

Religion as a Function of Self-reported Discrete Emotions Among Elite Student-Athletes Before Competition

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Abstract: Issues about religion through religious experiences have long been connected with individuals' positive functioning, and subjective well-being, including emotional expressivity. Despite religion being proven to be central towards the wellbeing and emotional labelling of many individuals in general psychology, it is surprising that limited attention has been given to the linkages between these constructs among performers within sport psychology literature. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the role of religion in the expression of self-reported discrete emotions (anger, anxiety, dejection, excitement, happiness) of elite student-athletes. The descriptive cross sectional survey design was used to conveniently select a sample of three hundred (N = 300) student athletes who filled the Sport Emotion Questionnaire during the 2018 West Africa University Games (WAUG) in Nigeria. A multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) after controlling for age revealed significant main effect for religion on only anger, anxiety, and dejection. A pairwise analysis revealed that student athletes of other religious affiliations (Hinduism, Buddhism and African Traditional Religion) reported being more anxious than their Muslim and Christian counterparts. A similar trend was reported for dejection. Additionally, Christian student athletes reported the least value on anger, followed by Muslims, with athletes from other religions reporting the highest mean value. Findings provide useful information that may help coaches, sport psychologists and other personnel better manage challenging working environment of athletes whose identities are grounded in religious activities. Working with athletes with different religious orientations call for cultural awareness built on understanding diverse religious and/ or spiritual practices, including cultural skills (e.g., cultural reflexivity, culturally informed strategies) that incorporate content related to religious diversity.

Keywords: Anger, Anxiety, Buddhists, Christians, Dejection, Emotions, Muslims, Religion

1. Introduction

Issues about religion through religious experiences have long been connected with individuals' positive functioning, and subjective well-being, including emotional expressivity [1-5]. According to Vishkin et al. [4], not only does religion actively shape emotional expressions such as prescribing what to feel or what not to feel, but also provides a framework that offers strategies to modify one's emotional

experience.

Evidence from mainstream psychology literature has established that religion may also safeguard individuals from prevailing stressors they encounter by providing people with more resilience and dominant mood in the midst of life adversities [5]. For example, research has shown the relation between religion and positive emotions like happiness among

Christians compared to individuals from other religious affiliations (e.g., Buddhists, Muslims, or adherents of other non-Christian religions) [6]. Cohen [7] revealed that diverse religious aspects predicted subjective wellbeing for Christians and Jews. Similarly, Tsai, Miao, and Seppala [8] also identified variations between Christians and Buddhists in the expression and valuation of different emotions.

Despite religion being proven to be central towards the wellbeing and emotional labelling of many individuals in general psychology, it is surprising that limited attention has been given to the linkages between these constructs among performers within the sport psychology literature [9]. Previous research in sport psychology literature has already established that an array of emotions: positive (e.g., happiness, excitement) and negative (e.g., anxiety, dejection) are crucial in functionality, performance variability, attention, action tendencies, and athletes' performance enhancement or decline [10-15].

To date, only few studies [16, 17] have investigated the potential influence of religious practices on emotions or affect responses of athletes in sport. For example, in a recent study, Hagan [16] examined the influence of religious coping, as against the orthodox psychological skills (e.g., imagery, goal setting, self-talk, relaxation) to establish whether the former option will impact elite student-athletes' discrete emotions across gender, competitive status, and religion from varied sport disciplines. Findings revealed athletes' competitive status and religious standing showed variance in the expression of self-reported negative emotions (e.g., anxiety) and negative religious coping. Similarly, Spittle and Dillon [17] had previously studied 92 competitive golfers and observed no relationship between scores on the Spirituality in Sports Test (SIST) and the Zone Test but identified a significant correlation between spirituality and "sense of control".

Despite these scholarly attempts, it is not clear whether the limited studies surrounding religion and affect states in sport psychology literature might be due to methodological concerns (e.g., measurement) or an area that is not well understood, hence the neglect. Some scholars have reiterated the need for more awareness of cultural diversity in sport and culturally informed sport psychology research and practice [18-23]. Besides, issues about religion and/ or spirituality are very dominant in most parts of sub-Saharan Africa, where more overt religio-spiritual practices are part of everyday life of its people [24, 25].

