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The Effect of Spirituality Orientation on the Psychological Health Factors of Athletes in University Sports Teams

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Abstract

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The aim of the current study was to study the effect of spirituality orientation on the psychological health factors among athletes of university sports teams. According to the research purpose, it was a descriptive and a practical one, that has been done based on structural equation modeling. The research population involved the male athletes of university sports teams who participated in the fifteenth sport and cultural Olympiad of universities and higher education institutions in Tabriz, and a sample of 400 male athletes was selected through random sampling. A researcher-developed questionnaire has been applied as the research tool. The questionnaire validity was verified by six experts, and the reliability of the questionnaires was confirmed based on Chronbach's alpha. SPSS18 and Amos18 as well as structural equation modeling were applied for data analysis. The result showed that spirituality orientation had significant effect on anxiety ($\beta = 0.52$), memory and centralization ($\beta = 0.38$), psychological safety ($\beta = 0.44$), psychological and physical happiness ($\beta = 0.46$), as well as personality stability ($\beta = 0.35$) among athletes of university sports teams.

Keywords:

Spirituality orientation, University athletes, Psychological health

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Introduction

Spirituality and religiosity have attracted the consideration of many experts in the fields of mental health and other health sciences because of their effectiveness in this field (Pant, 2023). Sport is a phenomenon that has a wide penetration rate among different strata of society and has significant social and cultural consequences on its audience in society. Due to the significant effects of sports and athletes on society, it is necessary to pay attention to the mental and physical needs of athletes in order to perform better in sports and provide more effective cultural and social role models. Because of its competitive and challenging nature, the sport setting may be accompanied by many psychological issues (Bakhshalipour et al., 2021), to efficiently cope with different problems, considering the mental capacity is of great importance (Akhshabi & Rahimi, 2021). Although presence and activity in the field of sports can help improve the physical health of athletes, paying attention to mental aspects and improving mental health is also of significant importance in addition to physical health (Zia & Rouhollahi, 2020). Today, one of the major challenges in the field of sports is the occurrence of abnormal behavior on the part of athletes and their fans in sports environments. Studying the fields of religion and sport has been the topic of many studies in literature for many years (Shoemaker, 2023). Violence is one of the examples of unpleasant and undesirable behavior that seriously threatens the atmosphere of sports competitions and events. Basically, because of their special professional conditions, athletes are prone to face mental health-threatening factors, and therefore, increasing attention to the aspects of mental and behavioral health of athletes is necessary along with the technical development of sports.

Undoubtedly, along with the progress of science and technology, mental disorders and the behaviors caused by these disorders are also expanding, and sports as a global phenomenon is not an exception to this rule, along with the extensive progress in the sports industry and its transformation as an influential phenomenon in the world, the emergence of abnormal behavior in this field is becoming more prominent (Jaberi & Manzeli, 2022). Undoubtedly, by improving mental capacity and heart faith, athletes will be able to learn problem-solving methods, and when facing problems, deal with them using better skills in order to prevent the occurrence of abnormal behaviors. Paying attention to the components of mental health and strengthening the mental capacity of athletes and analyzing the factors affecting it can help improve the health and behavior of athletes in sports fields (Gómez-López et al., 2023), and lead to making more suitable role models of athletes among their audiences.

Mental health is a phenomenon that has long attracted the attention of counselors, psychologists and psychiatrists and is affected by a set of physical, social and cognitive factors. According to international standards, health does not include only physical aspects, so the World Health Organization defines health as a state in which a person is completely healthy mentally, emotionally, and socially, and has no signs of illness or suffering (Campos, 2002). The theorists believe that mental health means the growth, flourishing and realization of human talents and inner forces. From the point of view of the theoreticians, a healthy person is one who flourishes his talents and reaches the desired and ideal perfection. On the other hand, behaviorists consider mental health to mean the presence of adaptive behavior and the absence of maladaptive behaviors (Perera, 2023).

