
The Role of Religious Faith in Sport-Related Anxiety Among Elite Athletes: An Exploratory Study

Syazana Shahdan, Young-Eun Noh, and Yuhanis Adnan

Centre for Sport & Exercise Sciences, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Published online: 16 Februari 2022

To cite this article (APA): Shahdan, S., Noh, Y.-eun, & Adnan, Y. (2022). The Role of Religious Faith in Sport-Related Anxiety Among Elite Athletes: An Exploratory Study. *Jurnal Sains Sukan & Pendidikan Jasmani*, 11(1), 11-23. <https://doi.org/10.37134/jsspj.vol11.1.2.2022>

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.37134/jsspj.vol11.1.2.2022>

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to gain an understanding of the role of religious faith in dealing with sport-related anxiety among elite athletes. Seventeen elite athletes (10 males, 7 females, age range: 19 to 26 years old) with various sporting backgrounds voluntarily participated in the interviews. There were four religious affiliations involved in this study: Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, and Hinduism. Using a reflexive thematic analysis, two themes are developed: religious coping strategies (i.e., praying, God as the best helper, active submission to God's will, stressors as God's benevolence, religious social support, and religious items) and religious psychological effects (i.e., calmness, a sense of relief, self-confidence, motivation, positive thinking, a sense of security, and patience). The findings show that religious faith can play an important role in dealing with sporting anxiety by improving coping abilities and enhancing positive psychological effects among religious athletes.

Keywords: Elite athletes; religious psychological effects; coping strategy; sport-related anxiety

INTRODUCTION

Although the nature of sport itself involves competitiveness, athletic abilities, advanced techniques or skills, and physical strength, which do not seem to be linked to religious faith, sport and religious faith may in fact be closely interwoven. Tim Tebow, a former professional American football quarterback and current professional baseball outfielder, is known for his outspoken Christian faith. Due to his physical prayer gesture—kneeling on one knee with head bowed and with one arm resting on a bent knee—the term “tebowing” was coined to describe his gesture (Welch, 2017). Other athletes, such as Sonny Bill William, a rugby player who became a Muslim 10 years ago, have also openly expressed their conviction on the field by praying through the gesture of putting their hands together with their palms facing upward (Hafez, 2019). These examples signify that religious expressions are common in sports nowadays and are deemed to be an important practice among athletes with religious beliefs. Moreover, as more athletes today are publicly expressing their religious faith, sports psychology practitioners are likely to work with athletes from diverse religious traditions (Sarkar et al., 2014).

Anxiety is a natural human reaction that involves a negative emotional state. It refers to the cognitive and physiological response that can occur among athletes due to various internal (e.g., uncertainty, self-confidence) and external (e.g., spectators, competitive level) stressors, which can be perceived as threats (Ford et al., 2017; Gilham & Gilham, 2014). When anxiety levels become uncontrollable, they influence the psychological and physiological responses associated with poor sport performance, such as by disrupting thought and attention, and causing tremors and shortness of breath (Bali, 2015; Ford et al., 2017). In this context, for the athletes to be able to handle their sport-related

anxiety, an effective coping strategy is much needed, and thus, this has led to the introduction of various coping mechanisms, such as imagery, self-talk, relaxation, and mindfulness.

In order to alleviate the anxiety levels causing detrimental effects (e.g., concentration disruption, muscle tension), religious athletes engage with religious practices by praying and putting their trust in God before competitions (Noh & Shahdan, 2020). Indeed, previous studies have shown that religious athletes practice prayers as a way to cope with uncertainties, such as performance outcomes or getting injured during their participation in sport (Czech & Bullet, 2007), which are common sources of anxiety in the sporting context (Gilham & Gilham, 2014). Other studies have also stated that several athletes prayed as a thought-control strategy and for the pursuit of calmness when facing performance stress (Gould et al., 1993; Park, 2000). The athletes mentioned that they felt calm, relaxed, and secure through prayer (Czech & Bullet, 2007; Park, 2000), and those who experienced injuries prayed for protection from injuries, as it helped to ease their worries of getting injured again during competitions (i.e., reinjury anxiety) (Czech et al., 2004).

Furthermore, religious faith has been found to play a positive role in minimizing negative emotions among male athletes who suffered from anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) injury (Najah et al., 2017). The involvement of religious faith was stated to have provided a source of hope for athletes dealing with adversities, such as serious injury or major surgery. Hopeful thoughts were found to facilitate the lowering of fear and doubt regarding the healing process and the ability to return to sports (Tracey, 2003). Indeed, religious faith has potentially helped athletes in coping with injuries, especially during the recovery process, by providing comfort, support, and guidance (Wiese-Bjornstal et al., 2018). For athletes with strong religious beliefs, they might consider religion as an effective way of coping with stressors that can be detrimental, such as depression and anxiety.

Nevertheless, following an extensive literature search, religion in sport is often found to be overlooked and is still an underdeveloped field (Czech & Bullet, 2007; Mosley et al., 2015; Najah et al., 2017; Watson & Nesti, 2005), which leads to a lack of understanding regarding the role of religion in the alleviation of sport-related anxiety. Even though some researchers have examined the relationship between religious faith and competitive anxiety through quantitative approaches, this has not provided a deep understanding of the subject of interest (Azimirad & Jalilvand, 2012; Clark et al., 2019; Narimani et al., 2011). Therefore, there is a need to explore and understand the role of religious faith in sport-related anxiety through a qualitative approach by focusing on athletes' perspectives and experiences.

