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# The implications of COVID–19 on mental health and well–being in young athletes in Malta

Darren Bezzina, Maria Pace and Renzo Kerr Cumbo

## Abstract

This paper explores the effects of COVID–19 on the mental health and well–being of ten Maltese 14–year–old athletes and their coping strategies at the time of partial lockdown when sports and schools were stopped. Semi–structured interviews were carried out and data was analysed using thematic analysis, yielding three main themes: training and lifestyle; social interactions; and coping strategies. The findings show that COVID–19 had a deep effect on the mental health of participating young athletes, especially during the partial lockdown period. Nevertheless, young athletes were able to find different ways to cope during this period such as training at home, finding different ways to communicate with their friends, as well as trying new activities. Findings in this study are important for stakeholders and policymakers developing new return–to–sport policies as they highlight the importance of keeping mental health and well–being at the core of policy development.

## Keywords

COVID–19, sports, mental health and well–being, qualitative methodology, youth athletes, Institute for Education

## Introduction

The COVID–19 pandemic, defined as a systemic illness that affects major organs (Wang et al., 2020), has challenged our everyday life significantly. Consequences of the illness include severe decrements in cardiac functions (Baggish et al., 2020). The way this can affect athletes when resuming training remains unknown. On 30 January 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) announced a public health emergency. Undoubtedly the impact of this is not limited to physical health but also to mental health. By 12 March 2021, Malta had had over 26,000 cases with almost 350 deaths. The first case was reported on 7

Contact: Darren Bezzina, darren_bezzina@hotmail.com

March 2020 (Times of Malta, 2020). The Maltese health authorities introduced several preventive measures to stop the spread of the virus. In March 2020, all sports activities were stopped prematurely, and training facilities were closed for two months to help prevent the outbreak. In May 2020, the health authorities slowly started allowing athletes to return to their training (Micallef, 2020). Guidelines were given to coaches and athletes suggesting that coaches should remain two metres apart and groups should not be bigger than six, including coaches (SportMalta, 2021). Maximum capacity was restricted to one person per twenty square metres, and athletes were not allowed to borrow any equipment from each other. Games and competitions were allowed to continue without an audience. Despite strict guidelines followed by the clubs and associations, positive players were still being found and games cancelled regularly (Camenzuli, 2020). In March 2021, new restrictions put a stop to all training and competitive sport as Malta once again went into a partial lockdown.

## Mental health

Mental health is defined as the individual's capability to combat normal life stressors (Mukhtar, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic brought about new fears and stress. In fact, psychiatric symptoms such as depression, anxiety, anger, and confusion (Pakpour & Griffiths, 2020) have been reported also by people who never suffered from mental illness before (Shigemura et al., 2020). COVID-19–related measures such as social distancing, wearing of masks, self-isolation and quarantine, social and economic consequences, and even misinformation from social media were additional sources of stress. People became distant in the fear of contracting the virus and in some instances also developed aggressive behaviours towards people who were ill or perceived as ill (Ho et al., 2020). Feelings of helplessness, loneliness, fear, sadness, and nervousness (Khan et al., 2020) were also reported.

Although studies have shown that children and adolescents are less physically vulnerable to the virus, their mental well-being has been negatively affected during this pandemic (Ghosh et al., 2020) due to the lockdown, quarantine, school closures, and lack of outdoor activities. This is especially true for youths who already suffered from mental problems before the pandemic, since they lost the help they were getting due to the closure of schools and special services they had access to (Lee, 2020). Impact of this can be lifelong and has higher incidence in families with a poor financial background or who are

already suffering from other medical conditions (Dubey et al., 2020).

There are four basic sensations from which all emotions are built: fear, pain, anger, and pleasure (Papantuono et al., 2014). These basic sensations, identified by Nardone and Balbi (2012), can help us understand the problems these youths are experiencing during the pandemic. In a study analysing the effect of the quarantine on mental health, Brooks et al. (2020) found that post-traumatic stress symptoms (PTSS) occur in 28% – 34% of all participants and fear was reported in 20% of all participants.

