

Measuring Off-field Factors Affecting the Technical and Ethical Performance of Professional Football Athletes

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Abstract

Purpose: Football, as the most viewed event in stadiums overflowed with very many spectators, has turned into the most popular sport across the world. The purpose of this study was to compare the factors affecting the technical and ethical performance of professional football athletes off-field. **Method:** The research method of this research is descriptive survey implemented by completing a researcher-made questionnaire. The statistical population of the study included all athletes, referees, and coaches, members of the technical staffs and members of professional soccer clubs as well as members of the federation and football board of Tehran during the 18th round of the country premier league. The research sample was 384 people who were selected by purposeful sampling method and according to Morgan table. The validity of the questionnaire was evaluated by the professors of physical education and football experts and the reliability level was calculated to be 0.89 based on the Cronbach's alpha that was done by Exploratory Factor Analysis and Friedman test by SPSS version 24 and Liserl 8.8 software. **Results:** The present study was surveyed on the basis of effective factors off-field, that is the most important factors off-field were federation and family and the status of the club were the least important factor in the technical and ethical performance of professional football athletes. **Conclusions:** Supervision and education can play an important role, and family as the first social unit can be also of importance in this respect. After family, the FFIRI should take basic measures for culture-building and detailed reflections on its activities.

Keywords: Ethical performance, Technical performance, Football, Match, Professional athlete

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INTRODUCTION

It is widely accepted that in today's communities, interest in sports as a human-related and educational issue is growing among all social groups (Ebrahimi, Askari, & Nikneghad 2010; 62), so that it has overshadowed cultural, political, and socioeconomic events. Accordingly, athletes are being introduced as role-models and patterns in various communities, and some people are also copying their dress codes, hairstyles, conducts, as well as social interactions and gestures (Ahmadi, 2017; 2).

Therefore, sports authorities' awareness and knowledge of ethical responsibilities is on the rise due to much more emphasis on ethics in sports in communities; however, they are facing barriers in terms of characterizing ethical problems and setting appropriate strategies to explain them (Caswell & Gould, 2008; 207).

At present, team sports are of much priority, popularity, and locus of attention (Meletakos, Chatzicharistos, Apostolidis, Manasis, & Bayios, 2016; 391). Among them, football as the most viewed event in stadiums overflowed with very many spectators has turned into the most popular sport across the world, and it has been also selected as a national sport in some countries. According to the statistics released by the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA), 270 million people are playing football all around the world and more than 33 million unique spectators have watched the 2016-17 Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) Champions League (Paravizo & Souza, 2018; 510; Rookwood & Spaaij, 2017;1).

This amount of devotion to this sporting event by different social groups has drawn researchers to shed light on social environment in team sports (Benson & Bruner, 2018; 120). During football development, this sport has been often associated with violence and numerous instances of violent behaviors have been thus recorded. This violence is sometimes dubbed the English disease, reflecting the prevalence of this phenomenon in England (Rookwood & Spaaij, 2017; 2) and causing numerous scandals in international communities that shows football provides conditions in which so many ethical issues occur (Constandt & Willem, 2019; 402).

Accordingly, taking a glance at the development path of different sports and comparing present-day sporting events with those in the past, it can be recognized that sporting events are drawn against a new-age catch-22 situation, indicating the emergence of unethicity (Halabian, Godarzi, & Alidoust Qahfarkhi 2014; 11). Thus, ethical development in adolescents and young adults in professional sport environments with regard to teachings by coaches and trainers seems unreasonable (Shajie, Koze Chian, Ehsani, & Amiri, 2012; 20).

As matches and games increase, the amount of injuries increases, and the higher the pressure on players, the more likely they will be injured (Saheb AL Zamani, 2009; 9). Obviously having a good level of aerobic fitness can be a determining factor in maintaining athletes' performance during the race. So that a top footballer should be at an ideal level in all aspects of fitness (speed, endurance, power, strength, agility and balance) (Haghighi, Farhangian, Hoseini Kakhak, 2013; 69).

Often the reasons that prevent one athlete from succeeding or reaching another at the peak of success do not exist and should be sought in the inner and mental world of athletes. Based on this, one can deduce the level of functional and technical as well as many successes by practicing psychological skills in the athlete (khosravi Jafari, 2014; 6).