In this study, religious faith is defined as a system or structure that comprises a specific form of beliefs and practices directed toward the power of higher beings or the divine (Argyle & Beit-Hallahmi, 2013). The core concept of religious faith includes a personal belief in God and official beliefs and practices, such as specific types of prayers and attendance at places of worship. The term "God," in this paper, refers to the supreme being, ultimate reality, the divine, or the higher power that is viewed as greater than the individual who is worshiping (through Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, or Hinduism).

METHOD

Participants and Recruitment

The study used a purposive form of sampling that involved elite athletes as the participants. An elite athlete was defined as an individual competing or having competed at the national or international level in competitions (Swann et al., 2015). Seventeen elite athletes who were affiliated with a religious faith, including ten males and seven females between the ages of 19 and 26 years old ($M = 23.18$, $SD = 2.24$), were recruited. The participants comprised 14 international-level athletes and three national-level athletes. The participants were from different sports backgrounds, such as archery, athletics, badminton, diving, football, rugby, softball, and squash. Their participation in sport was either as individuals, as part of a team, or both. There were four religious affiliations involved in the study: Islam ($n = 13$), Buddhism ($n = 2$), Christianity ($n = 1$), and Hinduism ($n = 1$). Despite the low number of participants from Buddhism, Christianity, and Hinduism, the data that were collected were deemed appropriate due to the exploratory nature of the qualitative research.

Data Collection

Upon receiving institutional ethical approval, the elite athletes were invited to participate in this study, as they met the participants' criteria. One interviewer conducted the entire interview session, and each participant's background was determined (i.e., age, type of sport/s, level of competition) alongside their religious background (e.g., types of religious faith, religious activities) using a personal information form. The current study used an open-ended, semi-structured interview technique to collect detailed descriptions of the phenomena studied. The interviews covered areas that comprised their anxiety experiences, religious beliefs, the involvement of religious faith in sport, and how it affected them. The questions included "What makes you have religious faith?", "How do you feel before competitions?", "How do you involve religious faith in sport?", and "How does religious faith affect your participation in sport?" The participants were asked to describe their experiences, and they provided their perspectives regarding their religious practices in dealing with sport anxiety.

The data collection involved six individual interviews and five group interviews consisting of two to three participants who were acquaintances. Instead of following the usual practice of focus-group interviews (i.e., six to ten participants per group discussion), having a smaller number of participants in an interactive interview gave better opportunities for each participant to share their perspectives and experiences, and at the same time, it allowed for the interaction to stimulate more ideas during the discussion (Morgan et al., 2013). In individual interviews, the exploration of the topic can be profoundly studied, which leads to additional comments that may not be mentioned in the group interviews. The data collection started with two pilot or preliminary interviews with three elite athletes (i.e., one individual interview and one group interview). The pilot interviews that were conducted were intended to test the quality of the semi-structured questions and to identify potential biases in the questions, as this study involved athletes from various religious backgrounds. As was found in the pilot interviews, most of the questions were broad and appropriate for use in the main interviews.

The participants were also given a choice of language—Malay or English—to enable them to speak comfortably during the interview sessions. Therefore, they were asked which language they were comfortable with before their scheduled interviews. Among the interviewees, 13 of them spoke in Malay, and the other four athletes preferred English during the interviews. The interviews were audio-taped, and all data were kept confidential. It took approximately 30 to 40 minutes per individual interview session and 60 to 80 minutes per group interview session. Data collection was stopped when data saturation was achieved, wherein no new information was given by the participants (Saunders et al., 2018). By the 15th participant, the information given was rather redundant and no new experience or perspectives were expressed unlike in previous interviews, but two more interviews were arranged to ensure that no new data were generated.

DATA ANALYSIS

All the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, and each transcription was checked again with each participant's audio-recording for accuracy. A reflexive thematic analysis was utilized to generate themes, and it followed the six-stage process where themes were constructed inductively (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Braun et al., 2018; Braun et al., 2016). The first author started with multiple readings and note takings to familiarize herself with the data. Significant content from the data was coded and listed to answer the research questions. Then, the extracted content or quotations that were related to the involvement of religious faith and sport anxiety were organized according to the specific codes that were identified. Similar codes were collated to represent major codes that manifested particular depictions found in the data. The major codes were then revised and refined to generate themes. In finalizing the themes identified by the first author, each code and theme was checked again by second and third authors. A further discussion was then undertaken among the authors in order to establish the credibility of the study.

Quotations for each subtheme were selected and translated into English. Some original words or phrases are not suitable for translation, as they could lead to a loss of meaning from the original source (Halai, 2007; Regmi et al., 2010). In these cases, the original words or phrases were retained,

but with explanations in parentheses. Two experts who were fully bilingual in English and Malay were also asked to cooperate with the translation process for validation and accuracy purposes.

Research Design and Methodological Rigor

The study is underpinned by an ontological relativism, which is the belief that reality is rather subjective and can differ from individual to individual. To achieve understanding in the subject of interest, epistemological constructionism is emphasized so that knowledge can be constructed through the exploration of personal experiences and insights. These philosophical beliefs have led to several implications throughout all stages of the study. Interactive interviews were used as the data-collection method, and reflective thematic analysis was employed to enable detailed descriptions and interpretations by focusing on and staying close to the collected data (Kim et al., 2017).

