

Comparative Study of Sportspersonship, Competitive Anger and Aggression Among Professional and Recreational Female Football Players

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aims to provide a comparative analysis of Sportspersonship, competitive anger, and aggression among professional and recreational female football players in Iran.

Method: Utilizing an applied, causal-comparative design, data were collected from 330 participants—150 professional players from the Iranian Women's Premier League and 180 recreational players active in Tehran. Three validated instruments were employed: the Sportspersonship Questionnaire Vallerand and Brière (1), the Competitive Anger Scale Maxwell and Moores (2) and the Aggression Questionnaire Buss and Perry (3). statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS 24. One Sample T-Test and independent t-test were used.

Results: The findings of the study showed that the levels of aggression, anger, and violence in professional and recreational female soccer players are significantly higher than average. There is a significant difference between the levels of anger and violence among professional and recreational female soccer players. The results revealed that professional players exhibited significantly higher levels of competitive anger than recreational players. However, no significant differences were found between the two groups in terms of Sportspersonship.

Conclusions: These findings underscore the need for targeted psychological and behavioral interventions to address competitive anger and promote ethical behavior, particularly in professional women's football. Emphasizing Sportspersonship and ethical conduct can contribute to a healthier sporting culture and mitigate the normalization of aggressive behaviors in both competitive and recreational contexts.

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Introduction

Sport is recognized as one of the most effective tools for enhancing physical and mental health, which is why various societies utilize it as a multidimensional instrument to address diverse individual and social needs (4). The effects of sport can be observed in areas such as education, leisure, strengthening social relations, preventing moral and social deviations, and even in the development and cultivation of cultural and social capital (5). Among these, football stands out as one of the most popular sports in the world, holding a special place in shaping public culture and the atmosphere of nations (6). In recent years, particularly in team sports such as football, there has been a rapidly growing trend in women's participation in sports (7). This participation has not only made the role of women in professional and recreational sports more prominent but has also improved the status of women and the social perspective toward women's sports. Iran, too, has not fallen behind in this cultural, social, and athletic development and transformation, and has experienced significant growth. However, this rapid development has also brought with it challenges, such as the emergence of unsportsmanlike behaviors, tensions, and aggression in sports arenas (8). Such deviant behaviors are not limited to professional competitions; they are also observed in recreational and amateur matches, which are essentially intended for leisure and aimed at promoting social vitality. In other words, instances of anger, aggression, and unethical behavior are occurring even in environments that are fundamentally designed to boost morale and social vitality on the one hand, and to promote a culture of sportpersonship and ethics on the other, which is a concerning

issue. Moreover, sport in general plays a key role as an effective tool for the physical development and cultural growth of society in raising a healthy and ethical generation (9, 10,11).

Despite the growing public interest in women's football in Iran, some obstacles still challenge the widespread and sustained participation of women. Meanwhile, the lack of scientific research in the field of women's sports, especially in Persian literature, has led to limited attention being paid to the importance and necessity of addressing women's sports and the challenges it faces (10). This neglect has kept participation in both professional and recreational sports unstable and has weakened women's physical and mental health, which in the long term may lead to harmful consequences not only for women but for society as a whole (12, 13). Under such circumstances, it is understandable that professional-level competitions like football become arenas filled with tension and psychological pressure due to the necessity and priority of winning, affecting all participants in the events, from players to spectators and club managers (14). As a result, the competitive atmosphere and the pursuit of winning in such settings have created the conditions for the emergence of deviant behaviors such as anger, insults, aggression, and unusual rule violations in sports (15).

At the same time, football itself is recognized as a social and economic phenomenon which, beyond its recreational and leisure aspects, also constitutes a multi-billion-dollar industry (7, 16). In Iran as well, the growing trend toward professionalization in sport, especially football, has led to a profit-oriented outlook on the game. This form of expansion, which has accelerated rapidly and attracted investment, audiences, and media coverage, has contributed to the emergence and spread of competitive anger

and aggression during competitions. The rate of behavioral disorders and conflicts in football is higher compared to many other sports disciplines (17). The rising frequency of such behaviors has prompted researchers to explore their causes and potential solutions (18, 19). Many efforts have been made by researchers across various fields of the humanities and social sciences to identify the causes of and solutions to aggression and competitive anger. However, it appears that these efforts have not been sufficient and have yielded limited tangible results in reducing such behaviors. In other words, although awareness of the harms of competitive anger and aggression has increased, both in the literature and within societies, various and sometimes emerging forms of anger and aggression continue to occur in new contexts (20,21).

