

## Article

# Analysis of Socio-Emotional Competencies as a Key Dimension for Sustainability in Colombian Elite Athletes

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**Abstract:** Socio-emotional, cognitive, and behavioral learning are emphasized by UNESCO as being essential to the advancement of sustainability. Sports are big events that have a big social, economic, and environmental impact. This study examined the socio-emotional competitiveness of elite Colombian Olympic and Paralympic athletes in relation to their academic background, gender, age, sport type, and modality. Methods: Colombian elite athletes who were members of the “Support to the Excellence Coldeportes Athlete” participated in the study. The total population studied included 334 Colombian elite athletes: mean age  $27.10 \pm 6.57$  years old with  $13.66 \pm 6.37$  years practicing his/her sports modality. The socio-emotional competencies of the participants were assessed using the Socio-emotional Competencies Scale (SECS). Results: In the areas of conflict resolution, emotional control, self-awareness, and interpersonal regulation, men performed better than women. Athletes under 25 years old showed more self-consciousness. Sports, whether individual or team, did not differ. Higher levels of drive, self-awareness, cooperation, and emotional control were displayed by Paralympians. Athletes with a university education demonstrated more drive, self-awareness, empathy, and collaboration. Every competency showed a favorable correlation. Conclusion: Tailored interventions aimed at enhancing socio-emotional functioning are essential for sustainability and should consider variations in gender, age, level of education, and handicap status. The article aims to facilitate and optimize the creation of specific programs to help Olympic and Paralympic athletes in their preparation through socio-emotional competences.

**Keywords:** high performance; Olympic; Paralympic; gender; age; type of sport; sport modality



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## 1. Introduction

A number of studies have demonstrated the significance of striking a balance between these three elements, cognitive, socio-emotional, and behavioral learning, and the critical importance of developing socio-emotional competencies to support living in and constructing a more inclusive, just, peaceful, and sustainable society [1,2]. UNESCO [3,4] has emphasized the importance of applying the three learning dimensions—cognitive, socio-emotional, and behavioral learning—in a balanced way throughout the educational process.

Socio-emotional competencies are skills for overall development and subjective well-being throughout life. They have garnered a lot of attention recently due to their link to success in the classroom, workplace, and interpersonal interactions [5].

The mastery of socio-emotional competencies allows us to face everyday situations by facilitating decision-making, establishing satisfactory interpersonal relationships, mastering leadership strategies, and maintaining communication, among others. In addition, emotions have been closely related to cognition, creative thinking, motivation, and learning [6].

On the other hand, it must be borne in mind that socio-emotional competencies are maintained throughout life, are sustainable, and allow for greater labor insertion and greater adaptation and problem solving [7]. The practice of sports has been identified as a context for identity work and emotional [8,9] and social development [10].

Athletes, due to the characteristics of their training, should have a high mastery of socio-emotional competencies and, therefore, should acquire skills to grow with future prospects and life skills. In fact, sports activities are a vehicle of emotional education for the socio-emotional improvement of young people [11–13]. In addition, Magrum and McCullick [14] argue that the ability to recognize and understand one's own emotions as well as those of others and the possible outcomes of their interactions makes coaches more successful. As such, they have advised evaluating the connection between coaches' emotional intelligence, efficacy, talent acquisition, recruitment, and coaching background.

In addition, the persistence of socio-emotional skills must be taken into account. According to Attanasio et al. [15], the socio-emotional skills of parents and children during early childhood are comparable, and their intergenerational mobility is estimated. Hence the importance of analyzing athletes' mastery of these skills and their relationship with personal and academic variables.

According to the 2022 European Union Council resolution, sporting events have a major external impact on the social, economic, and environmental spheres in the communities in which they are held [16]. The resolution has also addressed the strategic role that sports and physical activity play in accomplishing the 17 Sustainable Goals. Because of its intrinsic nature, sport is a fundamental tool to work directly on several of the Sustainable Goals, such as Health and Well-being and Gender Equality. In addition, high-performance athletes serve as role models for the whole world, especially for young people, so that other sustainable goals can also be addressed. As a result, numerous studies have demonstrated the enormous potential that sports activities offer for sustainability [17]. Olympic sports are a shining example of gender equality and sustainability, and via its athletes, they serve as a legendary source of motivation and aspiration for everyone [18].

What role does sport play in the shift towards a more sustainable global scenario, as highlighted by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainability? The European Union Council asserts that physical exercise and sport have been crucial to the worldwide effort to achieve the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and promote sustainability.

The concept of socio-emotional competence is closely related to the constructs of Emotional Intelligence (EI) [19] and Multiple Intelligences (MI) [20]. Socio-emotional competencies are those skills necessary to effectively self-regulate one's emotions, solve problems effectively, and cultivate interpersonal relationships, taking into account both personal needs and those of others [21], although they can also be defined as the set of behaviors of emotional and social content, transferable to different contexts and work situations, which provide quality and effectiveness in the professional development of the individual who possesses them [22].

Since the mid-1990s, the progressive interest in the study of Emotional Intelligence has contributed to the rediscovery of socio-emotional competencies [23]. Thus, numerous studies have shown the importance and potential effectiveness of the use of socio-emotional competencies in the educational environment, through different practices, such as the use of mindfulness [24].

From the different taxonomies proposed by different authors, Talavera et al. [22] highlight five major socio-affective competencies that are key to professional success: emotional self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, motivation, and social skills. More recently, the authors [22], who will be the main reference in this research, have highlighted seven socio-affective competencies: interpersonal regulation, motivation, self-awareness, conflict resolution, teamwork, emotional self-regulation, and empathy. These seven socio-affective competencies have been briefly explained below.

