

Identifying and Ranking the Effective Factors in the Delinquency of Football Spectators in Iran and Its Prevention Strategies

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Purpose: One of the social problems of football spectators is their delinquent behavior and the reasons for this behavior. As a result, the aim of this study was identifying and ranking the effective factors in the delinquency of football spectators in Iran and its prevention strategies.

Methodology: This study in terms of purpose was applied and in terms of implementation method was quantitative. The research population was football spectators in Iran, which the sample size were determined 400 people and this number were selected with using available sampling method. The research tool was a researcher-made questionnaire of delinquency of football spectators, which its face validity and reliability were confirmed and the data obtained from its implementation were analyzed with exploratory factor analysis test and Friedman's test in SPSS version 23.

Findings: The results of the exploratory factor analysis test showed that the effective factors in the delinquency of football spectators in Iran were included the socio-economic factors, mental-psychological factors, managerial factors, events inside the football field and media, which whose content validity was higher than 0.60 and whose Cronbach's and combined reliability was higher than 0.80. Also, the results of Friedman's test showed that the most effective factors in the delinquency of football spectators in Iran were included the events inside the football field, managerial factors, socio-economic factors, mental-psychological factors and media, respectively.

Conclusion: According to the results of this research, in order to reduce the delinquency of football spectators in Iran, respectively can manage the events inside the football field, improve the managerial factors, promote the socio-economic factors and mental-psychological factors, and optimize the media behaviors.

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1. Introduction

Exercise, as a social process, involves dynamic forces that interact with each other and can strengthen elements within cultural and social structures. Among various sports, football more than any other reflects social processes and has become a major industry today (Lindsay, Wikkmott, and Richardson, 2023). Nowadays, football is referred to as an industry, and officials of national, continental, and world football federations are considered influential and powerful political figures. The suspension of important political, social, economic, and cultural meetings and various businesses during football matches indicates the high excitement and inclination of people towards football (Nepomuceno, De Moura, Silva, and Costa, 2017). Among all sports, football has a special importance and position with the highest capacity to attract spectators. This sport (football) has transformed itself into one of the most popular, attractive, most-watched, and most-followed sports, with four billion viewers worldwide; in some matches, the stadium attendance exceeds 100,000 (Taheri, Andam, Bahrololoum, and Salehi, 2020). Football and its massive audience have taken on many roles in the political, legal, criminal, and criminological fields and also contribute to social learning of roles, strengthening a sense of responsibility and national spirit, and filling the leisure time of youth. Thousands of spectators provide immediate and direct social encouragement and reinforcement, both positive and negative, for athletes. Indeed, modern sports would not be attractive without spectators, and the structure of sports would be meaningless without them. Undoubtedly, the high volume of spectator presence creates a suitable environment for high excitement and violence among spectators and fans (Aghaei, Taheri, and Andam, 2019). Sports spectators in general, and football spectators in particular, hold a special place in contemporary society. In recent decades, football has been accepted as a social phenomenon and holds a special place among individuals and different communities (Boyчук, Sukharev, Voloshin, and Karbovskii, 2016). Football is one of the sports that is often associated with unrest and violence worldwide. Some experts attribute the expression of violence and aggression in football to pressures and frustrations, finding the noisy atmosphere of the sport as a field for expressing dissatisfaction (Tian, Ma, and Shi, 2022).

The presence of spectators in matches, besides being a financial source, also increases the attractiveness of the stadium environment, and part of the appeal of football in the media is due to the atmosphere created by the presence of fans in the stadiums. The presence of spectators, while influencing the outcome of football teams, also serves as a financial resource for a team. Therefore, understanding the factors influencing the criminality of football spectators is important and necessary (Zohrevandian, Khosravizadeh, Honari, and Mahmoudi, 2020). The most important criminality of football spectators includes violent and aggressive behaviors that are considered actions outside the norms and sportsmanship, causing public harm (Sander and Thiem, 2023). In the 1985 European Club Cup final, due to the English spectators' rush towards the Italian fans' stands and the collapse of the Italian spectators' stand, 39 people lost their lives, and 670 were injured. One of the most tragic incidents in football occurred in 2000 in the match between Galatasaray of Turkey and Leeds United of England, where during a clash among the spectators, two Leeds United fans were stabbed to death. In 2012, after the match between Al-Masry and Al-Ahly of Cairo, spectators of both teams clashed, resulting in 75 deaths and hundreds injured, according to Egyptian state television. Many incidents have also occurred in Iran. For instance, in 2017, the match between Persepolis and Pas was canceled due to the presence of over 30,000 spectators, who stormed the field, uprooted the goalposts, burned the ground mat, jumping mats, and 19 people were injured. Also, in the 2000 match between Esteghlal and Fajr Sepasi Shiraz, after the game was suspended due to stone and grenade throwing by spectators, severe clashes occurred after the match, causing significant damage to vehicles, facilities, and public places, resulting in approximately 350 injuries and about 1000 arrests. One of the most tragic incidents in club football happened in 2007 during a match between Persepolis and Sepahan, where a soldier lost his eyesight due to a grenade thrown by Isfahani fans. Similarly, in the 2018 Hazfi Cup final between Esteghlal and Khoneh Be Khoneh Babol, a spectator lost his eyesight. Another incident in May 2019 during the Hazfi Cup semi-final between Sepahan and Persepolis caused blindness in a child, 150 injuries, and several cars set on fire (Rahmani Khalili and Safavian, 2019).