Mental health and well-being in athletes

Apart from the mental health stressors commonly experienced every day, research shows that there are significant cases of mental health issues among athletes (Foskett & Longstaff, 2018; Rice et al., 2016). Under normal circumstances, competitions lead to increased pressures such as meeting performance expectations, following strict training regimes, travelling, and even personal issues such as managing family commitments (Küttel & Larsen, 2020). Since mental health is detrimental to sports performance, it is a factor that has to be monitored by coaches and athletes at all times, including the pandemic circumstances.

Youths participating in sporting activities were greatly affected by the pandemic since most governments banned large-scale gatherings to enforce social distancing. This brought to a stop the majority of sports worldwide. Competitions and training alike were either cancelled or postponed to avoid virus transmission. I would argue that health implications of this on youths may be long-lasting, hence, given the unprecedented circumstances, future research may analyse how this pandemic has affected youth in the long-term.

Youth athletes had to deal with the loss of training and education and might have felt pressured by parents and school to catch up on lost time. Moreover, there may be long-term effects on mental health, social problems, and developmental and cognitive impairment (Bowen, 2015; Felitti et al., 1998; Neamah et al., 2018). As athletes return to the sport, there will be the likelihood of new stressors added, including a higher risk of injuries if competitions resume immediately with limited time to prepare (Bisciotti et al., 2020). Athletes who were infected with the virus may find that their cardiovascular performance has

been affected, which might additionally add to the stressors and perhaps lead to anxiety (Phelan et al., 2020). Also, since a lot of social contacts involve the actual human touch (such as high fives or handshakes), the loss of this form of communication may require some adjustments.

## Coping strategies

Coping strategies can help people deal with times of stress. During times of need, some athletes refer to psychotherapy, defined as the treatment of mental health symptoms or disorders (Stillman et al., 2019). However, the nature of the delivery of these sessions has drastically changed or has even been cancelled during the COVID-19 lockdown. Therefore, athletes have been seeking alternative ways to cope with their stress or mental challenges. For example, athletes sought counselling sessions more than traditional psychotherapy sessions (Sederer, 2020). Still, one of the biggest barriers for athletes is the denial of their psychological problems and the stigma that comes with accepting help related to mental health issues (Castaldelli-Maia et al., 2019). This was more pronounced during the pandemic as athletes became more accustomed to social distancing and being away from their fellow teammates, who would otherwise have noticed first symptoms related to mental health (Reardon et al., 2020).

The increased stress emerging during this pandemic can also increase existing negative mental disorders (Hartman et al., 2019). This increase in mental health problems may increase maladaptive coping as the capacity for emotion regulation is reduced (Compas et al., 2017). For this reason, during such a pandemic, clear and correct information must be provided so that everyone has a good understanding, as this would help everyone cope with the situation better (Fegert et al., 2020), avoiding unnecessary panic while enhancing compliance to measures issued by the government and health authorities. During the pandemic, clubs and coaches should seek different ways to educate their athletes about mental health and refer athletes to medical professionals as necessary.

## Conclusion

Many studies have focused on the effects on mental health and well-being of COVID-19 on athletes (Bisciotti et al., 2020; Clemente-Suarez et al., 2020; di

Fronso et al., 2020). There have also been similar studies on youths. However, very few studies focus on the health and well-being specifically of youth athletes (Fegert et al., 2020). This paper bridges the gap between these two areas. Also, since the Maltese government, unlike many countries in Europe, has opted against a complete lockdown, and youth sports have been ongoing as long as athletes follow mitigation rules, this paper provides a perspective on how this different approach has affected youth athletes' health and well-being.

The study asks whether the COVID-19 affected youth athletes' mental health and well-being, aiming to a) examine the effects on the mental health of youth athletes, and b) determine whether students are using positive coping strategies to deal with the pandemic. With these aims in mind, the following research questions have been formed:

a) How were the mental health and well-being of youth athletes affected during the COVID-19 pandemic?

b) What positive coping strategies, if any, did youth athletes utilise, to maintain their self-care during the COVID-19 pandemic?

