

Correlation between Ability to Cope with Sporting Problems and Athlete Engagement

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Abstract

This research was performed with the aim of determining the relationship between the ability to cope with sports problems and athlete engagement of students in sports sciences. The study was designed according to correlational survey and causal comparative model. The study included a total of 288 athletes, 81 women and 207 men, obtained with the convenience sampling method. For collection of data in the research, the Turkish adaptation of the "Athletic Coping Skills Inventory 28 (ACSI-28)" and the "Athlete Engagement Questionnaire" developed with the aim of measuring commitment to sport among athletes were used. Multiple regression analysis was used to test whether the ability to cope with sports problems predicted athlete engagement or not. As a result of data analysis, the model where the ability to cope with sports problems predicted athlete engagement was significant ($p < .01$), and it appeared athlete engagement was positively and significantly predicted by concentration ($p < .01$), high performance under pressure ($p < .05$), and confidence and achievement motivation ($p < .01$). It was determined that athlete engagement was not significantly predicted by goal setting/mental preparation ($p > .05$), freedom from worry ($p > .05$), coping with adversity ($p > .05$) and coachability ($p > .05$). In general, it can be stated that coping with sportive problems is an important factor for athlete engagement. In future studies, the reasons for the insignificant results in the relationship between coping with sportive problems and athlete commitment should be examined in detail.

Keywords: Coping, Athlete Engagement, Performance.

Sportif Sorunlarla Bařa ıkabilme ile Sporcu Baęlılıęı Arasındaki İliřki

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Öz

Bu arařtırma spor bilimlerinde okuyan öğrencilerin sportif sorunlarla bařa ıkma becerileri ile sporcu baęlılıęı arasındaki iliřkiyi ortaya koymak amacıyla yapılmıřtır. Arařtırma iliřkisel tarama ve nedensel karřılařtırma modeline göre desenlenmiřtir. Elde edilen verilere uygun örnekleme örnekleme yöntemiyle ulařılmıřtır. Katılımcılar 81 kadın ve 207 erkek olmak üzere toplam 288 sporcu öğrenciden oluřmaktadır. Arařtırmada veri toplamak için Türkçe'ye uyarlaması yapılan "Sportif Sorunlarla Bařa ıkma Becerileri Envanteri-28 (ACSI-28)" ile sporcuların spora olan baęlılıklarını ölçmek amacıyla geliřtirilen "Sporcu Baęlılık Ölçeęi" kullanılmıřtır. Verilerin analizinde öncelikle korelasyon analizi gerekleřtirilmiřtir. Ardından çoklu regresyon analizi ile sportif sorunlarla bařa ıkmanın sporcu baęlılıęını yordayıp yordamadıęı test edilmiřtir. Verilerin analizi sonunda sportif sorunlarla bařa ıkmanın sporcu baęlılıęını yordadıęı modelin anlamlı olduęu ($p < .01$), sporcu baęlılıęı ile konsantrasyon ($p < .01$), baskı altında yüksek performans ($p < .05$) ve güven ve bařarı güdüsü ($p < .01$) tarafından pozitif yönde anlamlı yordandıęı görölmektedir. Dięer taraftan, hedef belirleme/zihinsel hazırlık ($p > .05$), kaygıdan uzak olma ($p > .05$), zorlukla bař etme ($p > .05$) ve antrenörlük durumu ($p > .05$) ise sporcu baęlılıęını anlamlı biçimde yordamadıęı belirlenmiřtir. Genel itibarı ile sportif sorunlarla bařa ıkma sporcu baęlılıęı için önemli bir faktör olduęu belirtilebilir. Sonraki arařtırmalarda sportif sorunlarla bařa ıkabilme ve sporcu baęlılıęı arasındaki iliřkide anlamsız ıkan sonuçların nedenleri detaylı bir řekilde incelenmelidir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Bařa ıkabilme, Sporcu Baęlılıęı, Performans.*

Introduction

One of the basic principles of sports psychology is that psychological skills are an important determinant of sporting performance (Smith and Christensen, 1995; Nicholls and Ntoumanis, 2010). Following an approach focusing on results more than needed negatively affects athletes in psychological terms and may cause low performance, and it is emphasized it may progress to distancing from sport and even leaving the sport (Cox, 2007). Sports performance displays differences in the rate of compatibility between linked variables like physical, morphological, environmental, psychomotor and psychological features (Booyesen, 2007). Two basic elements related to sports performance are coping ability (Cosma et al., 2020) and athlete engagement (Hodge, Lonsdale, and Jackson, 2009). Analyzing the relationship between these two constructs will ensure better understanding about how sportspeople use these features to display consistent performance and provide an idea about the sports development process (Leuens, 2008). In the context of sports psychology, explaining the factors affecting sports performance and process is important in terms of achieving the desired performance and achieving success (Cox, 2007).

