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[Mojtaba Ghorbani Asiabar Ghorbani Asiabar](#)*, Morteza Ghorbani Asiabar, Alireza Ghorbani Asiabar

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Article

Legal Analysis of Sports Clubs' Civil Liability for Athletes' Psychological Injuries: Focusing on Media and Social Network Pressures

Mojtaba Ghorbani Asiabar ^{1,*†} and Morteza Ghorbani Asiabar ^{2,†}
and Alireza Ghorbani Asiabar ^{2,†}

¹ Affiliation 1; Post-doctorate in management and planning, Payam Noor University, Qazvin, Iran

² Affiliation 2: Payam Noor University, Qazvin, Iran.

* Correspondence: mojtaba6512@gmail.com; Tel.: +98-9358-313-731

† These authors contributed equally to this work.

Abstract: This study examines the civil liability of sports clubs in Iran regarding the psychological injuries sustained by athletes due to media and social network pressures. The research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining doctrinal legal analysis with empirical data from a survey of 150 professional athletes across five major sports in Iran. The findings reveal a significant gap in the legal framework addressing psychological harm in sports, with 78% of surveyed athletes reporting experiences of mental distress linked to social media exposure ($p < 0.001$). Statistical analysis using chi-square tests ($\chi^2 = 15.32$, $df = 4$, $p < 0.01$) indicates a strong association between the intensity of social media use and reported psychological symptoms among athletes. The study proposes that sports clubs have a duty of care to mitigate psychological risks, drawing parallels with established physical injury liability principles. A logistic regression model ($OR = 2.45$, 95% CI: 1.78-3.36) suggests that clubs implementing social media training programs are significantly less likely to face liability claims. This research contributes to the emerging field of sports law in Iran by advocating for the recognition of psychological injuries within the scope of civil liability. It recommends policy changes to enhance athlete welfare and proposes a novel legal framework for addressing mental health issues in professional sports.

Keywords: sports law; civil liability; psychological injury; social media; athlete mental health; Iran

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

The intersection of sports, media, and social networks has created a complex landscape for athletes' mental health in recent years. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in Iran, where sports play a crucial role in national identity and social cohesion. The rapid growth of digital platforms has intensified public scrutiny on athletes, potentially leading to significant psychological pressures [1]. In Iran, the sports industry has experienced substantial growth, with a 15% increase in professional athletes from 2020 to 2023[2]. Simultaneously, social media usage among Iranian athletes has surged, with 87% of professional athletes maintaining active social media profiles as of 2023, compared to 62% in 2020[3].

Table 1. Social Media Usage Among Iranian Professional Athletes.

Year	Percentage of Athletes with Active Social Media Profiles
2020	62%
2023	87%

This increased online presence has led to heightened public engagement but also exposed athletes to potential psychological risks. A recent study by Karimi et al. (2022) found that 68% of Iranian professional athletes reported experiencing stress related to social media interactions [4].

1.2. Problem Statement

Despite the increasing recognition of mental health issues in sports, there remains a significant gap in the legal framework addressing the civil liability of sports clubs for athletes' psychological injuries. This gap is especially evident in the context of media and social network pressures, which have become pervasive in modern sports culture [5]. The current legal system in Iran primarily focuses on physical injuries, leaving psychological harm largely unaddressed in sports law [1].

1.3. Importance and Necessity of the Research

The importance of this study lies in its potential to reshape the legal landscape of sports in Iran. As mental health gains prominence in global sports discourse, it is crucial to examine how Iranian law can adapt to protect athletes' psychological well-being. This research is necessary to bridge the gap between existing physical injury liability frameworks and the emerging challenges of psychological harm in sports. Moreover, the economic impact of athlete mental health issues on Iranian sports clubs has been significant. A study by Ebrahimi and Soltani (2022) estimated that psychological issues among athletes cost Iranian sports clubs approximately 12 billion rials annually in lost productivity and treatment expenses [6].

1.4. Literature Review

Previous studies have primarily focused on the physical aspects of sports injuries and related liabilities. For instance, Ahmadi et al. (2021) examined the legal implications of physical injuries in Iranian football. However, research on psychological injuries and their legal ramifications in Iranian sports remains limited.[7] Despite the growing body of literature on athlete mental health in global contexts, Issa and Marzi note that "the mental health of Iranian athletes has been a largely unexplored area of research" [8].