Therefore, this study examined the role of religion as a source of variability in the experience of emotions among elite student-athletes. Based on previous research [6, 16, 26], it was hypothesized that there would be variations in the type and valuation of self-reported emotions between Christian, Muslim and other religious student-athletes. It is anticipated that Christian athletes, compared to others from different religious affiliations would experience more positive emotions (e.g., happiness, excitement) and less intensity of negative emotions (e.g., anxiety, anger) before competition.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Participants

The descriptive cross sectional survey design was used to select the sample for this study which consisted of three hundred (N = 300) student athletes who participated in the 2018 West Africa University Games (WAUG) in Nigeria. The convenience sampling method was used to recruit participants with 136 (45.7%) females and 164 (54.3%) males' composition, with ages ranging from 19 to 34 years (Mean = 25.95, SD = 3.254). With a minimum of three (3) years of involvement in competitive sports at their various levels and training at least three (3) times weekly on the average, student-athletes were grouped into three main categories (regional or non-elite, national or semi-elite, and international or elite) depending on their levels of participation in their home countries. Overall, 31 (10.3%) participants were classified as non-elite (regional), and 125 (41.7%) were referred to as semi-elite (national) whilst 144 (48.0%) of the participants were named as elite (international).

Christians, N = 177 (59.0%) were the majority among the selected athletes, followed by Muslims, N = 87 (29.0%) and then those in the other religions (e.g., Buddhism, African Traditional Religion and Hinduism), N = 36 (12.0%), respectively (see Figure 1). At the time of the competition, student athletes were officially registered and resident students of various public universities in their countries of origin and were pursuing either undergraduate or graduate programs. For a participant to be classified as a non-elite (regional) athlete, that person should have participated and received awards or honors at the district and or regional levels in their own countries, whilst athletes classified as semi-elite (national) involved those who had competed and received national honors in their own countries. To be classified as an international or elite athlete, she or he should have competed regularly in their sub-African region, must have received national awards and honors as well as representing their respective countries at the international level during different sporting events at varying levels of their sporting career.

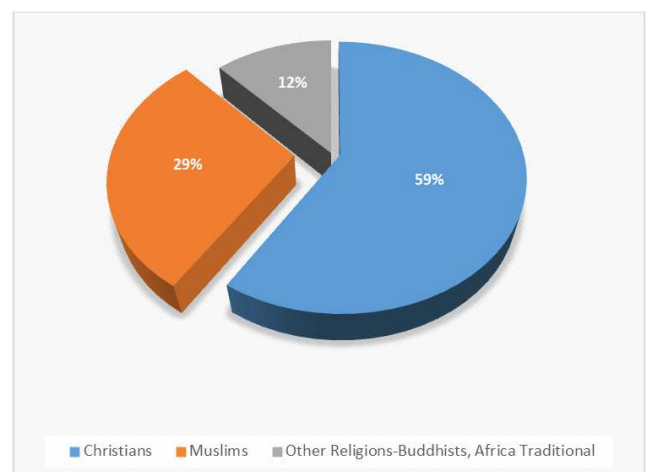


Figure 1. Student-athletes representation by religious standing.

Representing three (3) different African countries (Ghana, Benin, Nigeria), these athletes participated in varied sporting events that included handball (N = 24), basketball (= 24), volleyball (N = 24), football (N = 78), and athletics (N = 150). In recruiting the study participants, team coaches and captains, including other assigned leaders were contacted for assistance in their various places of residence at the games village. Participants trained well and aimed at winning the greatest number of medals for their various teams. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Bielefeld University after adhering to the ethical standards of the sixth revision of the Declaration of Helsinki approved this survey procedure. Every participant signed a written informed consent form prior to the data collection.