The noteworthy thing is that many athletes show their best performance in practice, but they fail to demonstrate all their potentials and have emotional reactions during competitions and confrontations with rivals, even with the presence of the mass media and spectators, lack of motivation, improper coaching styles and behaviors as well as other stressful circumstances (Barzegar, 2017; 2; Najafi, Heidarinejad, Shetab Bushehri 2018; 186).

Possibly; the reason is that once there was merely a game between players in traditional football in the past, but today's football game occurs between all stakeholders (Khaghani Avar & Shanavaz, 2016; 41). Therefore; directors, coaches, trainers, and generally individuals working at professional levels are specifically under pressure by their professions, the public, and the mass media to obtain the best results at the shortest possible time. This issue is among one of the factors providing grounds for unethical decision-making in this respect (Rudd, Mullane, & Stoll, 2010; 62).

Following the ever-increasing difficulties at the present time in the domain of the ethical manifestations of football, football-related violence has been put forth which is often used as a synonym for football-oriented tactic (Goldblatt, 2014), and it is assumed that situational match-related factors can affect the prevalence and severity of football-induced violence including the importance of the match and the relationships between rivals as the most important factors (Lewis, 2007; 146; Spaaij, 2014; 147).

Football clubs that are directly challenged by different ethical issues are also facing ethical standards and principles to deal with unethical behaviors (Constandt, Waegeneer, & Willem, 2019; 621). But, the real effects of actions that aim to reduce violence in football are still not well understood due to lack of strong evidence as well as appropriate theoretical and methodological models (Schaap, Postma, Jansen, & Tolsma, 2015; 84).

In this regard, the results of the study by Klimczak, Kalina, & Jagiello (2015) revealed that many sports and particularly contact ones could raise violence. Moreover, the findings of the investigation by Kavussanu, Seal, & Phillips (2006) indicated that, making rivals injured deliberately in men's football teams was nothing special. Rafiei, Asadi, Yazdani, and Madadi (2017) also suggested that physical fitness training could reduce violent behaviors and increase temperament characteristics in sports.

Besides, Harlick and McKenzie (2000) and Rudd (2005) concluded that all those engaged in sports could inevitably confront the phenomenon of violence and thus aggressive behaviors at different times and during various competitions with high or low severities due to needs for power, pain, discomfort, etc.

Accordingly; if athletes need to have ability to distinguish right from wrong, beautiful from ugly, and also fair from unfair, they must put it in practice while doing sports activities. The results of the study by Ahmadi (2017) similarly showed that sometimes there was not as much of opportunity for making a decision; however, the importance of a decision could be high during conflicts, so making wrong ones was likely to disturb the future of a profession and even personal life of individuals.

It should be noted that off-field viz. external factors can have a significant effect on technical and ethical performance of football

players; however, to what extent these effects can be involved in a player's performance is an issue that has not been entirely clarified yet. Undoubtedly, technical and ethical performance is regarded as one of the most important criteria for any spectator, so that attractiveness of a match is diminished if such a performance is at low levels. They are also important factors having an effect on absorption of spectators, fans, and sponsors for a football club.

There is possibly no progress if an athlete suffers from ethical defects. Moreover; athletes can upset the atmosphere of a team if their technical performance is not at a desirable level. Therefore, athletes need to make efforts to achieve stability in technical issues. Since technical and ethical performances are interrelated; athletes with good technical performance but not in ethically good conditions may be involved in unimportant issues and excluded from a team.

In contrast, athletes benefiting from good ethics, but poor performance may fail to reach appropriate progress. Previous studies in this field have revealed that various conditions could shape athletic performance as far as there is an rise or a fall in technical performance and demonstration of unexpected appropriate or inappropriate ethical behaviors during competitions among professional athletes under the pressure of these effects.

Thus, identifying and comparing factors affecting such behaviors from the perspective of sports management is of utmost importance; which can ultimately provide suitable strategies for preventing, controlling, and reducing stress, as well as improving technical and ethical performance in athletes in sport environments. In this study, factors affecting the performance of professional football players in different competitions and at different levels were investigated. Accordingly, the main purpose of the present study was to address the following research question:

“What are the off-field factors affecting technical and ethical performance of professional football athletes in competitions and how much are they are effective?”

