

The Journey of Female Athletes: Overcoming Barriers and Exploring Motivations - An In-Depth Examination of Emotional Experiences

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Abstract

This study explores the motivations, challenges, and emotional experiences of seven female athletes involved in various sports disciplines at Nevşehir Hacı Bektaş Veli University. The research gathers data through individual interviews with successful female athletes who offer in-depth insights into their experiences. The study employs a phenomenological qualitative research design. The focus of the study is on the phenomena of female athletes' sports motivations, barriers, and emotional experiences, with the data analyzed using traditional content analysis. Key themes include intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, societal challenges, emotional responses to gender stereotypes, and the role of family and social support systems. To further explore the athletes' emotions, NRC (National Research Council) sentiment analysis was used, which analyzes eight primary emotions and polarity intensity mapping to examine emotional tendencies. Despite facing societal and gender-based barriers, the athletes demonstrated resilience and expressed positive emotions such as joy, trust, and empowerment. The study emphasizes the need to develop targeted strategies to help female athletes overcome challenges and increase their long-term participation in competitive sports. The findings aim to contribute to discussions on gender equality in sports and provide valuable insights into how elite female athletes navigate gendered expectations in the sports world.

Keywords: Female athletes, Motivational factors, Sentiment analysis, Societal barriers, Sports psychology

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INTRODUCTION

Motivation plays a crucial role in encouraging young women to participate in physical activities. However, gender norms and societal barriers often hinder their involvement. Historically, these perceptions have restricted women's participation in sports, framing it as an activity primarily for men. Despite progress in female representation, ingrained gender norms continue to limit women's ability to express themselves freely within the sports community. Female athletes face not only physical challenges but also significant social and cultural obstacles, which impact both their motivation and how society perceives their participation (Sherry et al., 2016).

Women's involvement in sports is influenced by two key motivational factors: intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic factors include health, fitness, and personal growth, while extrinsic factors relate to social acceptance, achievement, and family support (Samara et al., 2015). Recognizing the importance of increasing female participation, the World Health Organization, through its 2018-2030 Global Action Plan on Physical Activity, urges countries to promote physical activity among women, the elderly, and marginalized groups (Ni & Yu, 2023). Understanding the factors that influence female university students' engagement in sports is essential for enhancing their motivation and fostering a healthier lifestyle (Ni & Yu, 2023).

Social-ecological theory emphasizes that human behavior is shaped by environmental factors, highlighting the significant role of external influences alongside internal ones. Therefore, research on sports participation should not only consider individual factors but also examine changes in both the natural and social environment (Hillsdon et al., 2002). The physical environment plays a crucial role in individuals' willingness to engage in sports, with spatial accessibility positively correlated with enthusiasm for physical exercise (Jiang, 2019). Additionally, family, school, community, and peer environments significantly influence university students' physical activity behaviors. For example, a study on factors affecting young students' participation in physical activity found that school-related influences had the greatest impact, followed by family, community, and personal factors (Yangyang et al., 2023). Women's participation in sports is often analyzed through four key dimensions: personal factors, interpersonal relationships, social environment, and policy factors. Furthermore, research indicates that interpersonal relationships, policy support, and socialization play a critical role in encouraging women to participate in sports (Abadi & Diane, 2020).

Research on women's sports participation highlights that it is constrained by socio-cultural, economic, and individual barriers, with various strategies proposed to address these challenges. O'Reilly et al. (2018) analyzed the obstacles to women's sports participation in Canada, finding that participation rates remained consistently lower due to work-family balance, media representation, and insufficient funding. Similarly, Hopkins et al. (2022) explored the factors influencing young women's engagement in sports, emphasizing the significance of personal factors and family support. Vasudevan and Ford (2022) identified gender-based stigmas and a lack of information as the most common barriers to women's participation in strength training, while also noting that social support and expectations of weight loss served as key motivators.

for continued involvement. Samara et al. (2015) examined the challenges faced by female university students in Saudi Arabia, highlighting inadequate sports facilities and insufficient institutional support as major limitations. Additionally, Zhang et al. (2024) applied the Self-Determination Theory framework to women's sports participation, demonstrating that autonomous motivation has a strong positive effect, with identified regulation emerging as the most influential factor.

Moreno-Vitoria et al. (2024) found that both intrinsic and extrinsic factors significantly influence adolescent women's sports participation, with gender stereotypes playing a notable role. White et al. (2005) highlighted the critical importance of social support and self-efficacy in sustaining women's engagement in physical activity. Similarly, Abbasi (2014) identified socio-cultural barriers as key limitations to women's physical activity levels and emphasized the need to address these challenges. Peng et al. (2023) suggested that the factors shaping young adult women's participation in physical activities are complex and interconnected, underscoring the importance of considering socio-cultural influences. Joseph et al. (2015) examined individual, societal, and environmental barriers affecting African American women's physical activity participation, stressing the need to understand and mitigate these obstacles. Additionally, Duffey et al. (2021) advocated for a multi-stakeholder approach to increasing adolescent women's involvement in sports.

While research on female athletes' motivation and barriers exists, studies exploring various sports disciplines in Turkey remain limited. Additionally, societal barriers affecting women have not been fully addressed, highlighting the need for further investigation. In this context, this study aims to examine the personal experiences, motivations, and challenges faced by female athletes at Nevşehir Hacı Bektaş Veli University. It explores the reasons behind their participation in sports, the impact of societal pressures and gender norms, their emotional experiences, and their perceptions of gender-based attitudes and equal opportunities in sports.

