirus pandemic. We included a period after the Tokyo Games ended on 5th September 2021 to capture any stories relating to post-event mental health problems, as well as any reporting on stories that emerged after the games completed.

The search process identified 581 articles. These were screened by authors JK and JW to filter out irrelevant articles. Articles were deemed relevant if they related to the 2020 Tokyo Olympics or Paralympics and included content on the topic of mental health. Articles were discarded if they were duplicates, in a non-text format (e.g. video, audio), clearly unrelated to the Tokyo 2020 Olympic or Paralympic Games, clearly unrelated to mental health, were summaries of live reporting, or were daily briefing articles that contained information that would also be included in more detailed reports.

As the aim of our study was to look at the media’s representation of mental health during the 2020 Olympic and

Paralympic Games we opted for a reflexive thematic analysis. We chose thematic analysis for its theoretical flexibility. We took a mostly inductive, semantic approach to identify and progressively refine themes in the articles.

A final list of 95 articles was generated and this became the dataset for our analysis. We conducted the thematic analysis according to the six stages described by Braun and Clarke [8, 9]. Articles were distributed equally between the researchers and read in full to develop familiarity with the contents. We then discussed initial observations which would guide further analysis of the articles. Next, we re-read the articles and coded the data. Discussion took place between the researchers at several stages to aid consistent and comprehensive coding, taking an iterative approach to the analysis. The codes were reviewed, and we conceptualised recurring patterns as themes. We then reviewed the potential themes, grouping and refining them to finish with the four themes discussed in this paper. We undertook a detailed analysis of each of these themes.

Results

581 articles were identified after the initial search. Once articles that did not meet our criteria were discarded, we had 95 articles to include in our analysis. There was greater reporting of the Olympic Games than the Paralympic Games. We identified four key themes in the media reporting on mental health at the Tokyo 2020 Games: 1) Pressure on athletes, 2) Impact of COVID, 3) Lack of specific diagnostic terms, and 4) Athletes as human.

Pressure on athletes reflected the multiple pressures athletes faced including the pressure to perform well on the international stage, to win medals, to maintain their funding status, to please their coaches, and to engage with the media.

Impact of COVID covered the effects of uncertainty about whether the Games would go ahead and if athletes could travel, as well as the mental health aspects of quarantine procedures and isolation from support networks. It also covered teams’ responses to the need for additional resources to focus on mental wellbeing of athletes and their support networks.

Lack of specific diagnostic terms reflected the tendency to report on mental health using non-specific language, rather than identifying particular diagnoses, symptoms or treatments.

Athletes as human grouped together subthemes of athletes being viewed as ‘normal’ people rather than super-human or extraordinary, athletes’ portrayal as relatable for the public, and the idea that athletes speaking up could impact society’s view of mental health problems.

Pressures on athletes

Several articles commented on the specific pressures experienced by athletes and this being a factor for mental health problems.

“Coming out of the Olympics... athletes have finally been able to talk about the impact that these pressures have on their mental health.”

“she had struggled with the demands of being one of the most famous athletes in the world, the unique pressure of these Games and the added challenge of being stuck in a Covid secure bubble.”

“Too Much Pressure could well stand as the unifying theme for [these] Games”

The pressures described included pressure to qualify for competition, to win medals, to represent particular subgroups of the population (e.g. the LGBTQ+ community, female gender, ethnic groups) and to comply with additional expectations such as engaging with the media, including having a presence on social media.

“Playing for your country in a once-in-a-career home Olympic Games is difficult enough, but doing so after essentially being elected the face of the whole event is another level altogether.”

“Today’s sporting heroes face unprecedented pressure, not just to perform on the sporting field, but on social media and as the face of their own brands and businesses.”

Other pressures included meeting expectations of coaches and team managers, needing to gain or maintain funding for training, and team selection. Articles reported on negative experiences of pressure leading to athletes feeling they had failed themselves or others and the experience of disappointment.

“It was one of the biggest moments in my career, but when I watch it... rather than euphoria all I feel is relief. Prior to the Games we had been told that if we didn’t medal in Athens we’d lose all our funding.”

Athletes who do experience pressure and its consequences feel unable to talk openly about it, viewing struggling with pressure as a weakness.

“That’s another kind of pressure that athletes feel, many of us suffer from impostor syndrome... but as elite athletes you’re not supposed to talk about it, or show any signs of weakness.”

