

# Interactions Between Gender, Age and Competitive Level on Elite Student-athletes' Religious Coping Experiences in the Week Leading Up to Competition

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**Abstract:** In recent times, religiosity and spirituality have been embraced by most athletes as alternative coping mechanism around the world. Although extensive scholarly works on different dimensions of coping exist in sport, only few studies have explored the use of other coping strategies like religious coping. The current study investigated elite student-athletes' religious coping strategies as a function of gender, age and competitive level in the week leading up to competition. This cross-sectional study conveniently recruited a sample of 300 student-athletes competing at the 2018 West Africa University Games (WAUG) in Nigeria. Sociodemographic data (i.e., gender, age category and competitive level) and religious coping using the Brief RCOPE Scale were assessed. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used to evaluate the possible effect of gender, age and competitive level on religious coping. Results indicate that no significant interaction effects were realized across all between-subject factors: gender-age-competitive level on religious coping. However, a significant main effect was noted for only participants' competitive level on religious coping, with international students employing more religious coping strategies (both positive and negative) compared to their national and regional counterparts. Sport psychologists, coaches and managers working closely with these athletes could integrate positive religious coping strategies for athletes of different competitive levels as part of an adaptation framework that may independently influence important outcomes such as emotion and cognitive regulation, including their psychological wellbeing.

**Keywords:** Allah, Cognitive Appraisal, Cognitive Regulation, God, Religious Coping, Spiritual Being

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## 1. Introduction

Elite student-athletes are often expected to devise adequate means of coping with the stressors associated with competitive engagements before, during and after competition [1, 2], as well as their academic demands [3]. Since individual roles of being either an athlete and/or a student could be stressful, occupying both roles would be extremely stressful or

demanding [4]. However, there is the existence of a sound argument that addresses this logic or inference. Since humans are capable of positively adapting to stressors of all kinds, it is envisaged that student-athletes would become more psychologically efficient to simultaneously manage their stress and other life stressors they encounter. Nevertheless, if

they fail to effectively manage these stressors, then the design and implementation of psychological skills training would help them to overcome these perceived demands [1, 5, 6].

In recent times, religiosity and spirituality have been embraced by most athletes as alternative coping mechanism around the world, especially in societies where cultural issues are quite pervasive [7-10]. For instance, a study reported that athletes agreed that they believed in God or a spiritual being for protection against injury, to help them win competitions and to help them manage their stressors [7]. Some athletes exhibit their beliefs in a spiritual being by engaging in varied practices or routines such as knocking on a wood [11], keeping a crossed finger [12] and/ or doing a sign of the cross [13]. At critical times, teams even resort to sprinkling of animal blood, seeds and other spiritual substances on the field or game arena which are believed to cause a change in outcomes during competitive events [8, 14]. Elite-athletes together with their coaches use spiritual means to manage their psychological demands as opposed to other strategies [7].

Although extensive scholarly works on different dimensions of coping exist in sport [15-23], only few studies have explored the use of alternative coping strategies such as religious coping [9, 24, 25]. There seems to be scarcity of literature on religious coping experiences before and during competition [26]. Recently, Hagan [9] assessed the effect of religious coping compared to conventional psychological skills (e.g., imagery, self-talk) on elite student-athletes' self-reported discrete emotions across gender, competitive status, and religion. Results showed that athletes of different competitive level and religious affiliation experienced diverse negative emotions (e.g., anxiety, anger) and negative religious coping. An earlier study by Spittle and Dillon [25] had also shown a connection between spirituality and "sense of control". In this study, religious coping is termed as "the use of religious beliefs or behaviors to facilitate problem-solving to prevent or alleviate the negative emotional consequences of stressful life circumstances" [27, p. 513].

Besides, some moderating variables such as gender, age and competitive level have been found to play a crucial role in coping with athletes' stressful experiences or events prior to competitions [28, 29]. For instance, coping literature suggests that gender discriminates the selection of coping strategies in general psychology literature, nonetheless scholarly attention on competitive athletes is sparse [30]. Whereas evaluating gender variations among elite athletes is relatively sparse [31], research on the use of religious coping as a function of age and competitive level is apparently unknown. Given the recent emergence of religiosity and/or spirituality in sport, showing the potential interactions between these variables may help unearth useful information for future athletes' mental preparations before competition. It is worth noting that cross-cultural experiences may also determine what events are prioritized, the potential implications and the gains of sport success and failure, often controlled by the methods used to manage specific demands. Therefore, how athletes from diverse identities appraise, cope, and adapt to sport-related demands may be influenced by their cultural settings [32, 33].