METHOD

Research Model

This study adopted a phenomenological research approach to explore female athletes' sports experiences, motivations, challenges, and the emotional and social dimensions of these experiences. Phenomenological research seeks to understand individuals' life experiences and distill them into a universal explanation (Creswell, 2013). The phenomenon investigated in this study encompasses the motivations, challenges, and emotional and social aspects of female athletes' sports experiences. Key components of this phenomenon include female athletes' individual experiences in sports participation, the influence of gender norms, sources of motivation, and the barriers they encounter. To examine these aspects, semi-structured interviews were conducted with successful female athletes from the Faculty of Sports Sciences at Nevşehir Hacı Bektaş Veli University. The collected data were recorded and analyzed using traditional content analysis. Research questions were developed through a literature review and consultations with experts. To gain a deeper understanding of the emotional aspects of

participants' experiences, NRC Sentiment Analysis and Polarity Intensity Analysis methods were employed. The NRC lexicon categorizes emotional expressions in texts, while Polarity Intensity Analysis measures the strength of emotions. The combination of these methods provided a comprehensive perspective on the emotional dimensions of participants' experiences, offering deeper insight into the role of sports in the lives of female athletes.

Research Groups

This study's participants include seven female athletes actively engaged in various sports disciplines at the Faculty of Sports Sciences at Nevşehir Hacı Bektaş Veli University. The selection criteria focused on athletes who actively participate in sports, have excelled in their respective disciplines, and can provide in-depth insights into their experiences. This approach facilitated the collection of detailed information regarding their perceptions of gender roles and their sports experiences. To ensure confidentiality, participants were assigned coded names. Aslı began her athletic journey in track and field before transitioning to basketball. Esra plays volleyball, holds a coaching certificate, and provides volleyball training in schools. Leyla specializes in football (soccer) and plays for Fenerbahçe Sports Club. Merve practices skiing, influenced by family and geographical conditions, and holds a specialized coaching certificate. Sıla competes in taekwondo, while Dilara, after previous experience in athletics, now practices tennis and competes internationally. Lastly, Dilek transitioned from aikido and judo to football.

In Turkey, as in many other areas, women encounter various barriers in sports. This study focuses on female athletes to gain deeper insight into these obstacles, explore their sports motivations, and understand the challenges they experience throughout their athletic journeys. Additionally, the study aims to highlight the social and emotional aspects of women's sports experiences. Rather than applying specific selection criteria for sports disciplines, the research included athletes from various fields to examine how different sports impact women differently. This approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges female athletes face across diverse sports disciplines.

Additionally, the participants' levels of achievement vary. For instance, one football participant plays for Fenerbahçe Sports Club, while another, specializing in volleyball, holds a coaching certificate and teaches the sport in schools. The skiing participant has obtained an expert coaching certificate. Other participants have achieved success at the university level in their respective sports and remain actively engaged in their disciplines. This diversity enables an exploration of how different sports impact female athletes from multiple perspectives. The selection of participants from various sports disciplines aims to provide a broader understanding of the role of sports in women's lives. While the limited number of participants may be considered a constraint in capturing extensive data depth for a phenomenological study, qualitative research allows for in-depth data collection even with a small sample size.

Data Collection Tools

This study collected data through semi-structured interviews, with questions developed based on a comprehensive literature review of women's experiences in sports. With participants' consent, individual interviews were recorded using an audio device.

Ethics Approval

During the research process, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and their personal information was kept confidential to ensure anonymity. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Nevşehir Hacı Bektaş Veli University (Approval No. 2100072605, dated 01.12.2021), ensuring compliance with ethical standards throughout.

Collection of Data

This study employed a semi-structured interview technique as a qualitative data collection method to explore participants' personal experiences with sports, including their emotional and social aspects. In qualitative research, particularly phenomenological studies, semi-structured interviews provide a systematic yet flexible approach, allowing participants to openly share their thoughts. This method enables the exploration of unique perspectives while addressing specific topics. Key themes in this study include motivations for starting sports, challenges in a male-dominated field, and the emotional and social impacts of sports experiences. This approach not only allows participants to express their experiences in their own words but also enables the researcher to gather in-depth insights on specific subjects.

The research questions were developed following a comprehensive literature review and consultations with qualitative research experts. Before the main study, two pilot interviews were conducted in March 2022 to assess the accuracy and effectiveness of the questions. The data from these pilot interviews were excluded from the final research but played a crucial role in refining the questions. Subsequently, individual interviews were conducted in April and May with students from the Faculty of Sports Sciences at Nevşehir Hacı Bektaş Veli University who excelled in various sports disciplines. With participants' consent, the interviews were recorded using an audio device and later transcribed. The average interview duration was 25 minutes. The longest interview lasted 40 minutes (first interview), while the shortest lasted 15 minutes (sixth interview). The remaining interviews lasted 35, 30, 30, 25, and 20 minutes. During the interviews, the focus was on participants' motivations for starting sports, the challenges they faced in their athletic journeys, and their experiences with societal gender norms.

In phenomenological research, audio recordings play a crucial role in deeply understanding participants' life experiences and emotional responses. The detailed transcription process preserved the nuances of their narratives, allowing for a more comprehensive interpretation. During analysis, recurring patterns, themes, and meanings in participants' sports experiences were identified, with particular focus on the deeper emotional and social significance they attributed to their engagement in sports.

