



Research Protocol

Lived Experiences of UAAP Season 84 and NCAA Season 97 Student-Athletes in their Bubble Set-up Training during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Research Protocol

Ken Erbvín Sosa¹, Charles Nicolei Nermal¹, Karlos Lorenzo Rea¹, Gabrielle Atasha Tanhueco¹, Isaac Miguel Andico¹, Janelle Audre Chiu¹, Timothy Lao¹, Ma. Julia Isabelle Peñaloza¹, John Mari Quilang¹, Zeuch Ryonin Silva¹

¹Department of Physical Therapy, College of Rehabilitation Sciences University of Santo Tomas, Manila, NCR, Philippines

Correspondence should be addressed to: Ken Erbvín Sosa¹; krsosa@ust.edu.ph

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Abstract

Background: The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly affected the sports industry, postponing events worldwide. To adapt to the situation, athletes have been forced to train at home. Bubble training was introduced to provide a safe and conducive training environment while adhering to government health protocols. However, concerns have emerged regarding the set-up's implementation. **Objective:** The study aims to explore the lived experiences of UAAP Season 84 and NCAA Season 97 student-athletes who underwent bubble training. **Methods:** The study will employ a qualitative phenomenological approach based on Seligman's Well-Being Theory. A purposive sampling technique will be used to recruit at least seven eligible student-athletes. Data will be collected through on-site or online interviews using a semi-structured interview guide to reveal a narrative of the student-athletes' bubble training experiences, common themes, and patterns. Deductive thematic analysis approach will be used with the help of the NVivo software program. **Expected Results:** This study is expected to develop themes from the daily bubble training routines, habits, coping strategies, and perceived thoughts and feelings of Filipino collegiate student-athletes, regarding their emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement in bubble training. This may provide insights to the government, educational institutions, and athletic associations on possible comprehensive guidelines if they plan to implement bubble training when the need arises.

Key Words: Bubble Set-Up Training OR Bubble Training, Well-being, UAAP, NCAA, Student-Athlete

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic caused widespread postponement of sports events that negatively impacted athletes' mental and emotional health.¹ Bubble camps have emerged as restrictive measures for the athletes and the coaching staff during the pandemic.^{2,3} This setup offers benefits including lowered COVID-19 transmissions⁴ and enhanced access to coaching, training, and medical services,³ but also presents with limitations such as communication restrictions and additional pressures on student-athletes.^{3,5} Nationally, the University Athletic Association of the Philippines (UAAP) and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) initiated bubble training to resume tournaments after two consecutive cancellations of competition and

training, and by mandate of the Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) that permits training under general community quarantine (GCQ) or modified GCQ areas last September 2020.⁶ The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) also assessed the readiness of both athletic associations and allowed training to commence last December 2021, provided that students are fully vaccinated and compliant with COVID-19 health protocols.⁷ These include clustering teams in a bubble for tournaments, limited person-to-person contact, and antigen testing before each game.⁸ In a pandemic, the future of sports competitions and training remains to impose uncertainties and setbacks on student-athletes' well-being. Hence, investigating the lived

experiences of Filipino student-athletes in bubble training may become grounds for effective training protocol implementation as necessitated.

Existing literature on bubble training focuses on quantitative assessments of an athlete's well-being in a bubble set-up^{2,9} and its effectiveness in mitigating COVID-19 transmission.¹⁰ Studies primarily investigated COVID-19 incidence rates, symptoms,¹¹ and general bubble protocols,¹⁰ and presented with insufficient local studies and data gathering limited to online surveys,² small sample sizes, and sport-specific contexts.^{5,10,11} However, the potentially diminished mental and performance status of athletes in bubble training is yet to have profound coverage in literature. Therefore, retrieving qualitative data imparts a deeper understanding of the student-athletes' personal and unique experiences in bubble training which offers novel perspectives by integrating quantitative and qualitative data in advancing the research inquiry.

Thus, the study intends to explore the experiences of UAAP Season 84 and NCAA Season 97 student-athletes in bubble training, encompassing their daily training routines, coping strategies, thoughts, and emotions. These are geared toward a broader understanding of physical therapists regarding student-athlete's experiences and in improving bubble training protocols if a paradigm shift to bubble training is necessitated.