Emotion regulation has been typically described as the method by which people control the emotions they feel, when they feel them, and how they express and experience

them [25]. In this sense, van Driel and Gantz [26] claim that liking sports can contribute to happiness. Moreover, psychological theories related to emotional self-regulation, in particular, self-efficacy theory and the emotion regulation process model, could shed light on how resilience performance has been determined, and a greater understanding of how it has been determined can implement psychological interventions [27]. Contemporary emotion regulation models, on the other hand, contend that as humans are social animals who experience, express, and regulate their emotions with and through others, emotions are seldom, if ever, experienced in a social vacuum [28]. Consequently, interpersonal emotion regulation, a kind of emotion regulation that places an emphasis on social elements and their indisputable influence on an individual's capacity to control emotions either directly or indirectly, has just been recognized as an efficacious method of emotion management [29]. The intrapersonal management of emotion response systems—that is, subjective experience, thoughts, behaviors, or physiological reactions—has received the majority of attention in research on emotion regulation in sport [30]. In this regard, sport researchers have mostly adopted an intrapersonal perspective by focusing on how individual athletes appraise stressors, how they experience, express, and regulate their own emotions, and how they cope with stress before and during competitions, with few studies adapting an interpersonal and multilevel approach to examine the ways in which athletes try to regulate their own and their teammates' emotions [31]. Accordingly, a study including participants from 50 interdependent sports teams has demonstrated the significance of emotion regulation behaviors among teammates for anxiety and performance outcomes. However, this effect is mitigated when athletes exhibit emotional self-regulation [32]. Findings from other studies have highlighted the part that ego involvement and personal objectives can play in maximizing effective interpersonal management during team competition [33]. In addition, athlete roles and interpersonal factors have also been shown to influence interpersonal emotion regulation [34]. Most of the research on emotion regulation has ignored aspects pertaining to situational circumstances and individual variances [35]. According to gender theories, there are disparities between men and women when it comes to the importance of emotional support and how it affects wellbeing; women are more likely than men to seek out emotional support, and they may also benefit from it more [36]. As a result, plans must be made to implement the 2030 United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development's goal number five, which is "gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls". This goal states that gender equality is not only a fundamental human right but also the cornerstone of a world that is peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable [37]. In the study of Kucharski and Strating [35], athletes could make flexible use of a variety of emotional regulation strategies, although its use depended on the context (pre- and post-competition) and emotional style.

The energy that propels someone to carry out actions is known as motivation, and it can come from both internal and external sources [38]. The following are some of the several ways in which you can witness motivation in action [39], intrinsic motivation, in which the athlete acts motivated by the satisfaction that training or competing produces in him/her, based solely on the pleasure he/she experiences when participating in it; extrinsic motivation, which is derived from an athlete's accomplishments and societal acknowledgment and where motivation levels may fluctuate based on rewards realized on a personal level; and demotivation, which is the process of losing the meaning and motivations that underpinned the action and is marked by a decline in interest. The results of different studies with athletes have shown differences according to gender and competitive level [40,41] the age [42], the type of sport [43], or educational level [44,45]. In addition, the Sport Education Model (SEM) has promoted greater prosocial attitudes and intrinsic motivation than the conventional, direct, skill-drill teaching methods utilized in physical education [46].

The capacity to conduct introspection and reflection in order to comprehend one's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors is known as self-awareness [47], considered the preceding step to controlling our emotions or to knowing and understanding the emotions of

others [22]. Self-awareness is the underlying basis for many existing psychological interventions and tools, such as Post-Event Reflection (PER), that coaches can use to help athletes analyze their results in a positive and growth-oriented way [48], or biofeedback and neurofeedback training intervention for optimal performance: learning to improve self-awareness and self-regulation with athletes [49]. Because self-awareness plays a fundamental role in skill development, skill execution, arousal regulation, and emotional control, it is therefore a prerequisite for achieving optimal athletic performance. According to one study's findings, in this regard, coaches' impressions did not match the data that were recorded. This emphasizes the necessity for techniques that raise coaches' self-awareness [50].

In terms of conflict resolution, interpersonal disputes arise in all social relationships, including those in sports; therefore, good emotional control can enhance athletes' performance and overall well-being [51]. In this sense, the connection between the type of emotion experienced in unfavorable outcomes and the differential use of regulatory strategies has been demonstrated in the sport context [52]. Thus, the advantages of implementing mediation as the method par excellence for conflict resolution in the world of sports have been demonstrated [53]. On the other hand, it is important to highlight new trends, such as the use of branched emotional education programs for the assertive resolution of conflicts in sports [51].

McEwan and Beauchamp [54] have defined teamwork as a dynamic process that entails members working together to efficiently carry out the independent and interdependent behaviors necessary to maximize the possibility that a team will succeed in its goals. It has been demonstrated that teamwork training enhances how well athletes collaborate with one another [55]. In this sense, different models created to adequately guide teamwork have stood out, such as the Optimal Team Functioning (OTF) model, which comprises eight key components for optimal team functioning: (a) individual attributes, (b) team attributes, (c) foundational communication process, (d) team structural processes, (e) individual regulation processes, (f) team regulation processes, (g) context, and (h) desired results [56]. For the De Prada, Mareque, and Portela-Pino [57], teamwork skills have been considered essential for personal, academic, and professional achievement [57]. There appear to be gender differences, with girls having higher teamwork skills, except in leadership [57,58].