Football is one of the most-watched and popular sports worldwide, providing a platform for the expression of various emotions and behavioral reactions such as competitive anger and aggression. Competitive anger in football manifests in both physical and verbal forms. Despite efforts made in the field of ethics in sports, numerous instances of aggression, competitive anger, and inappropriate behavior are still observed in women's football (23,24,25). Despite the undeniable progress of women's sports at both domestic and international levels, this growth has not been deemed satisfactory compared to men's sports, and there remains a need to overcome social, cultural, and infrastructural barriers in this domain (26). However, factors such as male-dominated perspectives in the decision-making structures of sports (27), the lack of recognition of the importance of developing women's sports in various aspects of social life (12), and the shortage of proper facilities and infrastructure (23) have hindered the appropriate growth and development of this

field. Cultural and social restrictions, along with research gaps, have posed serious challenges to the development of women's sports. Consequently, most existing studies have focused on topics such as women's feelings of inequality and social mobility (28), barriers to women's participation in leisure-time sports activities (29), and obstacles to accessing managerial and decision-making positions (30). Meanwhile, marginal behaviors, excluding factors, and unethical behaviors that emerge in the context of women's sports have received less attention.

According to some researchers, sport helps strengthen values such as cooperation, responsibility, teamwork, and the ability to cope with critical situations (31, 32, 33). On the other hand, it is undeniable that sport can also place individuals in situations where they may be drawn toward cheating, violent behavior, or even the use of illegal substances (34). Amidst this duality, the concept of *Sportspersonship*, which refers to individuals' moral and social traits, becomes prominent and significant. In fact, *Sportspersonship* is a concept that simultaneously encompasses personal ethics, social morality, and social norms within the sporting environment (1, 34, 35). The concept of *Sportspersonship* can be described with words such as fairness, kindness, politeness, respect, altruism, generosity, and goodwill. Based on the research by Vallerand and Brière (1), the concept of *Sportspersonship* includes five key dimensions: respect for rules, respect for opponents, observance of social etiquette, commitment to the sport, and avoidance of negative attitudes such as participating solely for rewards and medals. However, sometimes athletes, in highly sensitive competitive situations, due to the pressure or lack of proper and sufficient education, may step beyond the principles of *Sportspersonship*

and display behaviors such as aggression or violence toward their opponents or even teammates (24).

In fact, there is a significant gap in the existing literature regarding a comprehensive conceptual framework that considers gender-based contexts, the type of sport (whether professional or recreational), and relevant behavioral theories. For instance, the few studies that have addressed sportspersonship have typically focused on specific groups, such as male athletes or particular sports disciplines (22, 34), while comparative research between professional and recreational athletes has been largely neglected. This is despite the fact that differences in such structures, characterized by varying levels of psychological pressure, social expectations, and skill levels, can lead to the emergence of competitive anger, aggression, and differing adherence to ethical principles. In this regard, considering the psychological, social, and physical differences between women and men, and the lack of studies in the field of sports, especially in Iranian women's sports, this study aims to examine the level and type of competitive anger, aggression, and sportspersonship among professional and recreational female football players.

Materials and Method

Participants. The current research is applied in terms of type and is a causal-comparative study that was conducted as field research using a questionnaire. The statistical population of the research was formed by two groups. The first group of players of the Premier Women's Football League of Iran was in the year 2019-2020, whose number was 244, consisting of twelve teams. The second group was formed by women's leisure soccer players from Tehran.

Sampling method from both groups was done by using questionnaire.

