

The Impact of Sports Participation on the Psychological Well-Being of Employees of the Ministry of Youth and Sports of Iraq

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to examine the effect of sports participation on the psychological well-being of employees of the Ministry of Youth and Sports of Iraq. This study employed a descriptive–applied field research design. The statistical population consisted of all employees of the Ministry of Youth and Sports of Iraq, from which the sample size was estimated using Krejcie and Morgan's table. A convenience sampling method was applied to recruit participants. Data were collected using Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Questionnaire (1989), which measures six dimensions of well-being including autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. Descriptive statistics, including mean, standard deviation, and frequency distribution, were used for preliminary analysis. Structural equation modeling (SEM) with SmartPLS was applied to test the research hypothesis and assess the significance of relationships among variables. Reliability and validity were confirmed through Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and average variance extracted (AVE). The results revealed that sports participation had a strong and significant effect on psychological well-being among employees of the Ministry of Youth and Sports of Iraq. The path coefficient from sports participation to psychological well-being was 0.943, with a t-value of 22.399 ($p < 0.001$), confirming the hypothesis. Furthermore, factor loadings for all measurement items exceeded the threshold of 0.40, and the model demonstrated high reliability and convergent validity, with all Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values above 0.70. These results confirm that increased engagement in sports activities significantly predicts higher levels of psychological well-being across all measured dimensions. The findings indicate that sports participation plays a critical role in enhancing the psychological well-being of employees. Promoting active lifestyles within the workplace can foster self-acceptance, autonomy, social relationships, and overall mental health, thereby contributing to individual wellness and organizational performance.

Keywords: Sports participation, psychological well-being, employees, Iraq

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Introduction

Psychological well-being is a central construct in contemporary psychology, representing a multidimensional framework that encompasses an individual's sense of purpose in life, autonomy, personal growth, positive relationships with others, environmental mastery, and self-acceptance. Scholars argue that well-being is not only the absence of mental illness but also the presence of optimal functioning and flourishing across personal, social, and professional contexts (1, 2). The beneficial effects of sport and physical activity on psychological outcomes have been consistently documented. Historically, research has emphasized that regular engagement in physical activity reduces anxiety, depression, and stress, while simultaneously enhancing self-concept, resilience, and social integration (3, 4). Early studies in Iran, such as Esfahani's examination of female university students, revealed that participation in sports activities significantly improved mental health in terms of sleep quality, reduced anxiety, and enhanced social functioning (3). These foundational studies established a precedent for later work, which consistently reinforced the positive psychological and physiological outcomes of sports engagement.

Contemporary research has advanced these insights by focusing on the occupational dimension of sports and physical activity. For instance, Baldi et al. highlighted that employees in the Abadan Oil Refining Company who actively engaged in sports exhibited significantly higher levels of psychological adjustment, coping capacity, and workplace performance (5). These findings underline that physical activity contributes not only to individual well-being but also to organizational productivity and efficiency. When applied to employees of the Ministry of Youth and Sports in Iraq, this framework becomes particularly relevant, as their professional responsibilities are deeply intertwined with promoting physical activity and wellness at the national level.

Scholars have also examined how psychological well-being intersects with broader mental health challenges. The burden of mental disorders in Middle Eastern countries has been a persistent concern, with studies indicating a substantial impact on both individual functioning and societal development (6). Within this context, identifying accessible, culturally relevant, and effective strategies to enhance well-being has become imperative. Sports participation represents a cost-effective and socially integrated approach to addressing these concerns, providing both preventive and therapeutic benefits.

In examining the relationship between physical activity and psychological well-being, international scholarship has highlighted that structured sports programs not only promote physical health but also strengthen social skills, self-regulation, and psychological resilience. For example, Nebojsa and colleagues demonstrated in a cross-national study that physical activity significantly enhances psychological well-being by fostering a sense of belonging, purpose, and competence (7). Similarly, Howie et al. emphasized the role of youth sports programs in promoting lifelong physical activity habits while also cultivating social cohesion and emotional regulation (8). These findings are consistent with the proposition that sports participation contributes to multidimensional aspects of psychological well-being.

