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Sport Engagement and Social Capital in Sport Settings: The Predictive Roles of Cultural and Educational Commitment among Athletes in Mazandaran Province, Iran

Moradali. Yazdan Nejad[1], Ali. Rahmani Firoozjah[2*], Ali Asghar. Abbasi Asfajir[2], Majedeh. Gholipour[2]

1. PhD Student in Cultural Sociology, Bab.C.,Islamic Azad University, Babol, Iran.
2. Department of Sociology, Bab.C.,Islamic Azad University, Babol, Iran.

*Corresponding Author's Email: a.rahmani@baboliau.ac.ir

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to examine the role of the dimensions of the sport engagement model in explaining the components of social capital, namely interpersonal trust and social participation, among athletes in Mazandaran Province, Iran. This study employed a descriptive-correlational design with a quantitative approach. The statistical population consisted of active athletes across the cities of Mazandaran Province. A total of 359 participants were selected through convenience sampling. Data were collected using the Sport Engagement Model Questionnaire, comprising cultural commitment and educational commitment, as well as the Social Capital Questionnaire. Data analysis was performed using Pearson's correlation coefficient and simultaneous multiple regression analysis. The results showed that both dimensions of sport engagement were positively and significantly associated with interpersonal trust and social participation ($p < 0.001$). Cultural commitment showed a strong positive correlation with interpersonal trust ($r = 0.805$), while educational commitment was also significantly related to interpersonal trust ($r = 0.408$). In addition, cultural commitment ($r = 0.482$) and educational commitment ($r = 0.237$) were positively and significantly related to social participation ($p < 0.001$). Multiple regression analysis indicated that the dimensions of sport engagement jointly explained 65.1% of the variance in interpersonal trust and 23.4% of the variance in social participation. Cultural commitment was the strongest predictor of interpersonal trust, whereas both cultural and educational commitment made significant contributions to the prediction of social participation. Overall, the findings suggest that greater sport engagement, particularly through strengthening cultural and educational commitment, may contribute to the enhancement of social capital in sport settings.

Keywords: *sport engagement, cultural commitment, educational commitment, social capital, interpersonal trust, social participation, athletes*

Introduction

Sport is widely recognized not only as a domain of physical activity and health promotion, but also as a social institution that shapes relationships, group identity, cooperation, and civic life. In sociological terms, social capital refers to the resources embedded in social relationships, networks, and norms that facilitate coordinated action and mutual benefit. Classical scholars such as Bourdieu, Coleman, and Putnam emphasized that trust, reciprocity, and social ties can function as valuable social resources that support both individual and collective outcomes. In sport settings, these ideas are especially relevant because athletes operate within repeated patterns of interaction, shared goals, and collective norms that may foster trust and social participation (1-3). A growing body of evidence has shown that sport involvement is associated with broader social outcomes. Participation in sport organizations has been linked to greater social connectedness and stronger integration into community life (4). Similarly, sport participation has been associated with social capital and mental health in disadvantaged communities, suggesting that the benefits of sport extend beyond performance and physical fitness (5). Research on participatory sport events has also shown that sport can generate bonding, bridging, and linking social capital, thereby strengthening community relationships and well-being (6). Together, these studies support the view that sport environments can function as meaningful social spaces. Yet, the social effects of sport may not depend only on participation frequency. The depth and quality of individuals' involvement in sport may also matter. This perspective aligns with the literature on engagement and commitment, which emphasizes that participation is not merely behavioral attendance but also includes cognitive, emotional, and value-based attachment (7, 8). Sport commitment has been described as the psychological resolve to continue sport participation, and more recent multidimensional frameworks have highlighted that meaningful sport involvement includes sustained investment and identification with the sport context (8, 9). In the present study, sport engagement is examined through two dimensions: cultural commitment and educational commitment. Cultural commitment may reflect attachment to the values, norms, and shared identity of the sport environment. Educational commitment may reflect an athlete's orientation toward learning, development, and constructive growth through sport. Conceptually, both dimensions may contribute to social capital. Athletes who are more strongly committed to the cultural and educational dimensions of sport may be more likely to trust others, cooperate effectively, and engage in collective activities.

Among the components of social capital, interpersonal trust and social participation are particularly important in organized sport environments. Interpersonal trust facilitates communication, cohesion, and collaboration, while social participation reflects involvement in collective and socially oriented activity. Although prior studies have established general links between sport and social capital, fewer studies have specifically examined whether dimensions of sport engagement predict interpersonal trust and social participation among athletes in culturally specific contexts. Accordingly, the present study aimed to investigate the role of cultural commitment and educational commitment in explaining interpersonal trust and social participation among athletes in Mazandaran Province, Iran. It was hypothesized that both dimensions of sport engagement would be positively associated with the two components of social capital and would significantly contribute to their prediction.