Analysis of Data

The interview data were analyzed using traditional content analysis techniques, which involved systematically coding, categorizing, and thematizing the transcripts (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999). Thematic analysis, a widely used method in qualitative research, facilitates the identification of key themes and patterns in data from individual interviews and focus groups (Embregts et al., 2020; Nardi et al., 2020). Transcribing audio recordings into written form was a critical step, enabling researchers to perform coding and categorization effectively (O'Brien et al., 2014). Coding involved assigning labels to text segments based on their content, which

were then organized into categories (Neale, 2016). In this study, different colors were used to code the interviews, helping to categorize data and identify similar patterns. Categorization grouped these coded segments into broader themes, providing a structured analysis (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999). Thematization then identified overarching themes emerging from these categories, offering deeper insights into the data (Chung et al., 2022; Nardi et al., 2020). This systematic approach allowed researchers to extract key findings and insights (Embregts et al., 2020; Keikelame & Swartz, 2016). Additionally, to better understand participants' emotional experiences and present them more concretely, sentiment analysis and polarity intensity analysis were conducted using Python 3.11.

Traditional Content Analysis: The data were coded based on key themes, and participants' experiences were classified in detail. Figure 1 presents an overview of the categories that make up these themes.

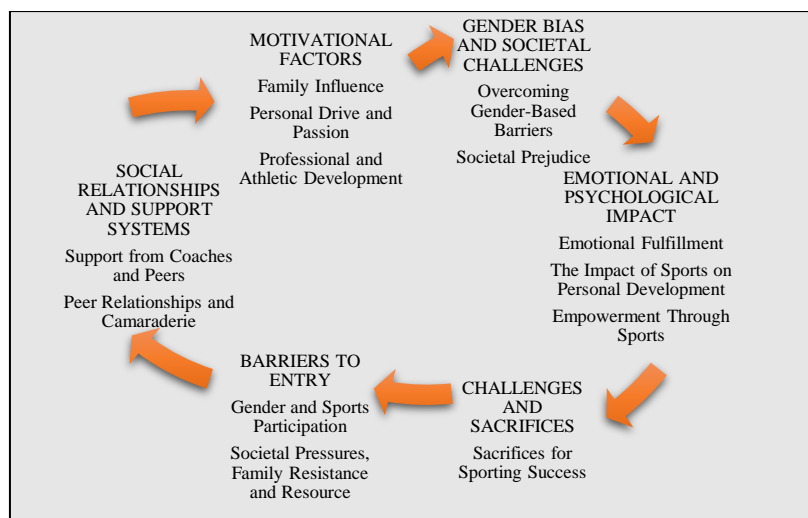


Figure 1. Themes and categories

Sentiment Analysis: The NRC (National Research Council) Word-Emotion Lexicon was used to analyze interview data on participants' sports experiences. This lexicon classifies English words into eight emotions and includes a basic bipolar sentiment—positive and negative. Positive sentiment encompasses anticipation, trust, surprise, and joy, while negative sentiment includes anger, fear, sadness, and disgust. Earlier lexicons categorized words based on sentiment score ranges, but their limited size restricted sentiment extraction. In contrast, the NRC Emotion Lexicon provides a more comprehensive classification, allowing for better categorization of words and phrases across eight distinct emotions (Wang et al., 2020).

Polarity Intensity Analysis: Beyond sentiment analysis, polarity (whether a sentence was positive or negative) and intensity were examined. This analysis assessed whether positive emotions (e.g., trust, joy) dominated participants' experiences and how they managed negative emotions (e.g., anger, fear).

FINDINGS

NRC Word-Emotion Lexicon

Figure 2 shows that Trust and Anticipation are the most dominant emotions among participants, with Joy generally high and Disgust and Anger at low levels. The high Joy scores suggest that participants experience positive emotions in sports despite challenges. Esra, Leyla, and Dilek exhibit the highest positive emotions, while Merve maintains a positive experience despite elevated Anger and Fear scores. In contrast, Sila and Dilara have balanced sports experiences with low negative emotions.

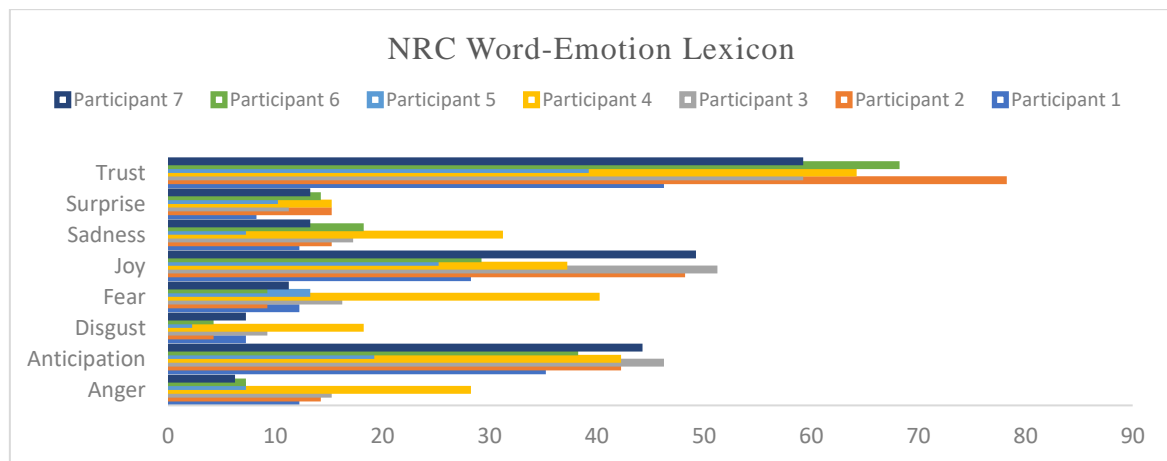


Figure 2. Sentiment analysis results related to participants

Trust is the dominant emotion among all participants, indicating that they maintain a positive and confident attitude even when facing challenges. This trust, likely supported by relationships with coaches, family and teammates, suggests they either genuinely feel supported or choose to project confidence and resilience. Anticipation is also significant, reflecting a hopeful outlook and belief in future success, which may arise from deep optimism or a deliberate focus on positivity despite setbacks. Joy consistently scores high, showing that despite some moderate levels of Fear and Anger, participants derive significant satisfaction and emotional fulfillment from their sports experiences. This suggests they focus on the positive aspects of their journey or consciously prioritize joy over frustration. Disgust remains universally low, supporting the idea that participants either experience few negative reactions or choose not to let negativity overshadow their experiences. Overall, the analysis shows that while difficulties exist, participants maintain an optimistic outlook, projecting confidence and resilience, whether these feelings are internalized or strategically adopted. In this section, the data related to the eight emotions included in the NRC emotion analysis are presented in detail under specific subheadings (Anger, Anticipation, Disgust, Fear, Joy, Sadness, Surprise, Trust).