METHOD

This study was a descriptive survey and an applied research using a field method and a questionnaire. The statistical population of this study consisted of all athletes, referees, coaches and trainers, technical staff, and members of professional football clubs (Premier League, First Division, Second Division, Third Division, Provincial League, and National League of other organizations) as well as members of the Football Federation Islamic Republic of Iran (FFIRI) and football associations in the city of Tehran during the 2018-19 Persian Gulf Pro League in Iran. As well, Stratified-purposive sampling method was used and a total number of 384 individuals were included in the study according to Krejcie and Morgan Table.

A researcher-made questionnaire was also used to collect the required data. Based on similar studies and guided by professors of sports management, each variable was further defined according to theoretical foundations in a detailed manner. Moreover, there were discussions and reviews with experts and then the final questionnaire was developed, revised, and distributed.

The content validity of the questionnaire was similarly confirmed by 13 professors of sports management and 5 elite experts working in the field of football. Before the implementation of the study and in order to ensure the reliability of the questionnaire, it was evaluated through a pilot study by distributing 30 questionnaires with a 90% Cronbach's alpha coefficient which was an acceptable value.

After confirming the face validity and the content validity of the given questionnaire, it was distributed among other participants in the statistical population until the sample size reached the desired number. A five-point Likert-type scale was also employed to answer the questionnaire items which was of composite type with options from "very low" (1) to "very much" (5).

To complete the related literature in this study; library research containing articles in English and Persian, theses and dissertations, books, journals, and the Internet sources were used.

The sample size in the present study was comprised of 384 individuals according to Krejcie and Morgan Table. Before completing the questionnaire by the participants, a to-the-point guide was presented on how to complete it and then differences in responses to the items were

explained. It should be noted that questionnaires were also submitted to the Premier League football clubs in Tehran (i.e. Esteghlal, Persepolis, and Paykan), but there was no cooperation and no response was received. Given the difficult access and obligations for arrangement requirements in football clubs for women to attend their trainings, only a limited number of these female athletes were recruited in this study through an intermediary.

Based on the results associated with demographic characteristics information of the study samples and with regard to frequency and percentage as descriptive statistics, the data were analyzed through mean and standard deviation. In the domain of inferential statistics and considering factors affecting technical and ethical performance of professional football players off the pitch, confirmatory factor analysis model in the case of standardized coefficients and significance as well as Friedman test for ranking were used.

RESULTS

In this study, the minimum and maximum age of the samples was 16 and 65 years; respectively. Among them, 34.1% (n=131) were in the range of between 15 and 30 years, 39.6% (n=152) aged 31-45 years, 22.7% (n=87) were in the range of between 46 and 60 years, and 3.6% (n=14) aged 61 years and over. Moreover, 28% of the study samples (n=109) having high school diploma constituted the most frequent level of education and 5% of them with PhD degree (n=23) had the lowest frequency. As well, the most frequent position and type of activity was being a player (37%, n=143) including 243 men (63.3) and 141 women (36.7). The highest frequency regarding level of activity belonged to First Division by 22% (n=85). It should be noted that the samples studied have at least 3 years of professional level experience in provincial or higher leagues. The results of the demographic characteristics information of the study samples including level of education, position, type of activity, and level of activity is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Results from demographic information of research sample members

Variable	Degree	Frequency	Percentage
Academic Degrees	Under high school diploma	54	14.1
	Diploma	109	28.4
	Associate	53	13.8
	Bachelor	96	25
	Master	49	12.8
	Ph.D.	23	6
Position and type of activity	player	143	37.2
	coach	116	30.2
	Referee	39	10.2
	Technical staff	46	12
	Management of the club, federation and board	40	10.4
Level activity	Premier League	32	8.3
	League Azadegan	85	22.1
	League 2	59	15.4
	League 3	66	17.2

Table 2: Statistical description of the variables of the research

	component	Mean	SD
Effective factors off-field	Income	5.9089	2.28847
	Family	12.2969	2.93896
	exercises	5.4453	2.02262
	Club condition	6.5781	1.77277
	Federation	12.1302	3.00890
	Media and community culture	12.4688	3.05973