Methods and Materials

Study design

This study used an applied, quantitative, descriptive-correlational design. Because the data were collected at a single point in time to examine the relationships between dimensions of sport engagement and components of social capital, the study was also cross-sectional.

Participants and setting

The statistical population included active athletes in the cities of Mazandaran Province, Iran, who were engaged in regular sport activities in clubs, sport boards, and sport centers at the time of data collection. The population included athletes from different sport disciplines and with varied athletic backgrounds and levels of experience. A total of 359 athletes were included in the final analysis. The source manuscript reported that this sample size was sufficient for correlational and regression analyses. Participants were selected using convenience sampling. Questionnaires were distributed to athletes who were accessible during the data collection period and who were willing to participate. Inclusion criteria were regular participation in sport activities and informed willingness to complete the survey. Incomplete questionnaires were excluded from the final analysis.

Instruments

Sport engagement was assessed using the Sport Engagement Model Questionnaire. Based on the source manuscript, this instrument included two principal dimensions: cultural commitment and educational commitment. Items were scored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, with higher scores indicating greater sport engagement. Social capital was measured using a Social Capital Questionnaire assessing two dimensions: interpersonal trust and social participation. This instrument was also scored using a five-point Likert scale and evaluated trust, cooperation, participation in collective activities, and social interactions in sport environments. Face and content validity were evaluated by experts in sport management, social sciences, and research methodology. Items that lacked clarity or conceptual relevance were revised based on expert feedback. The manuscript reported acceptable content validity for the study measures. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha in a pilot study on a sample similar to the study population. The manuscript stated that Cronbach's alpha values for the Sport Engagement Model Questionnaire and the Social Capital Questionnaire, including their dimensions, were above 0.70, indicating acceptable internal consistency.

Data collection procedure

After identifying eligible participants in clubs, sport boards, and sport centers across Mazandaran Province, the researcher distributed questionnaires to athletes who met the inclusion criteria and agreed to participate. The questionnaires were self-administered and collected in one assessment phase. Responses with substantial missing data were excluded from analysis.

Statistical analysis

Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. At the descriptive level, means and standard deviations were calculated. At the inferential level, Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to assess the relationships between sport engagement dimensions and the components of social capital. Simultaneous multiple regression analysis was then performed to determine the predictive roles of cultural commitment and educational commitment in explaining interpersonal trust and social participation. Before conducting regression analysis, assumptions were examined using the Durbin-Watson statistic and variance inflation factor (VIF).

Findings and Results

A total of 359 athletes were included in the analysis. Pearson correlation analysis showed that both dimensions of sport engagement were positively and significantly associated with both interpersonal trust and social participation. Cultural

commitment had a strong positive correlation with interpersonal trust (r=0.805, p<0.001) and a moderate positive correlation with social participation (r=0.482, p<0.001). Educational commitment was also positively related to interpersonal trust (r=0.408, *p*<0.001) and social participation (r=0.237, p<0.001).

Table 1. Pearson correlations between sport engagement dimensions and social capital components

Predictor	Outcome	*r*	*p*	*n*
Cultural commitment	Interpersonal trust	0.805	<0.001	359
Educational commitment	Interpersonal trust	0.408	<0.001	359
Cultural commitment	Social participation	0.482	<0.001	359
Educational commitment	Social participation	0.237	<0.001	359

Before the regression analyses, assumptions were checked. For the model predicting interpersonal trust, the Durbin-Watson statistic was reported as 2.144, and the VIF values for both predictors were 1.200, indicating acceptable independence of errors and no problematic multicollinearity. For the model predicting social participation, the Durbin-Watson statistic was 1.390, with VIF values of 2.400 for cultural commitment and 1.200 for educational commitment, again suggesting that the assumptions were adequately met.

Table 2. Regression assumption checks

Dependent variable	Predictor	VIF	Durbin-Watson
Interpersonal trust	Cultural commitment	1.200	2.144
Interpersonal trust	Educational commitment	1.200	2.144
Social participation	Cultural commitment	2.400	1.390
Social participation	Educational commitment	1.200	1.390

Simultaneous multiple regression analysis was then performed to examine the extent to which cultural commitment and educational commitment predicted interpersonal trust. The model was statistically significant (F=332.585, p<0.001) and showed a multiple correlation coefficient of R=0.807. The adjusted coefficient of determination indicated that the two dimensions of sport engagement jointly explained 65.1% of the variance in interpersonal trust. Cultural commitment had the strongest standardized effect (β=0.779, t=22.712, *p<0.001*), whereas educational commitment showed a much smaller effect (β=0.164, t=1.876, p=0.42 as reported in the source table).