2.2. Instrumentation

Discrete Emotions- Sport Emotion Questionnaire (SEQ)

The pre-competition emotions of the student athletes were examined using the 22 items from the Sport Emotion Questionnaire (SEQ). The items are grouped under five (5) subscales, namely anxiety (5 items: nervous, anxious, tense, apprehensive and uneasy); dejection (5 items: unhappy, sad, upset, dejected and disappointed); anger (4 items: annoyed, irritated, furious and angry); excitement (4 items: enthusiastic, excited, energetic, and exhilarated); and happiness (4 items: joyful, pleased, cheerful, and happy). The subscales of emotions are further grouped into two main dimensions: unpleasant or negative emotions (i.e., anger, anxiety, and dejection) and pleasant or positive emotions (i.e., excitement and happiness). Each item is scored on a five-point Likert type scale, and ranges from 0 (not at all) to 4 (extremely). All participants were asked to indicate how they had felt “right now, at this moment, regarding the upcoming competition” within the competitive setting in the week before actual competition ([27], p. 431). The psychometric properties of the Sport Emotion Questionnaire (SEQ) have been established using content, face, factorial, and concurrent validity tests [27, 28]. Excellent Cronbach alpha reliability co-efficient values ranging from 0.74 to .90 for the Sport Emotion Questionnaire (SEQ) scales have been reported previously [16, 27, 29, 30]. In the current study, reported Cronbach alpha reliability values are between 0.76 and 0.90 respectively. These reported figures are standard and considered acceptable [16, 30].

2.3. Procedure

Formal approval was sought from leaders of various team’s delegates from the three West African Countries namely Ghana, Benin and Nigeria after formal permission was granted from various institutions prior to the collection of the data. The recruitment of the student athletes took place directly after enquiring from the coaches and captains of the various teams. Following the establishment of good rapport with coaches and team captains of the various teams, the sampled participants were informed that their responses would be accessible to only the researcher and his two other

research assistants. Additionally, respondents were assured of the confidentiality of all the responses they would give. This approach was done to ensure anonymity of participants, and that participating in the research was entirely voluntary and that the decision to either continue or stop responding to the questionnaire was solely theirs. Before the surveys were completed, the standard instructions for SEQ survey instrument were explained in detail to all participants for clearer understanding of the various phrases and meanings of each item on the questionnaires (i.e., the SEQ) regarding the emotions they experienced in the week prior to the West African University Games (WAUG). Before the opening ceremony, the research assistants collected the completed survey instruments in sealed envelopes at study participant’s hostels to avoid a disruption of their schedules and other competition related programs. Answering of the questionnaire lasted for 30 minutes.

2.4. Data Analysis

Initial data prescreening processes were carried out to assess the accurateness of the data. Statistical assumptions of multicollinearity of variances, homogeneity, homogeneous regression coefficients and outliers were assessed. For the reduction of error variance due to some possible confounding variables, a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was used to analyze the data [31, 32]. In the MANCOVA model, religion (Muslim, Christian and others (e.g., African Traditional Religion, Buddhism, Hinduism) was the independent variable whilst the five subscales of discrete emotions made up of two positive or pleasant emotions (i.e., happiness and excitement) and three negative or unpleasant emotions (i.e., anger, anxiety, dejection) were the dependent variables. Age as a continuous variable was used as the covariate. A further univariate analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was carried out to examine the mean differences for each dependent variable to find out where significant differences occurred. Partial eta squared values were calculated and interpreted as large effect (0.80), medium or moderate effect (0.50) and small effect (0.20). MANCOVA was applied because of its fit in testing multiple dependent variables (discrete emotions - anger, anxiety, dejection, excitement, happiness) and independent variable (religion) [32]. All data analyses and related procedures were conducted using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.0 for Windows.

3. Results

3.1. Preliminary Data Screening

Assumptions for univariate and multivariate analyses in addition to missing values and distributions were verified [31, 32]. There were no missing values. Mahalanobis distance testing was used to determine univariate and or multivariate outliers. Furthermore, assumptions of linearity, singularity, normality, multicollinearity matrices were assessed and were deemed appropriate. Meanwhile, at the

univariate level (Levene's test and Fmax ratios), the equality of covariance was considered to be satisfactory even though at the multivariate level (Box's M Test) there was a violation of this assumption in some instances. Therefore, because Pillai's trace has high robustness over test violations, it was chosen as the multivariate test statistic [31, 32].