The descriptive statistics of scores related to the off-the-pitch factors affecting technical and ethical performance of professional football players including indices of mean and standard deviation is illustrated in Table 2. The results of this study obtained from descriptive statistics indicated that the mass media and community culture with a mean value of 12.4688 and a standard deviation of 3.05973 followed by family with a mean value of 12.2969 and a standard deviation of 2.93896 had the most significant effect on professional football player's performance. As

well, trainings in club with a mean value of 5.4456 and a standard deviation of 2.02262 had the least significant effect on technical and ethical performance of professional football players in a match. It should be noted that, there were limitations in the present study including participants' honesty in responses, inaccessibility of study samples, participants' cultural and economic status and place of residence, as well as an imbalance in distribution of resources and capital.

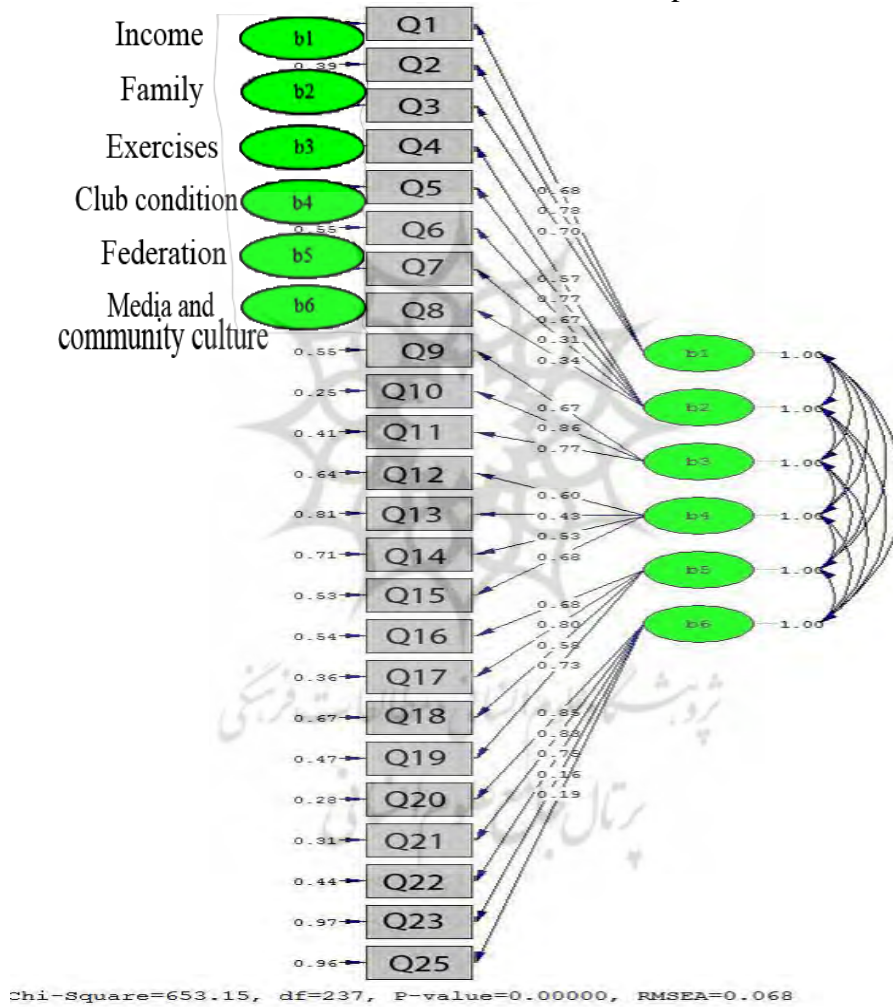


Figure 1: Final confirmatory factor analysis model for off-field factors affecting technical and ethical performance of professional football athlete in standardized coefficients

The confirmatory factor analysis model for off-field factors affecting technical and ethical performance of professional football athlete in the case of standardized coefficients is shown in Figure 1. The parameter estimate value for each variable represented factor loading of each variable for its associated factor.