Recent experimental and quasi-experimental studies reinforce this perspective by investigating targeted interventions. Homayounnia Firoozja's study revealed that movement game-based training improved cognitive performance, social skills, and quality of life among primary school students (9). Such findings provide strong evidence that even structured, short-term interventions in physical activity can yield measurable improvements in psychological well-being indicators. In a related study, Pourazar Morteza

Homayounnia demonstrated that athlete students, both in team and individual sports, displayed significantly higher levels of social growth compared to non-athlete students, underscoring the socialization benefits of sports engagement (10). These studies suggest that the positive effects of sports are not limited to specific age groups or populations but extend across diverse contexts, including occupational environments.

Sports participation also interacts with creativity, social functioning, and cognitive development. Setar Mohammed and Dawood examined the relationship between psychological well-being and functional creativity among female professors of gymnastics in Iraqi universities, showing that higher levels of psychological well-being were significantly correlated with enhanced creative output and professional innovation (11). Their findings imply that promoting well-being through physical activity can also indirectly foster creativity and innovation in work environments, which is particularly relevant for employees of the Ministry of Youth and Sports tasked with designing and implementing creative policies and programs.

The impact of physical activity on mood and emotional states has been further explored in specialized settings. Fakourian et al. investigated the effect of military training on cadets and found that structured physical programs improved mood, reduced body mass index, and enhanced both physical fitness and mental health (12). These results parallel the outcomes observed in civilian contexts, suggesting that structured, physically demanding activities consistently yield psychological benefits across diverse populations.

Motivation is another critical factor that links sports participation with psychological well-being. Jariono and Subekti emphasized that students' motivation for sports participation is directly related to their level of physical activity and overall well-being, with motivated individuals engaging more consistently and reporting higher satisfaction (13). This finding resonates with the work of Keyvanlou et al., who found that athlete students exhibited significantly better mental health indicators compared to their non-athlete peers, further validating the argument that sports participation enhances mental health and psychological well-being (14).

In addition to motivation and mental health outcomes, sports participation also plays a role in promoting social integration and reducing isolation. Psychological well-being encompasses the capacity to establish and maintain positive social relationships, a domain that is significantly enhanced through sports activities that emphasize teamwork, cooperation, and social interaction (7, 8). These benefits are particularly relevant in the workplace, where collaborative relationships among employees can directly impact organizational effectiveness.

Furthermore, the relationship between happiness and occupational satisfaction has also been studied. Doosti et al. demonstrated that happiness significantly contributes to the mental and emotional resilience of teachers, which in turn enhances their professional engagement and effectiveness (15). By analogy, employees of the Ministry of Youth and Sports who experience higher psychological well-being as a result of sports participation may also demonstrate increased occupational satisfaction, resilience, and productivity.

The cumulative body of evidence clearly suggests that sports participation exerts a profound influence on multiple dimensions of psychological well-being. From reducing anxiety and depression (3, 4), to enhancing creativity (11), social growth (10), motivation (13), and cognitive performance (9), sports and physical activity emerge as a holistic strategy for promoting psychological health. These findings align with Norouzi's broader

conceptualization of mental-social health and strategies for its improvement, which emphasize the need for integrative, lifestyle-based interventions (1).

Given the rising burden of mental disorders in Middle Eastern societies (6), the exploration of sports participation as a determinant of psychological well-being among employees in Iraq's Ministry of Youth and Sports is both timely and necessary. Employees in this ministry not only represent a critical segment of the workforce but also serve as role models and policymakers for national sport and health initiatives. Understanding how their own well-being is influenced by sports participation may provide valuable insights for designing interventions that enhance both employee wellness and organizational effectiveness.