Spirituality orientation and paying attention to religious rites and customs have long been emphasized as one of the key tools for improving mental health in different religions and religious beliefs. The religion of Islam is one of the heavenly religions that emphasizes this central principle and believes that "only with the remembrance of Allah, the hearts are reassured" (Quran, Surah Ar-Ra'd); without a doubt, achieving this confidence in the heart will mean achieving health in various physical and mental dimensions. In this way, paying attention to spirituality and strengthening spiritual foundations in the field of sports can be considered as a guarantor of the physical and mental health of athletes to a great extent. On the other hand, improving the health of athletes can have significant direct and indirect effects on the health of sports environments and sports competitions and bring many social and cultural consequences for the society.

Today, extensive studies have been conducted in the world regarding the effects of religion and religious rituals on the behavioral health and mental health of people. Studies have shown that religious people suffer less depression and anxiety (Leung & Pong, 2021). The presence of religion can protect people from mental

and spiritual problems. Religion, prayer and communication with God are the ways that help mankind in fighting the problems of modern life; therefore, in the current study, the effect of spirituality orientation on the components of mental health has been studied in a sports context.

Regarding the importance of spirituality and religion for humans, some researchers believe that religion equips humans with the philosophy of life and provides them with the necessary enlightenment. Religion fulfills the basic needs of the soul, especially the need for love and immortality ([Berggren & Bjørnskov, 2011](#)). Researchers believe that these aids provide peace of mind, spiritual compatibility, and strength to resist moral hazards. [Berggren and Bjørnskov \(2011\)](#) believe that religion has also different effects on social behavior. Studies have shown that religion can play an important role in preventing delinquency ([Chadwick & Top, 1993](#)). Extensive studies that have been conducted in this regard confirm the effects of spirituality on mental health issues. Religion can provide different health outcomes ([Koenig & Fetterman, 1995](#)). According to [Pant \(2023\)](#), the relationship of spirituality with mental health and quality of life was confirmed. [Nmah \(2023\)](#) found that religiosity had a significant effect on mental health. [Cowden et al. \(2023\)](#) showed that prayer during COVID-19 home confinement supports psychological health after lockdowns end. [Sulaiman et al. \(2023\)](#) reported changes in the mental well-being among Nigerians due to fasting during Ramadhan month. [Robbins & Francis \(1996\)](#) found that there is a positive relationship between positive mood and religious components. In addition, the findings of [Weerasinghe & Tepperman \(1994\)](#) demonstrated that religiosity affected happiness. [Kajbaf & Raeespour \(2008\)](#) concluded that with increasing religious attitude, mental health also improves. In their studies on the relationship between religiosity and mental health, [Maltby & Day \(2004\)](#) found that religion increases the level of mental health. [Levin et al. \(1997\)](#) found that religious participation is an epidemiological protective factor. The results of [Ghodrati Mirkohi & Khormaie's research \(2010\)](#) showed that there is a negative relationship between the components of religious commitment, religious belief and religious emotions with the general health (physical complaints, anxiety, depression and social incompatibility). In a meta-analysis, [Smith et al. \(2003\)](#) showed that religiousness, on average, is associated with lower levels of depressive symptoms. [Arian \(2001\)](#) showed that there is a positive and significant relationship between the feeling of psychological well-being and religiosity, in other words, people who had a higher level of religiosity; they also had a greater sense of mental well-being. [Bergin et al. \(1987\)](#) also investigated the relationship between religion and mental health by meta-analyzing 24 research articles and showed that there is a positive relationship between religion and mental health.