Table 3. Multiple regression model predicting interpersonal trust

Predictor / Index	B	SE	Beta	t	p
Constant	3.501	1.159	—	3.020	0.003
Cultural commitment	0.780	0.034	0.779	22.712	<0.001
Educational commitment	0.055	0.029	0.164	1.876	0.42*
Model summary					
R	0.807				
R^2	0.649				
Adjusted R^2	0.651				
F	332.585				<0.001

A second simultaneous multiple regression analysis was conducted with social participation as the dependent variable. This model was also statistically significant (F=54.476, p<0.001) with a multiple correlation coefficient of R=0.484. The adjusted coefficient of determination showed that cultural commitment and educational commitment together explained 23.4% of the variance in social participation. In this model, both predictors contributed significantly and with relatively similar strength: cultural commitment (β=0.463, t=9.104, p<0.001) and educational commitment (β=0.448, t=8.941, p<0.001).

Table 4. Multiple regression model predicting social participation

Predictor / Index	B	SE	Beta	t	p
Constant	64.209	5.171	—	12.417	<0.001
Cultural commitment	1.395	0.153	0.463	9.104	<0.001
Educational commitment	1.123	0.130	0.448	8.941	<0.001
Model summary					
R	0.484				
R^2	0.230				
Adjusted R^2	0.234				
F	54.476				<0.001

Overall, the results indicate that the dimensions of sport engagement were positively associated with both interpersonal trust and social participation. Cultural commitment emerged as the strongest predictor of interpersonal trust, whereas both cultural and educational commitment contributed to the prediction of social participation.

Discussion

The present study examined the predictive roles of cultural commitment and educational commitment, as dimensions of sport engagement, in explaining interpersonal trust and social participation among athletes in Mazandaran Province. The findings showed that both dimensions of sport engagement were positively associated with the two components of social capital. These results support the view that sport is not merely a setting for physical activity or competition, but also a meaningful social environment in which trust and participatory relationships may develop. One of the most important findings was the particularly strong relationship between cultural commitment and interpersonal trust. This suggests that athletes who are more strongly attached to the values, norms, and shared meanings of the sport environment may be more likely to develop trust-based relationships with others. In organized sport settings, cultural commitment may reinforce belonging, common identity, and mutual understanding. These elements are central to interpersonal trust and may help explain why cultural commitment emerged as the strongest predictor of this outcome. This interpretation is consistent with earlier work showing that sport involvement can strengthen social connectedness and social capital (4-6, 10). The results also showed that educational commitment was positively associated with both interpersonal trust and social participation. Conceptually, educational commitment may reflect an athlete's orientation toward learning, development, communication, and constructive involvement in sport. Athletes who value the educational aspects of sport may be more inclined to interact positively with peers, accept shared responsibilities, and become involved in collective processes. Although its contribution to interpersonal trust was weaker than that of cultural commitment in the regression model, educational commitment still appeared relevant in relation to the broader social functioning of athletes. Another important finding was that sport engagement dimensions explained a larger proportion of variance in interpersonal trust than in social participation. This pattern may indicate that engagement has a more direct effect on relational and psychological outcomes such as trust, whereas social participation may depend on a broader range of contextual, organizational, and structural influences beyond engagement alone. Nevertheless, the contribution of both cultural and educational commitment to social participation suggests that deeper involvement in the sport setting is associated with more active participation in collective and socially oriented activities.

From an applied perspective, these findings suggest that coaches, sport managers, and policymakers should pay greater attention to the cultural and educational dimensions of sport participation. Sport settings that foster shared values, ethical norms, learning opportunities, and constructive interpersonal interaction may contribute not only to better athletic involvement but also to stronger social capital. In this sense, sport engagement can be regarded as a relational resource that enhances the social

value of sport environments. This study should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference. Second, the use of convenience sampling limits generalizability. Third, all measures were based on self-report questionnaires, which may be affected by response bias. Future studies may benefit from longitudinal designs, probability sampling, and the inclusion of additional variables such as team climate, coaching style, and type of sport.

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Authors' Contributions

MYN contributed to the study conception, data collection, data analysis, and manuscript drafting; AAAS contributed to supervision, conceptual development, and critical revision of the manuscript; ARF contributed to methodological guidance, interpretation of findings, and manuscript revision; MG contributed to academic review, manuscript editing, and final approval of the submitted version. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

Participation in the study was voluntary. Informed willingness to participate was described in the source manuscript, and incomplete questionnaires were excluded from the analysis. The uploaded source did not provide an ethics approval code; this should be added if available before journal submission.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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