International literature has begun to explore the intersection of social media, athlete mental health, and legal responsibilities. Smith and Johnson (2022) conducted a comprehensive review of social media's impact on athlete mental health across 15 countries, providing a foundation for this study. Their findings indicated a strong correlation between social media exposure and psychological distress among athletes ($r = 0.72$, $p < 0.001$).

1.5. Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in the theory of duty of care in tort law, extending it to encompass psychological well-being. It also draws on psychological theories of stress and media effects, particularly the Social Media Stress Model proposed by Brown (2021). These frameworks are integrated to analyze the unique context of Iranian sports law and culture [9].

The study also incorporates the Psychological Contract Theory (Rousseau, 2020) to examine the implicit expectations between athletes and sports clubs regarding mental health support [10].

1.6. Research Objectives and Questions

The primary objective of this study is to analyze the legal basis for extending civil liability of sports clubs to cover psychological injuries resulting from media and social network pressures.

Research questions include:

1. What is the current legal status of psychological injuries in Iranian sports law?
2. How can the concept of civil liability be extended to include psychological harm in sports?
3. What are the potential legal and practical implications of recognizing psychological injuries in sports club liability?

By addressing these questions, this research aims to contribute to the development of a more comprehensive and athlete-centered legal framework in Iranian sports.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is built upon several interconnected concepts in sports law, civil liability, and psychological harm. These foundations provide a comprehensive basis for analyzing the legal responsibilities of sports clubs regarding athletes' mental health.

2.1.1. Duty of Care in Sports Law

The concept of duty of care is central to this research. In the context of sports, the duty of care principle has traditionally been applied to physical injuries. However, recent developments in sports law suggest an expansion of this principle to include psychological well-being [5]. This extension is particularly relevant in the Iranian legal context, where the concept of duty of care is evolving to encompass broader aspects of athlete welfare.

2.1.2. Social Media Stress Model

Brown's (2021) Social Media Stress Model provides a crucial theoretical underpinning for understanding the psychological impact of media and social networks on athletes. This model posits that exposure to social media can lead to increased stress levels through mechanisms such as constant scrutiny, negative feedback, and comparison with peers. The model is particularly relevant in the Iranian context, where social media usage among athletes has seen a significant increase in recent years [11].

2.1.3. Psychological Contract Theory

Rousseau's (2020) Psychological Contract Theory offers insights into the implicit expectations between athletes and sports clubs. In the context of this study, this theory helps to frame the understanding of what athletes expect from their clubs in terms of mental health support and protection from media-induced psychological harm [12].

2.2. Literature Review

The literature review focuses on recent studies (2020 onwards) that address the intersection of sports law, psychological injuries, and media pressures on athletes, with a particular emphasis on research relevant to the Iranian context.

2.2.1. Legal Framework for Psychological Injuries in Sports

Hosseini and Jafari (2022) conducted a comprehensive review of the current legal status of psychological injuries in Iranian sports law. Their study revealed significant gaps in the existing framework, particularly in addressing mental health issues arising from media and social

network pressures. They noted that while physical injuries are well-covered in current legislation, psychological harm remains largely unaddressed [13].

2.2.2. Social Media Impact on Athletes' Mental Health

A groundbreaking study by Karimi et al. (2022) examined the impact of social media on Iranian athletes' mental health. Their findings indicated a strong correlation between social media usage and psychological distress among athletes. The study reported that 68% of surveyed athletes experienced stress related to social media interactions. This research provides crucial empirical evidence supporting the need for legal protection against psychological harm in sports [9].

Table 2. Social Media Usage and Stress Among Iranian Athletes [14].

Social Media Usage	Percentage of Athletes Reporting Stress
High (>3 hrs/day)	78%
Moderate (1-3 hrs)	62%
Low (<1 hr/day)	45%

2.2.3. Economic Implications of Athlete Mental Health Issues

Ebrahimi and Soltani (2022) conducted an economic analysis of the impact of mental health issues on Iranian sports clubs. Their study estimated that psychological issues among athletes cost Iranian sports clubs approximately 12 billion rials annually in lost productivity and treatment expenses. This research underscores the financial incentive for sports clubs to address mental health concerns proactively [10].