## Methodology

The study was carried out in a secondary school in Malta where ten youth athletes (4 boys and 6 girls) from Year 9 were selected through purposive sampling (Maxwell, 2005) from across different sports and were given an invitation to participate along with consent and assent forms. To meet the selection criteria, students had to have been training regularly for at least 5 years and competing regularly before the partial lockdown was announced.

A qualitative approach was used to support the quantitative data found in previous research. A qualitative approach is often used when exploring phenomena such as feelings or thought processes that are difficult to learn through quantitative research (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Qualitative data helps give meaning to people's experiences, interactions, and behaviours without using statistics (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), hence it felt natural to explore the feelings these young athletes were being exposed to through a qualitative approach.

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect information or expressions of opinion or belief (Young et al., 2017). Pre-determined questions were used for each interview to allow comparison between transcripts while still allowing room for discussion. Participants were interviewed about how their mental health and well-being were affected during the pandemic. The questions were adapted from the General Health Questionnaire-12 (GHQ-12), the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) checklist – civilian version, and the simplified coping style questionnaire (SCSQ) (Liang et al., 2020). Interviews were conducted individually so no one would be affected by the answers of others and all COVID-19 safety measures could be observed. Participants were encouraged to answer honestly and in detail about how they were feeling at that very moment. A tutor acted as an external reviewer of the data to further minimise the researcher's influence.

Engaging the participants

Several procedures were taken into consideration to ensure that the study would be ethical. Permission was obtained from the Research Ethics Board of the Institute for Education (IfE), the Ministry for Education and Employment (MEDE), the college principal, and the Head of School. Following all the necessary procedures ensured that the study does not harm and deceive the participants since they were providing consent, and thus ensuring privacy and confidentiality (Sales & Folkman, 2000). Participation in the study was completely voluntary.

Since the participants were all minors, parents/guardians were given consent forms to sign, agreeing that their children be part of the study and the interviews be recorded. Assent forms were also given to the students.

Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to organise and analyse the data. The six-phase guidelines issued by Braun and Clarke (2006) were followed to ensure the best possible choices when using thematic analysis (Figure 1). Three main themes emerged: training and lifestyle; social interactions; and coping strategies. These themes were further divided into sub-themes.

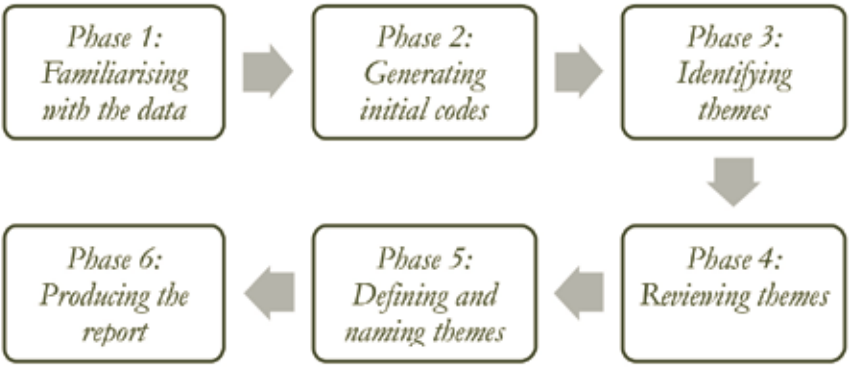


**Figure 1: The six-phase guidelines (Braun & Clarke, 2006)**

## Findings

After analysing the interviews, three main themes emerged: the effects of COVID-19 on mental health, social interactions, and coping strategies. These themes and their sub-themes are presented in Figure 2. Furthermore, these findings were compared to already-existing COVID-19 research.

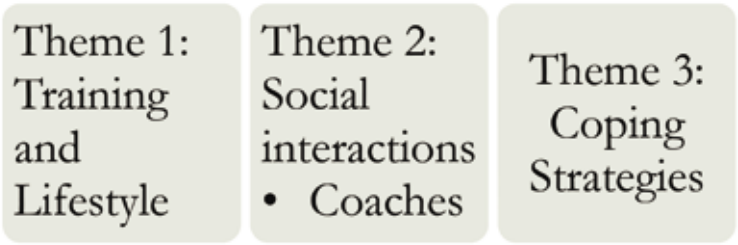


**Figure 2: Themes and sub-themes**

Demographics of the study

The participants involved in this study were all 14-year-old athletes participating in different sports, including football, bowling, artistic gymnastics, athletics, water polo, table tennis, karate, rhythmic gymnastics, synchronised swimming, and swimming (See Table 1). Six of the participants were female, whilst four participants were male. The interviews were held in January–February 2021.