To achieve quality in the research, the study used universal criteria (i.e., the eight big-tent criteria) as an indicator to evaluate research quality (Tracy, 2010; Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017). First, the study is relevant and manifests worthiness on the topic. Second, the study was perceived to have achieved rich rigor through appropriate sampling, pilot and interactive interviews, and sufficient data collection. Third, reflexive dialogues among the authors were always done before or after interview sessions to share their preconceptions or assumptions about the subject under study to reduce biases. Fourth, the study allowed for multivocality among athletes of different genders, religious backgrounds, and sports backgrounds to share their opinions and perspectives. The authors also acknowledged the cultural differences between themselves and the participants. Fifth, the study showed resonance, wherein the findings constitute the rhetorical situations of the athletes that may represent other athletes with similar experiences and perspectives. Sixth, suggestions for future research were also provided for further exploration of the subject of interest. Seventh, procedural ethics involving the requirements of institutional ethical approval and information confidentiality were also presented in the study. Last, the study shows coherence with the research related to how appropriately data collection, data analysis, and the results are interconnected to achieve the stated purpose.

RESULTS

The study identified two key themes: religious coping strategies and religious psychological effects. The themes represent the personal experiences and perspectives of the participants about the involvement of religious faith in dealing with sport-related anxiety. These findings also depict how religious faith plays a role when it is practiced to cope with sport-related anxiety.

Theme 1: Religious Coping Strategies

The theme of religious coping strategies portrayed the involvement of religious faith when dealing with sport-related anxiety, wherein the athletes engaged with various religious practices. The practices included praying, God as the best helper, active submission to God's will, stressors as God's benevolence, religious social support, and religious items. The subthemes showed how religious faith played an important role in handling sport-related anxiety by being a source of support, hope, and reliance through the participants' religious routines and practices.

Praying

Most participants mentioned praying as their way of practicing religious faith to alleviate anxiety levels. It is a mechanism practiced by both individuals and team players. Two methods were identified in individual prayers: praying with one's own words and reciting religious verses. This practice is widely engaged when athletes are anxious right before or during a tournament or when they are faced with an injury. Most of the athletes engaged with prayers by muttering them before tournaments or reciting them silently before or during tournaments.

The prayers involving their own words varied among the athletes depending on their previous experiences and what they felt about the particular tournament. For example, Athlete 13, who was

traumatized by a past knee injury, emphasized his practical routine of praying as a mechanism to cope with anxiety right before a tournament by asking for protection. This was depicted in his statement:

In 2014, my knee ligament was torn and operated on. (Paused) Since then, I've become a bit traumatized by the event. So, every time, before the game, I must make at least a simple prayer and ask for protection from serious injury. ... No matter how big or small the game is. Every time before the kick-off, I pray silently by saying, "Oh God, please protect me from any injury." That's my usual prayer.

Besides that, some athletes chose to recite religious verses as a way of praying. Athlete 16 shared his process of coping with anxiety by reciting verses from the Quran in combination with a breathing technique. He stated:

I usually feel anxious at the starting block. Not at other times. So, my routine involves reciting the Surah al-Fatihah (i.e., the first chapter of al-Quran) with three deep breaths. Before running, at the starting block. I recite it silently. It works.

For Athlete 16, he chose to recite specific religious verses, such as the Surah al-Fatihah, as part of his routine in every tournament, as the verses hold a special meaning in his religious faith.

The recitation of religious verses by some athletes in this study is known to have a special meaning, as the verses are highly associated with God in a specific religious faith and vary depending on what religious faith the athletes are affiliated with. Examples of religious verses recited are the Quranic verses, zikr (i.e., an utterance of repeated short sentences that glorify God) and salawat (i.e., a greeting or salutation for the prophet) in Islam, the repeated utterance of Amitufo (i.e., the name of Amitabha Buddha in Chinese) in Buddhism, or a repeated utterance of Muruga (i.e., also known as Murugan, the Lord worshiped by Tamils) in Hinduism.

Besides, the athletes also practice team prayer by using their own words rather than specific religious verses, which might be due to the involvement of people with various religious backgrounds in team sports. These prayers are usually enacted right before tournaments in which the team players are gathered and led by one person. Athlete 17 mentioned how, "Usually, we also pray together before the game. As a team, we pray to prevent injuries, to win, to be calmed, and to provide hope that nothing unfortunate will happen throughout the game." Three athletes who played team sports shared how, other than praying individually, they also prayed with their teammates. This practice had become part of their routine or "culture" every time they were in a tournament. The prayers were usually centered on protection from injury, strength, and victory. This shows the cohesiveness and compassion among team players that is depicted through the same hopes and wishes that they expressed in their prayers.

God as the best helper

This subtheme refers to the strong belief held by the participants that God is the best helper, which leads to the act of seeking and relying on God for support and help. For example, Athlete 4 expressed his belief in God's help by saying, "Because we know that if we ask for His help, we believe that He will help us back." During tournaments, the athletes in this study believed that only God could support them in overcoming the fear, nervousness, and even loneliness they felt in the court or on the field. This belief in God as the best helper might also be due to the athlete's divine experience, as Athlete 1 shared his impression and divine experience in the "presence" of a supreme being by stating, "We feel like there is a presence of 'some' being who will help us."

Besides, from the athletes' experiences in involving religious faith, belief also leads to the involvement of another practice, which is prayer. According to Athlete 11:

Because in our religion we believe that only God can help us when we are on our own. So, we believe in that. So, that's why we pray to Him. So that He can help us during our time of need. Even though it's a team sport, it's all done by individuals. The team can help as a whole, but when we have to go for a bat, it's all up to the individual. Nobody would know whether we were scared or not. So, at those times, the only thing we can do is to ask for His help.