Emotional self-regulation refers to the ability to manage emotions with special emphasis on the avoidance of prolonged feelings of anxiety or irritability, constituting a flexible, adaptive, and cognitive-emotional approach. Moreover, it involves the management and control of emotions and includes both the modulation and cessation of negative emotions and the initiation and maintenance of positive emotions [22]. In this sense, it is important to emphasize the intricate interactions that occur between athletes' emotions, emotional expression, and self-regulation in order to accomplish a variety of objectives (such as good performances and positive social relationships). In this framework, it is also important to mention the relevance of studying interpersonal processes related to emotion and emotional regulation in team sports [59].

Finally, empathy is the characteristic feature of successful interpersonal relationships [22], currently understood as the capacity to perceive and communicate others' emotional states, which is essential for social interactions [60]. It is believed that teaching athletes empathy skills will improve their ability to see things from other angles, communicate with others more effectively, uphold moral and ethical standards in sports, and reduce aggressive and self-serving behavior [61].

The results suggest that perspective taking and empathic concern have a negative correlation with aggressiveness, and that this effect is stronger in female athletes than in male athletes. On the other hand, perspective taking is a negative predictor of aggressiveness and antisocial behavior in sports, and in female athletes only, anger mediated these relationships. These findings suggest that strategies based on empathy and directed emotion should be tailored to both male and female athletes in order to reduce aggressiveness in sports [62].

In elite sport, as in the case of this study's sample of high-performance Olympic and Paralympic athletes, athlete concentrations and competitions on behalf of the country have been common. To all the above, adding to the continuous relationships with their teammates and coaches and other periodic interactions with other team members, socio-emotional skills may have an even greater importance.

Thus, taking into account the different studies applied to sport mentioned above, focusing on one or more of the seven socio-emotional competencies proposed by Talavera et al. [22] (interpersonal regulation, motivation, self-awareness, conflict resolution, teamwork, emotional self-regulation and empathy), it was considered appropriate to treat them jointly. In this sense, the Socio-emotional Competencies Scale (SCS) was developed [22] due to the need for a reliable and valid instrument for the evaluation of the seven socio-emotional competencies mentioned above, having been used mainly in the educational context [23,63].

There are not many studies that have analyzed the association between the level of socio-emotional competencies and performance in sports activities. In this line, a first approach has been carried out by Portela-Pino et al. [5], reaching the conclusion that girls have greater skills in relationship management and boys in self-management. On the other hand, these same authors affirmed that pupils who take part in extracurricular activities of a sporting nature do not have greater socio-emotional competences, but those who take part in musical or artistic activities do.

In university students, students' interpersonal and communication skills are quite developed, and they rank second in terms of adaptability and decision-making abilities. Leadership and coordination skills received the lowest scores. And there seems to be a relationship between extracurricular activities (sports, artistic, and musical) and the acquisition of socio-emotional skills [57].

In a study with physical education teachers [64], the influence of socio-emotional skills on successful professional performance of physical education teachers and sports coaches in the educational system was tested.

When accounting for the emotional intelligence components, it was shown that boys who exercise and possess strong social skills have better emotional attention; girls who exercise and possess strong social skills have better emotional clarity; and girls under the age of thirteen who exercise, have good academic records, and possess strong social skills have better emotional repair.

Taking into account all of the above, the objective of the present research is to produce new knowledge on the use of socio-emotional competencies, as a key dimension for sustainability, of Colombian elite athletes considering gender, age, type of sport, sport modality, and academic training, as well as the correlations between the seven SECS competencies.

## 2. Materials and Method

### 2.1. Participants

The inclusion criterion for this study was participation in the "Support to the Coldeportes Athlete of Excellence" program run by the Colombian Ministry of Sports. The main objective of the Coldeportes program is for high-achieving Colombian athletes to achieve notable accomplishments, especially in international competitions like the Olympic, Paralympic, and Deaflympic Games. Consequently, this program provides players with sports-science-based technical support. In total, 334 elite athletes from Colombia were part of the study population. Their age was  $27.10 \pm 6.57$  years, they had been in the program for  $3.62 \pm 3.12$  years, they had been playing their sport for  $13.66 \pm 6.37$  years, and they had placed  $4.05 \pm 3.96$  in the last international tournament. There were 287 athletes from individual sports ( $26.86 \pm 6.45$  years) and 47 from team sports ( $28.74 \pm 7.16$  years), and 284 from Olympic sports ( $26.16 \pm 5.66$  years) and 50 from Paralympic sports ( $32.46 \pm 8.59$  years). A total of 178 female athletes ( $26.24 \pm 6.25$  years) and 156 male athletes ( $28.10 \pm 6.80$  years) were represented. A total of 177 athletes were 26 years or older ( $31.92 \pm 5.12$  years), and 157 athletes were 25 years or younger ( $21.68 \pm 2.59$  years).

Based on their athletic accomplishments, athletes are categorized into 7 groups under the Coldeportes program: 1. “Talent” (17 years old): medalist in the Para-South American Championships, the World Junior Championships, the South American Youth Games, or both, with a gold medal; 2. “Junior”: medalist in the Pan American/Para-American Championships, the World Junior Championships, or both; 3. “Development”: winner of a silver or bronze medal in the Central American and Caribbean Games, or a medalist at the South American and Para-South American Games; 4. “Promotion”: Silver or Bronze medalist in Para/Parapan American Championships, medalist in the Youth Olympic/Paralympic Games, or qualified for the Summer or Winter Olympic Games; 5. “Advanced”: winner of a gold medal at the Pan American/Parapan American Championships, or medalist at the World Games; 6. “Elite”: finishing fourth to eighth at the World Championships, or sixth to eighth in the World Ranking at the end of the season, or winning a gold medal at the Para/Parapan American Games; 7. “Altius”: winner of an Olympic or Paralympic Games medal in the summer or winter, or medalist at the World Championships, or first to fifth place in the world ranking at the end of the season (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Athlete characteristics.