Therefore, the current study sets out to investigate elite student-athletes' religious coping experiences as a function of gender, age and competitive level in the week leading up to competition. Based on previous literature [9, 25, 28-30], the following hypothesis was formulated: there would be significant interactions between gender, age and competitive level on elite student-athletes' religious coping responses.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Study Participants

This study employed a descriptive cross-sectional survey design to conveniently select 300 student-athletes who participated in the 2018 West Africa University Games (WAUG) in Nigeria as participants for the study. One hundred and sixty-four (164) of the participants representing 54.3% were males whilst 136 of them representing 45.7% were females. The participants' ages ranged from 19 to 34 years ( $M = 25.95$ ,  $SD = 3.254$ ). These student-athletes trained for a minimum of 3 times a week and participated in competitive sports for at least 3 years on the average. Based on the levels of experience in competitive sport in their respective countries, participants were grouped as non-elite/regional, semi-elite/national, and elite/international. Under this classification, the elite/International student-athletes were 144 (48.0%), with the semi-elite/national group being 125 (41.7%) while that of the non-elite/regional athletes were 31, representing 10.3% (see Figure 1).

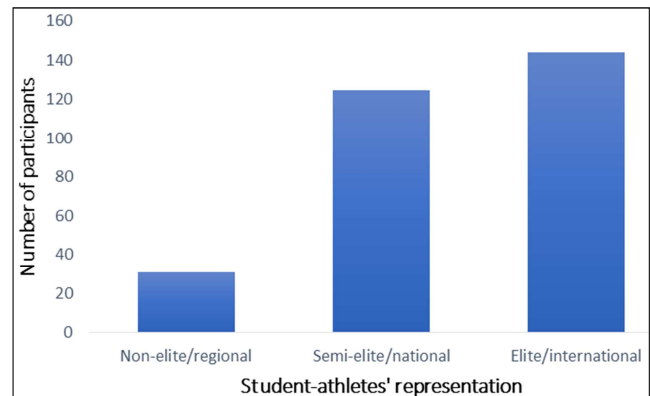


Figure 1. Elite student-athletes' representation by competitive level.

For religious background, Christian student-athletes formed the majority,  $N = 177$  (59.0%), followed by Muslims,  $N = 87$  (29.0%), with those in the other religions (e.g., Buddhism, African Traditional Religion and Hinduism) being the least represented,  $N = 36$  (12.0%). Student-athletes who were pursuing various study programs in different public universities in Ghana, Benin and Nigeria were officially registered to take part in the WAUG. To be classified as an elite/international athlete, semi-elite/national or non-elite/regional, student-athletes should have competed, won or received awards internationally, nationally and at the district levels respectively in their countries of origin.

The sampled athletes participated in athletics ( $N = 150$ ),

handball (N = 24), football (N = 78), basketball (N = 24) and volleyball (N = 24). Before the data collection, a scheduled meeting for briefing was held with captains, team coaches and other assigned leaders at the games' village. After complying with ethical standards of the sixth revision of the Declaration of Helsinki, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Bielefeld University approved this survey process. All participants for the current study signed a written informed consent form before the data collection.

## 2.2. Instrumentation

### Religious Coping – Brief RCOPE Inventory

The 14-item Brief RCOPE Inventory, developed by Pargament, et al. [34-36] was used to measure both positive and negative religious coping experiences of the selected student athletes due to its appropriateness and its extensive usage in mainstream psychology.