Procedure

In order to collect data, three questionnaires were used: Sportspersonship Vallerand and Brière (1), Competitive anger Maxwell and Moores (2) and Aggression Buss and Perry (3). Its validity was examined by expert professors of sports management and reliability of the questionnaire through the distribution of 30 questionnaires in the target population, and Cronbach's alpha was measured. Cronbach's alpha of Sportspersonship questionnaire was 0.95, Competitive anger questionnaire was 0.90, and Aggression questionnaire was 0.82, which can be said that the questionnaires had acceptable validity and reliability for research. This questionnaire was scored with a five-point Likert scale and was given to the samples in printed form and in person to answer. 150 responses were collected from women's premier league players and 180 responses were collected from women's leisure soccer players.

Statistical Analysis

SPSS 24 software was used for data analysis; In the descriptive statistics section, indicators such as frequency distribution, mean and standard deviation were used, and in the inferential statistics section, Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, One Sample T-Test and comparison with the population mean and independent t-test were used.

Results

In Table 1, the demographic findings of women's professional football players, which include age, marriage, level of education, and history of playing football, are presented.

Table 1. Demographic findings of professional players

Item	Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Age	15-20	55	37
	21-25	33	22
	26-30	40	26
	+31	22	15
Marriage	Single	120	80
	Married	30	20
Level of Education	High School	37	25
	Associate Degree	33	22
	Bachelor's degree	58	38
	Master's degree	20	14
	P.H. D	2	1
Professional Playing History	1-5 (years)	42	28
	6-10	33	22
	11-15	40	27
	+16	35	23
Total Respondents	-	150	100

The findings of Table 1 showed that most of the players are in the age group of 15 to 20 years and have university education. Most of the players were single and had less than five years of playing experience in professional

football.

Table 2 presents the demographic findings of female recreational soccer players, which include age, marriage, level of education, and history of playing soccer.

Table 2. Demographic findings of recreational players

Item	Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Age	15-20	27	15
	21-25	59	33
	26-30	63	35
	+31	31	17
Marriage	Single	124	69
	Married	56	31
Level of Education	High School	53	29
	Associate Degree	43	24
	Bachelor's degree	60	33
	Master's degree	18	10
	P.H. D	6	3
Professional Playing History	1-5 (years)	58	32
	6-10	44	24
	11-15	41	23
	+16	37	21
Total Respondents	-	180	100

The findings of Table 2 showed that most of the players are in the age group of 26 to 30 years and have a bachelor's degree. Most of the players were single and had less than five years of playing experience in recreational

football.

Kolmogorov Smirnov test was used to check the normality of the variables. The results of this test are given in Table 3.

Table 3. Findings of the Kolmogorov Smirnov test

Item	Group	Number	Z-Test	P-value
Sportspersonship	Recreational	180	1/21	0/10
	Professional	150	1/24	0/09
Competitive anger	Recreational	180	1/29	0/06
	Professional	150	1/09	0/18
Aggression	Recreational	180	1/24	0/19
	Professional	150	1/09	0/18

Based on the results of Kolmogorov-Smirnov test in Table 3, the assumption of normality ($p > 0.05$) was accepted for all variables.

Hypotheses Analysis

The values of the descriptive indices for the variables of Sportspersonship, competitive

anger and aggression separately for two professional and Recreational groups are given in Table 4. Also, considering the normality of the data distribution, the T-test and the Levene's Test were used to analyze the hypotheses, the results of which are shown in the Table 5.

Table 4. The values of the descriptive indices for the variables

Variable	Group	Number	Mean	Median	Mode	Standard Deviation	Range
Sportspersonship	Recreational	180	72/35	71	71	18/59	56
	Professional	150	73/00	74	77	18/92	64
Competitive Anger	Recreational	180	23/48	33	20	9/42	33
	Professional	150	34/83	35	35	10/19	38
Aggression	Recreational	180	77/46	75	80	14/29	65
	Professional	150	74/98	75	69	15/43	82

Based on the obtained results in Table 4, The average level of Sportspersonship was slightly higher among professional players (73.00) compared to recreational players (72.35). However, this difference is minimal, and indicators such as the median (74 vs. 71) and standard deviation (18.92 and 18.59, respectively) suggest that the dispersion of scores in both groups is relatively similar. These findings indicate that the level of Sportspersonship among female football players remains fairly consistent regardless of their level of involvement.