Anger: Leyla shares frustration with sexist remarks like, “*Can women play football? Why wear shorts and play with men?*” These comments angered her, but she continued playing football with support from her family. “*It really got on my nerves, but I continued because my father always supported me*”. This example reflects how Leyla’s reaction to gender-based prejudice

sparked anger, yet it also highlights their resilience. Despite societal pushback, their ability to keep going indicates a strong, determined attitude, where anger, rather than demotivating them, becomes a driving force.

Anticipation: Aslı describes excitement and forward-looking anticipation about sports as a feeling of freedom. Experiences with the friend who introduced her to basketball reignited her passion for the sport. *“Basketball and not just basketball, but sports in general, represent freedom for a woman”*. Aslı’s anticipation for the future in sports shows a deep connection between empowerment and participation. Their perspective suggests that sports open up opportunities, not just for physical activity but for personal liberation.

Disgust: Leyla experienced disgust at society’s prejudices about women playing football. The community questioned her involvement in football, reflecting broader societal bias. *“Many still view women playing football with prejudice, especially men who think football is a man’s game”*. The disgust felt by Leyla reveals how entrenched societal views can act as a significant barrier. This example highlights both the emotional toll of such attitudes and the participant’s rejection of these prejudices.

Fear: Dilara explains that in her community, women often fear participating in sports due to traditional norms and societal expectations. This fear is common among women who aspire to pursue sports but face resistance from their surroundings. She shares, *“There aren’t many expectations for women, so when I step on the court, I feel like I’m on a stage, a place where I need to prove myself”*. Dilara’s fear is deeply rooted in societal expectations that limit women’s roles in sports. Her experience highlights the internal pressure many female athletes face to validate their presence and abilities in environments where they are not traditionally expected to succeed.

Joy: Esra expresses deep joy about involvement in sports, describing it as a passion and love. Experiences with the team and the camaraderie they built brought immense happiness. *“Now it’s something entirely different. It could be described as a passion or even love; there’s a certain attachment”*. For Esra, joy is not just an emotion but a state of being in sports. Her emotional connection with her team shows how sports can enhance personal fulfillment and provide a sense of belonging.

Sadness: Dilek talks about sadness when thinking about women who don’t participate in sports due to societal expectations or lack of opportunity. She reflects on how women miss out on the benefits of sports. *“Of course, it’s a sad situation when women don’t play sports, like housewives, for example”*. Dilek’s sadness stems from societal limitations that prevent many women from experiencing the physical and emotional benefits of sports, highlighting a broader societal issue.

Surprise: Initially, people were surprised to see women playing football, as it was viewed as a male-dominated sport. Over time, however, this surprise diminished as women’s football gained more visibility. Leyla says, *“That’s a completely wrong perspective, but as women’s football becomes more popular, people are getting used to it and it’s no longer surprising”*.

The initial surprise at seeing women in a male-dominated sport reflects shifting attitudes. This transition from surprise to acceptance marks the growing normalization of women's participation in sports.

Trust: Sila places a lot of trust in her coach and teammates, describing them as a family that provided constant support. This deep trust was foundational to her sporting journey. “*My coach and team became like a family to me, and this support was vital in keeping me engaged in sports*”. Sila's trust in her team highlights the importance of a supportive network. This sense of belonging and security was critical to maintaining her commitment to sports, illustrating the power of trust in overcoming challenges.

The examples provided under the headings of the eight basic emotions highlight the participants' diverse emotional experiences and how these emotions shape their perspectives on sports and gender equality. Despite societal challenges, their passion for sports, trust in their support systems, and anticipation of future success reveal their resilience and optimism. These emotional responses reflect both their internal attitudes and the external pressures they navigate, highlighting their ability to maintain a positive outlook despite obstacles.

Polarity Intensity Map

The Polarity Intensity Maps reflect participants' emotional experiences in sports, displaying scores ranging from high positive intensity (e.g., joy, pride, fulfillment) to high negative intensity (e.g., frustration, sadness, societal challenges). These maps illustrate the complex range of emotions athletes experience. Positive polarity is associated with personal achievements, team cohesion, and pride, while negative polarity is linked to societal challenges, gender-based discrimination, and the pressure on female athletes to constantly prove themselves. Overall, participants tend to focus on the positive aspects of their sports experiences, emphasizing personal growth and success. Participants like Esra and Dilara exhibit strong positive emotions, characterized by joy, pride, and trust, while Leyla and Merve display a more balanced polarity, reflecting both satisfaction and frustration.