**Table 1: Participants' Sports**

| Participants | Age | Gender | Sport Practised |
|---|---|---|---|
| Participant 1: | 14 | Male | Football |
| Participant 2: | 14 | Male | Bowling |
| Participant 3: | 14 | Female | Artistic Gymnastics |
| Participant 4: | 14 | Female | Athletics |
| Participant 5: | 14 | Male | Water Polo |
| Participant 6: | 14 | Male | Table Tennis |
| Participant 7: | 14 | Female | Karate |
| Participant 8: | 14 | Female | Rhythmic Gymnastics |
| Participant 9: | 14 | Female | Synchronised Swimming |
| Participant 10: | 14 | Female | Swimming |

All youth athletes had their life turned upside-down during the pandemic. They experienced changes with school, their sport, and also their daily life. Interestingly, although effects were mostly limiting, some positive effects were also reported.

*Training and competitions*

Athletes had to adapt their training schedule during the partial lockdown as they were offered online training and had to train from home. Six participants stated that they did not enjoy training at home:

> During the lockdown, I trained at home and in a small ground. We also had online meetings with the coaches, and teammates where we practised passing and shooting against a wall. I felt very uncomfortable training that way and I could not run and concentrate properly. So, when we returned to training, we were having some trouble with our fitness. (Participant 1)

Four participants reported enjoying training at home and found this type of training beneficial:

> During the lockdown, I trained at home alone or with my father but now I started regular training. We did have online training sessions and we were also keeping in contact through messages. I feel that training at home made me better to a certain point. I felt that although I could not compete with someone physically, I could compete with myself and push my limits in any way I wanted to. (Participant 5)

With the return to sport and competition, several changes had to be made to decrease the virus spread. Some competitions were restarted by following mitigation rules, whilst some competitions remained on hold. Almost all competitions abroad were cancelled. All participants in this study shared their views regarding this:

> Competitions have been done online. It was really hard to participate in them because in rhythmic gymnastics we have to throw the apparatus very high and I obviously could not practise that at home and I could not practise the routines. (Participant 8)

When asked about how they felt about competing, seven participants expressed negative feelings such as being pressured and scared of catching the virus, and having lack of motivation to train:

> I have mixed feelings because sometimes I feel motivated and there come days, for example when numbers go up, when I ask whether or not I should go to training. (Participant 4)

Three athletes reported feeling good and well-prepared for the upcoming competitions:

> We are organising a club tournament and I feel really good that we are finally going to compete in a competitive tournament. I am prepared and ready to win. (Participant 6)

Since schools and sports were closed during the partial lockdown and mitigation measures completely changed how these institutions operate, the support youths were used to having at their disposal became limited and, in some cases, stopped entirely (Rousseau & Miconi, 2020). Coaches still provided some form of online training. However, the limitations of these training sessions have been highlighted during the interviews. There was no equipment or facilities available, so most of the training sessions were spent on physical conditioning. Whilst this may have helped athletes to become stronger, some athletes reported

having problems in improving their technique. There were also some problems in communicating and understanding each other. This caused feelings of stress, negative feelings, negative thoughts, fear, anxiety, sadness, and difficulty in staying motivated and concentrated.

With the return to sport, many sports organisations, both at national and international level, have developed new return–to–sport policies with changes even to the rules of the game. In synchronized swimming for example, during the interview, the participant noted that competitions were different as they were given tasks to do rather than develop a routine. Similarly, competitions for rhythmic gymnastics were done online. Running events in athletics were also keeping an empty lane in between. These rules were introduced to ensure social distancing between players and reduce the spread of the virus. However, there is still limited evidence on the practices being introduced in these policies (Kelly et al., 2020). Studies such as this one, which explore how youths feel about these rules, can help analyse whether these policies are enhancing or hindering the athlete's progress or motivation, and whether they are causing the athlete to move away from the sport.