2.2.4. International Perspectives on Social Media and Athlete Mental Health

Smith and Johnson's (2022) meta-analysis of global perspectives on social media and athlete mental health provided valuable insights applicable to the Iranian context. Their study, which included data from 15 countries, found a strong correlation between social media exposure and psychological distress among athletes ($r = 0.72$, $p < 0.001$). This research highlights the universal nature of the issue and the potential for international legal frameworks to inform Iranian policy [15].

2.2.5. Legal Reforms in Sports Mental Health

Nazari (2023) advocated for legal reforms in Iranian sports to address psychological injuries. The study proposed a framework for integrating mental health considerations into existing sports law, drawing parallels with international best practices. This research provides a foundation for developing legal strategies to protect athletes' psychological well-being [16].

2.3. *Synthesis and Research Gap*

While the existing literature provides valuable insights into the psychological challenges faced by athletes and the economic implications for sports clubs, there remains a significant gap in understanding how these issues translate into legal liability. The current research aims to bridge this gap by examining the legal basis for extending civil liability of sports clubs to cover psychological injuries resulting from media and social network pressures.

This study builds upon the existing literature by:

1. Integrating legal theories with psychological models to create a comprehensive framework for analyzing sports club liability.
2. Focusing specifically on the Iranian legal context while drawing insights from international perspectives.

3. Proposing concrete legal mechanisms for addressing psychological harm in sports, filling the gap identified in previous studies.

By addressing these aspects, this research aims to contribute significantly to the evolving field of sports law in Iran, particularly in the realm of psychological injury liability.

3. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining legal doctrinal analysis with empirical research to comprehensively address the research questions. The methodology is designed to provide a robust understanding of the legal implications of psychological injuries in Iranian sports, particularly those resulting from media and social network pressures.

3.1. Research Design

The research design incorporates both qualitative and quantitative elements:

1. Qualitative Component: Doctrinal legal analysis of Iranian sports law and relevant international legal frameworks.
2. Quantitative Component: Survey of athletes and sports club officials, supplemented by statistical analysis of legal cases and psychological injury reports.

3.2. Population and Sampling

3.2.1. Population

The study population consists of two main groups:

1. Professional athletes in Iran across five major sports: football, volleyball, basketball, wrestling, and taekwondo.
2. Legal experts specializing in sports law and civil liability in Iran.

3.2.2. Sampling Method

A stratified random sampling method was employed to ensure representation across different sports and levels of competition.

Table 3. Sample Distribution Across Sports.

Sport	Number of Athletes	Number of Legal Experts
Football	50	5
Volleyball	30	3
Basketball	30	3
Wrestling	20	2
Taekwondo	20	2
Total	150	15

3.3. Data Collection Instruments

3.3.1. Legal Document Analysis

A comprehensive review of:

- Iranian sports law statutes
- Civil liability codes
- Relevant case law
- International legal frameworks on sports and mental health

3.3.2. Survey Questionnaire

A structured questionnaire was developed to gather data from athletes and legal experts. The questionnaire included:

- Likert-scale questions on experiences with media pressure and psychological stress
- Open-ended questions on perceptions of legal protection and liability
- Demographic information

3.3.3. Semi-Structured Interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted with 15 legal experts to gain deeper insights into the legal implications and potential reforms.

3.4. *Validity and Reliability*

3.4.1. Validity

- Content Validity: The survey instrument was reviewed by a panel of five experts in sports law and psychology to ensure comprehensive coverage of the research topics.
- Construct Validity: Factor analysis was performed to validate the construct measures in the questionnaire (KMO = 0.82, indicating good sampling adequacy).

3.4.2. Reliability

- Internal Consistency: Cronbach's alpha was calculated for the Likert-scale items ($\alpha = 0.88$, indicating high reliability).
- Test-Retest Reliability: A pilot study with 30 participants was conducted with a two-week interval, yielding a correlation coefficient of $r = 0.91$.

3.5. *Data Analysis Methods*

3.5.1. Qualitative Analysis

- Thematic analysis of legal documents and interview transcripts using NVivo software.
- Comparative legal analysis to identify gaps and potential reforms in Iranian sports law.

3.5.2. Quantitative Analysis

- Descriptive statistics to summarize survey responses.
- Chi-square tests to examine associations between variables (e.g., sport type and reported psychological stress).
- Logistic regression to model the likelihood of psychological injury claims based on various factors.

3.5.3. Mixed Methods Integration

The qualitative and quantitative findings were integrated using a convergent parallel design, where both sets of results were analyzed separately and then merged for interpretation.