METHODS

Ethical Considerations. The study will abide by the ethical principles based on Belmont Report (1979), National Ethical Guidelines for Health and Health-Related Research (2017), and the Data Privacy Act of 2012. This is approved by the Technical Review Committee (TRC) and the University of Santo Tomas-College of Rehabilitation Sciences (UST-CRS) Ethical Review Committee (Protocol number SI-2022-041). It is also registered on the Philippine Health Research Registry (Registry ID:PHRR230216-005441).

Study Design. A phenomenological study will be used to explore the lived experiences of Filipino collegiate student-athletes in bubble training.

This approach elevates the understanding of the impacts of COVID-19 and the bubble training circumstances on student-athletes. Such necessitates attention due to the pandemic-related implications on a student-athlete's mental health. Thus, this design facilitates comprehension of the personal accounts of student-athletes to potentially improve training support systems.¹² The Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) Checklist was used as a guide in protocol writing.

Participants/Study Selection. Student-athletes across the UAAP Season 84 and NCAA Season 97 sporting teams who trained in bubble camps from 2021-2022 will be recruited in the study. The researchers will recruit at least seven participants, as this is the usual number needed to achieve data saturation in phenomenological studies.^{13,14} However, if new themes still arise after seven interviews, more participants will be recruited. Data saturation will only be achieved once no new themes emerge or when themes appear redundant during the interviews.¹⁵ To ensure a good balance and representation between UAAP and NCAA participants, only one student-athlete per UAAP and NCAA sporting team will be included. They will be stratified into UAAP and NCAA groups and divided into competing and non-competing athletes after recruitment. The study will recruit participants who meet the criteria presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Eligibility criteria

Type of Criteria	Qualifications
Inclusion Criteria	<p>Age: The student-athlete must be at least 18 years old during the bubble training.</p> <p>Student-Athlete Classification</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student-athletes included in the UAAP Season 84 and NCAA Season 97 rosters regardless if they had scheduled competitions or not, as long as they actively participated during the bubble training period. Student-athletes who have trained under the same team prior to UAAP Season 84 or NCAA Season 97. <p>Bubble Training Requirements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bubble training must have been conducted last 2021-2022 in preparation for the commencement of UAAP and NCAA. The student-athlete must have undergone at least six weeks of bubble training to ensure that participants have incurred substantial training experiences. A student-athlete who continued bubble training upon recovery after acquiring COVID-19 or did not acquire COVID-19 at any point during bubble training.
Exclusion Criteria	<p>COVID-19 History: Student-athletes who acquired COVID-19 during bubble training and were not permitted to continue training.</p> <p>Transferees: Student-athletes from a different school who joined another team in the same or different league between UAAP Season 84 and NCAA Season 97 (i.e., UST student-athlete transferred to ADMU or CSB).</p> <p>Withdrawal History: Student-athletes who suspended all athlete-related activities and discontinued participation in bubble training.</p> <p>Changing of Sports: Student-athletes who switched sports between UAAP Season 84 and NCAA Season 97 (i.e., basketball student-athlete switching to volleyball).</p>

Note: The table above shows the inclusion and exclusion criteria that are used in the recruitment of participants.

A period between 2021-2022 of bubble training was set as this represents the time frame of bubble training implementation by CHED.⁷ Six weeks of bubble training were patterned after a previous study on the set-up⁵; hence, their COVID-19 and withdrawal histories are pertinent as this may have forced student-athletes to discontinue training. Student-athletes who changed schools or sports between the

bubble training period were excluded for a more homogenous sample¹⁶ to compare experiences in conventional and bubble set-ups.

A homogenous purposive sampling technique will be utilized for selecting participants as it is widely used in qualitative studies to investigate a certain phenomenon, in this case on bubble training, and analyze similarities among the student-athletes' experiences. Such a sampling approach ensures that potential participants satisfy the required characteristics.¹⁶

Setting. The researchers will conduct one-on-one semi-structured interviews (SSIs) in the Philippines, either online or on-site. On-site SSIs will be held in the San Martin de Porres Building at the UST - Manila. Meanwhile, online SSIs will utilize Zoom Video Communications or Google Meet to mitigate the health risks associated with virus transmission and allow athletes from distant locations to participate in the study.¹⁷

Interview Protocol. Figure 1 depicts the study methodology. An SSI guide will be formulated and adopted based on studies with similar research objectives.¹⁸ An independent and experienced qualitative expert in research methodology with credentials in publishing qualitative studies¹⁹ will validate the SSI guide using a self-made validation tool, assessing the question content, relevance, and alignment with the research objectives. The selected expert is also an educator with significant education units and training in content alignment.