In conclusion, the extant literature strongly supports the hypothesis that sports participation positively influences psychological well-being across diverse populations and contexts. By integrating insights from foundational studies (3, 4), occupational research (5), experimental interventions (9, 12), and cross-national perspectives (7, 8), this study aims to extend the knowledge base by specifically examining employees of the Ministry of Youth and Sports of Iraq.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study is a field research of a descriptive-applied type and aims to examine the effect of sports participation on the psychological well-being of employees of the Ministry of Youth and Sports of Iraq. The statistical population of this research included all employees of the Ministry of Youth and Sports of Iraq, and the sample size was estimated based on Krejcie and Morgan's table. A convenience sampling method was employed.

In the present research, data collection was conducted through a questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed among employees who engaged in sports activities and subsequently collected. For this purpose, the standardized Psychological Well-Being Questionnaire developed by Ryff (1989) was used.

Data Collection

The data collection tool used in this study was the **Psychological Well-Being Questionnaire developed by Ryff (1989)**, which is a standardized and widely validated instrument designed to assess multiple dimensions of psychological well-being. This self-report questionnaire consists of several subscales that measure autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance, each reflecting a core aspect of optimal psychological functioning. Responses are typically scored on a Likert-type scale, allowing participants to indicate the degree to which they agree or disagree with each statement. The instrument has been extensively applied in psychological and health-related research and has demonstrated strong psychometric properties, including high internal consistency, construct validity, and reliability across different cultural contexts. In the present study, the questionnaire was administered to employees of the Ministry of Youth and Sports of Iraq who engaged in sports activities, ensuring that the tool captured their subjective evaluation of psychological well-being as related to their participation in physical and sports activities.

Data Analysis

For data analysis at the descriptive statistics level, mean, standard deviation, and frequency distribution tables were applied. At the inferential statistics level, after validating the questionnaires, structural equation modeling was employed to test the research hypotheses.

Findings and Results

In order to organize, summarize, and describe the observations, descriptive statistics were used and the results showed that among the participants, 52.5% were women and 47.5% were men, indicating a relatively balanced gender distribution with a slight predominance of women. In terms of age, the highest frequency belonged to participants under 30 years old, accounting for 28.7%, while the lowest frequency was observed in the age group over 50 years with 18.8%, showing that the sample was generally composed of younger individuals. Regarding educational level, the majority of participants held doctoral degrees with 40.0%, whereas the lowest proportion was associated with associate degrees at 11.3%, reflecting the generally high level of education among employees of the Ministry of Youth and Sports. Considering work experience, the largest group consisted of employees with 5 to 10 years of experience, comprising 25.0% of the sample, while the smallest group included those with less than 5 years of experience at 12.5%, suggesting that most participants had moderate to long-term professional backgrounds. Finally, in relation to weekly exercise participation, the highest frequency was found in the group exercising 2 to 3 hours per week at 42.5%, while the lowest frequency was reported among those exercising only 1 hour per week at 5.0%, indicating that the majority of employees maintained a relatively active lifestyle.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables

Variable	Mean	Median	Mode	Standard Deviation	Variance	Skewness	Kurtosis	Range	Minimum	Maximum
Self-Acceptance	2.1646	2.0000	1.0	0.96206	0.926	0.842	0.580	4.0	1.0	5.0
Positive Relations	2.6833	2.3333	1.0	1.28816	1.659	0.380	-1.001	4.0	1.0	5.0
Autonomy	2.3125	2.3333	1.0	1.05188	1.106	0.607	-0.216	4.0	1.0	5.0
Environmental Mastery	2.7257	2.6667	1.0	1.22969	1.512	0.337	-0.770	4.0	1.0	5.0
Purpose in Life	3.1292	3.0000	3.0	1.23645	1.529	-0.017	-0.938	4.0	1.0	5.0
Personal Growth	2.3080	2.0000	1.0	1.07784	1.162	0.598	-0.109	4.0	1.0	5.0
Sports Participation	2.9550	3.2000	3.6	0.95253	0.907	-0.295	-0.520	4.0	1.0	5.0
Psychological Well-Being	2.5434	2.4444	3.0	1.00135	1.003	0.289	-0.624	3.89	1.0	4.89

Based on Table 1, the self-acceptance component had the lowest mean value (2.1646).