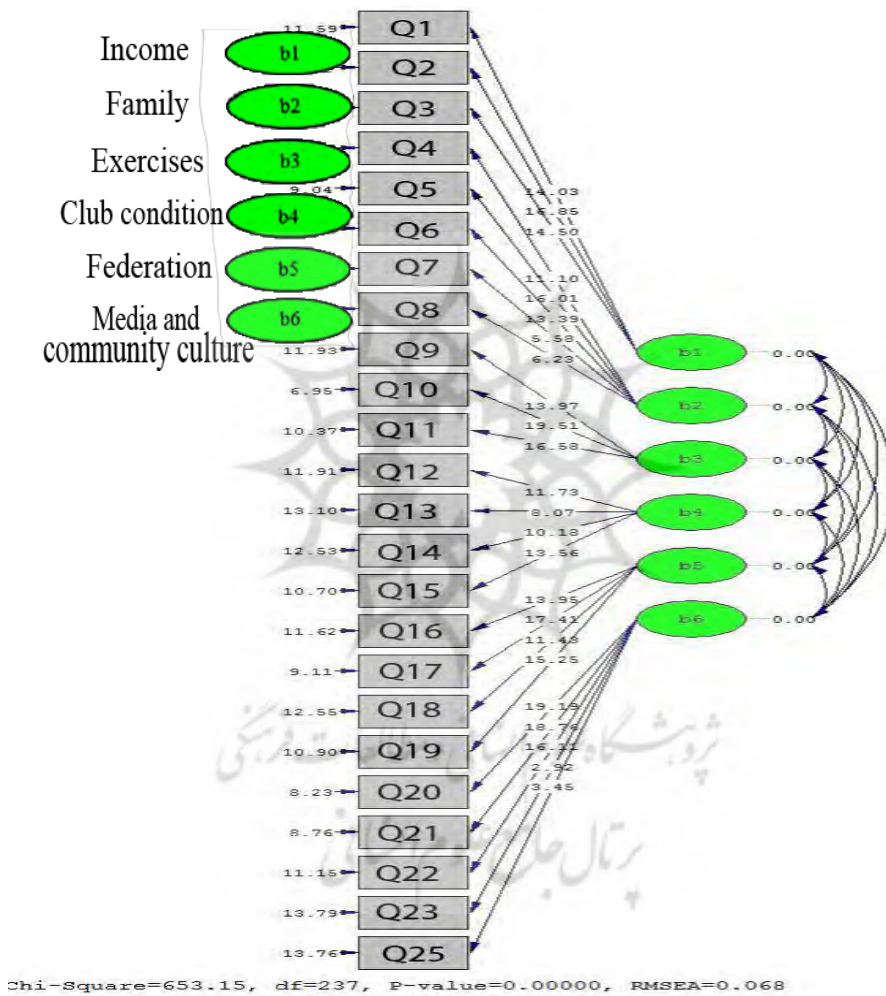


Figure 2: Final confirmatory factor analysis model for off-field factors affecting technical and ethical performance of professional football athlete in the case of significant coefficients

According to Figure 2, the confirmatory factor analysis model for off-field factors affecting technical and ethical performance of professional football athlete in the case of coefficients was significant. The values on paths represented t-values for each path. To make the factor loadings more significant, it was required to have a t-value > 1.96 in each path. According to the results obtained, all the t-values associated with factor loadings were greater than 1.96 and they were significant. Out of 25 related off-the-pitch factors, the factor loading associated with Item no.24 was not significant, so it was eliminated from the questionnaire.

Table 3: Fit index of factor model

Fit index	Acceptable range	The observed value	Measurement Fit index
$df\chi^2/$	≤ 3	2.75	Suitable
IFI	>0.9	0.97	Suitable
RFI	>0.9	0.96	Suitable
RMSEA	<0.8	0.068	Suitable
CFI	>0.9	0.97	Suitable
NFI	>0.9	0.96	Suitable

The ratio index of the degree of freedom for the Chi-square (df/χ^2) confirmed the fit of the model. Accordingly, the df/χ^2 was a number less than 3 which meant the model was fitted with the data. The root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) was also equal to 0.068 that was smaller than the criterion value (0.08), and thus confirmed the fit of the model. Eventually, the indices of incremental fit index (IFI), comparative fit index (CFI), normed fit index (NFI), and relative fit index (RFI) were larger than the desired criterion (0.9). In general and with regard to the sum of fit indices calculated, the fit of the model of off-field factors affecting technical and ethical performance of professional football players was confirmed.