Many articles commended athletes who spoke about their difficulties, but others regarded mental health as a cause for poor performance and something that needed to be overcome. The stance of the two newspapers studied was

broadly supportive of athletes who experienced mental health problems and took a critical tone when reporting on other media sources that were less empathetic:

“Despite her obvious burden and the fundamental importance of mental health... some [media platforms] have portrayed Biles’s decision to withdraw not as a brave stand but rather as quitting in the face of adversity.”

Multiple articles reported on competitors withdrawing from competition for mental health reasons, often using language to suggest the withdrawal was ‘shocking’ or unexpected.

“dropped a bombshell... when she pulled out of the Games, citing mental health concerns”

“sent shockwaves across sport by admitting her “mind and body are not in sync” due to mental health issues.”

“The news followed her dramatic decision to stop competing in the women’s team event”

Impact of COVID-19

The impact of COVID-19 was a unique factor for the Tokyo 2020 Games. Articles commented on the mental health consequences of COVID-19 and the associated quarantining, isolation and complex testing procedures. Athletes reported that the measures in place were detrimental to their mental health - causing or worsening anxiety and reducing their access to informal support networks such as friends and family.

“[Athlete] admitted he was struggling mentally after spending the past six days in his room at the UK Athletics camp in Yokohama, being allowed out only to train.”

A number of articles referred to specific mental health support offered by organisations, highlighting a willingness to factor it into athletes’ needs at the Games, but there was little detail given about what form this took in terms of the professionals involved or input offered. This may be because organisations did not share such information with the media. The exception to this was that some detail was given around the Team GB set-up at the Tokyo Games, such as the 24-hour helpline.

“Anson also confirmed measures would be in place to protect the mental health of athletes, who will have to quarantine and face severe restrictions on their movements.”

“Calls to the Australian Institute of Sport’s mental health referral network have surged.”

“there will be unprecedented mental health and wellbeing support on offer for both athletes and staff as they head into a unique competitive environment.”

Quarantine requirements added to disruption of competition, training programmes and travel plans. One positive result from this delay was greater prioritisation of mental wellbeing and resource allocation than previously, with the reporting including quotes from team officials regarding this.

“We have overhauled a lot of our medical practices. A big shift in how we approach mental health. We believe happy riders are fast riders.”

“We have been putting in place mental health guidance for our own staff as well because it’s a tough environment for the team around Team GB. They’re very much confined to the village in a very hot country, in a very tight village – it’s tough for everyone.”

Lack of specific diagnostic terms

Despite recent interest into mental health in sporting populations in sports medicine literature, the nuanced aspects of identification and sports specific treatment options are relatively new concepts.

Generic terms seem to be favoured by both the athletes and the media rather than specific mental health diagnoses.

“For anyone saying I quit, I didn’t quit, my mind and body are simply not in sync... Physical health is mental health.”

“Mental health is not a sign of weakness.”

The term ‘mental health’ was also favoured by journalists when explaining why an athlete may have withdrawn from an event.

“... pulled out of Australia’s Tokyo campaign in the days ... due to mental health concerns.”

Disclosure of mental health difficulties by elite athletes within the articles suggested a variety of symptoms discussed both as precipitants to and as part of the psychological experience.

Terms such as ‘stress’, ‘struggling’, ‘pressure’, ‘difficulties’, ‘grief’ or ‘numbness’ tended to predominate in the articles to describe athletes’ psychological experience. Infrequent exceptions to this include the inclusion of the diagnostic terms ‘post-traumatic stress disorder’ and ‘attention deficit hyperactivity disorder’.

Athletes as human

A common theme identified was that experiencing mental health difficulties made athletes ‘human’, and that elite athletes are ‘just like us’.

“we are acknowledging a very human response to pressure even when athletic ability can seem impossible to comprehend.”

“Maybe not even looking at them as an athlete, but seeing them as a human is what people should try to do”

The articles contrasted this with previous portrayals of athletes as ‘superhuman’ or ‘machine-like beings’ with their self worth and public credibility relying upon sporting achievement.

“Her clip was a display of ... just some of the qualities that often compel us to view sportspeople in a sort of invincible, superhuman light.”

“we watched as the superhumans who had won record hauls of shiny medals revealed their vulnerabilities... they told us about the human side in so much more detail.”

Also within this theme was the portrayal of athletes who spoke out as being brave or inspiring. Athletes’ human experience of mental health difficulties was validated, independent of their sporting achievement.