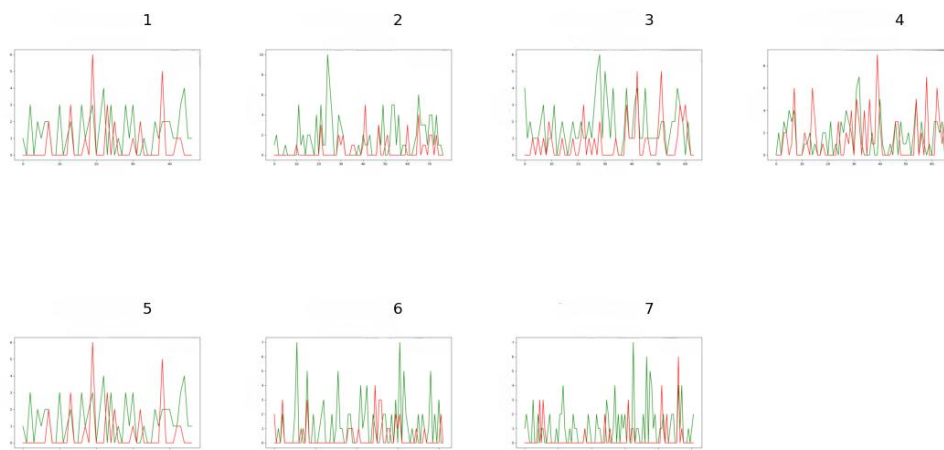


Figure 2. Positive and negative polarity

Figure 3 presents the positive and negative emotion scores of the participants. Red represents negative scores, while green represents positive scores. The vertical axis indicates polarity

scores, while the horizontal axis represents the chronological order of participants' responses to the semi-structured questionnaire.

Aslı (1): *“Achieving success after success is a beautiful feeling; it’s a great sense of accomplishment”*. This statement scored highly, suggesting that Aslı finds success deeply fulfilling, reflecting a High Positive Polarity. She also highlights societal pressures, stating, *“For women, there aren’t many expectations, so when I step on the court, I feel like I’m on a stage, a place where I need to prove myself”*. Similarly, she notes, *“When you step on the court, if you think of it from a male perspective, it’s expected—they’re stereotypically associated with sports, and higher performance is often expected from them”*. These statements reflect societal pressures and the burden female athletes face in constantly needing to prove themselves (High Negative Polarity).

Esra (2): *“It could be described as a passion or even love; there’s a certain attachment. What brought me here were the successes I achieved with my team”*. This statement reflects a deep connection with sports, emphasizing how success and camaraderie foster positive emotions (High Positive Polarity). Although Esra describes mostly positive experiences, she also hints at negative emotions stemming from initial discouragement from her family, as reflected in her statement: *“I was a bit overly attached to sports; I remember crying just from looking out the window because they wouldn’t let me go to practice”* (High Negative Polarity).

Leyla (3): *“Some male players even acknowledge that our training is more intense than theirs and say, ‘You’re even better than us,’ it makes me incredibly happy and proud”*. This statement conveys a sense of pride and validation, highlighting the achievement of overcoming gender stereotypes in football (High Positive Polarity). In contrast, the statement, *“Why would a woman go to practice? Why wear shorts and play with men?”* reflects the gender-based discrimination the participant has faced, serving as a source of frustration and anger (High Negative Polarity).

Merve (4): *“It taught me to be self-sufficient. For example, if you earn money, it teaches you how to manage it. It also helps you learn how to handle difficult situations without relying on your mom, dad, or a guardian”*. This statement highlights Merve’s personal growth and independence gained through sports, reflecting a High Positive Polarity. However, despite these positive experiences, Merve also faces gender-based challenges, as reflected in her statement: *“Being a female athlete is difficult from this aspect... everything is generally designed for men”* (High Negative Polarity).

Sıla (5): *“I’ve had the honor of becoming a national athlete three to four times. It’s a great feeling to be recognized in a different field”*. This statement conveys a sense of pride and accomplishment, reflecting a High Positive Polarity. In contrast, *“As you know, women frequently face discrimination and violence, which we constantly see in the news”* highlights the societal struggles women face, linking to broader social issues (High Negative Polarity).

Dilara (6): *“We are very strong, we can do anything. Why not?”*. This statement reflects confidence and empowerment, demonstrating a High Positive Polarity. Although Dilara places

less emphasis on negative emotions in her responses, the societal pressures faced by female athletes remain in the background (High Negative Polarity).

Dilek (7): *"I feel very proud when I see women involved in football because I think we're doing a very tough sport"*. This statement reflects a strong sense of pride and accomplishment (High Positive Polarity). Like other participants, Dilek acknowledges societal barriers and gender-based expectations, which contribute to negative polarity, although not as intensely expressed as in other cases (High Negative Polarity).

Participants' high positive emotion intensities center on personal achievement, team camaraderie, and empowerment. Many experience joy and pride when discussing their sports successes, such as winning competitions or reaching personal goals, which contribute to a sense of fulfillment. Supportive relationships with coaches, teammates, and family members serve as key sources of positivity. Empowerment, especially in overcoming societal challenges and breaking gender stereotypes, is also significant, as participants express pride in their resilience and success in a male-dominated field. Together, these elements drive the strong positive emotions in their experiences.

Motivational, Emotional and Societal Dynamics in Female Sports Participation: Key Themes and Insights

The findings are categorized into six themes: Motivational Factors, Gender Bias and Societal Challenges, Emotional and Psychological Impact, Social Relationships and Support Systems, Challenges and Sacrifices, and Barriers to Entry.

Motivational Factors (Theme 1): Sports motivations are influenced by individual and environmental factors, including social surroundings, family, interests, geography, and physical conditions. Childhood experiences, family support, peer influence, and energy channeling all play crucial roles. For example, Merve started skiing under the influence of her father, stating, *"My father was the first to direct me to skiing; he used to do it when he was young"*. Similarly, Dilara found motivation through her brother and cousin's involvement in sports, stating, *"My cousin was into athletics, and my brother was into cycling; I started doing sports with them"*.