Generally, three types of violence and aggression are observed in football matches: violence and aggression of footballers against each other and the referee, violence and aggression of spectators against footballers, referees, and team members, and violence and aggression of spectators against each other and public property, with the latter receiving more attention from researchers (Andres, Fabel, and Rainer, 2023). Criminal behaviors by some football spectators during or after the game, such as breaking windows, blocking car routes, etc., are considered abnormal and inappropriate behaviors, with the culprit recognized as a criminal and subject to legal prosecution (Romanet, Graillon, Le Roux, Guyot, Chossegras, De Boutray, and Foletti, 2019). Violence and aggression are aspects of crimes and deviations in the realm of football sports, with the police force responsible for maintaining order and controlling violence and aggression among football spectators (Craig, Overbeek, Condon, and Rinaldo, 2016). If the behaviors of football spectators in the stadium and after the game are not well managed and controlled, they can lead to many social anomalies, including clashes and violence, breaking stadium and street lights, attacking public places, damaging public property, etc. (Newson, Bortolini, Buhrmester, Da Silva, Da Aquino, and Whitehouse, 2018). Many factors contribute to the formation and increase of violence and aggression among football spectators in games, especially between prominent and popular teams, including the influence of the stadium atmosphere, unfair and biased refereeing, inappropriate player behaviors on the field provoking spectators, inappropriate and provocative behaviors of other spectators, behaviors of technical staff and police force, anxiety and fear of some spectators about their team losing in the final minutes of the game, operational issues in conducting the game, lack of welfare facilities, structural problems of societies, media, and economic and social deprivations (Dinesh, Fenil, Gunasekaran, Vivekanada, Thanjaivadivel, Jeeva, and Ahilan, 2019).

Literature Review

In their research on the impact of frustration on the inclination towards violence among football spectators, Yalcin, Ekinci, and Ayhan (2021) found a moderate positive relationship between frustration and the tendency towards violence. Additionally, other factors such as spectators attending away games, the duration of watching matches in the stadium, and with whom the fans watched the game were influential in violence and criminality in football.

Bakhshizade, Atghia, and Mokhtari Dinani (2021) concluded in their research on the factors influencing the emergence of aggression among football spectators that contextual factors had the most, and managerial and operational factors had the least, impact on the aggression of football spectators.

In their study on identifying and prioritizing strategies for crime prevention in the realm of football spectator violence, Moslehi, Hosseini, and Salimi (2020) concluded that in overall prioritization, the situational component of increasing the difficulty of committing a crime ranked first, the social component of improving welfare facilities ranked second, and the situational components of increasing the risk and preventing the provocation of crime ranked third and fourth, respectively. Therefore, a combination of situational and social strategies, with an emphasis on situational strategies, should be employed in implementing preventive measures. Consequently, increasing the difficulty of committing a crime in situational strategies and improving welfare facilities in social strategies should be prioritized.

In their research on police control methods and media portrayal in reducing the tendency of Iranian football spectators towards violence and hooliganism, Moradi Sayaser, Abdolrahmani, Parvizi, and Mahmoudi (2019) found that effective factors in police control methods included controlling entrances and exits, the absence of police in military uniforms, the use of CCTV, and the development of new laws. The effective factors in media portrayal included showing football violence on television, broadcasting provocative news and reports, excessive sensationalism, and presenting reports on match sidelines.

Aghayie and Molanorouzi (2019), in their criminological analysis of the frustration-aggression theory among football spectators, concluded that factors such as frustration due to inability to attend the stadium, the favorite team's defeat, inappropriate refereeing, and poor performance of the favorite team played a significant role in the emergence of spectator violence.

In their research on the causes of football spectator riots after a city derby, MohammadKazemi, Sheykh, Shahbazi, and Rasekh (2007) found that age, education, and socio-economic status had a significant inverse relationship with spectator violence, while environmental factors had a direct and significant relationship. However, the marital status and occupation of the spectators did not have a significant relationship with their violence.