A 4-point Likert type scale generated scores for each item on the questionnaire ranging from 0 (“never” or “not at all”) to 3 (“very often” or “a great deal”). Respondents were asked to indicate their ages, religious affiliations, competitive levels and country of origin on the survey instrument as demographic information. Participants were also asked to indicate the level at which they utilized specific religious coping methods to deal with stressful events before competition. The Brief RCOPE has varied coping strategies classified under 2 main headings namely positive religious coping (in which religion is seen as “achieving a state of well-being and getting closer to God, providing a supporting role, and finding meaning during a difficult situation”) and negative religious coping (in which religion is seen as “perceived punishment or abandonment from God whilst encountering a stressor”). Some specific items on the questionnaire that measure both positive and negative religious coping include; “asking forgiveness of my sins”, “trusting God will be on my side” and “deciding the devil made this happen respectively”. The face and content validity of the Brief RCOPE Inventory were ascertained from experts in religious studies. The reported Cronbach coefficient alpha values obtained in the present study on the 2 subscales are; positive religious coping (0.89) and negative religious coping (0.78). These values are consistent with values obtained from previous studies [37-39], an indication that the internal consistency values among the variables on the scales are high and therefore considered acceptable.

## 2.3. Procedure

The researchers sought formal approval from leaders of the various team delegates from Nigeria, Ghana and Benin after formal permission was granted from the various Universities before collecting the data. Student athletes were recruited soon after enquiring from captains and coaches of all the teams. After establishing a good rapport with team coaches and captains of all teams, the study participants were told that the responses they would provide would only be accessible to the researchers and the two research assistants. Additionally,

for the sake of anonymity, all participants were assured that all the responses they would give would be treated as confidential and that partaking in the study was voluntary. Hence, quitting or continuing to respond to the questionnaires was their sole decision to make.

The study sample were given an extensive briefing to explain the meaning of all the specific items, phrases, and instructions on the Brief RCOPE survey instrument for clearer understanding before administering the questionnaires. The two research assistants retrieved the completed survey instruments from the participants in their hostels and sealed them in envelopes. Duration for the questionnaire completion lasted 20-30 minutes.

## 2.4. Data Analysis

Data was primarily prescreened to determine its accuracy whilst statistical assumptions of outliers, homogeneity, multicollinearity of variances were tested. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was applied to analyze the data in order to minimize error variance. Religious coping that included both positive and negative religious coping strategies were entered into the MANOVA model as the dependent variables whereas gender (Male, Female), age category (18-24, 25-29, 30 and above), and competitive level served as the independent variables. MANOVA was deemed fit for this analysis because of its ability to measure several dependent (positive and negative religious coping) and different categories of independent variables (gender, age category and competitive level). All data analyses and related procedures were conducted using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23.0 for Windows.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Preliminary Data Screening

Before the analysis, several assumptions were tested including univariate and multivariate normality, multicollinearity, linearity, detection of outliers, singularity, and homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices. The Box's M Test showed a violation of the homogeneity of variance-covariance assumption  $F(39, 13264.410) = 77.061, p = .001$ . Hence, Pillai's trace was chosen as the multivariate test statistic because it has a high level of robustness over tests that violate assumptions.

### 3.2. MANOVA Analysis on Religious Coping

A 2 (Gender)  $\times$  3 (age category)  $\times$  3 (competitive level) MANOVA was computed on religious coping. Results of the MANOVA analysis revealed that there were no interaction effects for gender, age category and competitive level. However, a significant main effect was reported for only competitive level on religious coping. A one-way ANOVA testing for any potential differences across the between-subject factors was subsequently conducted. A follow-up post-hoc test was done using the Bonferroni correction factor to indicate where the actual variations exist.

### 3.3. Religious Coping

The MANOVA analysis computed revealed no significant interaction effects across all between-subject factors: gender-age-competitive level,  $F(8, 564) = 1.435, p = .179$ , including for gender and age category,  $F(4, 564) = 1.545, p = .188$ ; gender and competitive level,  $F(4, 564) = 1.573, p = .180$ ; age category and competitive level  $F(8, 564) = .650, p = .735$  on religious coping. However, a significant main effect was reported for only participants' competitive level  $F(4, 564) = 7.912, p = .000, \eta^2 p = 0.83$  on religious coping.

A multiple comparison analysis indicated that for positive religious coping, a significant difference occurred between international and national (Mean difference = 1.63,  $p < 0.005$ ) but a non-significant difference between international and regional (Mean difference = 1.58,  $p > 0.005$ ) as well as national and regional (Mean difference = .0488,  $p > 0.005$ ) student-athletes. For negative religious coping, the results showed a significant difference between international and national (Mean difference = 1.50,  $p < 0.005$ ), international and regional (Mean difference = 4.70,  $p < 0.005$ ), and national and regional (Mean difference = 3.20,  $p < 0.005$ ) student athletes.