*Lifestyles*

This study evidenced how sudden drastic changes affected some of the participants and their lifestyles. Two participants reported having trouble sleeping due to either a change of lifestyle or to stress from the pandemic:

> I spent weeks crying myself to sleep since I was stressing a lot because I was missing the normal life. (Participant 3)

Six athletes felt that despite the mitigation measures imposed after the partial lockdown, their life was not affected that much:

> I think that with the procedures that we have to follow, we are free to do what we want. I still can go meet friends, spend time with family, go to training, and come to school. That's my normal day. I had some negative thoughts as I was afraid that when I got back I wouldn't be as strong and as fast which wasn't true as I even improved. Life is the same as it was before, perhaps only I don't go out as much with my friends. (Participant 5)

Five participants also commented about how they think this pandemic will not affect their future:

> Funnily enough I think it will affect me in a positive way because, in Malta, I think that the COVID-19 situation was not that bad as it was in other countries. Many athletes abroad couldn't train at home and I had a big advantage over them. When it came to school, yes I did fall behind, but now I am back on track and I am doing really well. (Participant 5)

Two participants believed that their future will be affected due to the pandemic:

> I think it will have an impact on my future as recently I have not been travelling a lot so it, sort of, limited the opportunities that I would have. I think my progress also got affected a bit due to the fact that I lost 5 months of training and competing which I could have reduced my personal bests. (Participant 10)

The pandemic has brought a sense of disengagement as it became difficult for individuals to plan (Settersten et al., 2020). This may lead young athletes to lower their future goals and fear that their future might be affected. Still, youths have the advantage of having a longer time to recover from this pandemic. They also tend to have a more positive approach to life than older people. When interviewed, some participants reported that the pandemic has helped them improve in their training, whilst some others took the opportunity to try different things. The way some of these youths are handling the pandemic is quite surprising, especially considering the lack of experience they have, since youths are usually heavily protected by their parents in normal day-to-day problems (Kelly et al., 2020). Whilst older people tend to blame the pandemic, youths have found different ways to still make life interesting and do their utmost to surmount the challenges.

Mental health is associated with sleep quality. Athletes who were not able to cope with the COVID-19 also had their sleep affected, changed their diets, and consumed larger amounts of carbohydrates, as well as adopted a more sedentary lifestyle (Makarowski et al., 2020). During the interviews, two athletes did report having trouble sleeping, with one individual saying that she cried herself to sleep during the partial lockdown. Whilst this may be due to a change in lifestyle, it can also be due to higher stress and anxiety because of being lonely and afraid of their future (Zhang et al., 2020). However, regular exercise

is also a good treatment for mental health and for reducing negative emotions (Loprinzi, 2013). Since athletes continued their training indoors, this could help promote sleep quality, which might explain why eight athletes had no trouble sleeping.

Theme 2: Social Interactions

Social interactions are very important for youths, especially youth athletes, as they build a special bond throughout the years with their family, coaches, and teammates. Sport is considered a social activity since there are continuous interactions. Thus, analysing how these social interactions have changed with the introduction of online learning is vital when creating new policies.

*Coaches*

One participant noted that the relationship with the coach was adversely affected during the COVID-19 pandemic:

> For many of us, our relationship with the coach decreased as we could not understand the coach during the explanation. I also used to spend more time with the family during the lockdown since with training, school, and games I usually have less time. (Participant 1)

Seven others think that their relationship with coaches has improved:

> My relationship with the coach improved because when I felt I had a problem or was passing through some form of stress, I would talk to the coach and we would talk using social media. (Participant 3)

The relationship between coaches and athletes is described as a sense of belonging which includes mutual benefits of closeness (LaVoi, 2004). This relationship is based on the mutual emotional bond between coaches and athletes, and on trust, respect, support, communication, appreciation, emotional care, collaboration, and commitment (Jowett & Arthur, 2019). Communication in particular is an important factor because it ensures a strong and harmonious coach–athlete relationship (Li et al., 2020). During the partial lockdown, the way communication was done dramatically changed. Despite this change, during the interview many athletes reported that the relationship with their coach was

stronger than ever. Similar studies also found that the relationship between the coach and the athlete improved following the lockdown (Li et al., 2020).

