



Designing and Explaining a Safety Culture Model for Children's Sports Environments in Iran

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the topic of safety culture in sports environments for children in Iran. The research method is applied in terms of purpose, utilizing qualitative research grounded in theory for data collection. Data were collected through a study of documentary sources and semi-structured interviews with 19 academic experts and managers active in the field of children's sports, through purposive and snowball sampling using MAXQDA18 software. In the open coding stage, 285 preliminary codes were identified from the analysis of the interviews. In the second stage, axial coding was carried out using the structures of the axial coding model around the phenomenon under study. Based on the research findings, the concept of safety culture was selected as the central phenomenon. Causal conditions were placed in the form of five categories of safety management systems, leadership commitment to safety, employee participation, attitudes and sports coaches, and five main categories were selected, including infrastructure strategies, educational strategies, legal strategies, specialized strategies, and evaluation and monitoring. Intervening factors were identified in two categories: reinforcing and weakening. Cultural factors, structural factors, physiological factors, relationship quality, individual characteristics, social factors, and physical environment were identified as the foundational background factors of maintaining a safe sports environment. Finally, the consequences of the culture of maintaining a safe sports environment were determined at three levels: micro, meso, and macro.

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

Protecting children and adolescents who participate in sports has become a prominent concern in policymaking and research across various societies worldwide. Major organizations such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and UNICEF have formally recognized that children in sport can be at risk of exploitation and abuse. Research demonstrates that without adequate policies and oversight regarding sports environment safety, cases of maltreatment may go not only unreported but also insufficiently investigated. Children's participation in sport is generally regarded as a component of a healthy childhood and a physically and mentally healthy adulthood, offering benefits such as increased body awareness, self-esteem, respect for rules, sportsmanship, and social interaction. However, these potential benefits are only achievable within a healthy sporting culture; in an unsafe environment where harassment and abuse occur, sport participation may pose inherent threats and fundamental risks to children. Evidence from various countries indicates that different forms of abuse, violence, neglect, and other forms of maltreatment are prevalent in sport. A comprehensive review of the literature reveals two fundamental gaps: first, the absence of an integrated, systemic approach that simultaneously addresses all dimensions of safety culture; and second, the lack of localized models adapted to Iran's specific cultural and social context, where factors such as the governmental-club sport structure, the cultural role of coaches, family educational patterns, and cultural differences in defining boundaries and discipline are not accounted for in Western-developed models. Therefore, the present study aims to design and explain a comprehensive and indigenous model for the culture of safe sports environments for children in Iran, addressing the main research question: What are the dimensions, components, and causal relationships of an optimal safety culture model for children's sports environments in Iran?

Methods

This study is applied in terms of purpose and qualitative in terms of data collection, employing the grounded theory approach based on the Strauss and Corbin paradigm. Data were collected through a review of documentary sources and semi-structured interviews with 19 academic experts and managers active in the field of children's sports. The statistical population was defined in a multifaceted manner, encompassing two main groups: academic experts with specializations in sport management, child psychology, sport law, and sociology who possess research backgrounds in safety, ethics, or behavior in sport; and executive managers with direct experience in managing sports academies and schools for children. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on criteria of theoretical knowledge and practical experience, supplemented by snowball sampling to identify additional key informants. The interview process continued until complete theoretical saturation was achieved, confirmed by the absence of new codes in the final three interviews. To ensure the quality and rigor of the findings, Lincoln and

Guba's (1985) four criteria were employed: credibility was ensured through member checking with four interviewed experts; dependability was achieved through an external audit of the coding process by a qualitative research specialist; transferability was enhanced through rich, thick descriptions of the research context and participant characteristics; and confirmability was assessed through intra-coder test-retest reliability, yielding an agreement coefficient of 86 percent. Data analysis was conducted using MAXQDA18 software through three stages of open, axial, and selective coding.

Results

In the open coding stage, 285 preliminary codes were identified from the interview analysis. Through axial coding using the paradigm model structures, the concept of safety culture was selected as the central phenomenon. Causal conditions were organized into five categories: safety management systems (including diverse policies and operational guidelines), leadership commitment to safety (manifested through prioritization, stakeholder consultation, and transformational leadership), employee participation (active involvement in safety initiatives and shared attitudes), organizational attitudes (values, preferences, and perceptions), and the role of sports coaches (competence in instruction, continuous presence, supervision, awareness of athletes' health, and familiarity with first aid). A distinctive finding was the identification of coaches as an independent causal factor, reflecting the unique cultural significance of the coach-mentor role in Iranian society that extends far beyond technical instruction. Eleven contextual and background factors were identified: environmental and physical safety, relational safety, sport optimization, organizational characteristics, cultural factors, structural factors, physiological factors, relationship quality, individual characteristics, social factors, and physical environment. Five categories of strategies were determined: infrastructural strategies (policy development and community sport development), educational strategies (enhancing awareness among managers, coaches, parents, and children), legal strategies (developing guidelines and regulations for children's physical and psychological security), specialized strategies (understanding children's needs and parental involvement), and evaluation and monitoring (establishing performance indicators and continuous assessment processes). Intervening factors were classified into reinforcing factors (social institutions, family support, health professionals' influence, personal factors, and clear regulations) and weakening factors (health hazards from inadequate supervision and equipment, exploitation, neglect, abuse and violence, and various forms of child maltreatment including physical, psychological, and sexual abuse). The consequences of establishing a safety culture were determined at three levels: micro-level (enhanced self-esteem, improved physical and mental health, social relationship capabilities, and respect for rules), meso-level (social advancement, reduced crime and social deviance, promotion of healthy lifestyles, and reduced healthcare costs), and macro-level (improved national

sport outlook, socioeconomic development, workforce enhancement, and increased public health).

Conclusion

This study presents a comprehensive and indigenous model for the culture of safe sports environments for children in Iran that demonstrates safety culture as a complex, multi-level phenomenon that cannot be achieved through unidimensional policies or isolated measures alone. The primary innovation of this research lies in its transition from a fragmented, single-dimensional perspective to an ecosystemic and integrated approach. Unlike imported models that may not fully align with Iran's governmental-club sport structure and its cultural-social fabric, this model identifies indigenous challenges such as weaknesses in reporting systems, cultural differences in defining punishment and discipline, and the importance of the coach's role as a culture shaper. The findings reveal that the successful establishment of safety culture requires serious commitment from leadership, active participation of all stakeholders including coaches, staff, parents, and children, infrastructure improvement, strengthening of legal and supervisory frameworks, and comprehensive education and culture-building. The model provides a realistic and practical framework for domestic policymakers and sport managers, bridging the gap between theory and practice while remaining compatible with both strong theoretical foundations and Iran's indigenous realities. Implementation of this model can provide a safe and healthy environment for the flourishing of the country's future generation of athletes, yielding positive outcomes at individual, social, and national levels for Iranian society.

Keywords :Safety, Sports Environment Safety Culture, Children, Grounded Theory.