3.2. MANCOVA Analysis on Discrete Emotions

A MANCOVA was computed on discrete emotions. A significant main effect for the independent factor (religion) was followed with one-way ANCOVAs testing for any potential variations. A follow-up t-test with the Bonferroni correction factor was applied where necessary [31, 32].

Discrete Emotions

The covariate (age) showed no effect on discrete emotions: Pillai's Trace = 0.026, $F(7, 290) = 1.096$, $p > 0.05$. However, there was a significant main effect of religion, Pillai's Trace = 0.154, $F(14, 582) = 3.479$, $p = 0.000$ and $\eta^2 p = 0.77$. A follow up analysis of covariances revealed a between group religious differences for only anxiety, $F(2, 296) = 9.529$, $p = 0.000$, $\eta^2 p = 0.60$, dejection, $F(2, 296) = 9.611$, $p = 0.000$, $\eta^2 p = 0.61$ and anger, $F(2, 296) = 15.593$, $p = 0.000$, $\eta^2 p = 0.95$.

A pairwise analysis revealed that for anxiety, a significant difference was realized between Christians and athletes from

other religions (Mean difference = 1.838, $p < 0.005$), Muslims and athletes from other religions (Mean difference = 1.218, $p < 0.005$) and also between Christians and Muslims (Mean difference = 1.838, $p < 0.005$). For dejection, there was a significant difference between Christians and athletes from other religions (Mean difference = .725, $p < 0.005$), Muslims and athletes from other religions (Mean difference = .588, $p < 0.0005$), as well as between Christians and Muslims (Mean difference = .725, $p < 0.0005$). For anger, a significant difference showed between Christians and Muslims (Mean difference = .492, $p < 0.005$), Christians and athletes from other religions (Mean difference = .727, $p < 0.005$), and Muslims and athletes from other religions (Mean difference = .492, $p < 0.005$).

Specifically, student athletes in the other religions (African Traditional Religion, Buddhism, and Hinduism) reported being more anxious ($M = 8.92$) than their Muslim ($M = 7.70$) and Christian ($M = 7.10$) counterparts. A similar trend was reported for dejection across athletes from other religions ($M = 2.20$), Muslims ($M = 1.61$), and Christians ($M = 1.50$) respectively. Additionally, Christian student athletes reported the least value for anger ($M = 1.70$), followed by Muslims ($M = 2.20$), with athletes from other religions ($M = 2.42$) reporting the highest mean value (see Figure 2).