Table 2. Results of Normality Tests

Variable	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test Statistic	df	Sig.	Shapiro-Wilk Test Statistic	df	Sig.
Self-Acceptance	0.139	78	0.001	0.911	78	0.000
Positive Relations	0.140	78	0.001	0.913	78	0.000
Autonomy	0.115	78	0.001	0.928	78	0.000
Environmental Mastery	0.111	78	0.000	0.933	78	0.001
Purpose in Life	0.116	78	0.014	0.937	78	0.001
Sports Participation	0.124	78	0.032	0.965	78	0.038
Psychological Well-Being	0.060	78	0.020	0.969	78	0.040

As shown in Table 2, since the significance levels of both the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test and the Shapiro-Wilk test for all variables were less than the error value of 0.05, the assumption of normality of the mean scores of the research variables at the 0.05 error level was rejected. Therefore, Smart PLS software was used for further analysis.

To examine the model fit, the factor loadings of the research items were first evaluated. The factor loading for each item should be higher than 0.4. As observed, the factor loading coefficients for all items were above 0.4.

Table 3. Results of Reliability and Convergent Validity Criteria

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Psychological Well-Being	0.970	0.971	0.973	0.666
Environmental Mastery	0.916	0.919	0.947	0.856
Autonomy	0.890	0.892	0.932	0.820
Personal Growth	0.921	0.922	0.950	0.864
Positive Relations	0.944	0.944	0.964	0.899
Purpose in Life	0.949	0.950	0.967	0.908
Sports Participation	0.850	0.844	0.895	0.635
Self-Acceptance	0.917	0.923	0.947	0.857

As shown in Table 3, all results for Cronbach's alpha, the rho_A index, composite reliability, and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) were above 0.7, indicating that the model has acceptable reliability and convergent validity.

The structural model was then evaluated using the significance coefficients (t-values).

Table 4. Results of Hypothesis Testing

Path	Path Coefficient	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation	t-value	Sig.
Sports Participation → Psychological Well-Being	0.943	0.932	0.042	22.399	0.000

As presented in Table 9, in the path from sports participation to psychological well-being and its dimensions, the test statistic (Z-value) was greater than 1.96 and equal to 22.399. Moreover, given the positive path coefficient (0.943), it can be concluded that a significant relationship exists in this path at a 95% confidence level. Therefore, this hypothesis was confirmed.