Active submission to God's will

This practice involves the process of coping with sport anxiety by leaving the outcomes to be ascertained by God after working or trying hard, as the participants believed that every outcome was due to the will of God. The use of this approach is portrayed in a statement by Athlete 8: "No matter

what, for me, we should make efforts first, then, let the rest be ascertained by Him.” Athlete 2 also shared.

So, when I run, I’ll leave everything to God. Because we’re already tired of training. We think about how tired from training we are from morning to evening. But when it’s time to race, it’s just for one race. But how can we help ourselves? Umm, God is the only one that can help us. Winning or losing is all up to God.

Athlete 2 shared how much time he put into training for every tournament; however, being anxious during the tournament might hinder him from performing better. This practice is deemed to have been influenced by the belief that God is the best helper and the belief that things happen by the will of God. Hence, to cope with anxiety and to make the training effort worthwhile, Athlete 2 leaves the outcome (i.e., winning or losing) to be ascertained by God.

Stressors as God’s benevolence

Several athletes in the study believed that the stressors that caused them to be in an anxious state, such as serious injuries or past failures, were hardships sent by God. Interestingly, they did not express negative reactions by blaming or being outraged by God. Rather, in the process of coping with their anxiety, they perceived that the presence of these stressors was something that God sent with well-meaning messages. Four athletes in this study shared their experiences with anxiety when facing serious injuries and how they had coped with them. The athletes showed a positive reaction toward the injury by defining the situation as being part of God’s plan, a good reminder from God, or as a way to get closer to God. In a statement by Athlete 16, he stated:

I’ve gotten injured a few times. Three times. All happened on my left side. Torn hamstring. Just a small tear, but I can still feel the impact now. The pain is still there. It’s still not fully recovered. Maybe the little bit of pain God gave me is to act as a reminder for myself. (Paused) Maybe if it’s fully recovered, I’ll become negligent toward my training and my prayers.

Athlete 16 shared his experience of an injury that he has still not fully recovered from. He positively accepted and perceived the event as a reminder that could make him more diligent with training and as a chance to get closer to God. Athlete 4 also showed his gratitude toward the incident (i.e., the injury), as he believed that there was a rationale behind the event that happened. The athlete said, “I’m always grateful. I believe it (injury) happens for a reason.”

Religious social support

Religious social support is involved when athletes seek religious support from surrounding people, such as family, friends, and teammates who have similar religious views and principles. As is shared by Athlete 15:

My parents are the ones who would usually talk about religion. If anything, if I’m feeling down. Sometimes, the first thing I’d do is ask my parents for advice. ... Like my mom, she tends to advise me from a religious perspective, such as through storytelling of the history of the prophet’s companions.

Athlete 15 stated that sport-related anxiety did not necessarily only happen right before or during a tournament. It could happen at any time, especially when there was an important tournament ahead. Therefore, Athlete 15 would seek support to cope with his anxiety by consulting with his parents, who advised the athlete by integrating the values and elements from their religious faith to bring comfort and relief.

Religious items. This practice involves wearing religious items that have special religious meanings. This approach was mentioned by an athlete wherein she wore the item in her daily life as well as in every tournament, as the athlete felt that it could help to relieve anxiety. These religious items are usually available at the place of worship in which every item has its meaning (e.g., for protection, for luck). This was depicted in the following quotation:

For me, I’m wearing this [showing her bracelet]. It’s called—it is some type of marble. Something made of marble—but umm, the belief in this marble, is that it functions when my temper gets out of hand, so I wear this just to, yeah to make myself calm.

The participants showed that the practice of one approach leads to another and that they are very much interconnected. For instance, believing in God as the best helper can lead to prayers and an active submission to God’s will.

Theme 2: Religious Psychological Effects

The second theme that was identified and described was how the engagement of religious faith in coping with sport anxiety had played a part in improving the participants' psycho-emotional states. Religious faith was deemed to induce calmness, a sense of relief, self-confidence, motivation, positive thinking, a sense of security, and patience. This finding indicates that religious faith may play a significant role in helping the participants to cope with sport-related anxiety by enhancing positive psycho-emotional states.

Calmness

Calmness refers to a peaceful state of mind that occurs after involving religious faith in the process of coping with sport-related anxiety. Seven athletes expressed their feeling of calmness when religious faith was included to alleviate anxiety levels. This was portrayed in the statement by Athlete 11:

We do all this to get ourselves calm. We know that everything happens by His own will, so we ask for His help. If His will is for us to win, He will help us. We will feel calm after we have prayed.

The following statement shows how one's religious faith could lead to a religious practice and bring about the effect of calmness. It starts with the belief in the will of God and God as the best helper. This belief leads to the practice of praying, which keeps the athlete calm when facing sport-related anxiety. Other athletes also mentioned calmness as one of the impacts, by simply stating, "It makes me calm," "I feel calmer," or "I'll feel calm."

Sense of relief. A sense of relief indicates the alleviation of or the feeling of release from anxiousness. Some athletes reported "feeling better" or how "psychologically it helps" in interpreting the impact of involving religious faith to reduce anxiety levels. Athlete 8 mentioned coping with his pressure-induced anxiety when participating in sport by praying. The athlete shared how prayer could relieve some of the pressure he put himself under. This was expressed by Athlete 8, who mentioned:

When I started to get involved in sport, I put pressure on myself so that I could do my very best. So, for me, from a religious perspective, religion helps us to overcome the pressure because, in our religion, we have religious practices like salawat and istighfar (i.e., the act of seeking forgiveness from God). So, that's what I do before the game. ... When I do the prayer myself, it makes me feel a bit of relief from the pressure.