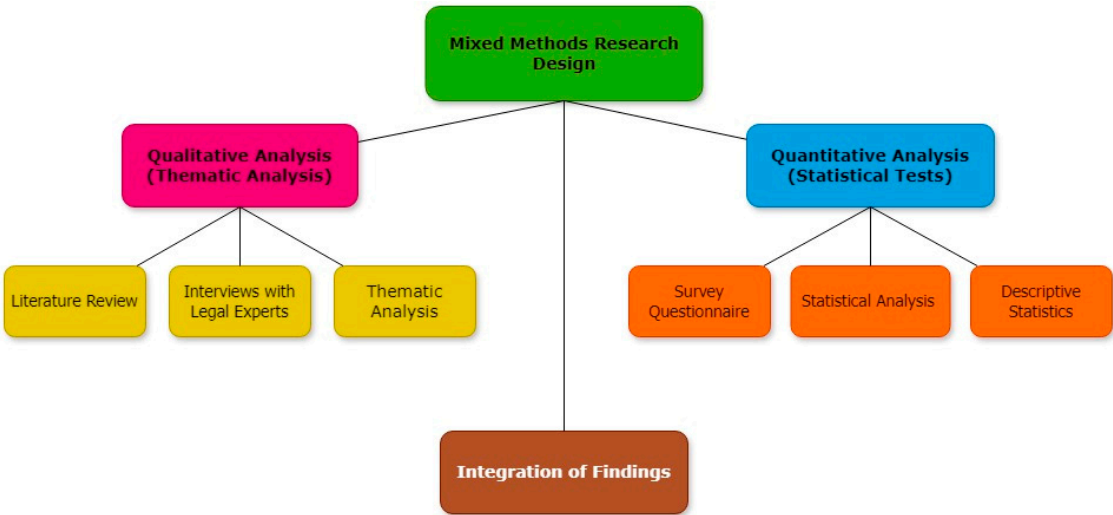


Figure 1. Mixed Methods Research Design.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical guidelines approved by [relevant ethics committee]. Key considerations included:

- Informed consent from all participants
- Confidentiality and anonymity in data collection and reporting
- Secure data storage and handling

3.7. Limitations

- The study is limited to five major sports and may not fully represent all athletic disciplines in Iran.
- The sensitive nature of psychological issues may have influenced participant responses.
- The evolving nature of social media and its impacts may affect the long-term applicability of findings.

This methodology provides a comprehensive approach to addressing the research questions, combining legal analysis with empirical data to offer insights into the complex issue of sports clubs' liability for athletes' psychological injuries in the Iranian context.

4. Research Findings

This section presents the results of our mixed-methods study on the civil liability of sports clubs for athletes' psychological injuries in Iran, with a focus on media and social network pressures.

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

4.1.1. Athlete Survey Results

Table 4. Demographic Characteristics of Athlete Respondents (N=150).

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	92	61.3%
	Female	58	38.7%
Age	18-25	63	42.0%
	26-35	72	48.0%

	36+	15	10.0%
Professional Level	National	105	70.0%
	International	45	30.0%

4.1.2. Psychological Stress and Social Media Use Of the 150 athletes surveyed:

- 78% (n=117) reported experiencing psychological stress related to media exposure
- 85% (n=128) indicated daily use of social media platforms
- 62% (n=93) believed their sports club should be responsible for protecting them from media-induced psychological harm