The results of the researches that have been conducted on the effect of religion on mental health indicate the existence of a positive effect of religion on adaptation, improvement of mental health, reduction of disease symptoms and reduction of discomfort and confusion, and support the existence of positive relationships between religion and mental health. According to various studies, it seems that all religious teachings and rituals and religious behaviors have an effective role in providing individual, family and social mental health ([Leung & Pong, 2021](#)). Iranian society is known as a religious society, and after the Islamic revolution, religion has been emphasized as a fundamental pillar in the administration of the society. This can provide the basis for using this spiritual matter in controlling and reforming many provide anomalies in various social and sports fields. Despite the importance of the topic, and the need to pay attention to spirituality and religious customs in the field of sports and its effects on the mental and physical health of athletes, no significant studies have been conducted in the field of university sportss in Iran. The research on the effect of spirituality orientation on psychological health of athletes is important for several reasons. Firstly, spirituality is a significant aspect of human experience and has been found to be associated with various positive outcomes, including improved mental health, coping skills, and overall well-being. Therefore, understanding the role of spirituality in the lives and profession of athletes can provide valuable insights into how to promote their psychological health and well-being. Secondly, athletes face unique stressors and challenges that can impact their mental health, such as performance pressure, injuries, and transitions out of sport. Exploring the potential protective effects of spirituality on their psychological health can inform interventions and support services that are tailored to their specific needs. Lastly, spirituality is a complex and multifaceted construct that can take different forms and have different meanings for different individuals. Therefore, studying the relationship between spirituality and psychological health in athletes can help to deepen our understanding of the diversity of spiritual experiences and their impact on mental health

outcomes. In this research, the authors tried to consider the research literature to present a conceptual model (Figure 1) including the effect of spirituality orientation on the mental health components of athletes of sports teams in the competitions of the 15th Cultural-Sports Olympiad of male students of universities and Higher education institutions.