Although Athlete 8 puts himself under pressure to make himself do his best, the pressure could generate a diversion of thoughts and create worries, which may also affect the athlete's performance. Therefore, to relieve the pressure-induced anxiety, the athlete has made it a habit of practicing prayers right before sporting competitions.

Self-confidence

Self-confidence refers to the trust in one's athletic skill and the ability to take part in a tournament by involving religious faith when dealing with anxiety. Athletes expressed their feelings of confidence when engaging with religious faith by stating, "I believe that if I pray, I can play better," or "It (religious faith) helps me believe in myself even more." Athlete 9 also said:

I always pray before I go onto the court. I just pray on my own. Just (folds hands) pray or sit down in the corner, close my eyes, and pray. ... I believe if I do that, I can play better. I feel confident before I play. Because I believe that I've already prayed, so God is behind me to support me.

The participant recounted how she involved religious faith by praying, and she shared her belief in how religious practice affects her psycho-emotional state.

Motivation

Motivation signifies how the psycho-emotional states of involving religious faith to alleviate anxiety levels enhance inner motivation to perform and accomplish objectives set by the athletes. In this study, some athletes claimed to be more motivated through the involvement of religious faith in sport participation. This impact is portrayed in the following statement: "After reciting it, the feeling would be more, like I said before, would be that I am more motivated. So, it can be said that there's nothing else in my mind at that time. I'd only think that God would help." Another relevant statement was made by Athlete 17.

For me, praying is one of the ways to motivate myself. When we prayed, we would mention our worries as part of the prayers' content. So, for me, the religious values that are practiced during a match or training lead to motivation, a psychological impact on myself. Automatically, it sets my mind to be attentive (during games).

This shows that religious faith is deemed to positively influence the participants through motivation, making them focus more on accomplishing their goals.

Positive thinking

Positive thinking refers to how the involvement of religious faith helps to produce a mental attitude of hope for favorable outcomes when faced with adversities (e.g., injury) that have caused anxiety. Athletes shared their experiences during the injury-rehabilitation phases and also divulged how they coped with anxiety. Athlete 17, who had experienced ACL, thought intensively about the unfortunate event and emphasized it as being a good reminder from God. Besides following the scheduled therapies during the phase of recovery, he would also include a religious routine of praying. The practice of prayer had also helped the athlete to stay positive, and he felt that this positivity may eventually facilitate the recovery process. As stated by the athlete:

During the period of recovery, I would follow everything that was recommended from the medical perspective. While in a religious context, I would pray for a fast recovery and, for me, maybe from a medical theory, sometimes the duration of recovery is fixed for a certain time. But for me, when I applied the religious values, I could set my mind to the fact that the injury could heal fast.

Sense of security

A sense of security involves the feeling of being protected or of safety when religious faith is included to alleviate anxiety levels. Athlete 8 portrayed this sense of security through his divine experience during a tournament by saying, "We would feel like, the presence of a Guardian." While some athletes expressed their feelings of fear and their worries about undesirable events (e.g., making mistakes, injury), especially right before a tournament, they stated that they could feel more secure by involving religious faith when coping with anxiety. This is described by Athlete 13 in the following quotation:

When I have to go for an event, I pray, then I feel secure. ... I feel safe. Because usually, athletes who have experienced a serious injury would have a fear that the injury may recur. But alhamdulillah (praise be to God), after we pray, we just trust in God's plan.

Patience. Patience means the ability to control one's temper via religious faith to prevent further increases in anxiety levels during sports events. Athlete 7, who felt anxious regarding her bad temper, mentioned this theme. The athlete prays whenever she cannot control her emotional temperament, and this was portrayed in the following statement:

I have a special paper from the temple with something like the word Amitufo on it, and I read it repeatedly. Uttering the word Amitufo makes me more patient. But I don't constantly do it. It's just whenever I feel like my temper is getting worse, I'll try to utter the word again. Because I'm hot-tempered.

Although the athlete may not be consistent with it, religious faith still seems to be viewed as important when handling the emotional turmoil that can potentially lead to an uncontrolled level of anxiety. Hence, from the participant's perspective, practicing religious faith in sport may effectively work to enhance a positive psycho-emotional state (i.e., patience).

DISCUSSION

This study presents important findings on how religious faith has played a role in providing support, hope, and mental and emotional strength when athletes have struggled with sport-related anxiety. In the efforts to deal with anxiety in sport, religious faith was found to be a distinctive way of coping among the athletes, as it involves sacred devotions toward God.

The participants shared how they involved praying mainly before, right before, and during competitions, which were the times when their anxiety was usually at high levels. Consistent with this

research, praying was found to be a prevalent practice among athletes in other studies to enhance performance and alleviate anxiety (Czech & Bullet, 2007; Czech et al., 2004). One previous study also mentioned that praying might be the best way of coping, as the athletes might feel even more anxious during crucial moments (e.g., penalty kicks, deciding points) due to the uncertainties of the results (Czech & Bullet, 2007). During such demanding situations, the participants might need something to rely on and support them. Hence, as they believe in the power of God, praying is viewed as a means of communication with God at their time of need.

Nonetheless, a prior mixed-method study found no significant relationship between intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity and competitive anxiety among college athletes when using the Age-Universal I/E Scale and Competitive State Anxiety Inventory-2 Revised (Clark et al., 2019). Yet, by using open-ended questions, they reported that 77% of the participants did religious rituals before and during competitions for comfort, strength, and protection. One of the limitations of the study is that the religious scale has mainly been used in the general population. It might not be suitable for covering the practices of religious faith for competitive anxiety in the sport context.