As explained above and given the high occurrence of criminal behaviors among football spectators, it seems necessary and essential to study and research football spectator criminality. Although there have been studies on the factors influencing the behavior of football spectators, most of these studies were qualitative or correlational and examined the relationship between various variables, including demographic variables related to it. Therefore, it is essential to conduct a study to identify and rank the factors influencing the criminality of football spectators and then rank the identified factors to take effective steps in preventing football spectator criminality based on their priority. Thus, one of the important, key, and fundamental social issues of football spectators is their criminal behaviors and the reasons for these behaviors. Consequently, the aim of this study was to identify and rank the factors influencing the criminality of football spectators in Iran and strategies for its prevention.

2. Methodology

This study was applied in purpose and quantitative in execution. The research population was football spectators in Iran, with a sample size of 400 determined and selected using a convenience sampling method. The population of this research included spectators of all Iranian football teams, especially the four popular teams, Persepolis, Esteghlal, Tractor, and Sepahan. The researchers first attended the stadium and asked those spectators willing to participate in the research to respond to the instruments of this research, following certain points explained in the research process.

The research process began with the researchers of the present study designing a researcher-made demographic information form and a researcher-made questionnaire on the criminality of football spectators. Subsequently, the first researcher attended the stadium and asked spectators of various Iranian teams, who had watched at least five games in the stadium during a football season and were willing to participate in the research, to respond to both the demographic information form and the football spectator criminality questionnaire. It is worth mentioning that before completing the research instruments, the purpose of the research, its importance, necessity, application of the research results, and adherence to ethical standards were explained and then the participants were asked to respond carefully, completely, and honestly to all the questions and items of the research instruments. Finally, all the spectators who participated in the research and responded to the demographic information form and the football spectator criminality questionnaire were thanked and appreciated.

The first research tool in the present study was a researcher-made demographic information form, which included questions about age, favorite club, marital status, education, and occupation. The second research tool was a researcher-made questionnaire on football spectator delinquency with 28 items and five dimensions: socio-economic factors (4 items), psychological factors (4 items), management factors (6 items), events within the football field (8 items), and media (4 items). A five-point Likert scale was used for responses, ranging from strongly disagree (score of 1), disagree (score of 2), neutral (score of 3), agree (score of 4), to strongly agree (score of 5). The score for each dimension was calculated by summing the scores of its constituent items, with higher scores indicating better possession of that characteristic. The face validity of the researcher-made questionnaire on football spectator delinquency was confirmed by experts in the field, and its overall reliability was calculated using Cronbach's alpha and composite methods as 0.73 and 0.78, respectively. Therefore, the results indicate the validity and reliability of the researcher-made questionnaire on football spectator delinquency.

Data from the implementation of the researcher-made questionnaire on football spectator delinquency were analyzed using exploratory factor analysis and the Friedman test in SPSS version 23 at a significance level of 0.05.

3. Findings

The results of the researcher-made demographic information form showed that the youngest football spectator was 10 years old, the oldest was 59 years old, and their average age was 32.54 years. Also, most of them were Persepolis fans (51%), married (73.4%), with a diploma or lower education (66.5%), and self-employed (51.2%) (Table 1).

Table 1. Results of the demographic information form completed by football spectators

| Variable | Value | Percentage (%) |
|----------------|-----------------------|----------------|
| Club | Perspolis | 51 |
| | Esteghlal | 28.1 |
| | Tractor Sazi | 16.3 |
| | Sepahan | 3.8 |
| Marital Status | Married | 73.4 |
| | Single | 26.6 |
| Education | Diploma or below | 66.5 |
| | Above Diploma | 23.5 |
| Job | Employee | 29.9 |
| | Self-employed | 51.2 |
| | Retired or unemployed | 18.9 |

The results of the exploratory factor analysis for the researcher-made questionnaire on football spectator delinquency revealed that the effective factors in football spectator delinquency in Iran include socio-economic factors, psychological factors, management factors, events within the football field, and media, with content validity above 0.60 and Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability above 0.80 (Table 2).

Table 2. The results of the exploratory factor analysis test for the researcher-made delinquency questionnaire of football spectators

| Component or factor | Content Validity | Cronbach's Reliability (Alpha) | Composite Reliability |
|------------------------------|------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Events on the football field | 0.68 | 0.83 | 0.86 |
| Management factors | 0.62 | 0.89 | 0.93 |
| Socio-economic factors | 0.70 | 0.85 | 0.88 |
| Psychological factors | 0.72 | 0.92 | 0.96 |
| Media | 0.63 | 0.81 | 0.85 |

The Friedman test results for the researcher-made questionnaire on football spectator delinquency showed that the most effective factors in football spectator delinquency in Iran, in order, were events within the football field, management factors, socio-economic factors, psychological factors, and media (Table 3).