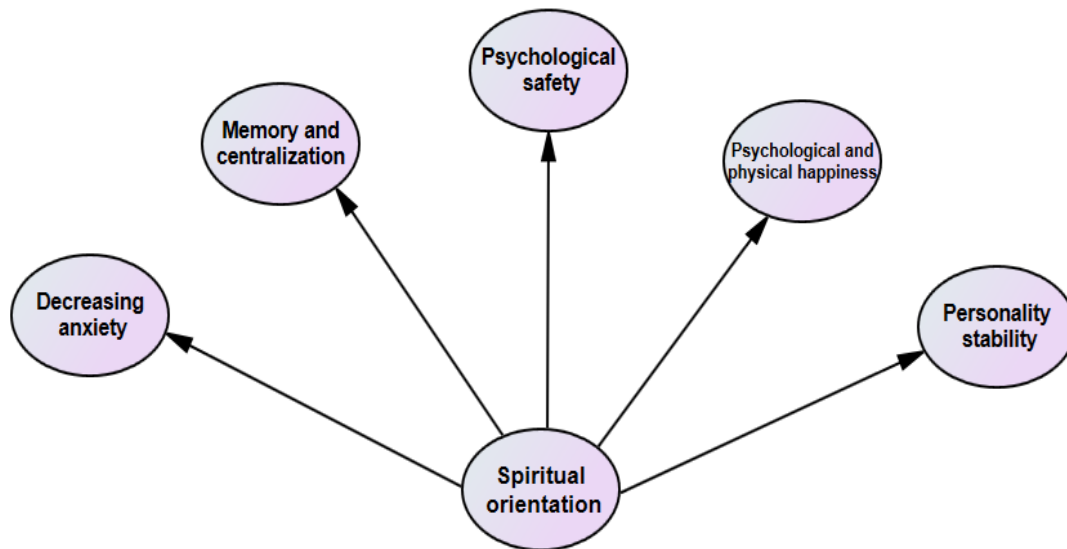


Figure 1. The research conceptual model

Research Methods

The aim of the current research was to investigate the effect of spiritual orientation on mental health components among athletes participating in the 15th cultural and sports Olympiad of male students of universities and higher education institutions in Tabriz, Iran. This research is descriptive in terms of its practical purpose, in terms of how to collect data, and is a type of research based on the structural equation model. The research population consisted of the male athletes of sports teams in the 15th cultural and sports Olympiad, male students of universities and higher education institutions in Tabriz. To determine the number of samples, the sampling formula used for structural equations ($5q \leq n \leq 15q$), where q is the number of items and n is the sample size, was used. In this research, the research tool consisted of 36 items, therefore at least 180 and at most 540 people were considered suitable as the research sample. Due to the possibility of some questionnaires not being returned or some of them being invalid for various reasons, 400 questionnaires were randomly distributed among the research sample in August 2022, and 376 questionnaires were returned. 369 questionnaires were finally used as valid questionnaires in data analysis process. According to the sample size formula, this number of samples is considered proper for conducting the research (it is within the acceptable range). The main tool for data collection is a researcher-developed questionnaire based on a five-point Likert scale that has been developed based on literature review. The research questionnaire consisted of 36 questions and each of the research variables contained six items. In order to evaluate the validity of the research tool, face and content validity were used using the opinions of 8 experts. Finally, after several stages of revision and a pilot stage, the final questionnaire was prepared. In this study, Cronbach's alpha method was used to calculate the reliability coefficient. The reliability of the tools based on Cronbach's alpha for spirituality orientation (6 items), anxiety (6 items), memory and centralization (6 items), psychological safety (6 items), psychological and physical happiness (6 items), and personality stability (6 items) was estimated to be 0.81, 0.82, 0.84, 0.89, 0.86, 0.93 and 0.90 respectively.

To confirm the construct validity of the questionnaire, confirmatory and exploratory factor analysis was used, and the results of the confirmatory factor analysis for all research variables confirmed the validity of the questionnaire (factor loadings were more than 0.50). Principal component analysis was used to test the exploratory factor analysis. In this research, the index value obtained from the analysis of the principal

components for spirituality orientation was equal to 0.81 and the significance level of Bartlett's test was equal to 0.001. The explained variance for spirituality orientation was 0.52. The value of KMO index obtained from principal components analysis for anxiety was equal to 0.83 and the significance level of Bartlett's test was equal to 0.001. The explained variance for anxiety was equal to 0.66. The value of KMO index for the result of principal components analysis for memory and concentration was 0.79 and the significance level of Bartlett's test was 0.001. The explained variance for memory and concentration was 0.61. The value of the KMO index obtained from the analysis of the main components for psychological security was equal to 0.82 and the significance level of Bartlett's test was equal to 0.001. The explained variance for psychological security was equal to 0.66. The value of the KMO index for the result of the analysis of the main components for physical and mental happiness was equal to 0.81 and the significance level of Bartlett's test was equal to 0.001. The explained variance for physical and mental happiness was equal to 0.63. Finally, in this research, the value of KMO index obtained from the principal components analysis for personality stability was 0.89 and the significance level of Bartlett's test was 0.001. The explained variance for personality stability was equal to 0.58. SPSS version 18 and Amos version 18 software were used for data analysis. In this research, structural equation modeling has been used to analyze hypotheses and examine the overall fit of the research model. In structural equation modeling, on the one hand, the degree of compliance of the research data with the conceptual model will be examined to see if it has a proper fit, and on the other hand, the significance of the relationships in this fitted model will be tested. The fitness indices of the research model included CMIN/Df, RMSEA, GFI, AGFI, NFI, CFI and IFI. A model has a good fit if CMIN is less than 3, RMSEA is less than 10%, GFI, AGFI, NFI, CFI and IFI are more than 90%.

Findings

The conceptual model of the research was examined in terms of having suitable indicators for testing the modeling of structural equations. Table 1 shows the general fit indices of the conceptual model of the research.

Table 1. Fit indices of measurement models

Indices	CMIN/Df	GFI	AGFI	NFI	CFI	RMSEA
Final model	2.34	0.91	0.91	0.91	0.92	0.086
Acceptable	3>	0.90<	0.90<	0.90<	0.90<	0.10<

As demonstrated in Table 1, the general indices revealed the good fitness of the model by the data, in other words, it can be stated that the collected data supports the model well. The model of the structural equation along with the regression coefficients is presented in Figure 2.

After examining and confirming the model, two partial indexes of critical value (C.R) and P have been used to test the significance of the hypotheses. The critical value is the value obtained by dividing the "regression weight estimate" by the "standard error". Based on the significance level of 0.05, the critical value should be more than 1.96. Less than this value, the parameter in the model is not considered significant, and values smaller than 0.05 for the P value indicate a significant difference between the value calculated for the regression weights and the zero value at the 0.95 confidence level. Hypotheses along with regression coefficients and partial index values related to each hypothesis are given in Table 1.