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Sports modality	Olympic	284	85.0
	Paralympic	50	15.0
Type of sport	Team	47	14.1
	Individual	287	85.9
Average hours of training/week	Less than 10 h	21	6.3
	Between 10 and 15 h	60	18.0
	Between 15 and 20 h	83	24.9
	Between 20 and 25 h	76	22.8
	Between 30 and 35 h	58	17.4
	Between 40 and 45 h	19	5.7
	Between 45 and 50 h	13	3.9
	More than 50 h	4	1.2
Program category	1. Talent	28	8.4
	2. Junior	17	5.1
	3. Development	94	28.1
	4. Promotion	74	22.2
	5. Advanced	60	18.0
	6. Elite	40	12.0
	7. Altius	21	6.3

The other main characteristics of the athletes in the sample are shown in Table 1.

## 2.2. Procedure

The web tool Google Forms in Spanish was used to perform this study (<https://docs.google.com/forms/>) (Accessed on 16 June 2022). The study employed a correlational design with inadvertent convenience sampling.

The Sports Positioning and Leadership Directorate of the Coldeportes program sent out a link inviting people to participate in the study. Out of the 420 athletes who were integrated into the program, 334 (79.52%) answered the questionnaire. Of them, 284 (79%) from Olympic sports and 50 (81%) from Paralympic sports (358 from Olympic sports) answered. Participants in this study were able to identify themselves without providing any personal information, and participation was entirely voluntary. In accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki (2013), the athletes gave their consent before starting the questionnaire, and the process of completing the questionnaire was explained to them prior to completion via the platform. All procedures were approved by the Ethics Committee of the Institución Universitaria “Escuela Nacional del Deporte” of Cali (Colombia) (approval number: 17.163).

### 2.3. Instruments

The SECS (Spanish version) was applied [22], which is of great utility in the analysis of the educational context, more specifically in university education [23,63]. This scale, with a Cronbach's reliability of 0.895, consists of 38 items grouped into seven self-report subscales, each of which measures a specific socio-emotional competency. The seven socio-emotional competencies are as follows: interpersonal regulation (6 items), motivation (6 items), self-awareness (5 items), conflict resolution (5 items), teamwork (5 items), emotional self-regulation (5 items), and empathy (6 items). The subject must indicate the degree of identification with the statement contained therein, on a 5-point Likert scale: not at all identified, little identified, occasionally identified, quite identified, and totally identified.

### 2.4. Statistical Analysis

The statistical tool SPSS (Statistical tool for Social Sciences, version 25 for Windows, IBM Corporation, Armonk, NY, USA) was used to conduct the analysis, and a significance threshold of  $p < 0.05$  was applied.

Subsequently, an internal consistency calculation was conducted using a reliability analysis. Cronbach's alpha was utilized for this, and a value of 0.70 or higher indicated strong consistency [65]. Additionally, the McDonald omega coefficient—which some authors claim demonstrates evidence of greater precision—was computed. It also served to confirm the internal consistency of the variables utilized in the study. The range for the McDonald omega coefficient is set at 0 to 1, with the highest values yielding the most accurate measurements [66]. However, it needs to be more than 0.70 in order to use the omega quotient to determine an appropriate confidence value [67].

The gender (male or female), age (25 years and under or 26 years and older), sport modality (Olympic or Paralympic), and sport type (individual or group) variables were compared using the Student's *t*-test for independent samples. A one-way ANOVA with Bonferroni correction was used to establish comparisons based on the athletes' academic training (university education, vocational training, or basic education). Cohen's *D* was used to calculate the effect size. A bivariate correlation study employing Pearson's correlation coefficient was performed to look into the link between the ESEC variables.

## 3. Results

The SECS's seven subscales' mean values are displayed in Table 2. With Cronbach's alpha and McDonald's omega coefficient values above, the internal consistency results indicated a sufficient degree of internal consistency. All variables showed values above 0.70, with the exception of the "Conflict resolution" subscale, which showed 0.60.

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics and reliability analysis.

Variables	N	Minimum	Maximum	M	SD	$\alpha$	$\omega$
Interpersonal regulation	334	1.67	5.00	3.49	0.61	0.81	0.82
Motivation	334	2.83	5.00	4.35	0.48	0.75	0.75
Self-awareness	334	1.40	5.00	3.82	0.63	0.79	0.79
Conflict resolution	334	2.20	5.00	3.61	0.56	0.61	0.63
Teamwork	334	2.60	5.00	4.23	0.52	0.76	0.76
Emotional self-regulation	334	1.40	5.00	3.45	0.61	0.72	0.72
Empathy	334	2.33	5.00	3.81	0.55	0.74	0.74

M: mean, SD: standard deviation,  $\alpha$ : Cronbach's alpha,  $\omega$ : omega coefficient.

### 3.1. Gender

The gender variable (male or female) revealed significant differences in the "Interpersonal regulation" variable ( $p = 0.033$ ), with men ( $\bar{X} = 3.57$ ) showing a higher mean than women ( $\bar{X} = 3.43$ ). Regarding the variable "Self-awareness" ( $p = 0.037$ ), males ( $\bar{X} = 3.90$ ) presented a higher mean than females ( $\bar{X} = 3.76$ ). Likewise, in the variable "Conflict resolution" ( $p = 0.018$ ), men ( $\bar{X} = 3.68$ ) presented a higher mean than women ( $\bar{X} = 3.54$ ).