Table 3. The results of Friedman's test for the researcher-made delinquency questionnaire of football spectators

| Statistical Index | Value | Factor or component | Ranked Mean |
|-------------------|--------|------------------------------|-------------|
| N | 400 | Events on the football field | 4.22 |
| Chi-square | 811.82 | Management factors | 4.10 |
| Df | 4 | Socio-economic factors | 2.48 |
| p | 0.001 | Psychological factors | 2.29 |
| | | Media | 1.91 |

4. Conclusion

This study aimed to identify and rank the effective factors in football spectator delinquency in Iran and the strategies for its prevention, showing that these factors include socio-economic, psychological, management factors, events within the football field, and media, with content validity above 0.60 and Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability above 0.80. Moreover, other results indicated that the most effective factors in football spectator delinquency in Iran, in order, were events within the football field, management factors, socio-economic factors, psychological factors, and media. These findings somewhat align with the results of studies by Yalcin et al. (2021), Bakhshizade et al. (2021), Moslehi et al. (2020), Moradi Sayaser et al. (2019), Aghayie and Molanorouzi (2019), and MohammadKazemi et al. (2007), suggesting that football spectator delinquency has its own characteristics, including spontaneity and disregard for the consequences of its harms to oneself and others. Aggression, violence, vandalism, and hooliganism are among the types of football spectator delinquency, which have a wide range. Among these types of delinquency, crimes against property and verbal violence are the most important. Many theories, such as biological, psychological, and sociological, have been proposed for the delinquent behaviors of football spectators, with ecological and sociological theories being more successful in explaining these behaviors. Football spectator delinquency in Iran is more prevalent among the lower socio-economic class of society, with some teams and clubs belonging to this class. Psychological factors of the spectators and management factors of the clubs are other important factors that can increase delinquent behaviors. Another significant point is the events within the football field resulting from the performance of referees and football players against the opposing team, which are very provocative factors for the occurrence of delinquent behaviors in football spectators. The final effective factor in football spectator delinquency is the media, and the amplification of controversies by mass media, especially television and virtual media, about ongoing events and previous games can play an effective role in increasing football spectator delinquency in Iran, similar to other countries.

Football spectators come from various social strata, and each of the five identified factors can lead to delinquent behavior in football spectators. Therefore, a comprehensive view should be adopted in identifying effective factors, and the issue should not be examined solely in the behavior of a specific group. Overall, it can be said that part of the reasons for violence among football spectators goes back to sociological and psychological issues, while another part is related to managerial issues and competition conditions. Many variables, such as age, family control, socio-economic status, personal and personality factors, history of fights, conflicts and tensions, failures, smoking and drug use, criminal history, group attendance, affiliation with clubs and officials, unmet expectations, management factors, incidents occurring on the field, television programs, and virtual media affect the level of delinquency in football spectators and cause them to exhibit violent and aggressive behaviors.

Reducing delinquency in football spectators is influenced by the moral, social, economic, and cultural atmosphere, as well as the psychological and mental conditions of the spectators, management factors, events within the football field, and media. Improving these factors requires a long-term plan influenced by strong determination and collaboration among government, private, and even international organizations and agencies, and achieving this goal is very challenging and difficult in practice. Additionally, short-term and operational solutions can also be derived from research findings on management and creating order within

the stadium. The results of this study indicate that spectators consider management factors as important delinquency factors after events within the football field. Therefore, in addition to controlling and managing the behaviors of football players and referees, securing the stadium environment and identifying individuals with high delinquency can reduce football spectator delinquency. Since delinquency is essentially a form of deviance that tends more towards norm-breaking than value-breaking, it has a broader semantic range compared to crime, and this tendency causes the barriers and situational factors created to improve security in the stadium and sports venues to be ignored by delinquent individuals. Consequently, considering the young age pyramid of the country on one hand, and the widespread phenomenon of football and its special importance among people on the other hand, along with the importance of leisure time and the lack of field research on some violent and abnormal events in the field of football activities and competitions in the country, and the physical and financial harms to citizens along with the destruction of public properties and aggressive and delinquent acts disrupting public order, it is necessary and essential to pay more attention to the phenomenon of football spectator delinquency and implement preventive measures from delinquency in football spectators derived from various researches, including the present study.

Ethical Considerations

In this study, the purpose, importance, necessity, application of research findings, and adherence to ethical standards were explained and clarified for the football spectators participating in the present research.

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Authors' Contributions

The authors of this study had approximately equal contributions in writing the present article.

Conflict of Interest

There was no conflict of interest among the authors of this article.

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