Since online meetings are a type of indirect communication, they reduce the sense of leadership the coach might have and shorten the psychological distance between the coach and the athlete that is usually present in the face-to-face distance (Li et al., 2020). Thus, it can be said that social media created a more diverse communication. Athletes were eager to return to training, which by itself improves the relationship between the coach and the athlete. Being in the same situation could help both the coach and the athlete show empathy and mutual care (Pan et al., 2020). Another factor that could have led to an improved relationship between the coach and athlete is the change in environment. Since players at home are surrounded by their loving family, it may give the athletes a sense of security and happiness, which in turn makes conversation and communication with the coach much easier (Fitriana & Xin, 2019). Finally, to express their ideas better, coaches had to resort to a wider use of body language in front of the camera which could have made it easier to communicate (Li et al., 2020).

*Friends*

Whilst all participants noted that they kept interacting with each other, one participant noted that her relationship with her friends improved during this period:

> My confidence with my teammates improved. For example, before, although we were quite close, we did not pay attention to each other. But now, during these few months that we have been training seriously together, my relationship with them changed as we were meeting more during the pandemic, something I did not even do with my school friends. (Participant 9)

Having sport affected can also lead athletes to question their identity. Individuals often support each other to embrace their role identities (Graupensperger et al., 2020). Athletes' teammates give each other identity, even in a situation where athletes are separated by a lockdown. Group members reported greater well-being (Cruwys et al., 2013). Almost all athletes noted that they were in some way or another connected to the team during the pandemic. This interaction can be extremely helpful to boost the identity at a time when people are most vulnerable.

Staying socially connected is vital for maintaining good mental health. Studies show that people who have high-quality social connections live longer than people who don't (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010). Research on social connectedness has been going on for many years. For example, a study by House et al. (1988) shows that individuals who perceive that they are cared for, valued by others and form part of a social group have their mental well-being improved and thus this helps protect them against depression. Similarly, when youths in college belong to groups with greater numbers, they report fewer depression symptoms (Iyer et al., 2009). Also, athletes developed a stronger identity when they were associated with a team (Graupensperger et al., 2020). Still, this pandemic has created a situation where people had to avoid physical contact. Participants during the interviews noted that meeting their friends physically became a stressful experience.

Theme 3: Coping Strategies

Continuing their training was a huge part of these athletes' coping mechanisms. They also devoted a lot of time to doing other activities, including learning new skills. Some participants also found that talking to their coach and keeping a positive mindset helped them cope with the situation. All athletes noted that training helped them cope with the stress they were experiencing:

> I tried learning to play the PlayStation and I did but then I got bored. I tried studying maths but I was not understanding on my own. The coach was giving us sessions of what we could do when we didn't have online sessions and I used to do those. My father also bought me a gymnastics bar and hung it on the roof. Whenever I am stressing or have a problem, I talk to the coach and she gives me advice on what to do. (Participant 3)

Six other athletes noted that they were also doing other activities along with training to cope with the situation:

> I did a lot of baking and cooking with my mother and brother. I managed to organise my schedule for the coming years and set my goals. I also helped around the house and we even designed some parts in the house which was very fun! I am trying to stay as positive as possible and I am trying to be the best version of myself and push every day. (Participant 10)

Athletes are used to coping with stressful situations, including competitions and high-intensity training, as well as other stressors including fatigue, their sporting environment, poor performance, and fatigue (Pété et al., 2021). Thus, athletes are continuously using adaptive processes to cope with these situations. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought with it unprecedented and unknown situations with new stressors athletes may not be used to (Clemente-Suarez et al., 2020). After focusing so much on achieving high performance, stopping abruptly with the uncertainty of not knowing when life will return to normality may have had an impact on the well-being of the athletes.