In the variable “Emotional self-regulation” ( $p = 0.001$ ), men ( $X^- = 3.59$ ) had a higher mean than women ( $X^- = 3.32$ ) (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Differences between male and female athletes.

Variables	Gender	N	Mean	SD	t	p Value	Effect Size
Interpersonal regulation	Male	156	3.57	0.62	2.146	0.033 *	0.143
	Woman	178	3.43	0.60	2.142		
Motivation	Male	156	4.36	0.49	0.566	0.572	0.030
	Female	178	4.33	0.47	0.564		
Self-awareness	Male	156	3.90	0.591	2.091	0.037 *	0.144
	Female	178	3.76	0.66	2.108		
Conflict resolution	Male	156	3.68	0.54	2.369	0.018 *	0.144
	Woman	178	3.54	0.57	2.377		
Teamwork	Man	156	4.25	0.53	0.746	0.456	0.043
	Woman	178	4.21	0.51	0.744		
Emotional self-regulation	Man	156	3.59	0.57	4.223	0.001 **	0.278
	Woman	178	3.32	0.63	4.251		
I tieda	Male	156	3.78	0.55552	−1.020	0.308	−0.62
	Woman	178	3.84	0.55014	−1.020		

SD: standard deviation; t: t de Student; \* valor  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* valor  $p < 0.01$ .

### 3.2. Age

Significant changes were observed in the variable “Self-awareness” when taking the age variable into account ( $p = 0.001$ ), with subjects aged 25 years or younger ( $X^- = 3.70$ ) having a higher mean t than subjects aged 26 years or older ( $X^- = 3.93$ ). On the other hand, in the variable “Emotional self-regulation” ( $p = 0.033$ ), participants aged 25 years or younger ( $X^- = 3.37$ ) obtained a lower mean t than those aged 26 years or older ( $X^- = 3.51$ ) (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Differences among athletes between athletes aged 26 years or older and those aged 25 years or younger.

Variables	Ag	N	Mean	SD	t	p Value	Effect Size
Interpersonal regulation	25 o <	157	3.52	0.63	0.822	0.411	0.055
	>25	177	3.47	0.591			
Motivation	25 o <	157	4.30	0.51	−1.536	126	−0.080
	>25	177	4.38	0.45			
Self-awareness	25 o <	157	3.70	0.67	−3.362	0.001 **	−0.229
	>25	177	3.93	0.57			
Conflict resolution	25 o <	157	3.61	0.53	−0.046	0.963	−0.03
	>25	177	3.61	0.58			
Teamwork	25 o <	157	4.22	0.56	−0.481	0.631	−0.027
	>25	177	4.24	0.48			
Emotional self-regulation	25 o <	157	3.37	0.63	−2.138	0.033 *	−0.143
	>25	177	3.51	0.60			
Empathy	25 o <	157	3.79	0.57	−0.718	0.473	−0.043
	>25	177	3.83	0.54			

25 o <: subjects aged 25 years or younger, >25: subjects aged 26 years or older; SD: standard deviation; t: Student’s t; \*  $p$ -value  $< 0.05$ , \*\*  $p$ -value  $< 0.01$ .

### 3.3. Sports Modality

Considering the sport modality (individual or collective), no differences were found in any of the variables (Table 5).

**Table 5.** Differences between individual and team sports.

Variables	Sports Modality	N	Mean	SD	t	p Value	Effect Size
Interpersonal regulation	Individual	287	3.49	0.60	−0.097	0.923	−0.009
	Team	47	3.50	0.69	−0.088		
Motivation	Individual	287	4.35	0.48	0.749	0.455	0.057
	Team	47	4.30	0.48	0.749		
Self-awareness	Individual	287	3.83	0.64	0.572	0.568	0.057
	Team	47	3.77	0.60	0.601		
Conflict resolution	Individual	287	3.61	0.56	0.500	0.618	0.044
	Team	47	3.57	0.57	0.498		
Teamwork	Individual	287	4.23	0.53	0.263	0.793	0.022
	Team	47	4.21	0.50	0.277		
Emotional self-regulation	Individual	287	3.43	0.62	−1.413	0.159	−0.138
	Team	47	3.56	0.56	−1.517		
Empathy	Individual	287	3.81	0.55	−0.190	0.849	−0.017
	Team	47	3.83	0.57	−0.184		

SD: standard deviation; t: Student's t.

### 3.4. Type of Sport

Regarding the sport (Olympic or Paralympic), there were notable variations in the “Motivation” variable ( $p = 0.007$ ), with Paralympic athletes ( $X^- = 4.32$ ) having a higher mean than Olympic athletes ( $X^- = 4.51$ ). There were also significant differences in the variable “Self-awareness” ( $p = 0.006$ ), with Paralympic athletes ( $X^- = 4.05$ ) having a higher mean than Olympic athletes ( $M = 3.78$ ). Likewise, there were significant differences in the variable “Teamwork” ( $p = 0.038$ ), with Paralympic athletes ( $X^- = 4.37$ ) having a higher mean than Olympic athletes ( $X^- = 4.21$ ). There were also significant differences in the variable “Emotional self-regulation” ( $p = 0.005$ ), with Paralympic athletes ( $X^- = 3.67$ ) having a higher mean than Olympic athletes ( $X^- = 3.41$ ) (Table 6).