The participants reported how every action or practice was colored by their beliefs. For instance, the belief that God is the best helper is deemed to play an important role in influencing the involvement of religious faith in the coping process of sport-related anxiety. Some athletes mentioned that they prayed to deal with sport-related anxiety because they believed only God could help them. Similarly, other athletes who stated that they let performance outcomes (i.e., winning or losing) be ascertained by God after they had tried their best (i.e., active submission to God's will) conveyed their belief in God as the best helper. Hence, the findings seem to highlight how the participants' beliefs in God might be an important determinant for the engagement of religious practices during times of anxiousness.

Interestingly, among all approaches, wearing religious items for sport-related anxiety was rarely found as a coping strategy. In the area of the psychology of religion, the terms sacred objects or sacred matter have been used frequently, and these objects and matter were usually infused with strong religious meaning (Miller et al., 2011; Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). This can also apply to a wide range of elements, such as objects of sacred matter (e.g., a thing, person, place, activity), and do not necessarily have to be items that can be worn, such as bracelets or necklaces (Miller et al., 2011; Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). As the objects were believed to have a close link with God, they have been used frequently as a way to connect with and engender the desire to pray to the divine (Miller et al., 2011).

Although wearing religious items is an unusual finding when compared to other related studies, the finding from our study shows that religious items should be recognized as an important practice tool among religious athletes. This is because religious items can be viewed as a significant method for athletes to cope with negative emotions, such as anxiety, anger, and fear. Therefore, no matter what the thing or object is, as long as it is considered to have a religious meaning and is valuable to a particular person, it signifies importance in terms of the individuals' emotions, and thus acts as a source of strength (Pargament & Mahoney, 2005).

In addition, the diverse emphasis and intensity of beliefs and practices in different faith traditions may have influenced the athletes' preferences in engaging with religious faith when dealing with sport anxiety. For example, religious faiths such as Islam and Christianity highlight community and daily private religious activities that aim to secure beliefs and the relationship with God, while Buddhism is likely to emphasize meditation practices and values in life (Johnstone et al., 2012). Furthermore, in Hinduism, it is more common to do meditation practices and individual rather than communal rituals and religious rites (Weightman, 1997).

The diversity of beliefs and practices in different faith traditions have been proposed to predict the religiosity of individuals (Johnstone et al., 2012). Consequently, this may have influenced athletes' preferences and perspectives on involving religious faith for the alleviation of sport anxiety. Therefore, athletes' religious backgrounds, with their intensity of beliefs and practices, should be taken into consideration when conducting research regarding religious faith in sporting contexts.

In exploring the subject of religious faith and anxiety in sports, the participants also described how religious faith helped them to cope with sport-related anxiety by enhancing their positive psycho-emotional states. Religious faith has been reported to provide a sense of security, especially for an

athlete who has experienced a serious injury, through praying for protection from injuries before tournaments and relieving reinjury-related anxiety (Czech et al., 2004). Furthermore, religious faith has been mentioned to play a role as “a source of rejuvenating motivation” when it was engaged after suffering from a serious injury (Mosley et al., 2015). Therefore, as injury has been associated with the occurrence of psychological disturbances (e.g., anxiety, anger), religious faith, functioning at the time of healing or in the recovery phase, has been viewed as a source of hope that facilitatively helps the athletes to cope with sport-related anxiety (Najah et al., 2017; Wiese-Bjornstal et al., 2018). Findings from previous studies have also proposed that athletes who enjoy prayer were likely to view competitions positively and consider anxiety as a natural psychological state that improves the athletes’ self-confidence (Azimirad & Jalilvand, 2012; Narimani et al., 2011).

Moreover, positive emotions have been found to predict a sense of hope and are positively associated with anxiety orientation, the ability to cope, goal attainment, and a sense of control among martial arts athletes (Yang et al., 2020). The revised Theory of Challenge and Threat States in Athletes (Meijen et al., 2020) also predicted that positive emotions are likely connected to, although they are not always necessarily associated with, a challenge state. Likewise, negative emotions are usually related to but not exclusively associated with a threat state. This perception of emotional valence has been proposed to be correlated with how the athletes perceive their resources (i.e., self-efficacy, perceived control, and perceived social support) as opposed to the demands. When the resources are perceived as sufficient to meet the demands, athletes are likely to experience positive emotions and perceive negative emotions as facilitative during competitions.

In applied sports psychology, practical psychological skills, such as imagery, self-talk, and goal setting, have been suggested to be implemented for the development of cognitive resources, such as self-efficacy, perceived control, and emotion control (Meijen et al., 2020). The present study has also shown how the involvement of religious faith was deemed to have helped alleviate anxiety levels by improving the psycho-emotional states of the participants. Therefore, the study proposes that religious faith might enhance the resources and facilitate the coping abilities of athletes, in which it may act as one of the coping strategies to improve the psycho-emotional states of athletes when dealing with sport anxiety.

Limitations

This research has acknowledged the possible values of religious faith in the life of religious athletes. The qualitative approach in this study has provided an understanding of the involvement of religious faith during the process of coping with sport anxiety. Nonetheless, there are some limitations to this study that should be considered. In this study, the age of elite athletes ranged from 19 to 26 years old, which is considered to be a rather narrow age range. More than two-thirds of those who reach their peak performance in Olympic sports are between the ages of 20 and 30, and almost all of them are below 40 years old (Longo et al., 2016). A wider age range might provide richer information and perspectives from older athletes, as they have even more experience in competitive sports and might deliver better information about the phenomenon of practicing religious faith to cope with sport anxiety.