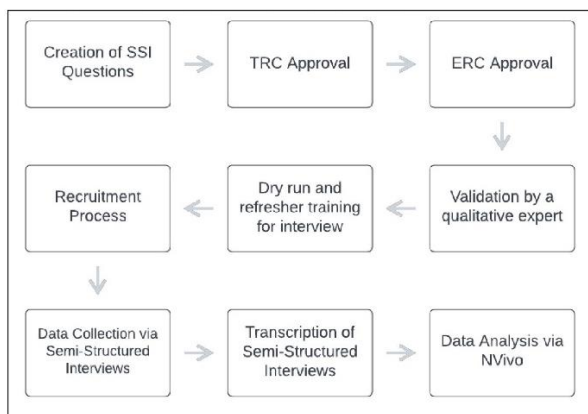


Figure 1. Step-by-step procedures

A dry run will be conducted to simulate the interview process and determine the need to refine the interview guide. This ensures the

clarity, coherence, and non-redundancy of the interview questions.²⁰ It will include three male faculty researchers who are licensed Physical Therapists and Master's Degree holders with substantial experience and knowledge in conducting qualitative studies and the student researchers. The data gathered will not be part of the data analysis.

Interviews will be recorded using a phone camera for on-site interviews and Zoom or Google Meet for online interviews to allow backtracking of responses and simultaneous transcription using Google Docs. All transcriptions, audio, and video recordings will be saved in a restricted Google Drive folder and may only be accessed through the researchers' Google accounts, which are password-protected and further secured by Google Authenticator to ensure data privacy.

Roles during the interview include the following:

1. An **Interviewer**, a faculty researcher who either underwent training from a qualitative expert or is experienced in facilitating interviews, adept in sports rehabilitation, and qualified to facilitate the smooth delivery of one-on-one SSIs,²¹ shall lead the discussion and extract data from participants.
2. A **Technical Assistant** shall record the interview and assist in cases of technical difficulties for online and on-site SSIs.
3. **Transcribers** shall consist of two note-takers who will transcribe the participants' responses verbatim and a field note-taker who will take note of the participants' body language, emotions, tones, and reactions.
4. Two **cross-checkers** shall work closely with the transcribers to ensure data accuracy.
5. A **Timekeeper** shall monitor the duration of the interview to ensure efficiency.

Aside from the participant, only four persons will be inside the room during each interview to ensure the participant's comfort. This includes one interviewer, one technical assistant and timekeeper, and two transcribers.

Recruitment Process. Recruitment will be done via social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The recruitment poster includes the Google Forms link and QR code that interested

participants may access for further information. The Google Form includes the informed consent form and an orientation video explaining the process and the study's objectives. Participants who signed up will further be verified and validated by the researchers based on the set eligibility criteria. If eligible, they will receive an email from the researchers to confirm their participation and interview schedule. They are given two weeks to respond.

Data Collection. A single semi-structured interview of 60 minutes maximum will be employed in inquiring open-ended and follow-up questions to reduce interviewer and participant fatigue.²¹ Before the interview, participants will be assigned a number as their code name (e.g., Participant 1, Participant 2, etc.) by one researcher for identification, privacy, and confidentiality. Interview details will be emailed to the participants three days before their schedule. Online interviewees must rename themselves with their assigned code names, exhibit proper online etiquette, and keep their cameras on throughout the interview. On-site interviewees will be provided a name tag corresponding to their code name, which shall be worn throughout the interview. They shall abide by the UST COVID-19 health protocols at all times.

The SSI will begin with an introduction of the study's objectives, followed by retrieval of consent to record the session and reiterance of the informed consent guidelines. After asking the predetermined questions, the interviewer will summarize the discussion and ask the participant for any additional bubble training experiences they want to share. The session shall end by thanking the participant and articulating the study's next steps.

The researchers will transcribe the participants' responses, emotions, tones, and reactions in verbatim. Transcriptions will be cross-checked to adequately perform member-checking and ensure data accuracy. The final transcription and the 300 PHP GrabFood gift certificate will be forwarded to the participants for validation and appreciation, respectively.

Rigor and Trustworthiness. Rigor will be established by employing credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability.