Coping with difficulty is accepted as a contextual mediator between the person and their surroundings. In fact, it is a case which can be noticed through internal observations or observation in situations the person experiences within themselves or that occur in their environment. The connection between the stress perceived by a person and ability to resist it has been encountered in the results of much research performed related to psychology, physiology and behavior (Lazarus, 1993). Performance anxiety, personal and family expectations, and media are some of the elements that an athlete must learn to cope with to display successful performance in competition. It is stated that poor performance is related to weak emotional management (Holt, Rutherford, and Clohessy, 2007). Coping regulates perceptions appropriately to create the necessary mental comfort in order to display optimum performance and ensures changing of perceptions (Geczi et al., 2009). The aim in the coping process is to ensure results are obtained by reducing psychological distress, resolving stressful situations, reducing physiological reactions that may disrupt motor perfor-

mance, improving mental health and revealing the desired affective performance (Anshel and Anderson, 2002; Nicholls and Polman, 2007). Additionally, the ability to cope with difficulties is accepted as an indicator of talent in terms of the person's mental state, motivation and effort to achieve their determined targets (Duda, Chi, Newton, Walling, and Catley, 1995). An adjustment framework, coping is not just a response to problems and negative affect, at the same time it is accepted as involving planned and proactive cognition and behavior to ease psychological and emotional development (Tamminen, Crocker and McEwen, 2014). Athletes with low coping levels are emphasized to experience more anxiety (Barrell and Terry, 2003). The coping style avoiding facing difficulties increases the severity and duration of stress; thus, there is a susceptibility to experience more stress factors (Carver and Connor-Smith, 2010; Dunkley, Zuroff, and Blankstein, 2003).

When considered in working life, the engagement concept involves employees with high engagement feeling an effective and energetic connection to their work and these people appear to have the ability to cope with difficulties faced while doing their best in line with expected demands (Schaufeli and Salanova, 2001). At this point, there is a connection between engagement and coping. Normally this situation emerges as a person asserts control and can cope with stress (Lazarus, 1993). In this context, there appears to be a positive relationship between problem-focused coping and engagement. However, Lees (2009) stated that in spite of social support being an effective form of coping, there is no significant correlation with engagement in working life.

Positive psychology attempts to determine and explain the most appropriate environments for people by analyzing features related to development and improvement in terms of positive affect, thoughts and situations of people (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The aim of positive psychology is to attempt to understand personal traits and orientations to contribute to the psychological health and well-being of individuals and societies. The engagement concept has gained a place within the scope of positive psychology developing over the last 25 years. Considered within the framework of an organization, engagement appears to be the inverse of burnout (Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma and Bakker, 2002). Research by Lonsdale, Hodge and Raedeke (2007) stated that burnout and

engagement are opposite constructs and there is a negative correlation between them. Sport, included in the research, involves confidence, dedication and vigor; thus, a person who is fully busy with sport is stated to have the inverse features to a burnt-out sportsperson. Athlete engagement states sport is a permanent, positive, cognitive-affective experience and is defined as a construct with four interrelated dimensions characterized by confidence, dedication, enthusiasm and vigor (Lonsdale, Hodge and Jackson, 2007). Vigor is characterized by high energy levels and means the ability to prevail in the face of effort and difficulties; confidence is understood as the capacity to show high levels of performance and achieve results; dedication is defined as the meaning, pride and a sense of defiance and enthusiasm is defined as a sense of physical and mental vitality characterized by excitement and high levels of enjoyment (Lonsdale et al., 2007). In this context, engagement represents a continuous and common affective-cognitive status focusing on any object, event, individual or behavior (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2001). Athletes have a feeling of control over the present situation and this assists them in achieving their goal. This is very similar to the definition of athlete engagement as 'skillful management of energy' by Loehr and Schwarz (2005). Research completed by Matthews et al. (2002) stated that enthusiasm and interest resulted from high engagement, while contrarily low engagement was a process resulting in disinterest and indifference.