Table 2. Regression coefficients and test results of relationships

Number	Exogenous variable	Path	Endogenous variable	Beta coefficient	Critical value	Sig	Result
1	Spiritual orientation	→	Decreasing anxiety	0.52	8.91	***	Confirmed
2	Spiritual orientation	→	Memory & centralization	0.38	6.63	***	Confirmed

Number	Exogenous variable	Path	Endogenous variable	Beta coefficient	Critical value	Sig	Result
3	Spiritual orientation	→	Psychological safety	0.44	7.21	***	Confirmed
4	Spiritual orientation	→	Psychological and physical happiness	0.46	8.01	***	Confirmed
5	Spiritual orientation	→	Personality stability	0.35	6.89	***	Confirmed

0.001 < p < ***

According to the results and indicators obtained in Table 2, the relationships in the research model have been confirmed.

The structural equation model of the research, along with the regression coefficient, is presented in figure 2.

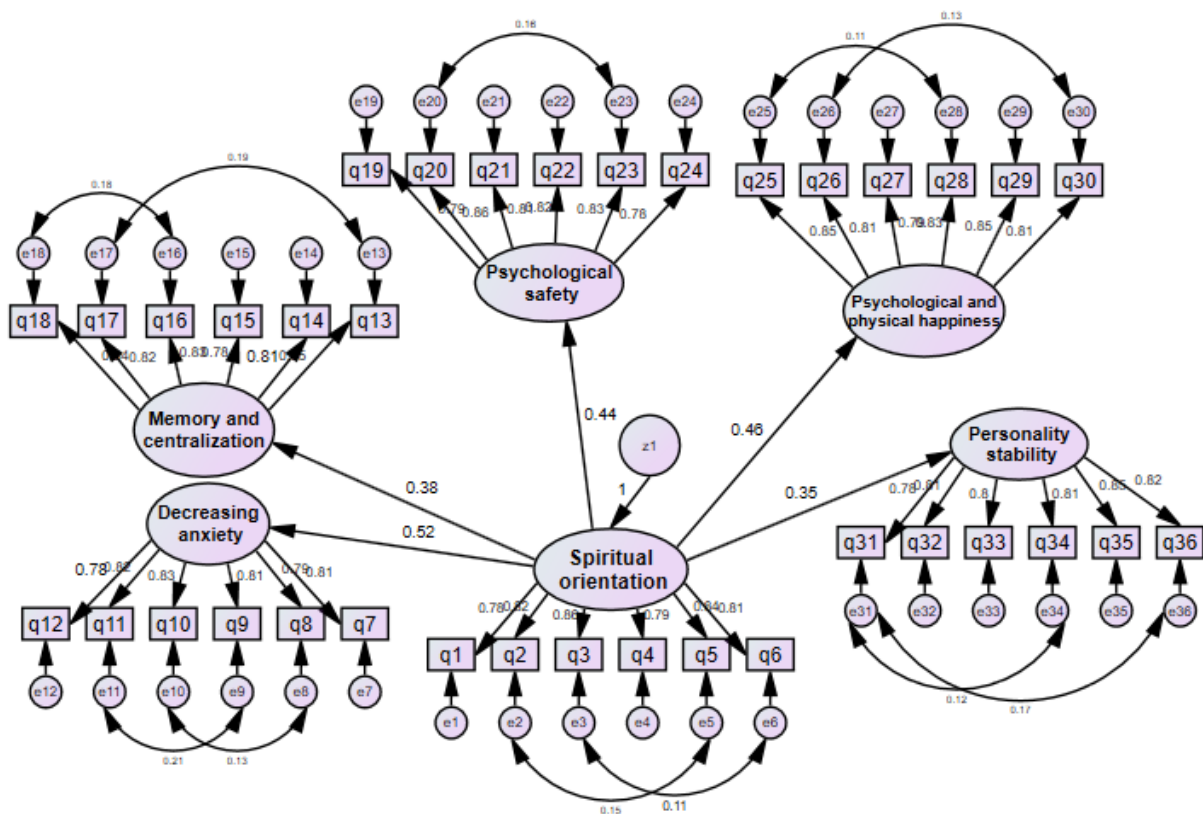


Figure 2. Structural equation of the research model

Discussion

Due to the professionalization of sports and the change in the nature of sports and sports activities from a fun activity to a professional activity, and on the other hand, the society's excessive attention to this attractive phenomenon, sports and athletes are under social judgment and social pressure more than it was in the past. The current conditions have caused the personal and family life of athletes to be greatly affected by the social pressures surrounding sports and their mental health is facing a serious threat. There is no doubt that one of the factors affecting the behavior and attitude of people in various societies is religiosity. Paying attention to the factors affecting the physical and mental health of athletes in different levels can provide the basis for dealing with and preventing possible mental and physical disorders. A spirituality orientation can have different behavioral, attitudinal and psychological consequences in the field of sports. Therefore, the

orientation towards spirituality in sports can be considered as a beginning step for the health of sports venues and events.

Part of the findings of this study indicated that spiritual orientation had a significant effect on the decrease of the anxiety of athletes. This part of the research findings is in line with the findings of [Smith et al. \(2003\)](#) and [Ghodrati Mirkohi and Khormaie \(2010\)](#). Due to the type of their activities in competitive environments, athletes are prone to facing various types of traits and state anxieties. According to the findings of the research, the spiritual and religious tendencies of athletes can have an effect on reducing their anxiety. In verse 227 of Surah Al-Baqarah, God asks everyone to pray; because it is an important factor in creating peace and eliminating fear and sadness. This means that through spirituality, a person can achieve peace and comfort (security). In addition, spirituality has the characteristic that stabilizes peace and brings humans to absolute, complete and eternal peace. (Qur'an, verse 227 of Surah Baqarah).