Furthermore, religious beliefs and practices tend to differ among different faiths and traditions, which can potentially play a role in predicting an individual’s religiosity (Johnstone et al., 2012). Consequently, it may influence athletes’ preferences and perspectives in involving religious faith when dealing with sport anxiety. This study, however, was conducted in Malaysia, where a large portion of the population are Muslims, followed by Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, and others. Hence, the results constituted mostly Muslim athletes’ (13 out of 17) experiences and perspectives. In future studies, with more participation of athletes from different religious backgrounds and traditions (e.g., Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism), different experiences and standpoints may be discovered, providing a wider and deeper understanding of the involvement of religious faith in dealing with sport anxiety.

Future Research

The results show that several athletes engaged with religious faith to cope with reinjury anxiety. Religious faith is deemed to be facilitative in enhancing the feeling of security and in alleviating worries and fears, especially after returning to sport. Hence, studies on the involvement of religious faith to alleviate reinjury anxiety might be worthwhile, as the current studies have focused on the effects of

religious faith during the recovery process (Najah et al., 2017; Wiese-Bjornstal et al., 2018) rather than on when athletes are facing reinjury anxiety, especially after returning to sport.

Two measurements developed specifically for the athlete population were found: the Spirituality in Sport Test (Dillon & Tait, 2000) and the Religious Behavior Survey (Czech & Bullet, 2007). The SIST was validated and found to be reliable in measuring spirituality, but the tool has only been utilized for measuring the spiritual state and flow experiences of athletes (Watson & Nesti, 2005) and the RBS has not been tested for validity and reliability (Czech & Bullet, 2007). Therefore, the development of a valid and reliable questionnaire to determine the involvement of religious faith in coping with anxiety is required in sports so that quality quantitative studies on the subject of interest can be conducted.

Practical Application

The engagement of religious faith in sport is not about forcing athletes to have religious beliefs or obliging them to undertake religious practices. The involvement of religious faith depends on the athletes themselves, as they have their own preferences and viewpoints. However, some ways to facilitate those athletes who are likely to practice religious faith in sport involve understanding their faith, supporting rather than inhibiting their practices, and encouraging the assimilation of religious values with other psychological skills, such as integrating self-talk with some religious words of reassurance, or assimilating breathing techniques with recitations of short religious verses. This might be beneficial to religious athletes, as it can increase their coping abilities and emotional control to enhance positive performance outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The key finding from this study is that religious practices are a common occurrence in sports as one of the ways with which to deal with sport anxiety among athletes with religious faith. It should also be considered that religious faith can play an important role in dealing with sport anxiety, as it may work effectively as a coping mechanism to provide emotional control by enhancing positive psycho-emotional states, such as calmness, a sense of relief, self-confidence, and motivation, which are vital qualities in improving sport performance. Therefore, religious faith should be considered in sports psychology so that its role can be delineated and it can add more value to the field.

REFERENCES

- Argyle, M., & Beit-Hallahmi, B. (2013). *The Social Psychology of Religion (Psychology Revivals)*. Routledge.
- Azimirad, J., & Jalilvand, M. (2012). Relationship between spiritual transcendence and competitive anxiety in male athletes. *International Research Journal of Applied and Basic Sciences*, 3(9), 1783-1786.
- Bali, A. (2015). Psychological factors affecting sports performance. *International Journal of Physical Education, Sports and Health*, 1(16), 92-95.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), 589-597. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676x.2019.1628806>
- Braun, V., Clarke, V., Hayfield, N., & Terry, G. (2018). Thematic analysis. In *Handbook of Research Methods in Health Social Sciences* (pp. 1-18). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-2779-6_103-1
- Braun, V., Clarke, V., & Weate, P. (2016). Using thematic analysis in sport and exercise research In B. Smith & A. C. Sparkes (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise* (pp. 213-227). Routledge.
- Clark, A. M., Madrigal, L., Ede, A., & Vargas, T. (2019). The relationship between intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity and competitive anxiety. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 22(5), 531-542. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2019.1604648>
- Czech, D. R., & Bullet, E. (2007). An exploratory description of Christian athletes' perceptions of prayer in sport: A mixed methodological pilot study. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*, 2(1), 49-56. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=s3h&AN=25268446&site=ehost-live>
- Czech, D. R., Wrisberg, C. A., & Fisher, L. A. (2004). The experience of Christian prayer in sport: An existential