Loehr and Schwartz (2005) dealt with spiritual and affective aspects of full engagement in their program. Considering a person's performance in a pyramid concept, physical capacity is at the base, while affective and mental capacities form the next two levels with spiritual capacity at the top of the pyramid. Loehr and Schwartz emphasized engagement involved development of all these capacities. If an athlete has these four capacities, they may display higher performance in life outside sport. Athletes trained about how to manage their sports life may obtain significant acquirements for life outside sports.

When the topic is considered within the scope of coach-athlete relationships, the inverse of engagement is burnout, which is stated to be connected with coaches' ability to meet or not meet the needs of athletes (Moen and Federici, 2017). At this point, the coach's style is a factor affect-

ing athlete engagement. When coaches focus on developing skill levels rather than performance, in a general sense athlete engagement was identified to be higher (Curran, Hill, Hall and Jowett, 2015). Similarly, meeting psychological needs provides an explanation for perfectionist anxiety predicting burnout and perfectionist efforts predicting engagement (Jowett, Hill, Hall and Curran, 2016). This relationship between basic needs, engagement and burnout has been a topic of research outside sport. Young athletes, especially, require encouragement to make their own decisions, contribute to assessment processes and express their feelings; thus, it is emphasized that sports engagement will increase (Jowett et al., 2016; Martínez, Guillén and Feltz 2016).

Considering the topic of sports engagement is new in the area of sport psychology, it is necessary to obtain more information about possible causes and outcomes of engagement. Acquiring information about the causes and outcomes of athlete engagement will ensure probable positive results of developed sports engagement are achieved (e.g., reduced burnout, increased enjoyment and flow).

Method

This research was designed with the relational survey model, which aims to determine the existence or degree of change between two or more variables, which is one of the quantitative research methods that try to reach the facts by means of external measurements, observations or experiments, by means of description or causality (Arıkan, 2013).

Population and Sample

The sample of the research consists of students studying in the sports science departments of three state universities in the Eastern Black Sea region of Turkey in the 2019-2020 academic year. Participants comprised a total of 288 athletes, 81 women (28.1%) and 207 men (71.9%), obtained with the convenience sampling method. In terms of department, 23 participants (7.9%) were attending the coaching department, 138 (47.9%) were attending physical education and sports teaching, 68 (23.3%) were attending rec-

reation and 60 (20.8%) were attending the sports management department. Ages of participants varied from 18 to 35 with mean age of 21.76 years (sd=2.19).

Measures

In this study, Athletic Coping Skills Inventory and Athlete Engagement Questionnaire were administered.

Athletic Coping Skills Inventory (ACSI-28): The scale developed by Smith et al. (1995) to measure the ability of athletes to cope with psychological difficulty. Turkish validity and reliability studies were performed by Özcan and Günay (2017). The ACSI-28 has the qualities of an advanced personal assessment according to explanatory and confirmatory factor analysis. The scale contains 28 items and comprises 7 factors (goal setting and mental preparation, concentration, freedom from worry, coping with adversity, peaking under pressure, confidence and achievement motivation, and coachability). The scale has 4-point Likert rating and participants are requested to state the frequency they experience the statements (nearly none of the time=0, sometimes=1, frequently=2, nearly all the time=3). The alpha internal consistency coefficient for the 7 factors on the ACSI-28 varied from .62 (concentration) to .78 (peaking under pressure). The alpha reliability coefficient for the whole scale was determined to be .86.