Family Influence (Category 1): Family is a central influence in participants' initial involvement in sports, often providing early exposure and continued support. Asli, introduced to sports by a friend, saw it as a means of freedom and self-expression, using it to challenge societal norms, describing sports as *"freedom for a woman"*. For Merve, her father's involvement in skiing inspired her participation, stating, *"My father was the first to direct me to skiing"*. The sport's regional popularity also influenced her interest. Dilara was motivated by her older siblings and cousins involved in cycling and athletics, saying, *"I was inspired by them and started athletics to be with them"* highlighting the importance of familial support in her sports journey.

Personal Drive and Passion (Category 2): While family influence is important, personal passion and internal motivation often drive sustained participation in sports. Many participants

express a deep personal connection with their sport, making it an intrinsic part of their identity. Esra's involvement is rooted in a passion and emotional connection with her team, describing it as *"a passion or even love"* highlighting the joy she derives beyond physical activity. Sila, initially channeling childhood hyperactivity, developed a passion for taekwondo, crediting her coach as a *"father figure"* who guided and motivated her. Dilek, originally managing hyperactivity through martial arts, shifted to football to challenge societal expectations, stating, *"I shifted to football to prove that women can play and be just as good as men"* demonstrating her determination to break gender stereotypes.

Professional and Athletic Development (Category 3): This category explores athletes' career progression, the path to professional levels, and the role of coaches in their journey. Participants' experiences highlight that an athlete's career is influenced not only by physical skills but also by psychological resilience and social support. Goals such as becoming a national athlete, receiving coach support, and overcoming career challenges are crucial factors. For example, Sila described her journey to becoming a national athlete, stating, *"I became a national athlete four times and competed internationally after ranking in the top eight at the Turkish Championship"*. Dilek emphasized that her coach's unfair treatment led her to switch sports, stating, *"My coach constantly belittled me during matches, so I quit football and turned to a different sport"*.

Gender Bias and Societal Challenges (Theme 2): Many participants faced gender-based barriers and societal prejudices when engaging in sports. However, through determination, support from family, and a desire to challenge traditional gender roles, they demonstrated resilience and found empowerment. For them, sports became a tool for building confidence and independence.

Overcoming Gender-Based Barriers (Category 1): Many participants reported encountering societal gender norms and stereotypes when they first began playing sports, often facing dismissive or sexist comments from peers, family, or the community. Leyla experienced sexist remarks as a female football player, such as, *"Can women play football? Why wear shorts and play with men?"* Despite these challenges, her determination strengthened, particularly with her father's support. Similarly, Dilek faced scrutiny for playing football, a traditionally male-dominated sport. Motivated to prove women's capabilities, she stated, *"People ask, can a woman play football? Of course, we can"* highlighting her resilience in challenging gender stereotypes.

Societal Prejudice (Category 2): Beyond gender-based barriers, many participants also encountered societal prejudices that reinforced traditional gender roles, limiting women's involvement in sports. Dilara encountered resistance from her family and society when she pursued athletics, as many questioned its purpose and worth. She recalls questions like, *"Why do you run in the cold? Why put yourself through this?"* reflecting societal prejudice she had to overcome through determination. Sila also faced pressure to conform to traditional roles, with expectations that women focus on family life rather than physical activities. Despite this, she found confidence and independence through sports, stating that *"People assume women*

should stay at home, but sports gave me confidence; I realized I could do more". Her experience highlights the empowering impact of sports in breaking societal expectations.

Emotional and Psychological Impact (Theme 3): Sports provide participants with emotional fulfillment, personal development, and empowerment. Beyond physical benefits, sports foster joy, discipline, self-confidence, and independence, shaping personal growth and resilience while helping individuals overcome societal challenges.

Emotional Fulfillment (Category 1): For many participants, sports provide not only physical benefits but also emotional and psychological fulfillment, becoming a source of joy and satisfaction. Esra describes her involvement as *"a passion and even love"* highlighting the emotional bond with her teammates and the camaraderie they share, which brings her a sense of belonging. Similarly, Leyla balances societal prejudices with the joy of playing football; although sexist remarks angered her, her achievements brought her a sense of fulfillment and success, helping her overcome these challenges.

The Impact of Sports on Personal Development (Category 2): Sports significantly impact personal development through factors like discipline, dedication, self-confidence, and social connections. They provide mental training, instill valuable life skills, enhance social participation, and boost self-confidence. Sila emphasized the importance of sports instilling discipline and dedication: *"Taekwondo occupies a large part of my life; the discipline of sports has brought structure to my life"*. Merve noted that sports expanded her social circle and boosted her self-confidence: *"Thanks to sports, I gained self-confidence and can now easily adapt to any environment"*.

Empowerment Through Sports (Category 3): Sports have significantly impacted participants' confidence, independence, and self-worth. Merve expresses her personal growth and independence by stating, *"Being able to stand on my own feet gives me confidence"*. Similarly, Dilara emphasizes that sports are *"an integral part of my identity"* providing her with a sense of purpose and empowerment. The emotional and psychological impact of sports has played a crucial role in shaping her self-worth and confidence.

Social Relationships and Support Systems (Theme 4): Support from coaches, peers, and teammates plays a pivotal role in participants' sports journeys, offering not only practical guidance but also emotional and psychological encouragement. This support fosters deep friendships and social bonds, contributing to their sense of belonging, motivation, and empowerment.