In terms of competitive anger, a notable difference was observed between the two groups. The mean score for professional players (34.83) was significantly higher than that of recreational players (23.48). The median scores (35 vs. 33) and standard deviations (10.19 for professionals and 9.42 for recreational players) further support the consistency of this difference. This suggests

that professional players tend to experience a higher level of competitive anger on average. For the aggression variable, no substantial differences were observed between the two groups. The mean score for recreational players was slightly higher (77.46 vs. 74.98), but the difference is not considerable. However, the range of scores among professional players (82) was broader compared to recreational players (65), indicating greater variability in aggression levels within the professional group. Overall, aggression levels appear to be relatively similar across both groups, with no significant differences.

However, to assess the statistical significance of these differences and determine whether they are meaningfully higher than the average values, a one-sample t-test should be conducted in the following table.

The results of the T-test and the Levene's Test are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. The findings of T-test and Levene's Test

Variable	Levene's Test				T-test				
	F-test	Significantly	T-test	Degree of Freedom	Significantly	Mean Difference	Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
Sportspersonship	0/15	0/69	-0/31	328	0/75	-0/65	2/07	-4/72	3/42
Competitive Anger	1/16	0/28	-2/17	328	0/03	-2/35	1/08	-4/47	-0/22
Aggression	0/88	0/34	1/51	328	0/13	2/48	1/63	-0/73	5/71

According to the results presented in Table 5, the significance value of Levene's test for the variable of Sportspersonship was greater than 0.05, indicating that the assumption of equality of variances holds. Additionally, the significance value of the t-test was also greater than 0.05. Therefore, the examination of the first hypothesis showed that although the level of Sportspersonship among professional women's football players was slightly lower than that of recreational players, this difference was not statistically significant at the 95% confidence level.

For the variable of competitive anger, the significance value of Levene's test was also greater than 0.05, confirming the equality of variances. Moreover, the t-test revealed a significance value less than 0.05 for this variable. Thus, the null hypothesis was rejected with 95% confidence; in other words, the level of competitive anger among

professional women's football players was significantly higher than that of recreational players. Therefore, the second research hypothesis was confirmed, indicating a significant difference in competitive anger between the two groups.

Regarding the aggression variable, the significance value of Levene's test was greater than 0.05, indicating equal variances. The significance value of the t-test was also greater than 0.05, suggesting that the difference in aggression levels between the two groups is not statistically significant. Although the mean level of aggression among professional players was slightly higher than that of recreational players, this difference was not significant at the 95% confidence level. Therefore, the null hypothesis for the third hypothesis was not rejected.

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to examine the differences in the levels of Sportspersonship, competitive anger, and aggression among professional and recreational female football players. The findings indicated that all three variables were, in general, above average. More

importantly, a significant difference was observed in the level of competitive anger between the two groups, with professional players experiencing higher levels of competitive anger.

In examining the first hypothesis, the results showed that there was no significant difference in Sportspersonship between

professional and recreational female football players, and both groups had a mean score above the average level. This indicates that Sportspersonship, which includes values such as adherence to rules, respect for opponents, and avoidance of cheating, is internalized among female football players regardless of the level of competition. In other words, the level of competition alone does not determine players' Sportspersonship. Accordingly, the findings of this study are consistent with those of (31), (23), and (36). One possible reason for this result may be related to the cultural and social characteristics of women's football in Iran. Unlike professional men's sports, which are usually accompanied by intense financial, media, and competitive pressures, women's football in Iran is still distant from professionalization in a way that such pressures have a strong impact. Some players even have conditions similar to recreational athletes. This situation has led training and competition environments to remain relatively free from external pressures, allowing the players' Sportspersonship to remain intact. Moreover, the role of educational, familial, and team factors in shaping this ethical disposition cannot be overlooked, as many female football players, especially in Iran, began their activities in environments that emphasize values such as respect, sacrifice, and fair play. These factors, along with the sense of social responsibility that many female athletes feel toward the identity and image of women's sports, have contributed to the lack of significant difference between professional and recreational players in terms of Sportspersonship.