Table 4: Friedman test results to determine the priority of outlying factors that affect the technical and ethical performance of the player

	Factors off-field		Mean Rank
1	Income		3.05
2	Family		4.55
3	Exercises		2.78
4	Club condition		2.07
5	Federation		5.55
6	Media and community culture		3.01
7	Friedman test	χ^2	932.712
8		Sig	0.001

To prioritize the most important off-the-pitch factors affecting technical and ethical performance of the professional football players, Friedman test was used. The results of the Friedman test to determine the priority and ranks of the off-field factors affecting technical and ethical performance of professional football players is presented in Table4. The results indicated that, from the perspective of the study samples, the FFIRI and family were the most significant off-the-pitch factors and trainings in club was introduced as the least important one affecting technical and ethical performance of professional football players.

DISCUSSION

Today, football has gone beyond a sporting event, and its direct or indirect issues off the pitch are affecting communities and attracting a large number of people. In this respect, football players as the integral parts of the battle scenes can have a direct effect on this huge wave and bring it to tranquility or a storm of controversy. Since adolescents and young adults' role-model professional football players in terms of their technical and ethical performance, looking at the root of this sport as well as its sidelines are of utmost importance. During a conflict, there is very little opportunity for decision-making and the decisions are of importance, so making wrong decisions can overshadow the future of a profession and even personal life of individuals (Ahmadi, 2017; 3). Although the idea that sports can lead to an ethical character has been

highlighted since the ancient times (Rafiei et al., 2017; 73), overlooking the main goals of this path can impose financial and spiritual burdens. Due to this violent nature and property damage, several attempts have been made to set limitations in football (Clark, 2006; 496).

Football-induced violence has caused injuries and casualties as well as property damage in stadiums in Iran and also those in other countries (Cleland, 2015). The disclosure of football violence has also brought about problems, so that violent behaviors have become reinforced and even smartened (Rookwood & Spaaij, 2017; 3).

The main purpose of the present study was to measure off-field factors affecting technical and ethical performance in professional football players. Accordingly, the results of the confirmatory factor analysis showed that, among the factors affecting technical and ethical performance off-field; the dimensions of non-creditworthy clubs and provision of facilities in the component of income had the most significant effects. Moreover, unmet expectations of players about a game and low pays had the least effects in this respect. The results of the present study were consistent with the findings of the investigation by Tunaru, Clark, & Viney (2005) in which the importance of a player in each football club compared with that in other clubs was considered different, depending on the income of a club and scores gained by a team. In another study, Vrooman (1995) reflected on the effect of pays to players and provision of facilities and stated that more pays could absorb more stars in a team. It should be noted that many clubs in Iran are encountered by financial difficulties in paying their players, so that most of the players talk about non-payment and also delays in pays. There are even complaints filed against the clubs as well as numerous reports of players not attending the trainings. On the other hand, players have higher goals in their minds to join a club which cannot be sometimes achieved and they might suffer a loss of spirits and reduced motivation to remain and some of players also become certain to leave the club.

Among the dimensions within the component of family, the level of family support for players had the most significant effect and being single or married had the least impact on players' technical and ethical performance. Many players were not also able to promote to higher levels because of lack of family support and poor financial status. The results obtained in this study were in line with findings in other investigations

including those by Michel, Mitchelson, Pichler, and Cullen (2010) and Matthews, Bulger, and Barnes-Farrell (2010). The role of family support and mutual understanding between partners had been correspondingly reported to affect inner peace and resolve resulting family conflicts. On the other hand, family support for players had been taken into account as an important factor in terms of motivating and improving players' spirits in terms of their performance, so that some athletes had been forced to take a leave because of family problems to fix them or even quit playing football since they were spending a lot of time at home and with their family. At this time; they needed peace, and if the home environment was not appropriate with concerns in their personal life, their trainings and games would be affected.