Support from Coaches and Peers (Category 1): Sila's development as an athlete was significantly influenced by the support from her coach, whom she describes as a father figure, providing both practical training and emotional encouragement. She explains, *"My coach was like a father to me, guiding me and supporting me through every step of my journey"*. This supportive relationship was crucial in her continued participation in sports. Aslı's involvement in basketball was reignited by a friend. The social connections she formed through sports

became a source of motivation. She shares that sports gave her a sense of freedom and empowerment, helping her challenge societal expectations.

Peer Relationships and Camaraderie (Category 2): Sports provide physical activity and foster social bonds, creating emotional connections with teammates. Esra found joy and fulfillment in the emotional bonds she built through sports, highlighting their role in creating social connections beyond physical activity. Dilara also emphasized the significance of friendships formed through sports. She explains, *“I’ve built strong friendships through sports, and they have become an integral part of my support system”*. These friendships were essential to her emotional and social growth, giving her a strong sense of community.

Challenges and Sacrifices (Theme 5): Many participants highlighted the personal sacrifices they made to achieve sporting success, such as missing family events and dedicating significant time to training, emphasizing that while balancing personal life and sports posed challenges, the emotional and social rewards of their athletic pursuits made these sacrifices worthwhile.

Sacrifices for Sporting Success (Category 1): Participants often discuss the sacrifices they've made to pursue their athletic ambitions, such as missing family events and dedicating most of their time to training. Sila shares her perspective on these sacrifices. She explains, *“I missed out on family time, and I rarely saw my friends outside of sports, but it was all worth it for the love of the game”*. Merve faced challenges in balancing personal life and sports, emphasizing the sacrifices athletes make to succeed and the discipline and persistence required. She acknowledges the *“tough times”* she experienced but emphasizes that the emotional and social rewards of sports outweighed these challenges.

Barriers to Entry (Theme 6): Despite their passion for sports, many participants faced significant barriers to entry, often stemming from logistical challenges or societal constraints. Dilek encountered difficulties when trying to break into football, a sport traditionally dominated by men. She explains how she had to constantly prove herself to her male peers and coaches, stating, *“Football reflects who I am, and it shows how determined and competitive I am”*. Despite these barriers, her passion for football kept her motivated. Logistical barriers, such as limited access to training facilities and transportation issues, posed obstacles for Dilara. However, she overcame these challenges through persistence and determination. She reflects on how these obstacles pushed her to work even harder in pursuit of her passion for athletics”.

Gender and Sports Participation (Category 1): The intersection of gender roles and sports participation poses a major challenge for women, as sports are traditionally male-dominated and associated with traits like strength and aggression. This undervaluation of women's participation underscores the resilience needed to challenge stereotypes and advance gender equality in sports. For example, Dilek faced sexist attitudes in football, with men questioning if women could play: *“They say, can a woman play football? A woman can do anything she wants”*. Dilara felt sidelined as a woman in sports: *“Men are given prominence, and as a woman, there is a constant sense of being pushed to the background”*. The study reveals that despite progress in promoting gender equality in sports, disparities persist, especially in rural areas, where women face restrictive social norms and economic barriers. For instance, Sila

noted equality in taekwondo: *"In taekwondo, we are completely equal. We train with the men and we support each other"*. Dilara highlighted rural disparities: *"In rural areas, women's opportunities to engage in sports are very limited; some are not even sent to school"*. Women's participation in sports challenges societal perceptions. Female athletes are not only showcasing their skills but also resisting gender norms, driving broader social change.

Societal Pressures, Family Resistance and Resource Limitations (Category 2): Women face challenges in sports due to societal pressures, family resistance, and limited resources. Traditional gender roles, expectations, and cultural norms make it harder for women to navigate the athletic field. Sila experienced this firsthand, stating, *"My family would go somewhere, but I would always be at practice"*. She also recalled that her family was initially hesitant to send her to practice due to transportation issues, explaining, *"Since I was young, my family was a bit reluctant to send me"*.

DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION

Our findings show that external factors (family, coaches, and peers) and intrinsic motivations, such as overcoming challenges, play a dominant role in encouraging female athletes' participation. Despite societal pressures and gender-based discrimination, participants experience positive emotions in sports, which lead to personal growth, empowerment, and the creation of a supportive community. Family and social support are essential in helping female athletes overcome these challenges. Research indicates that sports motivation is influenced by external factors such as social status, family and peer support, relationships with coaches, and access to sports facilities. In particular, peer support significantly enhances commitment to sports activities (Huang et al., 2019). Intrinsic factors, however, play a crucial role in sustaining long-term sports participation (Kaman et al., 2017). Families are key influencers in shaping young women's attitudes toward sports (Hayoz et al., 2017; Pope & Kirk, 2012). External factors, such as peer influence and family socioeconomic background, also impact motivation for sports participation (Joseph et al., 2015). Coaches who value athletes and promote personal development are significant motivators for sports involvement (Rosario, 2023).

Families can both support and hinder an athlete's professional journey (Esin & Bayköse, 2023). Positive family dynamics, such as encouragement, significantly impact the development of female athletes and children's involvement in sports, as well as their long-term athletic careers (Lundy et al., 2019; Wheeler, 2011). Furthermore, family support helps promote women's participation in sports by countering societal pressures and stereotypes. While boys are often encouraged to engage in sports to reinforce their masculinity, women are sometimes discouraged in order to preserve their femininity, leading to lower participation rates for women compared to men (Koca, 2006). Women's sports experiences often foster a strong sense of emotional support and positive reinforcement, shaped by social, cultural, and structural factors. This process highlights the importance of team spirit and strengthens social connections. Studies show that women who have familial or community connections encouraging sports participation develop a stronger sense of belonging within the sports community (Sutton & Knoester, 2021). This socialization process creates a supportive

environment that enhances women's sports experiences and fosters positive expectations for future participation. Additionally, policies promoting gender equality in sports play a vital role in increasing women's participation and support, offering more opportunities for women at various levels (Hanlon et al., 2019). Furthermore, networks and mentorship programs tailored for women in sports leadership help them overcome challenges and build confidence in their roles (Kraft et al., 2020).