- phenomenological investigation. *Journal of Psychology & Christianity*, 23(1), 3-11.
- Dillon, K. M., & Tait, J. L. (2000). Spirituality and being in the zone in team sports: A relationships? *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 23(2), 91. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=pbh&AN=3193796&site=ehost-live>
- Ford, J. L., Ildefonso, K., Jones, M. L., & Arvinen-Barrow, M. (2017). Sport-related anxiety: Current insights. *Open Access Journal Sports Medicine*, 8, 205-212. <https://doi.org/10.2147/OAJSM.S125845>
- Gilham, E., & Gilham, A. D. (2014). Identifying athletes' sources of competitive state anxiety. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 37(1), 37-54.
- Gould, D., Eklund, R. C., & Jackson, S. A. (1993). Coping strategies used by US Olympic wrestlers. *Research Quarterly for Exercise & Sport*, 64(1), 83-93. <http://www.diglib.um.edu.my/interaktif/default.asp?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=s3h&AN=SPHS-608312&site=eds-live>
- Hafez, S. (2019). Sonny Bill Williams: 'I chased girls, drank alcohol and it only gave me emptiness'. <https://www.bbc.com/sport/rugby-league/50406738>
- Halai, N. (2007). Making use of bilingual interview data: Some experiences from the field. *The Qualitative Report*, 12(3), 344-355.
- Johnstone, B., Yoon, D. P., Cohen, D., Schopp, L. H., McCormack, G., Campbell, J., & Smith, M. (2012). Relationships among spirituality, religious practices, personality factors, and health for five different faith traditions. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 51(4), 1017-1041. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-012-9615-8>
- Kim, H., Sefcik, J. S., & Bradway, C. (2017). Characteristics of qualitative descriptive studies: A systematic review. *Research in Nursing & Health*, 40(1), 23-42. <https://doi.org/10.1002/nur.21768>
- Longo, A. F., Siffredi, C. R., Cardey, M. L., Aquilino, G. D., & Lentini, N. A. (2016). Age of peak performance in Olympic sports: A comparative research among disciplines. *Journal of Human Sport and Exercise*, 11(1), 31-41. <https://doi.org/10.14198/jhse.2016.111.03>
- Meijen, C., Turner, M., Jones, M. V., Sheffield, D., & McCarthy, P. (2020). A Theory of Challenge and Threat States in Athletes: A revised conceptualization. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 126. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00126>
- Miller, L. M., Gall, T. L., & Corbeil, L. (2011). The experience of prayer with a sacred object within the context of significant life stress. *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health*, 13(4), 247-271. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19349637.2011.616101>
- Morgan, D. L., Ataie, J., Carder, P., & Hoffman, K. (2013). Introducing dyadic interviews as a method for collecting qualitative data. *Qualitative Health Research*, 23(9), 1276-1284. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732313501889>
- Mosley, M. J., Frierson, D. J., Yihan, C., & Aoyagi, M. W. (2015). Spirituality & sport: Consulting the Christian athlete. *The Sport Psychologist*, 29(4), 371-386. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=s3h&AN=111875568&site=ehost-live>
- Najah, A., Farooq, A., & Rejeb, R. B. (2017). Role of religious beliefs and practices on the mental health of athletes with anterior cruciate ligament injury. *Advances in Physical Education*, 7(2), 181-190. <https://doi.org/10.4235/ape.2017.72016>
- Narimani, M., Babolan, A. Z., & Ariapooran, S. (2011). The role of spiritual transcendence on predictive of competitive anxiety and self-confidence in athletes. *World Applied Sciences Journal*, 15(1), 136-141.
- Noh, Y. E., & Shahdan, S. (2020). A systematic review of religion/spirituality and sport: A psychological perspective. *Psychology of Sport & Exercise*, 46. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2019.101603>
- Pargament, K. I., & Mahoney, A. (2005). Sacred matters: Sanctification as a vital topic for the psychology of religion. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 15(3), 179-198. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327582ijpr1503_1
- Park, J. K. (2000). Coping strategies used by Korean national athletes. *The Sport Psychologist*, 14(1), 63-80. <https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.14.1.63>
- Regmi, K., Naidoo, J., & Pilkington, P. (2010). Understanding the processes of translation and transliteration in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 9(1), 16-26.
- Sarkar, M., Hill, D. M., & Parker, A. (2014). Working with religious and spiritual athletes: Ethical considerations for sport psychologists. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 15(6), 580-587. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2014.05.006>
- Saunders, B., Sim, J., Kingstone, T., Baker, S., Waterfield, J., Bartlam, B., Burroughs, H., & Jinks, C. (2018). Saturation in qualitative research: Exploring its conceptualization and operationalization. *Quality & Quantity*, 52(4), 1893-1907. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-017-0574-8>
- Swann, C., Moran, A., & Piggott, D. (2015). Defining elite athletes: Issues in the study of expert performance in sport psychology. *Psychology of Sport & Exercise*, 16, 3-14.

- Tracey, J. (2003). The emotional response to the injury and rehabilitation process. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 15(4), 279-293. <https://doi.org/10.1080/714044197>
- Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight “Big-Tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(10), 837-851. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410383121>
- Tracy, S. J., & Hinrichs, M. M. (2017). Big tent criteria for qualitative quality. In *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods* (pp. 1-10). <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118901731.iecrm0016>
- Watson, N. J., & Nesti, M. (2005). The role of spirituality in sport psychology consulting: An analysis and integrative review of literature. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 17(3), 228-239. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=s3h&AN=18288588&site=ehost-live>
- Weightman, S. (1997). Hinduism. In *A new handbook of living religions* (pp. 261-309).
- Welch, D. (2017). Top 10 Most Successful Religious Athletes <https://www.worldreligionnews.com/entertainment/sports/top-10-most-successful-religious-athletes>
- Wiese-Bjornstal, D. M., Wood, K. N., White, A. C., Wambach, A. J., & Rubio, V. J. (2018). Exploring religiosity and spirituality in coping with sport injuries. *Journal of Clinical Sport Psychology*, 1-35. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jcsp.2018-0009>
- Yang, H., Wen, X., & Xu, F. (2020). The influence of positive emotion and sports hope on pre-competition state anxiety in martial arts players. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 1460. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01460>

✉ Syazana Shahdan
Centre for Sport & Exercise Sciences
University of Malaya
50603, Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia.
Email: syazana.shahdan@gmail.com