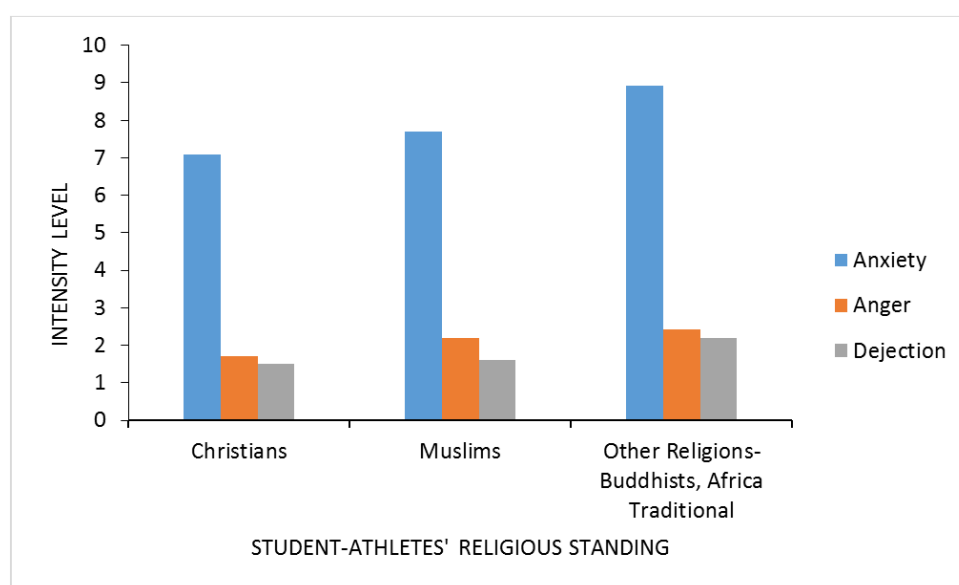


Figure 2. Displayed negative emotions by elite student-athletes across religious sect.

4. Discussion

The purpose of the study was to examine the role of religion in self-reported discrete emotions (anger, anxiety, dejection, excitement, happiness) of elite student-athletes. The study found that religion had a significant effect on the valuation and intensity of elite student-athletes' negative emotions only (i.e., anger, anxiety and dejection), a finding that is similar to previous studies [16, 33, 34]. For example, Hagan [16] found that religion played a significant role in the expression of negative emotions (e.g., anger, anxiety and

dejection) among elite student-athletes before competitive events, perhaps due to pre-competition related challenges or setbacks they encountered. The impact of religion as noted in the current finding is not surprising because of the high level of religiosity and spirituality among West African societies where more overt religio-spiritual practices are common among its people [24, 25]. Although religion has been cited for facilitating an individual's positive emotional functioning (e.g., happiness) and subjective well-being [3, 35, 36], it can also trigger undesirable emotional feelings (e.g., anger, anxiety) as captured in the present study because of pre-competition related situations that might be perceived as

threatening [37]. For these athletes, encouraging them to employ positive religious activities through imaginary social interactions such as prayers, singing religious songs and scripture recitals to combat their negative emotions might be useful strategies [25, 38]. For example, prayer as an imaginary social interaction has the capacity to foster cognitive attentiveness and positive motives on impending task relevant cues [39]. Alternatively, interactions with supportive others may provide individuals with specific social, cognitive, and behavioral resources they might use to carry out individual emotion management strategies [40-42].

Previous studies [16] have also reiterated the importance of religious coping strategies as a more viable means of coping with their negative emotions (e.g., anxiety, anger and dejection), hence, are more likely to adopt religious coping strategies [34, 43]. Therefore, interventions that are designed to reduce the level of anxiety, anger and dejection among elite athletes should take into consideration their religious affiliations [44].

Supporting the hypothesis formulated, other results indicate that compared to Christians who had the least intensities of negative emotions (i.e., anger, anxiety and dejection), Muslims and athletes of other religious standing reported high levels of negative emotions (i.e., anger, anxiety and dejection). This finding corroborates the observation of Hagan [16], who found that Christians felt less anxious, angrier and dejected compared to athletes who were Muslims and with other religions. Therefore, an individual's religious affiliations may determine the intensity, valuation and which specific emotions are expressed at any given time [44]. Previous literature has established that Christians usually hold positive emotions such as excitement and happiness in high esteem which makes them less likely to be anxious [44, 45]. For Muslims, some anthropological evidence provides support for negative emotions such as permissible anger and anxiousness as negative emotions among Muslims [46-49]. Some scholars [48, 50] have reported that Muslims recognize or give relevance to negative emotions such as being overly anxious and angrier with the slightest provocation. Additionally, for subscribers of other local traditional religious practices, empirical account supports anger as the usually experienced negative emotion [51]. These observed negative emotions of studied athletes indicate that certain religious teachings, practices, morals and beliefs may be demonstrable to specific religious groups and in turn, elicit certain emotional behaviors [4, 26]. For example, regular congregational activities among Christians may serve as a buffer on the intensity of self-reported negative emotions (e.g., anxiety, anger) among Christian athletes as against their Muslim and other religious group peers [16, 24, 25, 48]. Despite the fact that both Muslims and Christians engage in religious related activities such as congregational meetings, scripture readings and worship through religious songs, Christians may practice these congregational activities more often than members of the other religious entities [39, 52]. Within a religious sect, there could be variations in the level of religiosity among members such that even individuals

within the same religious sect may differ, with some more indoctrinated with religious practices than others [26]. The noted minimal differences in the mean values of Christian and Muslim student athletes on their levels of self-reported negative emotions may be because both religions are guided by similar moral values, ethics and customs [35, 36, 53].