Credibility will be attained by implementing a member-checking approach²² and assessment of data from multiple perspectives through methodological triangulation²³ of SSI, non-participant observation, and Google Forms. The researchers will be divided into two groups: three will transcribe data, and four will verify the transcribed data.²⁴ Transcripts will be returned to all participants for validation prior to data analysis.^{22,23} All researchers will code data, and the final set of codes will be based on a common decision among the researchers. Any disagreement will be resolved through consensus. If discrepancies cannot be resolved, a third-party coding expert shall intervene.²⁴ To attain dependability, all SSIs will have a consistent interview guide, interviewer, and duration, although the probing sequence may vary. Moreover, the researchers will create an audit trail to outline the research process, including all choices and decisions made during data collection, analysis, and interpretation.²³ The researchers will provide a thorough explanation of the methodology to ensure transferability.²³ Lastly, for confirmability, only one researcher will assign code names to the participants to reduce bias and strengthen confidentiality, and only information about their bubble training experiences will be asked to respect their privacy. Reflexivity using a reflective journal will be employed to prevent potential influences or biases of the researchers' experiences and to provide context on the research's processes.²³

Recall bias may be present but will be mitigated by selecting carefully crafted open-ended questions validated by a qualitative expert. All researchers shall also undergo the Principles of Health Research Ethics and Good Research Practice training initiated by the University of Santo Tomas and a refresher training from an externally affiliated expert to augment the probing proficiency of interviewers, thus reducing the risks of erroneous alteration of details from recall.²⁵

The identity and relationship between the researchers and the participants are also influential in the interviews and the results of the study. Some researchers may have established prior rapport by providing training or rehabilitation services. To address this bias,

the participants will not be assigned to the interviewer with whom they have interacted significantly from previous encounters.

Data Analysis. The researchers will undergo intensive training sessions focusing on the data encoding process led by a faculty researcher with experience in utilizing the NVivo software. After the training sessions, the gathered data will be translated into English and encoded using NVivo to aid in the organization, analysis, and discovery of insights.²⁶ The generated codes will be utilized to create a coding tree based on the codes-to-theory model,²⁷ categorizing codes and producing themes for UAAP and NCAA student-athletes separately. The data will be analyzed through a deductive thematic approach.²⁸ After conscientious deliberation among all authors, the themes will be finalized for interpretation through a semantic approach and undergo the six phases of thematic analysis.²⁸

In thematic analysis, the researchers will extensively familiarize themselves with the retrieved data and the step-by-step process of thematic analysis to ensure appropriate coding of the necessary information. Salient data features will be extracted and identified individually from participant responses and will be provided with codes then will be sorted accordingly to establish themes and similarities. These may be modified to derive more meaningful representations and relationships between various codes and major and minor themes that will be presented through a structural map. Thorough reviews of the codes will be conducted to ensure coherence and accuracy.²⁸

The researchers will evaluate the final themes by creating explanations and informative names for each that best summarizes their contents and essence. Once the themes are finalized, the researchers will begin writing the thematic analysis. They will discuss each theme's frequency and significance, which examples from the data will support. The main findings will be summarized with in-depth descriptions of the athlete's experiences, feelings, and thoughts about training under a bubble set up to demonstrate how the research question is addressed.²⁸ Finally, a complete report of the data analysis will be emailed to the participants

for validation and feedback for potential improvements of the interpreted results.²²

EXPECTED RESULTS

The study anticipates the elucidation and articulation of key themes in the lived experiences of collegiate student-athletes who underwent bubble training during the pandemic in terms of their emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement. This insight withholds significance for the development of bubble training set-up frameworks that augment the needs and welfare of student-athletes if a bubble-oriented shift is necessitated. This may reveal the daily roles and challenges of student-athletes, which are vital in alleviating their struggles through effective support systems.

Supplementary Files

[Supplementary File A. COREQ Checklist](#)

[Supplementary File B. Semi-Structured Interview Guide](#)

Individual Author's Contributions

G.T., & K.S: Conceptualized the research project. G.T. & I.A.: Distributed the tasks and led the submissions. K.S., C.N., and K.R.: Supervised manuscript revisions and guided other authors. K.S., C.N., K.R, GT., I.A., J.C., T.L., J.P., J.Q., and Z.S.: Substantially made contributions in the conception, writing, and revision of content. All authors fulfilled the responsibility of drafting, reviewing, and approving of the final version of the protocol. All authors also agreed to be held accountable and ensured integrity in all aspects of the protocol.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors of this paper declare no conflicting interest.

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