## 4. Discussion

The study examined the interaction effects between gender, age and competitive level on elite student-athletes' religious coping experiences (i.e., positive and negative religious coping strategies) in a week leading to competition. The study found that gender and age had no effect on the self-reported positive and negative religious coping responses of elite student-athletes prior to competition, a finding that is similar to earlier scholarly report from a similar homogenous geographical location [6]. This finding perhaps could be linked to the similarity in the geographical contexts in which the studies were conducted (i.e., West Africa). However, the current finding disagrees with other past studies [40-43]. For example, Kim [44] identified gender variations in the pattern of associations between religiosity and externalizing problems, that is, religious attendance was associated with externalizing problems among non-maltreated boys, but not among ill-treated boys or girls. Hoar et al. [29] also found that coping with stressful situations among male and female adolescent athletes differed significantly. A plausible explanation for this finding could be attributed to the difference in measurement of coping strategies, non-sporting populations and methodological variations. For instance, the current study considered religious coping strategies whereas the study by Anshel et al. [40] concentrated on conventional coping strategies (i.e., avoidance and approach) among athletes. Gendered coping variations in sport are inconclusive [45]. Although a previous study suggests robust gender differences [46], a critical look reveals inconsistent findings across studies [6, 33, 45, 47, 48]. According to Crocker et al. [33], there is still much to know about gendered coping in sport, with a proposition that two perspectives (i.e., the situational and dispositional hypotheses) could help bridge this research gap

and/or inconsistencies currently dominating coping literature in sport (see [29, 49, 50] for details).

Additionally, age of student-athletes had no influence on their positive and negative religious coping strategies, a finding that corroborates a previous study [43]. Notwithstanding, another previous study reported a contrary finding [41]. Interpretations of research findings on religious coping and age are mixed. While some studies indicate that religious experiences remain consistent throughout an individual's life cycle, other studies provide evidence on its steady increase with age. An important implication of these findings to sport psychology practitioners and coaches is that, in helping their athletes to develop adequate ways that conform to their religious beliefs and practices in dealing with their stressful situations before competitions, less emphasis should be placed on their age and gender but rather on type of demands they encounter and subsequent cognitive appraisals. More studies are required to help develop different conceptual and interventional frameworks to guide athletes' coping from a religious lens.

The study also revealed that competitive level impacted on positive and negative religious coping strategies of elite student-athletes prior to competition. This finding is akin to some previously conducted studies [9, 41, 48] that also confirmed the significant role of experience in coping with competition related-stress. An acceptable explanation for this finding could be attributed to the accumulated experiences of religious athletes who represent their schools at different competitive platforms (national, regional and international) [51, 52]. Essentially, it is normal for novice athletes to experience more stress and anxiety because of varied reasons (e.g., unfamiliar sporting environment, fear of failure) compared to experienced athletes [51, 52]. However, this may not be conclusively true as situations and individual differences might affect ones' degree of coping with impending stressful events [53].

More specifically, international student-athletes employed more positive religious coping strategies compared to their national counterparts. It is possible that international elite student-athletes may believe strongly that their object of worship (i.e., God, Allah, deity) has brought them to a certain level of accomplishment. Therefore, these athletes are more likely to depend on their object of worship as a source that could facilitate other successes [7, 10]. It could also be that the international student-athletes have come to a realization that other athletes from different geographical locations also have some degree of dependence on an object of worship. These athletes are more likely to also cope with competition related-stressors with positive religious activities such as listening to religious songs, praying, reading sacred scriptures (i.e., Bible and Quran), reciting scriptures, and making a sign of the cross, among others [54]. Given that religiosity or spirituality in sport is pervasive in Africa [8, 14, 55], it is not surprising that international student-athletes employed more positive religious coping strategies to counter their stressors before forthcoming competitive events.