“She has made it legitimate for any sportsperson to question whether sport is the most important thing on Earth... admitting the truth about her exit truly felt like the mark of a proper champion.”

“Her decision not to compete was courageous and extremely important for pushing the subject of mental health in sports forward.”

“It was brave of her to tell the world about her mental health issues.”

Additionally speaking about mental health difficulties was portrayed having a positive impact upon other athletes; reminding them of their humanity, regardless of their athleticism.

“Hearing the biggest names in sport talk so openly has helped athletes to own their emotions, and not feel ashamed.”

Experiencing mental health difficulties and seeking support was portrayed as relatable for the public, and links made between the pressure of Olympic sport and that of everyday life.

“if supreme performers are just like us after all, the field of sports psychology – traditionally the preserve of elite performers – has perhaps never been more relatable.”

Additionally, the media suggested that experiencing mental health difficulties made athletes valuable role models, reducing as the gap between them and ‘normal people’.

“It shows she is human and mental health still affects her just as it would other people.”

Discussion

The purpose of our study was to review the portrayal of mental health in media reporting on the 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games. These games were noted for a greater focus on mental health than in previous competitions, in a large part thanks to high-profile events bringing attention to mental health issues: such as Simone Biles' withdrawal from competition in the women's artistic gymnastics and Naomi Osaka's decision not to attend press conferences at the 2021 French Open just a couple of months earlier.

Media reporting gave an insight into the multiple pressures elite athletes faced at the Olympic and Paralympic Games. This offered some context to the stresses, and in some cases consequential mental health problems, for athletes despite the games often being a pinnacle of their careers.

Reporting focused on the mental challenges of performing under high pressure circumstances and the additional impact of COVID-19 protocols, but with less focus given to the pressures outside of the competition period that can also contribute to mental health problems, both specific to athletes and more general factors [3]. Some exceptions however were experiences of grief and bereavement.

Although much of the reporting was about individual athletes' personal experiences and symptoms, there was also some coverage of the support offered emphasising that mental health problems can be managed proactively and are worthy of resource allocation. What was perhaps less well covered in the reporting is the fact that support staff made as much, if not more, use of mental health provisions at the games [10].

One could postulate reasons for the non-specific language used in the articles; for example, athletes may not divulge a diagnosis due to potentially incurring stigma or fearing that a specific diagnosis could be misunderstood, misconstrued, or amplified. The athlete and/or journalist may not be literate with mental health terminology, requiring further education and development in this regard. Brief anti-stigma interventions and mental health literacy programmes that seek to increase knowledge of mental health symptoms have been shown to improve help-seeking intentions in elite athletes [11]. It is also possible that some athletes avoided going into detail so as not to detract from fellow competitors or other serious issues facing their countries in the light of a pandemic.

None of the articles sampled highlighted delays or concerns about accessing of psychological support. This disclosure can be a challenging aspect of the athlete's journey with reluctance to jeopardise any relationship with governing or funding bodies.

It was interesting to note that dealing with the psychological and mental health consequences of pressure was

reported in both negative and positive lights. There is still a stigma attached to experiencing mental health difficulties and perhaps an expectation that coping with extreme levels of pressure is part of elite athlete life [12]; that mental health shouldn't get in the way of successful performances. On the other hand, there is acknowledgement that even high-level athletes are not immune to mental health problems [13] and that those who speak up exemplify healthy attitudes to protecting their wellbeing. The UK broadsheet reporting appears generally empathetic and there is an air of criticism of those who are unsupportive of athletes' difficulties. That the broadsheet papers feel the need to publish articles countering negative opinions however demonstrates that stigmatising views are still held more widely within the media.

There is an interesting dilemma around the role of the media when it comes to athlete mental health. On the one hand there is potential benefit when athletes feel able to speak openly about their experiences. It can help highlight the prevalence of mental health problems within elite sport, enable more athletes to seek help, and influence how mental health is viewed within society more generally. The other side however is that the media can have a detrimental effect if athletes find it intrusive or pressurising. Media scrutiny is a psychosocial stressor for elite athletes [3] however research into its impact on mental health is lacking. One would hope that the spotlight on mental health difficulties during the Tokyo Games will increase awareness of such personal challenges of elite athletes. Over time, enhanced mental health literacy may lend itself to athletes being more open about specific diagnoses with concurrent sensitive reporting by the media.