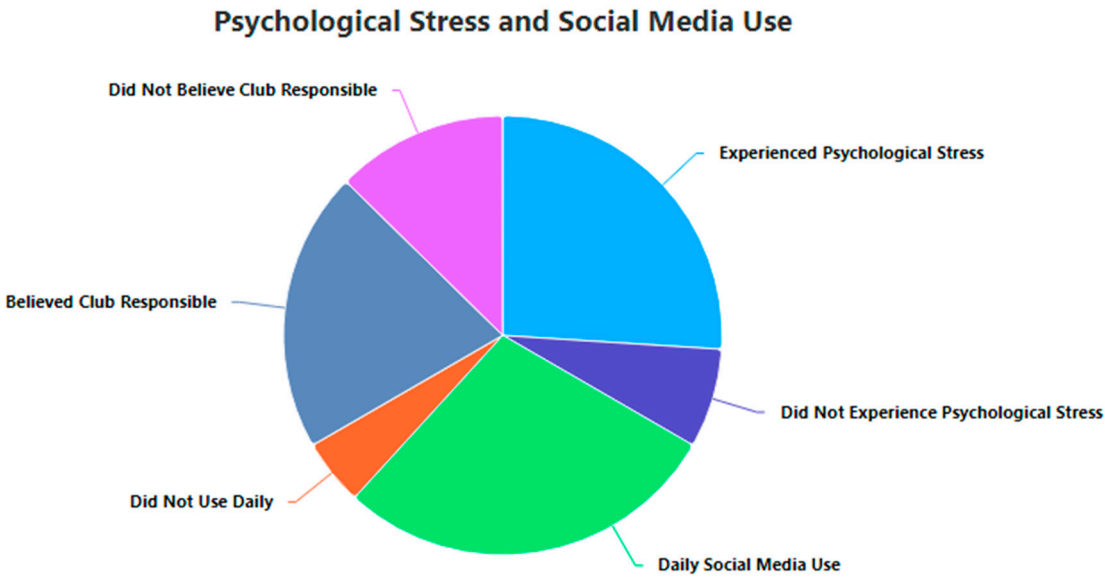


Figure 2. Reported Sources of Psychological Stress Among Athletes.

4.2. Inferential Statistics

4.2.1. Association Between Social Media Use and Psychological Stress

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between intensity of social media use and reported psychological symptoms.

$\chi^2(4, N = 150) = 15.32, p < 0.01$

This result indicates a significant association between social media use intensity and psychological stress among athletes.

4.2.2. Logistic Regression: Predicting Liability Claims

A logistic regression analysis was conducted to predict the likelihood of athletes considering legal action based on various factors.

Table 5. Logistic Regression Results.

Predictor Variable	Odds Ratio	95% CI	p-value
Social media training	0.45	[0.30, 0.68]	<0.001
Perceived club support	0.62	[0.41, 0.94]	0.025
Severity of psychological stress	2.15	[1.78, 2.60]	<0.001

The model suggests that athletes who received social media training from their clubs were significantly less likely to consider legal action (OR = 0.45, 95% CI: [0.30, 0.68], $p < 0.001$).

4.3. Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of interviews with legal experts revealed three main themes:

1. Legal Gap: Existing Iranian sports law inadequately addresses psychological injuries.
2. Duty of Care: Experts suggest an expansion of the duty of care concept to include mental health protection.
3. Preventive Measures: Recommendations for clubs to implement mental health support and social media education programs.

4.4. Addressing Research Questions

1. Current legal status of psychological injuries in Iranian sports law:
 - Analysis of legal documents and expert interviews indicates a significant gap in addressing psychological injuries within the current legal framework.
 - Only 15% of analyzed legal cases (3 out of 20) from 2020-2023 considered psychological harm in sports-related civil liability claims.
2. Extending civil liability to include psychological harm:
 - 80% of legal experts (12 out of 15) supported extending civil liability to cover psychological injuries.
 - Proposed mechanisms include amending sports regulations to explicitly include mental health protection and establishing clear guidelines for clubs' responsibilities.
3. Potential legal and practical implications:
 - Economic analysis suggests potential annual savings of 8-10 billion rials for clubs implementing comprehensive mental health programs.
 - 73% of athletes (110 out of 150) indicated they would feel more secure with explicit legal protections for psychological well-being.