Another part of the results of the present research shows that the spirituality orientation among athletes has a positive and significant effect on their concentration. One of the key skills in the successful performance of athletes, having a high concentration during training and competition is of particular importance. The tendency towards spirituality in different religions and especially in the Islamic religion is defined as an important source of mental and physical peace, therefore, athletes are able to provide more favorable performance in training and competition by being more inclined towards spiritual values. The certain and numerous recommendations that have reached people in Islamic teachings about the "presence of the heart" in prayer and other religious rituals and the full attention to prayer, all indicate that worship should be performed with complete concentration and careful attention to its contents. In this way, a person with his worship as one of the main examples of the tendency towards spirituality, actually practices "concentration of the senses" many times throughout the day and night. In this way, by practicing concentration in their religious and spiritual practices, athletes can strengthen their ability to concentrate to perform technical functions and perform sports activities with higher concentration.

The findings of the research show that the athletes' spirituality orientation also has an important and significant effect on the psychological safety component. Since the life of athletes in today's era is accompanied by many and varied stresses and considering the fact that adaptability and resistance to stress are necessary to live and continue life, it is necessary to have tools that develop the degree of human resistance. In other words, religion gives people confidence and spiritual support in life. In this way, the tendency towards spirituality plays a big role in creating mental security and the ability to deal with stress in humans. A religious person finds himself in the all-round support and grace of God, the greatest force in existence, and thus gives him a sense of security, peace, and deep spiritual joy. Mental security resulting from spirituality helps athletes to maintain and continue their sports and non-sports lives in the best possible way by using their full mental and physical capacity and without mental disturbance.

The results of this research show that the level of spirituality of athletes affects the level of their mental health. This part of the findings is consistent with the research conducted by [Ghodrati Mirkohi and Khormaie \(2010\)](#) and [Weerasinghe and Tepperman \(1994\)](#). Religion is one of the important and influential factors in mental health. Religion changes the face of the world in the eyes of a religious person and changes his perception of himself, creation and surrounding events. Every factor that gives freshness to athletes has actually helped their physical and mental health. One of the reasons for Islam's emphasis on the continuous mention of God is that during life, a person may experience various mental stresses and pressures from moment to moment and this may provide mental and sometimes physical disorders. Therefore, humans should increase their mental and spiritual strength by connecting themselves to the source of existence and relying on God from the heart and in the shadow of continuous worship can cope with the health problems. In other words, remembering God from the heart has pleasant spiritual results and is usually associated with the deepest emotional and mental consequences. It has been assumed for a long time that there is a positive relationship between prayer, religious beliefs and mental health, and recently the psychology of religion has provided empirical support for this belief. In addition, worshipping God has the characteristic that stabilizes peace in a stable and eternal form and brings humans to absolute and eternal peace (Surah Baqarah, verse 277).