Research shows that sports not only provide physical health benefits but also offer emotional satisfaction, increased self-confidence, and opportunities to build social connections (Eime et al., 2013). Sports are linked to psychological benefits, including improved self-esteem, enhanced social skills, and reduced anxiety. These benefits contribute to the overall well-being of young women and motivate them to remain active in sports. In our study, participants reported that sports significantly boosted their confidence. Moreover, participation in sports is strongly linked to self-esteem development. Engaging in physical activities improves self-esteem, while participation in sports enhances perceived competence, further contributing to higher self-esteem (Grandiere Perez et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2022).

Sport develops women's emotional resilience (Akelaitis & Malinauskas, 2018; Karagün, 2014). Female athletes demonstrate higher self-confidence than their male counterparts, highlighting how sports empower women (Bostancı et al., 2019). Women are more motivated by performance and ego-related factors compared to men (Kilpatrick et al., 2005). Women's participation in sports is shaped by the interaction of emotional factors, societal expectations, and barriers. Women's higher emotional intelligence strengthens their coping skills (Skurvydas et al., 2022; Yiyi et al., 2022). Emotional regulation affects athletes' performance (Kopp & Jekauc, 2018; Wagstaff, 2014). Due to societal pressures, women often experience emotional challenges such as anxiety and frustration (Dakic et al., 2023; Roh & Chang, 2022). Coping strategies, such as seeking social support and engaging in emotional communication, help women participate in competitive sports. However, as competition levels rise, reliance on these strategies tends to decline (Carratalá-Bellod et al., 2022).

Sport enhances women's self-confidence, shapes future aspirations, and challenges societal norms. Female athletes experience increased self-esteem and a sense of accomplishment through their connection with sports (Guddal et al., 2019; Singh et al., 2022; Yigiter, 2014). Research highlights the contextual factors influencing athletes' confidence, which vary by sports discipline (Chun et al., 2022; Koehn et al., 2013). Participation in sports contributes to the development of positive future expectations and creates an empowerment cycle for women (Daniels & Leaper, 2006). By engaging in sports, women challenge societal norms, overcome barriers, and inspire others. The visibility of female athletes promotes a culture of empowerment by challenging traditional gender roles (Beshārat & Pourbohloul, 2011; Sabiston et al., 2016). Women's participation in sports inspires younger generations to engage in physical activity, further extending its impact (Ferguson et al., 2014; Mosewich et al., 2013).

Women's participation in sports has historically faced societal resistance, hindering efforts to challenge gendered attitudes and norms. A primary reason for the marginalization of women in sports is the male-centered sports culture (Lusted & Fielding-Lloyd, 2017). Additionally,

cultural and religious factors play a significant role; in conservative regions, such restrictions severely limit women's participation in physical activities (Laar et al., 2019; Laar et al., 2022). These restrictions further challenge discussions on women's rights and equality. Social norms and stereotypes place emotional pressure on women, fueling concerns about their performance and acceptance in sports (Farzaneh et al., 2021; Roh & Chang, 2022). In patriarchal societies, cultural expectations can heighten emotional distress for women (Farzaneh et al., 2021). These challenges can discourage women from engaging in sports (Asghar, 2024). However, women are actively confronting cultural barriers and expanding their presence in sports (Laar et al., 2022). Sports empower women to advocate for equality, build self-confidence, and develop resilience (Pan et al., 2022; Parvathy, 2020). For female athletes, sports go beyond physical activity, they provide emotional fulfillment, shape identities, and challenge societal norms (Burton, 2015).

Despite the challenges they face, female athletes' sports experiences significantly enhance their happiness and overall satisfaction. Sports provide inner joy, emotional well-being, and meaning in life, boosting motivation and creating positive expectations for the future. Negative emotions often stem from sexist attitudes and societal pressures. Some participants reported experiencing anger and anxiety due to gender-based barriers and discrimination. However, negative emotions such as disgust were minimal, indicating that participants generally maintain a positive outlook. NRC emotion analysis indicates that female athletes' experiences are predominantly shaped by positive emotions like trust, anticipation, and joy, though struggles against gender norms also emerge. Overall, female athletes exhibit resilience and optimism in the face of challenges. Trust emerges as the dominant emotion, rooted in supportive relationships with coaches, family, and teammates. Anticipation reflects their hope for future success, while joy highlights their satisfaction despite occasional negative emotions like fear and anger. The emotional impact of societal pressures and gender-based biases is limited, as participants' resilience and empowerment are linked to their efforts to overcome gender stereotypes. This study emphasizes that female athletes' experiences involve a balance of personal motivations, societal barriers, emotional fulfillment, and support systems, with family and peer support playing a crucial role in sustaining participation. Gender discrimination creates emotional hurdles, but sports empower women to overcome obstacles, challenge stereotypes, and pursue their passions, fostering strength, self-confidence, and independence. However, societal pressures, family resistance, and resource limitations further highlight the resilience female athletes demonstrate in overcoming these barriers.

Limitations and Future Research Recommendations

A key limitation of this study is its small sample size, which may not fully capture the experiences of female athletes across diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Future research should include a more diverse demographic representation, employ longitudinal studies, and explore interventions aimed at increasing social support and reducing gender bias.

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Ethics Approval

Ethics Committee: Ethics Committee of Nevşehir Hacı Bektaş Veli University

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