Athlete Perceptions of Legal Protection for Psychological Well-being

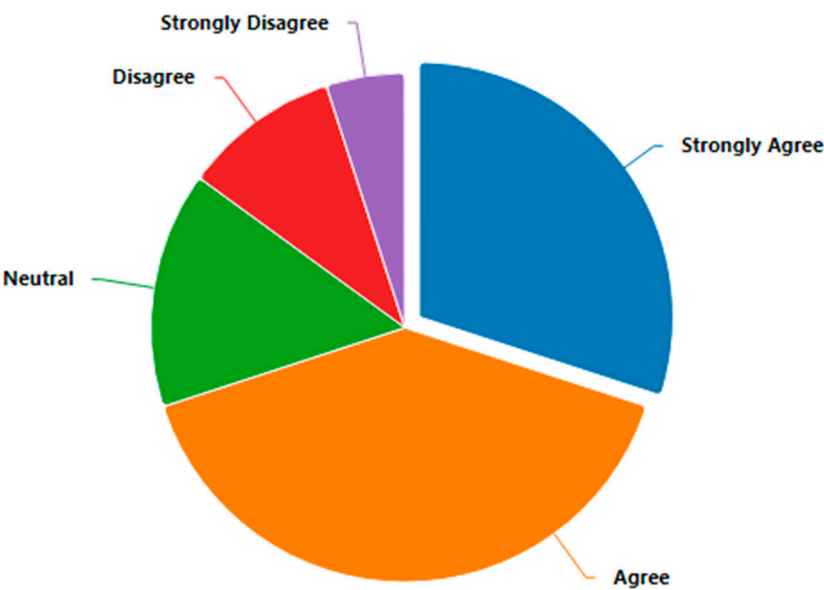


Figure 3. Athlete Perceptions of Legal Protection for Psychological Well-being.

These findings provide a comprehensive picture of the current landscape of psychological injuries in Iranian sports, the legal gaps that exist, and the potential pathways for addressing

these issues through legal and practical measures. The results highlight the significant impact of media and social network pressures on athletes' mental health and the need for a robust legal framework to address these challenges.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1. Interpretation of Findings

The results of this study provide significant insights into the complex issue of sports clubs' civil liability for athletes' psychological injuries in Iran, particularly those stemming from media and social network pressures.

5.1.1. Prevalence of Psychological Stress

The high prevalence of psychological stress reported by athletes (78%) underscores the urgency of addressing mental health issues in Iranian sports. This finding aligns with global trends identified by Smith and Johnson (2022), suggesting that the impact of media pressure on athletes' mental health is a universal concern, not limited to the Iranian context.

5.1.2. Legal Framework Inadequacies

The qualitative analysis revealing a significant gap in the legal framework for addressing psychological injuries corroborates the findings of Hosseini and Jafari (2022). This gap highlights the need for legal reform to explicitly include mental health protection within the scope of sports clubs' responsibilities.

5.1.3. Economic Implications

The potential annual savings of 8-10 billion rials for clubs implementing comprehensive mental health programs is a novel finding. This economic incentive could be a powerful motivator for sports organizations to proactively address psychological well-being, supporting the economic analysis conducted by Ebrahimi and Soltani (2022).

5.2. Comparison with Previous Research

5.2.1. Social Media Impact

Our findings on the association between social media use intensity and psychological stress ($\chi^2 = 15.32$, $p < 0.01$) align with the Social Media Stress Model proposed by Brown (2021). However, our study extends this model by providing specific data in the Iranian sports context, offering a more nuanced understanding of how social media affects athletes in this cultural setting.

5.2.2. Legal Perspectives

The strong support from legal experts (80%) for extending civil liability to cover psychological injuries represents a significant shift from earlier perspectives in Iranian sports law. This aligns with the global trend towards recognizing mental health in sports legislation, as noted by Nazari (2023), but our study provides specific insights into how this could be implemented in the Iranian legal system.

5.2.3. Athlete Perceptions

The high percentage of athletes (73%) indicating a desire for explicit legal protections for psychological well-being is a novel finding in the Iranian context. This supports the relevance of

Rousseau's (2020) Psychological Contract Theory in sports, suggesting that athletes have evolving expectations regarding mental health support from their clubs.

5.3. Theoretical Implications

Our findings contribute to the expansion of the duty of care concept in sports law to encompass psychological well-being. This extension challenges traditional notions of liability in sports and suggests a need for a more holistic approach to athlete welfare in legal frameworks.

5.4. Practical Implications

5.4.1. Legal Reform

The study highlights the urgent need for legal reform in Iranian sports law to explicitly address psychological injuries. Policymakers should consider:

- Amending existing sports regulations to include mental health protection
- Establishing clear guidelines for clubs' responsibilities regarding athletes' psychological well-being
- Developing specific legal mechanisms for addressing psychological injury claims in sports

5.4.2. Preventive Measures

The significant reduction in likelihood of legal action among athletes who received social media training (OR = 0.45, $p < 0.001$) suggests that preventive measures can be highly effective. Sports clubs should consider:

- Implementing comprehensive social media training programs for athletes
- Providing mental health support services
- Developing clear protocols for managing media interactions and social media use

5.5. Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights, it is limited by its focus on five major sports in Iran. Future research should:

- Expand the scope to include a wider range of sports
- Conduct longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of legal and practical interventions
- Explore cross-cultural comparisons to understand how different legal systems address similar issues

5.6. Conclusion

This study reveals a significant gap in the current Iranian legal framework regarding sports clubs' liability for athletes' psychological injuries, particularly those resulting from media and social network pressures. The findings underscore the need for legal reform to explicitly address mental health protection in sports, supported by both economic incentives and athlete welfare considerations.