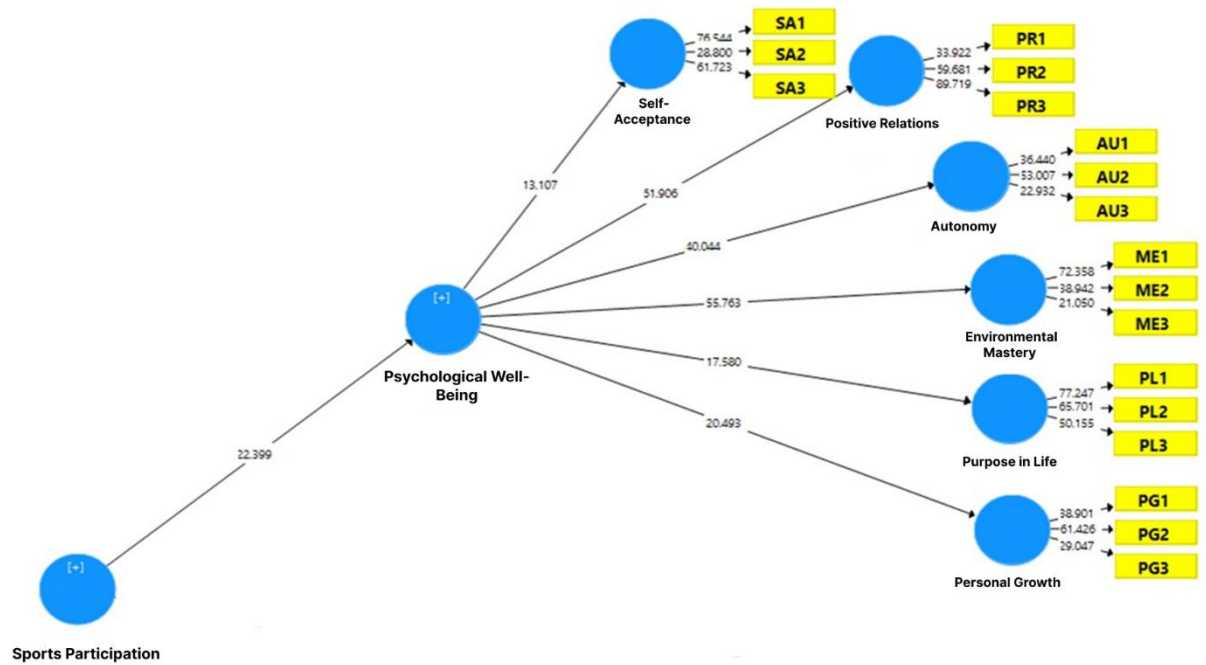


Figure 1. Model with T-Values

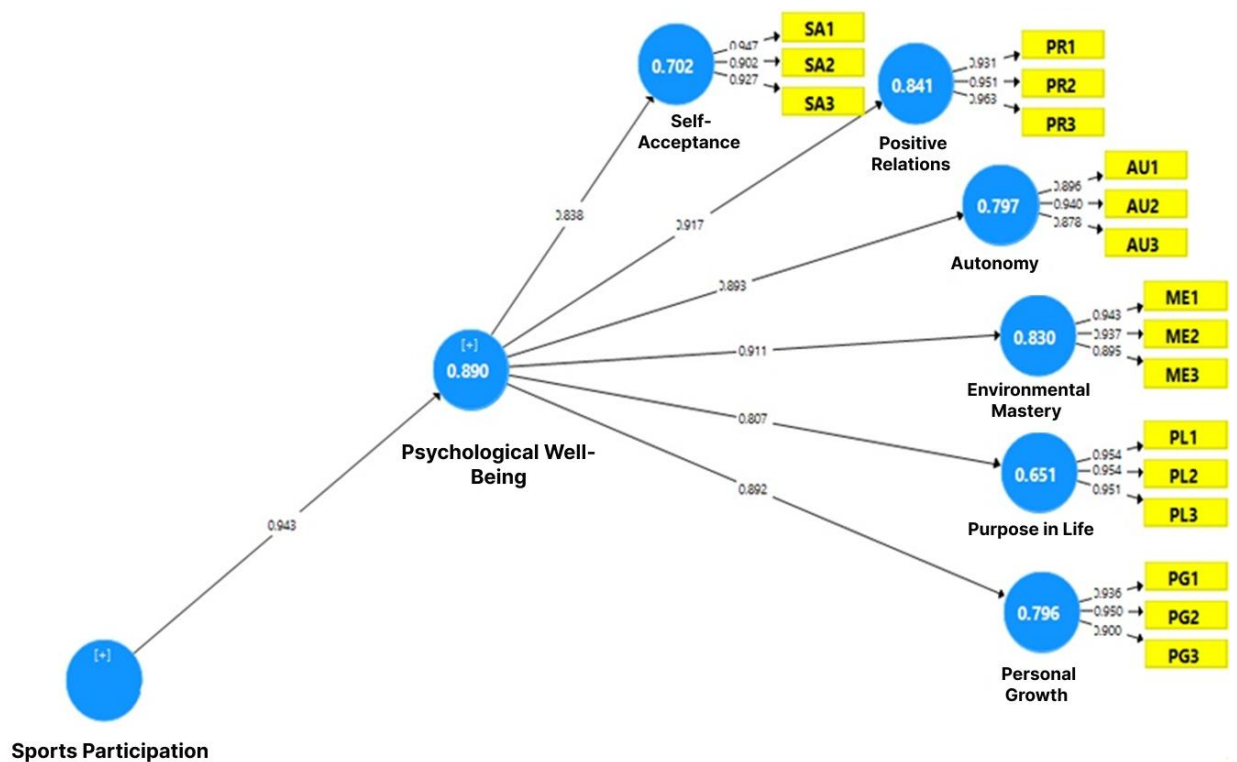


Figure 2. Model with Beta Values

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of sports participation on the psychological well-being of employees of the Ministry of Youth and Sports of Iraq. The results showed that sports participation has a strong and significant positive impact on psychological well-being, with the path coefficient indicating