**Table 6.** Differences between Olympic and Paralympic sports.

Variables	Type of Sport	N	Mean	SD	t	p Value	Effect Size
Interpersonal regulation	Olympic	284	3.48	0.59	−1.006	0.315	−0.094
	Paralympic	50	3.57	0.71			
Motivation	Olympic	284	4.32	0.48	−2.696	0.007 **	−0.196
	Paralympic	50	4.51	0.45			
Self-awareness	Olympic	284	3.78	0.65	−2.742	0.006 **	−0.263
	Paralympic	50	4.05	0.48			
Conflict resolution	Olympic	284	3.58	0.54	−1.728	0.085	−0.147
	Paralympic	50	3.73	0.62			
Emotional self-regulation	Olympic	284	4.21	0.51	−2.085	0.038 *	−0.166
	Paralympic	50	4.37	0.55			
Empathy	Olympic	284	3.41	0.62	−2.837	0.005 **	−0.265
	Paralympic	50	3.67	0.54			
Empathy	Olympic	284	3.81	0.54	−0.515	0.607	−0.044
	Paralympic	50	3.85	0.64			

SD: standard deviation; ES: effect size; t: Student's t; \*  $p$ -value < 0.05, \*\*  $p$ -value < 0.01.

### 3.5. Academic Background

Athletes with a basic level of training showed significant variations in the variable “Motivation” ( $p = 0.020$ ) when the variables were compared based on the different training levels ( $X^- = 4.29$ ), having a lower mean than those with university training ( $X^- = 4.43$ ). Similarly, significant differences were observed in the variable “Self-awareness” (0.001), with athletes with a basic level of training ( $X^- = 3.73$ ) having a lower mean than those with university training ( $X^- = 4.04$ ). On the other hand, the results showed significant differences in “Teamwork” ( $p = 0.018$ ) with athletes with a basic level having a lower mean ( $X^- = 4.18$ ) than athletes with professional training ( $X^- = 4.44$ ). Lastly, there were

noteworthy variations found in the “Empathy” variable ( $p = 0.049$ ), with athletes with a basic degree of study ( $X^- = 3.78$ ) having a lower mean than subjects with professional training ( $X^- = 4.06$ ) (Table 7).

**Table 7.** Differences according to educational levels.

Variables	N	Mean	SD	CI (95%)		Min	Max	F	p-Value	Bonferroni	
				Lower Limit	Upper Limit						
Interpersonal regulation	BE	213	3.49	0.62	3.40	3.57	1.67	0.00	1.011	0.365	No differences
	VT	26	3.65	0.64	3.39	3.91	2.83	5.00			
	UT	95	3.46	0.57	3.35	3.58	2.17	5.00			
	Total	334	3.49	0.61	3.43	3.56	1.67	5.00			
Motivation	BE	213	4.29	0.49	4.22	4.36	2.83	5.00	3.933	0.020 *	1–3 = 0.049
	VT	26	4.47	0.46	4.29	4.66	3.50	5.00			
	UT	95	4.43	0.43	4.34	4.52	3.33	5.00			
	Total	334	4.35	0.48	4.29	4.40	2.83	5.00			
Self-awareness	BE	213	3.73	0.63	3.64	3.81	1.40	5.00	8.641	0.001 **	1–3 = 0.001
	VT	26	3.84	0.68	3.56	4.11	2.00	5.00			
	UT	95	4.04	0.55	3.93	4.15	2.80	5.00			
	Total	334	3.82	0.63	3.76	3.89	1.40	5.00			
Conflict resolution	BE	213	3.56	0.55	3.48	3.63	2.20	5.00	2.189	0.114	No differences
	VT	26	3.73	0.53	3.51	3.95	2.60	4.40			
	UT	95	3.68	0.57	3.56	3.79	2.60	5.00			
	Total	334	3.61	0.56	3.55	3.67	2.20	5.00			
Teamwork	BE	213	4.18	0.53	4.10	4.250	0.60	5.00	4.064	0.018 *	1–2 = 0.045
	VT	26	4.44	0.50	4.23	4.64	2.80	5.00			
	UT	95	4.30	0.49	4.20	4.40	3.20	5.00			
	Total	334	4.23	0.52	4.17	4.29	2.60	5.00			
Emotional self-regulation	BE	213	3.39	0.62	3.31	3.47	1.60	5.00	2.468	0.086	No differences
	VT	26	3.55	0.70	3.27	3.84	1.40	4.60			
	UT	95	3.54	0.57	3.43	3.66	0.20	4.80			
	Total	334	3.45	0.61	3.38	3.51	1.40	5.00			
Empathy	BE	213	3.78	0.56	3.71	3.86	2.33	5.00	3.045	0.049 *	1–2 = 0.042
	VT	26	4.06	0.45	3.88	4.25	3.33	5.00			
	UT	95	3.81	0.54	3.70	3.92	2.67	5.00			
	Total	334	3.81	0.55	3.75	3.87	2.33	5.00			

BE; basic education, VT: vocational training, UT: university education; CI: confidence interval; F: variation between sample means; \*  $p$ -value < 0.05, \*\*  $p$ -value < 0.01.

### 3.6. Correlational Analysis

The links between the seven SECS scale dimensions—Interpersonal Regulation, Motivation, Self-awareness, Conflict Resolution, Teamwork, Emotional Self-regulation, and Empathy—are displayed in Table 8. A statistically significant  $p$ -value of 0.001 is shown for each dimension.

**Table 8.** Correlation analysis between variables.

Variables		IR	M	S	CR	TE	ES	E
Interpersonal regulation	r	1						
Motivation	r	0.464 **	1					
Self-awareness	r	0.411 **	0.551 **	1				
Conflict resolution	r	0.639 **	0.399 **	0.390 **	1			
Teamwork	r	0.571 **	0.607 **	0.412 **	0.513 **	1		
Emotional self-regulation	r	0.344 **	0.449 **	0.494 **	0.380 **	0.343 **	1	
Empathy	r	0.651 **	0.419 **	0.377 **	0.524 **	0.517 **	0.268 **	1

Sig. = 0.0001 in all cases. Legend: IR = Interpersonal regulation; M = Motivation; S = Self-awareness; CR = Conflict resolution; TE = Teamwork; ES = Emotional self-regulation; E = Empathy. \*\*  $p$ -value < 0.01.