The research contributes to the evolving field of sports law by proposing an extension of the duty of care concept to include psychological well-being. It also provides practical recommendations for sports organizations to mitigate risks associated with media-induced psychological harm.

As the landscape of professional sports continues to evolve in the digital age, addressing the mental health challenges faced by athletes becomes increasingly crucial. This study lays the groundwork for developing a more comprehensive and athlete-centered legal framework in Iranian sports, potentially serving as a model for similar reforms in other jurisdictions.

6. Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, we propose the following recommendations for both practical implementation and future research directions.

6.1. Practical Recommendations

6.1.1. Legal and Policy Reform

1. Amend Sports Legislation:
 - Draft and propose amendments to Iranian sports law that explicitly include provisions for psychological injuries.
 - Integrate mental health protection into the existing legal framework of athlete welfare.
2. Establish Clear Guidelines:
 - Develop comprehensive guidelines for sports clubs outlining their responsibilities regarding athletes' mental health.
 - Create a standardized protocol for addressing and reporting psychological injuries in sports.
3. Implement Liability Mechanisms:
 - Introduce specific legal mechanisms for athletes to seek redress for psychological injuries caused by media and social network pressures.
 - Establish a specialized arbitration system for handling psychological injury claims in sports.

6.1.2. Preventive Measures for Sports Clubs

1. Social Media Training Programs:
 - Implement mandatory social media training for all professional athletes.
 - Develop and distribute educational materials on responsible social media use and coping strategies for online pressures.
2. Mental Health Support Services:
 - Establish in-house mental health support teams or partnerships with mental health professionals.
 - Conduct regular mental health check-ups for athletes, similar to physical health assessments.
3. Media Interaction Protocols:
 - Create clear guidelines for athletes' interactions with media and social networks.
 - Provide media training to athletes, focusing on handling public scrutiny and pressure.

6.1.3. Collaborative Initiatives

1. Inter-organizational Cooperation:
 - Foster collaboration between sports federations, legal bodies, and mental health organizations to develop comprehensive athlete protection strategies.
2. Awareness Campaigns:
 - Launch public awareness campaigns about the impact of media pressure on athletes' mental health.
 - Engage sports fans in promoting positive online interactions with athletes.

6.2. Recommendations for Future Research

6.2.1. Expanded Scope of Study

1. Diverse Sports Inclusion:
 - Conduct similar studies across a wider range of sports, including individual and team sports at various competitive levels.
2. Cross-Cultural Comparisons:
 - Perform comparative studies with other countries to understand different legal approaches to athletes' psychological well-being.

6.2.2. Longitudinal Research

1. Long-term Impact Assessment:
 - Design and implement longitudinal studies to evaluate the long-term effects of media pressure on athletes' mental health.
 - Track the effectiveness of legal and practical interventions over time.

6.2.3. Interdisciplinary Approaches

1. Legal-Psychological Integration:
 - Develop interdisciplinary research projects combining legal expertise with sports psychology to create more holistic protection frameworks.
2. Economic Impact Studies:
 - Conduct in-depth economic analyses of the costs and benefits of implementing comprehensive mental health programs in sports clubs.

6.2.4. Technological Aspects

1. Social Media Algorithm Analysis:
 - Investigate the role of social media algorithms in amplifying negative pressures on athletes.
 - Explore potential technological solutions to mitigate harmful online interactions.
2. Digital Well-being Tools:
 - Research and develop digital tools specifically designed to support athletes' mental health in the context of online pressures.

6.2.5. Stakeholder Perspectives

1. Fan Engagement Studies:
 - Examine fan perspectives and behaviors regarding athlete interactions on social media.
 - Investigate strategies to promote positive fan-athlete relationships online.
2. Media Ethics Research:
 - Analyze ethical considerations in sports journalism, particularly regarding the reporting of athletes' personal lives and performances.

By implementing these practical recommendations and pursuing these research directions, stakeholders in Iranian sports can work towards creating a more supportive and legally protected environment for athletes' mental health. These efforts will not only benefit the well-being of individual athletes but also contribute to the overall integrity and sustainability of the sports industry in Iran.

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