a substantial effect size. Specifically, the structural equation modeling revealed that sports participation predicted psychological well-being with a high degree of reliability, and the hypothesis was confirmed at a 95% confidence level. These findings suggest that engaging in regular physical and sports activities plays a critical role in enhancing dimensions of well-being such as autonomy, environmental mastery, positive relations with others, personal growth, purpose in life, and self-acceptance.

The result of this study aligns closely with earlier research that demonstrated the strong link between sports and improved mental health. For example, Esfahani's early research on students at Al-Zahra University confirmed that sports significantly reduced symptoms of anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbances while improving social functioning (3). Similarly, Pahlavanzadeh found that female students who engaged in physical activity reported higher levels of mental health than their non-athlete peers (4). These early findings have since been substantiated by broader research emphasizing the protective role of sports in reducing mental health vulnerabilities and promoting adaptive psychological functioning.

In the context of occupational environments, the findings are further supported by Baldi et al., who reported that employees of Abadan Oil Refining Company benefitted significantly from sports participation, demonstrating higher levels of psychological adjustment and work satisfaction (5). This reinforces the interpretation that employees of the Ministry of Youth and Sports, who are directly involved in promoting physical activity at the national level, also experience enhanced well-being when they themselves engage in sports. The results suggest a potential reciprocal relationship whereby employees who model active lifestyles not only improve their own well-being but may also serve as role models for the communities they serve.

The positive influence of sports participation on psychological well-being observed in this study is also consistent with broader international research. Nebojsa and colleagues established that physical activity plays a significant role in enhancing psychological well-being by increasing life satisfaction, fostering resilience, and strengthening social connectedness (7). Similarly, Howie et al. underscored that participation in youth sports programs cultivates social bonds and promotes lifelong habits of physical activity, which in turn enhance psychological resilience and reduce risks of mental disorders (8). Taken together, these findings demonstrate that the positive impact of sports on psychological well-being transcends cultural and occupational boundaries, supporting the universality of this relationship.

Another key finding of the present research is the strong contribution of sports participation to dimensions such as self-acceptance and purpose in life. This resonates with the work of Homayounnia Firoozja, who showed that movement game-based training improved cognitive performance, social skills, and quality of life in primary school students (9). By enhancing these fundamental components of psychological functioning, sports and physical activity support not only physical fitness but also higher-order cognitive and emotional development. Similarly, Pourazar Morteza Homayounnia compared social growth in athlete versus non-athlete students and concluded that sports participation fosters stronger social skills and interpersonal growth (10). These studies highlight that the benefits of sports participation are multidimensional and extend beyond the physical body to shape psychological and social development.

The results also revealed that autonomy and environmental mastery were strongly influenced by sports participation. These findings echo the research of Keyvanlou et al., who found that students engaged in physical activity exhibited higher levels of psychological well-being, particularly in domains related to self-regulation and autonomy (14). By engaging in sports, individuals are required to set goals, regulate their

efforts, and adapt to changing environments—skills that directly translate into workplace autonomy and mastery of professional responsibilities.

The social dimension of psychological well-being was also strengthened by sports participation in this study. Employees who engaged in sports activities reported more positive relations with others, supporting the argument that sports foster social connectedness and collective identity. This aligns with the findings of Jariono and Subekti, who showed that motivation for sports among university students was closely linked to their level of physical activity and their ability to engage socially with peers (13). Similarly, Howie et al. emphasized the social dimension of youth sports programs, suggesting that sports naturally create opportunities for meaningful interpersonal interactions (8). The current findings indicate that such benefits are equally relevant in occupational contexts, where collaboration, teamwork, and social cohesion are vital to organizational effectiveness.