## 4. Discussion

This study aimed to examine how Colombian elite athletes applied socio-emotional competencies, a critical component of sustainability, taking into account factors such as gender, age, sport type, sport modality, academic background, and relationships between

the seven SECS competencies. The results showed that a considerable number of the dependent variables under investigation varied significantly and that there were strong positive correlations between the seven SECS socio-emotional competencies.

#### 4.1. Gender

Gender matters because forms of agency, legitimacy, authority, and access to material and discursive resources are generated and influenced by beliefs and ideals about bodies, behaviors, and belonging [68]. One of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasizes gender equality, particularly the equality of men and women [69], while the other SDGs contain a gender dimension that must not be overlooked [70]. In relation to the above, the differences found according to gender (male or female) are significant in “Interpersonal regulation”, “Self-awareness”, “Conflict resolution”, and “Emotional self-regulation”, with males presenting a higher mean than females in all cases. Some studies show gender differences in some of the analyzed variables. For instance, the socio-emotional skills of the teenagers in Portela-Pino et al. [5] were strong, emphasizing self-awareness, relationship management, and decision-making. Self-management and social awareness received the lowest marks. Boys exhibited better self-management, while girls demonstrated better relationship management.

A study conducted with young Chinese adolescents, using the Interpersonal Regulation Questionnaire (IRQ), a scale developed to measure the tendency and efficacy of intrinsic regulation of interpersonal emotions through positive and negative affective states, showed, contrary to our study, higher competence in the variable “Interpersonal Regulation”, with females reporting higher negative efficacy and positive tendency than males, while no gender variations were found for the remaining two factors [71].

In relation to the above, results across studies also demonstrate that gender and culture can affect levels of emotional reliance (ER), showing the gender theories disparity between men and women when it comes to the importance of emotional support and how it can affect well-being, women being more likely than men to seek out emotional support and benefit from it more [36]. Thus, although it is quite generalized, regardless of culture, that women perceive and give comforting skills, intimate communication, and emotional reliance interdependence with greater importance than do men [72,73], this influence of the cultural factor on RE could probably be explained in part by men having been influenced to present higher values of interpersonal regulation, considering that the sample of the present study, Colombian elite athletes, is very specific from a social point of view. In relation to the variable “Self-awareness”, the results of this study go in the same direction as others conducted in other contexts. Thus, for example, a study conducted with high school students showed that with regard to readability, only boys showed a significant correlation between self-awareness and performance [74].

The fact that the males in the study present a higher average than women in “Conflict Resolution” does not seem to agree with the fact of how women and men react to confrontations, as reported in the scientific literature. Generally, women are less belligerent than men, as a result of the moral dilemmas they face and, among other reasons, because they prioritize the care of others and mutually agreed solutions. On the contrary, men give greater importance to the application of justice, with it sometimes occurring that women who have the desire to practice competitive sports and remain “feminine” face social isolation and ridicule, such that, by choosing an active life, they move away from the traditional expectations of the feminine role (Saldívar Garduño 2005) [75]. However, these results may be influenced by sociocultural aspects of the country (Colombia) [76].

The results for “Emotional Self-Regulation”, with males presenting a higher mean than females, are in line with studies, such as the one conducted to examine self-regulation with elite and non-elite male and female competitive swimmers, in which all males present more frequently the Problem Identification component than all females [77]. Similarly, a study conducted on college students revealed that those who participated in physical activity

scored higher on all aspects of self-regulation and lower on all aspects of procrastination, except for learning from mistakes [78].

#### 4.2. Age

Most age groups have similar environmental attitudes, commitments, beliefs, and attitudes toward environmental conduct, or they represent different levels of pro-environmental behavior [79]. However, significant differences are seen when age is taken into consideration in the “Self-awareness” variable, with respondents who are 25 years of age or younger having a higher mean than individuals who are 26 years of age or older. In this sense, whereas private self-awareness initially appears as a distinctive quality in adolescence, it is more likely to become apparent and representative of social behavior in adulthood [80].

On the other hand, in the variable “Emotional Self-regulation”, participants aged 25 years or younger obtain a lower mean than those aged 26 years or older. These results are in line with the results of other studies that show that people who tend to report difficulties in emotion regulation are younger, with more maladaptive, reckless, and careless behaviors [81]. In affinity with these findings, a study conducted with Olympic and Paralympic athletes during the COVID-19 lock-in revealed that the under-26 group felt they have less control over all aspects of life in the past month than the 26-year-old group; also, the under-26 athletes more often feel angry about events happening to them that are out of their control and have a greater sense that problems are piling up without being able to overcome them than the 26-and-older group [82].

#### 4.3. Sports Modality

None of the factors differ when the sport modality (individual or collective) is taken into account. Significant differences were found in various socio-emotional competencies variables among Olympic and Paralympic athletes during the COVID-19 pandemic study. Specifically, athletes in individual sports felt more capable of handling personal issues in the past month compared to those in team sports, and athletes in team sports were more concerned about being unable to compete in sports due to confinement [82]. Another study, also carried out with Olympic and Paralympic athletes during the COVID-19 lock-in, showed that individual athletes obtain higher scores than those practicing team sports [83]. However, a study carried out by Mladenovic [84] with elite athletes during the first COVID-19 lockdown, showed that only 4.7% of them belonged to the Olympic team, demonstrating how athletes who play team sports are better at adjusting to constraints and maintaining their sense of competence and autonomy. Therefore, even within elite athletes, there seem to be differences between elite and super elite and the importance in itself of participating in an event like the Olympics, which is an opportunity that only exists every four years, which may pose added competitive pressure for Olympic and Paralympic athletes compared to other elite athletes. It must be kept in mind that empathy involves other skills such as communication, understood as the ability to listen reflectively, or accessibility such as comfort and personal connection [85].