During the interviews, athletes stated that that they were continuously in contact with their coach via online meetings and being provided with training programmes. Several athletes noted that training hard kept them going during the pandemic and it filled most of their time. This helped athletes ease their minds upon their return to sport as they felt they were doing something useful to try and control the situation. Some athletes also found interest in other things such as video games, new hobbies, talking to their coaches, meditation, and spending more time with their families. All these coping mechanisms can be considered positive. There are four distinct coping mechanisms that athletes use which include self-reliance, engagement, avoidance, and active and social coping strategies (Pété et al., 2021). Athletes in this study mentioned more than one coping strategy to deal with the pandemic. Engagement coping strategies such as problem-solving, cognitive restructuring, and distraction, and active and social coping strategies, such as seeking support, helped control anxiety levels and athletes were more in control of the situation during the pandemic. Athletes were able to cope better with the COVID-19 stressors by applying the coping strategies used for their sport (di Fronso et al., 2020).

## Conclusion

### Limitations

COVID-19 restrictions in Malta limited the researcher's access to youth athletes, limiting the number of participants in this study. More athletes from a wider variety of sports could have provided more information. Another limitation is that this data was collected months after the lockdown, hence the participants' reactions and feelings had already gone through an adaptation phase and started their recovery from the partial lockdown. Still, this study has yielded

important information on how youths were currently feeling about the return to their sport whilst following safety mitigation protocols.

Opportunities for further studies

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has halted a number of researchers from conducting their studies. However, it has also created a window of opportunity for further research in the coming months. For example, an important research topic would be the study of athletes' reactions to physical contact whilst competing, after spending so much time hearing about the importance of social distance. It is also interesting to analyse the mental effects that COVID-19 has left on people a few years after the pandemic, to see if these effects were long-term or not. Research can also be conducted on how many youths stopped training due to financial problems caused by COVID-19, delving more into socio-economic aspects.

Findings of this study signal that the COVID-19 pandemic did have an impact on the mental health and well-being of youth athletes, and these were very similar to other studies that investigated the mental impact major injuries had on athletes (Brewer et al., 2010). These findings can help guide coaches and athletes in their efforts to support youth athletes both during as well as in the aftermath of the pandemic. Many clubs, schools, and organisations are promoting student mental well-being. Efforts should also be done by all parties to keep the connection alive with all stakeholders and in particular the players/athletes and the coach.

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## Notes on contributors

**Darren Bezzina** (B.Sc. in Sports Science, M.Ed. in Physical Education, M.Sc. in Strength and Conditioning) has been a Physical Education teacher for seven years. He is also a gymnastics coach and conducts regular fitness classes for people seeking to improve their fitness. He believes that teaching and coaching should be built on two pillars, namely knowledge and a positive attitude. His goal is to help as many children as possible fall in love with sports, as it is only through the love of sport that lifelong sports participation can be achieved.

**Maria Pace** holds a Bachelor in Primary Education, a Master in Education in Social, Emotional, Behaviour Difficulties and a PhD in Children, Schools and Families. She worked as a Primary School Teacher and Nurture Group Teacher. She currently works as an Education Officer in Inclusive Education supporting four colleges and the Nurture Group and Learning Support Zones educators. She was one of the main contributors in policy documentations, namely a Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools: Route to Quality Inclusion and the National Inclusive Education Framework. She also delivered workshops at the European Conference on Resilience in Education and the seventh ENSEC Conference. Her research interests are: SEBD, Nurture Groups & Learning Support Zones, Circle Time, Student Voice, Inclusion, Inclusive Education and Inclusion Policy.

**Renzo Kerr Cumbo** holds a BEd (Hons) with specialisation in Physical Education, an MSc in Sports Coaching from Loughoborough University, and a PhD from the University of Sheffield which investigated the process of coaching through principles of play, and how coaches generate tactical content knowledge to supplement their coaching. Lecturing at MCAST he currently leads the Erasmus+ project CoachEd6 aimed at Sports Coaching Education. He spearheaded MCAST's first Sports Conference, was invited to present during the annual BASES conference in 2019 and initiated the first academic peer-reviewed journal dedicated to exercise, sports, and physical activity in Malta. He is an ex-Malta National Team Handball player, who moved into Handball and then football coaching at young age. He is a qualified football physical trainer and a UEFA PRO coach with coaching experience in all age groups across all Maltese divisions.

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