It is therefore imperative that elite student athletes develop a variety of coping strategies they can adopt against pre-competition related worrying experiences that may negatively affect their performance at competitions [54-56]. These alternative ways of coping could help athletes manage their negative emotions because of challenging situations they may perceive as threatening [57]. For instance, athletes who are less anxious and less angrier may have a quicker recovery rate after training compared to their counterparts who are more anxious and angrier [58, 59].

4.1. Limitations

The present study has some limitations. First, the study design is cross-sectional in nature, hence restricts causality. Second, emotional expressivity is not universal across cultures such that the same emotion can be expressed differently with varied social and religious implications among adherents of these religions [60, 53]. Therefore, future studies should investigate whether specific contextual beliefs may evoke specific emotions and religious coping strategies among adherents of other religions. Third, the generalizability of the noted observations is restricted because the study was conducted among student athletes and not professional athletes of West African background, where religious beliefs and practices are quite dominant. It would be useful to examine displayed emotions among professional athletes as a function of their belief systems across other societies. Also, since emotions may change over time, the current snapshot assessment may lack the power to accurately detect the transactional picture of athletes' expressed emotions. Employing longitudinal designs with multiple data points (e.g., before, during, after competition) in future studies may help address this limitation.

4.2. Practical Implications

The current empirical evidence suggests that coaches, sport psychology consultants and other analogous staff will work with athletes from diverse religious backgrounds (e.g., Christians, Muslims,) who hold particular doctrinal practices that align with their norms, beliefs and practices [16, 25, 61]. From cultural praxis perspective, working with athletes of varying religious and/ or spiritual orientations require cultural awareness (e.g., athletes' local beliefs and values), supported by cultural knowledge (e.g., understanding of diverse religious practices), and cultural skills (e.g., cultural reflexivity, culturally collaborative communication, and localized strategies) from applied practitioners who manage these performers in sport. It is imperative that mainstream psychological interventions are incorporated with culturally diversified coping methods (e.g., religious coping) that maintain respect for athletes' identities,

especially for those from indigenous societies. This professional shift is an area that has long been ignored in sport psychology practice [20-23].

5. Conclusion

The current study has revealed that religion plays a significant role in elite-student athletes' negative emotions (i.e., anger, anxiety and dejection). This suggests that coaches and sport psychology experts working closely with elite student-athletes should assist these performers in identifying religious activities that are in tandem with the practices and beliefs of their religious affiliations if any progress would be achieved in coping with experiences that may hinder their sport outcomes in competitions. The study also revealed that the levels of elite student-athletes' negative emotions are influenced by their religious affiliations. This means that sport psychologists and coaches need to equip themselves with the competencies of acknowledging these cultural and religious practices when working with religious athletes.

Declarations

Authors' Contributions

MSS, JBF, and JEH developed the study's concept. MSS, JBF, RSKA, RSS, and JEH drafted the preliminary version of the manuscript. TS supervised and revised the manuscript of its intellectual content. All authors proofread the manuscript's first draft, contributed intellectually to the overall development, and approved the manuscript's final version for submission.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

We followed all ethical procedures which were in line with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Bielefeld University and adhered to the ethical standards of the sixth revision of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Informed Consent Statement

Written permissions were obtained from the leaders of delegations and coaches of the various contingents for the games. Further, written informed consent were taken from sampled student-athletes.

Data Availability Statement

According to the ethical guidelines of the sixth revision of

the Declaration of Helsinki and Institutional Review Board, Bielefeld University, public data sharing, even anonymous, can be controlled by participants' written informed consent.

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