#### 4.4. Type of Sport

The factors “Motivation”, “Self-awareness”, “Teamwork”, and “Emotional Self-regulation” show substantial differences depending on the sport (Olympic or Paralympic), with Paralympic competitors consistently having a higher mean than Olympic athletes. In relation to these results [86], also carried out, like the present study, with Colombian athletes with a physical disability, it is concluded that there are differences in the team cohesion factor favorable for team athletes in comparison with individual sports. These results may be influenced by the training methods of team sports athletes requiring greater cooperative work. The only differences found in the personality variables (extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experiences) between Olympic and Paralympic athletes during the COVID-19 lock-in pertain to the Paralympic athletes’ higher scores in Consciousness, Self-awareness, and Self-regulation [83]. However, another study carried out during the COVID-19

pandemic revealed that Paralympic athletes feel less alone than Olympic athletes and are better equipped to handle personal issues. They also believe that life events go well more frequently for them than Olympian competitors [82]. All of the above results seem to confirm that Paralympic athletes have greater socio-emotional skills than Olympic athletes. These results can be supported by those of a study carried out with U.S. Paralympic athletes during the disruption of COVID-19 [86] that concluded that, although all athletes experience a decreased amount of training time, they are able to effectively cope with the negative aspects brought on by the pandemic, which reinforces the idea that Paralympic athletes have good levels of mental adaptation.

#### 4.5. Academic Background

According to a study, employees of all educational levels hold the same perspective on workplace social sustainability [79]. When comparing the variables according to the different educational levels (basic education, vocational training, or university education), significant differences are observed in the variables “Motivation”, “Self-awareness”, “Teamwork”, and “Empathy”, with university-educated athletes having a higher mean in all cases than subjects with a basic educational level. These findings appear to indicate that scores in a considerable range of socio-emotional abilities are positively correlated with higher educational attainment. According to a study conducted on Olympic and Paralympic athletes during the COVID-19 confinement, athletes with professional training score lower on the kindness factor than athletes with a basic or university education; on the other hand, the results show that the group with a basic education scored higher on psychological inflexibility than the other groups [83]. A different study conducted during the COVID-19 epidemic with Olympians and Paralympians revealed that athletes with less education miss out on socializing with other athletes more than those with a college degree [82,87].

#### 4.6. Correlational Analysis

The seven subscales of the SECS questionnaire—interpersonal regulation, motivation, self-awareness, conflict resolution, teamwork, emotional self-regulation, and empathy—show strong correlations with each other and with the socio-emotional dimensions examined in this study. These correlations are both significant and positive.

#### 4.7. Limitations and Future Research

The study’s limitations include potential bias in the self-reported data due to selective memory, the telescope effect, or exaggeration. The data also lack longitudinal effects and may have been influenced by unknown events. To increase reliability, it is recommended to collect data at different time intervals. Additionally, expanding the study’s hypotheses and using a strategic sampling method to broaden the population would enable a multivariate analysis to examine the simultaneous effect of multiple variables. As part of this, it would be valuable to examine how the COVID-19 crisis has affected athletes at various performance levels, including young athletes.

### 5. Conclusions

This article analyzed the socio-emotional competencies, as a key dimension for sustainability, of Colombian elite athletes according to gender, age, type of sport, sport modality, and academic background, as well as the correlations among the seven SECS competencies. The results show that men have higher levels of interpersonal regulation, self-awareness, conflict resolution, and emotional self-regulation than women. Athletes aged 25 years or younger have higher self-awareness than subjects aged 26 years or older. Athletes in individual sports do not show differences in any of the variables. Paralympic athletes present higher levels of motivation, self-awareness, teamwork, and emotional self-regulation than Olympic athletes. Athletes with university education present higher values of motivation, self-awareness, teamwork, and empathy than subjects with basic education. Finally, all the values of the socio-emotional competencies correlate positively with each other. Based

on the results of the present study, the creation of specific programs is suggested to assist Olympic and Paralympic athletes during this trying and stressful time, particularly those that allow for the enhancement of socio-emotional competences, thus facilitating decision-making, interpersonal connection establishment, leadership strategy modeling, or communication maintenance.

Among the practical applications of this study are that it allows us to design specialized programs taking into account age and gender, addressing the specific needs of each demographic group. In addition, it will allow us to identify the most relevant socio-emotional competencies for each sport modality and type of sport, enabling coaches and sports psychologists to design specific psychological support strategies. On the other hand, it will also be of great use in promoting inclusion and diversity, and in the design of educational programs.

**Author Contributions:** The study was conceived by F.H.M.-G., I.P.-P. and M.J.M.-P. and I.P.-P. oversaw the protocol. The questionnaire was created by F.H.M.-G., I.P.-P. and M.J.M.-P. The information was gathered by F.H.M.-G., examined by J.P.F.-G. and F.H.M.-G. analyzed the study's findings, J.P.F.-G. created the tables. The first draft of the manuscript was written by F.H.M.-G., I.P.-P., J.P.F.-G. and M.J.M.-P. On the ensuing drafts, F.H.M.-G., I.P.-P., J.P.F.-G. and M.J.M.-P. contributed crucial edits, revisions, and formal analysis. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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