With regard to the dimensions of the component of trainings in club, the amount and pressure of trainings, training camps, and preparatory games by a team had the most significant effect and the amount and type of trainings in a team had the least impact. These results are consistent with the findings by Barzegar (2017) and Akbari (2011) in which it had been argued that training season and playing style could influence players' performance. Since players endure a lot of pressure during a season, loss of technical and ethical performance may occur if they reach a level of physical and mental fatigue. In professional teams that are simultaneously present in several different competitions, there is a lot of pressure on players and they feel dissatisfied as manifested in talks by players, coaches, and how they play. So; proper planning and training camps at the right time can have a great effect on their performance during competitions.

Among the dimensions of the component of club status, club management had the most significant effect on players and high or low reputation of the club had the least impact in this respect. The results of this study were consistent with the findings by Mousavi and Salimi (2016) in which it was stated that the pressures from the club management were aimed at victory at any cost, reputation, and economic interests, promotion to higher levels of quality, spectator pressure, and commercialization of football. Today, senior management and members of board of directors in clubs can create appropriate conditions, provide conveniences, appreciate, support and encourage players, and also

enhance their motivation to remain. However, unusual pressure can have a negative effect on players and make them get into controversial issues.

Considering the dimensions of the component of the FFIRI, inappropriate and unusual punishments and fines administered by the disciplinary committee had the most significant effect, followed by support for clubs or players by the FFIRI and then restrictions long with rules and regulations of the FFIRI. Discriminations by the FFIRI towards provincial associations had the least effect in this respect. These results were in line with the findings reported by Jalali Farahani, Goodarzi, Khabiri, and Asadi (2004) and Khabiri and Ellahi (2004) in which the structure of the FEIRI, drawbacks in the FFIRI, comparison of football clubs in Iran's Premier League and UEFA standards, as well as comparison of Iran's football clubs with other ones in other countries had been delineated. Today; in many of the professional clubs and football federations across the world, players adhere to and practice detailed rules and regulations in terms of their performance including different encouragements and even strict punishments against breaking rules and regulations, so that even stars can be affected. For this reason, players need to serve a team and also take responsibility for their own actions. Nevertheless; Iranian football players are unfortunately at a higher priority and they are immune to violating rules and regulations which can affect their performance. In this context, the FFIRI does not act properly in terms of supporting clubs, to the extent that weaker clubs receive less support which can lead to discontent and undoubtedly affect the quality of the players.

Among the dimensions of the component of the mass media and community culture, live TV broadcasting had the most significant effect, followed by the mass media and the press, and after that, the cyberspace and social networks. According to the results of this study, popular culture and public reactions to players had the least effect on their technical and ethical performance. These results were in line with the findings reported by Barzegar (2017) and Rudd, Mullane, and Stoll (2010) in which it had been stated that players could experience emotional reactions once facing the mass media. Therefore, if players are further introduced through the mass media and the cyber space, they are most likely to demonstrate emotional behaviors. In this regard, not only players but also coaches and trainers can be affected. In some cases,

players' performance changes as they stand in front of the mass media in different conditions, and they show certain behaviors that are called the game of media.

CONCLUSIONS

According to the related literature as well as the results of confirmatory factor analysis and Friedman test, it became obvious that the components of the FFIRI and family were of utmost importance among the off-field factors. The role of the FFIRI as the one in charge of directing football in Iran was highlighted. Thus, it can be improved through modifying inappropriate punishment and fines administered against breaking rules and regulations and increasing support for various football clubs including teams at lower levels. In this respect, the role of family as the central point in communities and the first educational unit for children in shaping the foundations of this issue was also of importance. So, supervision and education can play an important role and family as the first social unit can be also of importance in this respect. After family, the FFIRI should take basic measures for culture-building and detailed reflections on its activities. Finally; the effective roles of family and the Education Department should be considered in terms of shaping the character of athletes since childhood; and then the mass media as the main source of culture-building, creating or changing the state of mind of people, needs to be pointed out. Based on the related literature, this effect has thus received much attention in football industry by all developed countries, so they have succeeded in introducing appropriate behavioral patterns and creating lively and safe environments for different spectators, especially families, in the presence of each other in a football match.

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