Limitations

There is a vast availability of media sources reporting on mental health and our research only looked at a small section of this limited to two print newspapers due to time and resource constraints. Review of wider media reporting might have generated additional themes as would including alternative methods of reporting such as audio or video. Our search method of using a Google advanced search is not as robust as the Boolean search operation available when searching a database of articles and the algorithmic nature means some relevant articles may not have been identified. This was mitigated however by manually reviewing relevant sections of the two websites to identify any additional articles that met our criteria.

Conclusion

In recent years there has been greater awareness of athletes' susceptibility to mental health problems and the

media reporting at the 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games would appear to reflect this. Reporting tended to focus on the links between competitive sport and mental health and to highlight the unique experiences of elite athletes in this regard.

We did not seek to quantify what proportion of articles took a positive or negative stance on athlete mental health however this might be an interesting further study. Broadly however it would appear that articles were either supportive or neutral in their reporting. Scope for further work in this area might include a more quantitative assessment and breakdown of the number of articles published according to each sport or by athlete gender to identify any patterns in reporting on mental health within certain fields.

Based on our findings we concluded that broadsheet newspaper reporting on mental health at the 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games was generally factual in nature, avoided sensationalist content and tended to take a neutral-to-positive attitude. We felt that they could have sought more commentary from qualified mental health professionals to strengthen the accuracy and credibility of the reporting.

The media remains closely linked to sport and has the potential power to influence the mental health agenda in sport via athletes' willingness to discuss or disclose mental health conditions. There is undoubtable value in patients, whether elite athlete or not, having a voice when it comes to speaking about mental health and being heard.

References

- Gouttebauge V, Bindra A, Blauwet C, et al. International Olympic Committee (IOC) Sport Mental Health Assessment Tool 1 (SMHAT-1) and Sport Mental Health Recognition Tool 1 (SMHRT-1): towards better support of athletes' mental health. *Br J Sports Med.* 2021;55:30–37.
- Currie A, Blauwet C, Bindra A, et al. Athlete mental health: future directions. *Br J Sports Med.* 2021;55:1243–1244.
- Rice SM, Purcell R, De Silva S, Mawren D, McGorry PD, Parker AG. The mental health of elite athletes: A narrative systematic review. *Sports Med.* 2016;46(9):1333–1353. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40279-016-0492-2>
- Reardon CL, Hainline B, Aron CM, et al. Mental health in elite athletes: International Olympic Committee consensus statement (2019). *Br J Sports Med.* 2019;53:667–699.
- Chen M, Lawrie S. Newspaper depictions of mental and physical health. *BJPsych Bull.* 2017;41(6):308–313. <https://doi.org/10.1192/pb.bp.116.054775>
- Whitley R, Wang J. Good news? A longitudinal analysis of newspaper portrayals of mental illness in Canada 2005 to 2015. *Can J Psychiatry.* 2017;62(4):278–285. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0706743716675856>
- Stuart H. Media portrayal of mental illness and its treatments: what effect does it have on people with mental illness? *CNS Drugs.* 2006;20(2):99–106. <https://doi.org/10.2165/00023210-200620020-00002>
- Braun V, Clarke V. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology.* 2006;3:77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>
- Braun V, Clarke V. Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qual Res Sport Exerc Health.* 2019;11(4):589–597. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806>
- Nishida M, Takagi S, Yamaguchi T, Yamamoto H, Yoshino S, Yagishita K, et al. Mental health services at the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Sport Psychiatry.* 2022. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1024/2674-0052/a000005>
- Bapat S, Jorm A, Lawrence K. Evaluation of a mental health literacy training program for junior sporting clubs. *Australasian Psychiatry.* 2009;17(6):475–479.
- Schwenk TL. The stigmatisation and denial of mental illness in athletes. *Br J Sports Med.* 2000;34:4–5.
- Hughes L, Leavey G. Setting the bar: Athletes and vulnerability to mental illness. *Br J Psychiatry.* 2012;200(2):95–96. <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.bp.111.095976>

History

Received January 14, 2022

Accepted March 17, 2022

Published online March 25, 2022

ORCID

Jennifer Keal

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4660-4227>

Thomas McCabe

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2775-8669>

Jennifer Keal

Berkshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust

Prospect Park Hospital

Honey End Lane

Reading RG30 4EJ

United Kingdom

jennifer.keal@berkshire.nhs.uk