Athlete Engagement Questionnaire: The questionnaire, developed with the aim of measuring the engagement with sport of an athlete by Lonsdale et al. (2007), had Turkish validity and reliability studies performed by Kelecek, Kara, and Aşçı (2018). Developed as a result of qualitative and quantitative research with different athlete samples, the Athlete Engagement Questionnaire comprises four dimensions and 16 items. The dimensions each include four items and are named "confidence", "dedication", "enthusiasm", and "vigor". The Cronbach alpha (α) values for the Athlete Engagement Questionnaire were found to be .76 for the confidence dimension, .62 for the dedication dimension, .82 for the vigor dimension and .99 for the enthusiasm dimension. Internal consistency, which is a marker of

whether scale items are related to each other and measure the same construct or not, was assessed by calculating the Cronbach alpha coefficient. Accordingly, the Cronbach alpha coefficients were determined to be 0.92 for the confidence dimension, 0.90 for the enthusiasm dimension, 0.83 for the vigor dimension and 0.75 for the dedication dimension. The Athlete Engagement Questionnaire uses a 5-point Likert rating from one (nearly never) to five (nearly always). Example items for the dimensions are: confidence – “I believe I have the required skills/technique to succeed in my sports branch”; dedication – “I am determined to achieve my goals in sport”; vigor – “I feel energetic/dynamic when performing in my sports branch”; and enthusiasm – “I enjoy my sports branch”.

Research Ethics

Prior to the start of the study, permission to conduct research was obtained from Artvin Coruh University Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee (Date: 26.08.2020, number: E.8669).

Data Analysis

Correlation analysis was first completed in this study investigating the relationships between coping with sports problems and athlete engagement. Then multiple regression analysis was used to test whether coping with sports problems predicted athlete engagement or not. Before analyses, assumptions were checked.

Findings

Firstly, correlation analysis of the relationship between the ability to cope with sports problems and athlete engagement is presented. Results are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Correlations between variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1.Athlete engagement	–						
2.Goal Setting	.298**	–					
3.Concentration	.424**	.543**	–				
4.Freedom from worry	.098	.275**	.217**	–			
5.Peaking under pressure	.313**	.373**	.450**	.163**	–		
6.Coping with adversity	.363**	.494**	.524**	.178**	.440**	–	
7.Confidence and achievement	.411**	.460**	.534**	.195**	.251**	.530**	–
8.Coachability	.241**	.326**	.399**	.313**	.150*	.382**	.422**

Not. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

As seen in Table 1, there were positive significant correlations between athlete engagement with goal setting/mental preparation ($r = .298, p < .01$), concentration ($r = .424, p < .01$), peaking under pressure ($r = .313, p < .01$), coping with adversity ($r = .363, p < .01$), confidence and motivation for achievement ($r = .411, p < .01$) and coachability ($r = .241, p < .01$). However, there was no significant correlation between athlete engagement with freedom from worry ($r = .098, p > .05$). Additionally, all of the dimensions of ability to cope with sports problems were found to have positive significant correlations with each other.

After investigating the correlations between variables, the prediction of athlete engagement by coping with sports problems was considered. Before multiple regression performed in this context, assumptions were checked. The Mahalanobis distance value was above 15 for 22 data points in the research set. Additionally, VIF values were investigated for multicollinearity. The VIF values were from 1.145 to 1.93 and abided by the recommendation by Tabachnick and Fidell (2001) of being smaller than 10. Tolerance values varied from .51 to .86. Finally, the Durbin-Watson value showing terms are not correlated was 1.71 and abided by the critical values from 1 to 3 according to Field (2005). In conclusion, the assumptions were met. Table 2 presents the multiple regression findings.

Table 2. Multiple Regression Analysis Results

Variables	B	SE _B	β	t	R ²	F
Goal setting	-.012	.304	-.003	-.038		
Concentration	1.032	.369	.201	2.798**		
Freedom from worry	-.158	.266	-.033	-.597		
Peaking under pressure	.528	.240	.135	2.202*	.250	13.35**
Coping with adversity	.347	.323	.075	1.075		
Confidence and achievement	1.466	.438	.227	3.348**		
Coachability	.117	.262	.027	.446		

Not. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$; dependent variable = athlete engagement

As seen in Table 2, the multiple regression model where coping with sports problems predicted athlete engagement was determined to be significant ($F_{(7, 280)} = 13.35, p < .01$). Coping with sports problems explained nearly 25% of the total variance in athlete engagement ($R^2 = .250$). When the model is investigated in detail, it appeared athlete engagement was positively and significantly predicted by concentration ($\beta = .201, p < .01$), peaking under pressure ($\beta = .135, p < .05$) and confidence and motivation for success ($\beta = .227, p < .01$). However, athlete engagement was not significantly predicted by goal setting/mental preparation ($\beta = -.003, p > .05$), freedom from worry ($\beta = -.033, p > .05$), coping with adversity ($\beta = .075, p > .05$) and coachability ($\beta = .027, p > .05$).