Another part of the results of this research shows that the spirituality orientation among athletes has a positive and significant effect on their personality stability. Today's knowledge classifies the factors that shape human personality into two groups, internal and external. Regardless of internal and physical factors affecting personality (including genetic issues, physical and appearance of the body, hormonal and chemical issues, etc.), external (environmental) factors play a major role in shaping human personality. Religious tendencies are among the indicators that can be considered both as an internal factor and an external factor affecting the personality and stability of athletes. Athletes can be exposed to personality fluctuations due to being in different environments and facing various environmental stimuli. In the world of sports, there have been various cases of athletes who suffered from personality disorders during their sports career and even after the end of their active sports life that led to abnormal behaviors. Undoubtedly, relying on strong spiritual beliefs and forces makes athletes find something beyond sports and their technical aspects as the main support of their lives and find sports as a tool in line with higher goals. As a result, athletes are able to stabilize their personality traits and, as a result, achieve personality stability in addition to accepting a complete pattern of life and a stable ideology.

In general, the results of the present research are consistent with the results of the research conducted by [Nmah \(2023\)](#), [Kajbaf and Raispour \(2018\)](#), [Bergin et al. \(1987\)](#), [Maltby and Day \(2004\)](#), [Ghodrati Mirkohi and Khormaie \(2010\)](#). In other words, based on the findings of the mentioned research, the tendency towards spirituality including worship and observance of religious customs and rituals, has a positive and significant effect on the mental health component of people.

If the athletes are subjected to correct spiritual training and gain a correct and comprehensive understanding of the innermost aspects of religion and spirituality, they tend towards spiritual and religious values. Some programs, including television and radio educational programs, and strengthening the spirit of participation in religious practices and rituals among athletes can be effective in increasing their level of religiosity. In addition, targeted investment in the field of religious-cultural issues and the establishment of educational courses for athletes can be useful in achieving these goals. As a result of using such educational and training processes in the field of sports, it is possible to help improve the mental capacity of athletes and the health of their mental health components, and as a result, we can hope for a healthier environment in the field of sports and sports events. The use of religious counselors along with athletes and sports psychologists can be effective in increasing the tendency of athletes towards spirituality, and athletes can benefit from the positive technical and non-technical consequences of this phenomenon. Due to the importance of the subject, more studies are suggested regarding the role of spirituality on behavioral and psychological indicators among different groups active in the field of sports such as fans, managers, etc. in Iranian sports.

Conclusion

If the athletes are subjected to correct spiritual training and gain a correct and comprehensive understanding of the innermost aspects of religion and spirituality, they tend towards spiritual and religious values. Some programs, including television and radio educational programs, and strengthening the spirit of participation in religious practices and rituals among athletes can be effective in increasing their level of religiosity. In addition, targeted investment in the field of religious-cultural issues and the establishment of educational courses for athletes can be useful in achieving these goals. As a result of using such educational and training processes in the field of sports, it is possible to help improve the mental capacity of athletes and the health of their mental health components, and as a result, we can hope for a healthier environment in the field of sports and sports events. The use of religious counselors along with athletes and sports psychologists can be effective in increasing the tendency of athletes towards spirituality, and athletes can benefit from the positive technical and non-technical consequences of this phenomenon. Due to the importance of the subject, more studies are suggested regarding the role of spirituality on behavioral and psychological indicators among different groups active in the field of sports such as fans, managers, etc. in Iranian sports.

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Conflicts of Interest

There is no potential conflict of interest.

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