The study also found that compared to national and regional

student-athletes, international student-athletes reported negative religious coping strategies. It is often common to see athletes engage in negative religious coping behaviors such as consulting shrines, sprinkling of blood and concoctions, exempting one's self from performing certain regular activities (e.g., brushing of teeth, eating, bathing) in order to emerge victorious due to enormous pressure or high expectations from coaches, spectators, the media, sponsors, and family members [56-60]. Some athletes who have represented their countries in international competitions might have witnessed such negative religious strategies of coping with competition stress, making them accept or vulnerable to such maladaptive or dysfunctional strategies perceived as efficacious in managing their stressors. More empirical studies are warranted to test the effectiveness of these naïve techniques in order to make conclusive judgment on their efficacy. These findings underscore the need for coaches and sport psychologists to adopt positive coping strategies to boost athletic performance and minimize the detrimental effects of stress resulting from competitive events.

Drawing from positive psychology, positive religious coping mechanisms (e.g., seeking spiritual support, benevolent religious reappraisal) are often connected with less stress, more psychological development, and improved cooperativeness whereas negative religious coping methods (e.g., spiritual discontent, punishing God reappraisal, passive religious deferral) trigger callousness and can create lower quality of life and wellbeing [36, 61, 62]. Therefore, athletes who engaged in positive religious coping strategies are more likely to have better psychological health compared to their counterparts who reportedly used negative religious coping methods. Current study findings imply that not only is religious coping critical, but that the coping method used by these athletes might play a crucial role in the effective management of their pre-competition demands that are often perceived as threatening.

#### **4.1. Limitations**

This study has some limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample was primarily composed of elite university athletes. Therefore, these results are not generalizable to other elite professional athletes. Second, the cross-sectional design of this investigation could not establish a causal association between religious coping and factors assessed. Third, other confounding variables (e.g., appraisals, type of stressors) were not measured in the present study, hence these findings should be interpreted with caution.

#### **4.2. Practical Implications**

Religious coping strategies can affect athletes' overall wellbeing regardless of their competitive standing. Whether the strategy used can positively or negatively impact on athletes' pre-competition demands depends on the kind of religious coping that is practiced. It has already been established from previous empirical evidence that when positive religious coping is used, the effect on the individual's

health and wellbeing is usually positive, especially on mental health. However, negative religious coping impacts negatively on the individual's health and wellbeing [62-64]. Therefore, promoting a positive spiritual climate of these athletes may improve their overall commitment through organizational loyalty that usually promotes a general sense of reciprocity [65]. Sport psychologists, coaches, and managers working with these athletes could integrate positive religious coping as alternative methods for promoting their wellbeing before competition. Besides, positive religious coping could be one of the processes that can boost athletes' self-regulation and be a key determinant if athletes can effectively meet the challenging demands of sport competitions [17, 66, 67]. Adopting a framework that recognizes athletes' religious identities could not only be an answer to problems and negative emotions but could also facilitate planning and proactive cognitive-behavioral tendencies that encourage positive psychological and emotional development [68].

## **5. Conclusion**

The study examined whether age, gender and level of experience could play a role in elite student-athletes' religious coping strategies prior to competitive events. Across all between-subject factors, no significant interaction was realized across positive and negative religious coping strategies of elite student-athletes. However, a link was found between athletes' competitive level and positive/negative religious coping strategies, with international students employing more religious coping strategies (both positive and negative) compared to their national and regional counterparts. For coaches and sport psychologists who work closely with elite student-athletes, developing efficient coping strategies that correspond with their respective religious beliefs and practices are suggested. This work suggests that sport psychologists, coaches and managers should consider integrating positive religious coping strategies for athletes of different competitive level as part of an adaptation framework because this construct may independently influence important outcomes such as emotion and cognitive regulation, as well as their psychological wellbeing. Future research directions could include prospective studies on the psycho-spiritual interventions designed to support positive religious coping among athletes. Investigating the effectiveness of these interventions in the short and long-term adaptation process would be an interesting area of study.

## **Declarations**

### **Authors' Contributions**

JBF, MSS and JEH developed the study's concept. JBF, MSS, RSKA, RSS, and JEH drafted the preliminary version of the manuscript. TS supervised and revised the manuscript of its intellectual content. All authors proofread the manuscript's first draft, contributed intellectually to the overall development, and approved the manuscript's final version for submission.

## Conflicts of Interest

None declared.

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## Institutional Review Board Statement

Ethical procedures were in line with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Bielefeld University and the sixth revision of the Declaration of Helsinki.

## Informed Consent Statement

Written permissions were obtained from the leaders of delegations and coaches of the various contingents for the games. Additionally, written informed consent were taken from sampled student-athletes.

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