From a regional perspective, the importance of enhancing psychological well-being through sports participation is particularly salient given the high burden of mental disorders in Middle Eastern countries. Norouzi et al. analyzed disease burden trends between 2000 and 2017 and found a considerable rise in mental health challenges, underscoring the need for preventive and integrative approaches (6). The current study contributes to this body of knowledge by demonstrating that sports participation provides a viable pathway for promoting psychological well-being in Iraqi employees, offering a practical and culturally appropriate solution to growing mental health challenges.

In addition, the present findings are consistent with Doosti et al., who reported that happiness significantly enhances occupational effectiveness in teachers (15). Happiness, a key dimension of psychological well-being, is fostered through active lifestyles and sports engagement. Employees in the Ministry of Youth and Sports who reported higher levels of well-being as a result of sports participation are thus more likely to be satisfied, resilient, and effective in their roles. This highlights the potential for sports participation to contribute indirectly to organizational efficiency and national development goals.

The findings also resonate with Setar Mohammed and Dawood's research on female professors of gymnastics in Iraq, which showed that psychological well-being was significantly related to functional creativity (11). In the current study, by enhancing their well-being through sports, employees may also indirectly boost their creativity, problem-solving skills, and capacity for innovation, all of which are critical for designing effective sports and youth programs.

The consistency of these results with prior findings also extends to specialized contexts such as military training. Fakourian et al. found that structured military physical programs improved mood and mental health among cadets (12). This parallels the current findings, as both structured and voluntary physical activities foster psychological improvements across different populations. Together, these studies suggest that the relationship between physical activity and psychological well-being is robust across diverse environments, from civilian workplaces to military academies.

Finally, the conceptual foundation of this study is supported by Norouzi's discussion of mental-social health and the need for strategies to enhance it (1). Sports participation, as demonstrated here, represents one of the most practical and effective strategies available. By integrating physical activity into daily routines, employees are able to enhance their well-being and contribute to a culture of health within their organization. The cumulative body of evidence, ranging from foundational studies to modern experimental

research, strongly supports the conclusion that sports participation is a powerful determinant of psychological well-being in occupational populations.

Despite its strengths, this study is subject to several limitations. First, the use of a convenience sampling method may limit the generalizability of the findings, as participants may not be fully representative of all employees in the Ministry of Youth and Sports of Iraq. Second, the reliance on self-report measures, such as the Ryff Psychological Well-Being Questionnaire, introduces potential biases related to social desirability and subjective interpretation of items. Third, the cross-sectional design restricts causal inference, as it cannot fully determine whether sports participation leads to higher well-being or whether individuals with higher well-being are more inclined to participate in sports. Finally, cultural and organizational factors unique to Iraq may limit the applicability of these findings to other national contexts.

Future research should address these limitations by employing longitudinal and experimental designs to establish clearer causal relationships between sports participation and psychological well-being. Randomized controlled trials could provide stronger evidence of the direct effects of structured sports programs on well-being outcomes. Additionally, qualitative studies exploring employees' lived experiences of sports participation could provide deeper insights into the mechanisms by which physical activity influences psychological states. Comparative studies between different occupational groups and between male and female employees would also be valuable for identifying potential moderating factors. Finally, expanding research to include other ministries and organizations could help determine whether the observed effects are unique to the Ministry of Youth and Sports or more broadly applicable across the Iraqi workforce.

From a practical perspective, the findings of this study underscore the importance of integrating sports participation into workplace health promotion programs. Managers and policymakers in the Ministry of Youth and Sports should consider developing structured exercise and sports opportunities for employees, such as weekly sports leagues, fitness classes, or recreational activities. Encouraging participation through incentives, flexible scheduling, and supportive organizational policies could enhance both individual well-being and collective productivity. Moreover, embedding a culture of active living within the ministry may serve as a model for other governmental organizations and foster broader societal adoption of sports as a pathway to psychological health.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

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

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