In examining the second hypothesis, it was found that there was a significant difference in the level of competitive anger between professional and recreational female football players, with professional players

experiencing higher levels of competitive anger on average. This finding is understandable given the differences in the nature of competition and pressures such as emphasis on winning and losing, pressure from coaches and club managers, and referee errors between the two groups (22, 31). In other words, professional players usually operate in a more competitive environment where match results, team rankings, pressure from coaches, and sometimes financial and fame-related issues play a decisive role. These external pressures can lead to the greater stimulation of negative emotions, including anger, in competitive situations. In contrast, recreational players often participate with more intrinsic motivations, such as enjoyment of the game, social interaction, or even maintaining physical and mental health. Therefore, participation in recreational football generally takes place in a lower-pressure environment, free from result-oriented obligations, which can reduce the likelihood of experiencing competitive anger. On the other hand, although in women's football—both at the professional and recreational levels—the overall atmosphere is generally perceived to be less tense compared to men's football, this very difference makes competitive anger more likely to appear at the professional level. A noteworthy point in this finding is the importance of managing behavioral issues in women's sports, especially considering that women's football in Iran is transitioning toward greater professionalism. In such circumstances, although progress and increased competition can lead to technical improvement, the need for psychological training to control emotions such as anger is increasingly felt (17).

The third hypothesis of the study focused on examining the difference in aggression levels between professional and recreational female football players. Although the mean

level of aggression among professional players was slightly higher than that of recreational players, the results showed that this difference was not statistically significant. In other words, there is no notable difference in the level of aggression between the two groups. Therefore, these results are in line with the findings of González García, Pelegrín (37), Cleland and Cashmore (36). Nevertheless, the minor differences observed can be analyzed within the framework of factors such as structural pressures, competitive environments, or the motivations behind participating in football. On the other hand, recreational players often engage in the sport in a calmer setting and with non-competitive motivations, where the importance of results and competition is significantly lower, thereby reducing the likelihood of aggressive behaviors. In fact, aggression at the professional level is more influenced by external factors and structural expectations, while at the recreational level, aggression—if it occurs—is more likely to arise from individual interactions or specific moments (24). These findings, which show that aggression is higher in both groups but not significantly different, can be highly important in the context of women's sports in Iran. As women's football is expanding and moving toward professionalization, increased aggression could have negative effects not only on the technical level but also on the ethical dimension of the sport—and even on society as a whole. Especially in an environment where sensitivity toward women is high, such aggression can be exaggerated by the media and negatively affect the public perception of women's sports.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that although some psychological characteristics—such as sportsmanship—do

not differ significantly between professional and recreational female football players, competitive anger as an emotional factor is influenced by the level of competition and is significantly higher among professional players. This suggests that with increased professionalism in sports, psychological and emotional pressures also intensify. At the same time, the lack of a significant difference in aggression between the two groups may reflect the presence of control and regulation mechanisms for aggression at both levels. This point is both promising and worthy of attention, as it indicates that behavioral and ethical skills have been relatively well cultivated among female football players in Iran; however, as the sport becomes more professionalized, this balance could be challenged. From a practical perspective, the results of this study highlight the need for the development of tailored psychological and ethical training programs specifically designed for professional female football players—programs that focus not only on technical skills but also on emotional regulation, psychological resilience, and anger management. Within such a framework, women's football in Iran can take meaningful steps toward professionalization without sacrificing ethical values. Ultimately, this research can serve as a starting point for more in-depth studies in the field of women's sports psychology in Iran. Examining factors such as social pressure, gender identity in sports, the role of coaches and clubs in the psychological development of players, and cultural differences across various regions of the country are among the topics that could be explored in future research. Strengthening such an approach would not only enhance the quality of women's sports but also contribute to the elevation of its social status.

Author contributions

All authors contributed equally to the conceptualization of the article and writing of the original and subsequent drafts.

Data Availability Statement

Data available on request from the authors.

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Ethical Considerations

In conducting this study, ethical considerations were observed in accordance with the guidelines of the Ethics Committee of Qom University. The authors adhered to ethical principles in the conduct and publication of this scientific research. This has been confirmed by all authors.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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