Discussion and Conclusion

In the research, the relationship between ability to cope with sports problems and athlete engagement was investigated among university students studying sports science. According to the findings, correlation analysis showing the power of correlations between the dependent variable of athlete engagement and independent variables identified positive significant correlations between the subfactors of ability to cope of goal setting/mental preparation, concentration, peaking under pressure, coping with adversity, confidence and motivation for achievement and coachability, but not freedom from worry. This significant correlation supports the results obtained in different studies about ability to cope with sports problems and athlete engagement. For example, in parallel with the data in this study, when coping is assumed to be related to behavioral engagement,

behavioral engagement was proposed to be an energizing resource ensuring athletes can cope more effectively with daily stress factors (Skinner and Pitzer, 2012). Additionally, Goodger, Gorely, Lavallee, and Harwood (2007) associated higher burnout levels with increasing stress in research related to burnout, defined as the opposite of engagement. As can be predicted, the skills of an athlete in coping effectively with stress and adversity are negatively correlated with burnout. In this context, in parallel with the research findings, athletes who overcome problems means they have high engagement.

Concentration is defined as a person's focusing all attention on a point in line with a certain aim, ignoring internal and external stimuli (Wilson, Peper and Schmid, 2006). When assessed in social sample groups, the concentration variable was determined to be a variable explaining athlete engagement. In other words, high concentration levels among university students studying sports science may be stated to be an indicator of athlete engagement and their ability to focus on the job without being easily affected by uncomfortable situations during sporting activities and their ability to display these features in unexpectedly difficult situations. As concentration levels increased, athlete engagement increased. The literature supports this finding. In fact, research by Hodge, Lonsdale, and Jackson (2009) stated there were positive correlations between the athlete engagement features of vigor and dedication with concentration.

Some athletes display better performance under pressure and can use their game plans more effectively, can find creative solutions when faced with adversity and resist them, can concentrate more intensely, can push their own limits, can learn new techniques more quickly and prepare better compared to their physical peers in races. When the research findings are evaluated, in situations with high performance under pressure, athlete engagement may be high if instead of being discomforted, they respond with resistance and show high performance. Athletes having the necessary mental resilience may be explained by concepts like instinctive belief, effective coping with pressure, adversity and negative situations, strengthening with pressure, being engaged and having superior concentration skills (Connaughton, Hanton, and Jones, 2010; Sheard, 2013).

The desire to be successful motivates individuals for achievements. The motivation for achievement is not toward a certain area but affects all of a

person's activities. Athletes with confidence and motivation for achievement in the sports environment learn to trust themselves and motivate themselves positively. These people continuously do the best they can and work very hard to develop their talent. In line with this they expend intense effort to acquire goals, strive for continuity and achieve their aims and are decisive about making efforts to achieve their goals. They attempt to overcome any problems encountered and like solving problems (Eren, 1996). While stress related to work whips the motivation for success of someone with high motivation for achievement, someone else may feel stress due to inadequacy coping with this situation (Aytac, 2006). Motivation for approaching achievement in sport is considered to represent an athlete's internal motivation in their approach to competition. This is almost synonymous with the terms self-confidence, authority or strength and personal competence. People with high levels of these features have higher participation in environments where they can achieve success when evaluations are made by others compared to people with low levels of these features (Cox, 1990). The result, in the context of these positive traits, is sustainable optimum performance that ensures the efficient management of athlete's lives by providing a more productive training environment and increasing athlete engagement with professional help to cope with their difficulties. The psychological status of an athlete is very important in terms of their ability to display high performance and increase sports performance. An athlete thinking and feeling that they are an athlete is stated to be due to engagement both on and off the field.

Limitations

This research has some limitations. Firstly, findings obtained within the scope of the research were collected with self-report-based scale tools. For this reason, data may involve a range of limitations in terms of subjective judgments. Secondly, the research was only completed with participation of university students studying sports science. From this aspect, the research findings only provide information about university students.

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