

Research Paper

Understanding the Lived Experiences of Athlete Elderly in COVID-19 Pandemic in Tehran (A Phenomenological Approach)



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ABSTRACT

Objectives Epidemics create extensive socio-behavioral changes in all areas, sport is no exception. The current study aimed at understanding the lived experience of athletic older adults from the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic.

Methods & Materials The present qualitative research applied a phenomenological approach. The study participants were 16 athletic older adults in Tehran City, Iran who were selected by the purposive sampling method. Through in-depth and unstructured interviews, the required data were collected. The obtained data were analyzed using the seven-step Diekelman's (1993) approach.

Results According to the obtained data, 4 categories of meanings were identified about the lived experiences of the explored elderly from the COVID-19 pandemic. These categories included the experiences of psychosocial isolation and thinking about death; the marginalization of older adult's sports; mood swings and lifestyle changes, and finding opportunities for sports activism.

Conclusion These concepts of experiences in the life-world of athletic older adults in Tehran from the COVID-19 pandemic were the constitutions of their social action. In the case of proper analysis and application, they can be helpful in better managing professional sports in epidemics.

Extended Abstract

1. Introduction

Epidemics can cause various socio-behavioral changes, i.e., generated by how they are experienced by individuals [17]. The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has greatly altered sports-related interactions (especially the elderly's sports) [12, 15]. Moreover, its main impact on sports environments is the cessation of collective and individual sports activities, and the closure of sports environments [10]. Given the suspension of sports activities for certain segments of society, as well

as the high risk of COVID-19 for the elderly, older athletes may have experienced the conditions in a particular way. Therefore, understanding these changes and the meaning of the elderly athlete's experience of the COVID-19 epidemic can provide useful information for such conditions and facilitate older sports policymakers to manage the current specific unstable, uncertain, and complex world.

2. Methods and Materials

This qualitative research applied a phenomenological approach. Based on this approach, the researcher sought to interpret and understand the lived experience of the elderly athletes in Tehran City, Iran from the COVID-19 epidemic.

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The criterion of being an athlete for the elderly (i.e., individuals aged over 60 years living in Tehran) having at least 3 weekly sessions of sports activities was considered regular. The study participants were selected by the purposive sampling method [18]. The study samples were selected with a maximum difference from each other [19]. This is because the purpose of this study was to obtain a range of views of the older athletes about their lived experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic and its interpretation.

In-depth unstructured interviews were used to collect the necessary data. In the present study, the researcher has interviewed 16 elderly Iranian athletes from March 11, 2019, to May 20, 2020. Each interview lasted 45-60 minutes. At the beginning of the interview, a few general open-ended questions were asked (What did you experience about the COVID-19 pandemic? What aspects in your life influenced your experience of the COVID-19 pandemic?).

The phenomenological approach in this study was interpretive; therefore, to interpret and analyze the relevant data, the approach of Dickelman et al. [21] was used. After the interview, the recorded words were transcribed, and the sentences, phrases, and quotations that indicated the study subjects' understanding of the phenomenon were identified. Next, the researcher used important phrases to categorize the meanings and concepts that led to the achievement of sub-themes. These sub-themes were also used to write what the study participants have experienced in covering the main themes. To ensure the reliability of the obtained information³, the research participants were referred and their compliance with the interpretations was ensured. The current study was approved by the specialized committee of the Department of Sports Sciences (as a local ethics committee) at Tarbiat Modares University.

3. Results

Based on the data analysis, 4 main themes of the lived experiences of the examined elderly from the COVID-19 pandemic were obtained, i.e., interpreted as follows:

The experience of increasing psychosocial isolation and mortality

One of the most essential and frequent sub-themes of this main theme was ignoring and increasing the restrictions on sports participation for elderly athletes. The examined elderly stated that they were ignored by the authorities in their plans and measures regarding sports and physical activity; accordingly, this issue imposed a great psychological burden on them. As per participant No. 3, "As much as I follow the news, I see that they do not mention anything

about senior sports; it is all about professional athletes and the resumption of leagues." This neglect of the elderly and their exercise has caused them psychological stress and isolation. The feeling of depression and consequently the reduction of opportunities for sports participation was repeatedly expressed among the research samples; thus, such conditions led them to psychosocial isolation.

The marginalization of old age sports

Regarding the marginalization of senior sports during the COVID-19 epidemic, the study participants stated that the authorities neglect senior sports and overlook the health needs and requirements for older athletes in their reopening policies.

Unwanted changes in lifestyle and mood disorders

This was one of the most frequently discussed topics by the explored subjects. They stated that during the COVID-19 pandemic, they developed obsessive-compulsive disorder, mood swings, insomnia, and dietary changes; ultimately, they presented weakness and physical problems. Living conditions in quarantine and socio-physical distancing have led to the disruption of the lifestyle and the routine of the elderly athletes; consequently, this lifestyle change has affected their moods.

Active and creative sports activism

According to this theme, some of the studied elderly attempted to accept the existing conditions and adapt to them as much as possible and take advantage of the existing opportunities. Older athletes tended to act as active elements at different levels in the current situation. This has led some of their creativity to emerge and design their exercises in their quarantine environments. "I designed a series of exercises with small sticks that I could do at home", mentioned participant No. 3. The invention of new sports and body movements by the elderly was among the sub-themes of active and creative sports activism.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The explored elderly have experienced the COVID-19 epidemic with unintended lifestyle alternation and mood swings. Special conditions and health requirements have caused their moods to fluctuate and their lifestyles to change. Ignorance and high sensitivity, along with increasing restrictions on participation in sports, have made them more fearful of death; subsequently, this condition creates an experience of psychosocial isolation and death thinking in the examined older athletes. Improper compassion and indifference of of-

ficials to the needs of the sports of the elderly; disregarding the requirements of reopening sports facilities for the elderly; as well as the loss of expression have made the elderly athletes prone to the experience of marginalizing senior sports. Additionally, some older athletes have attempted to adapt to the new conditions and develop creativity to have the desired physical activity. They have experienced active and creative activism in sports, resulting from the transformation of threats into opportunities and the acceptance of a lifestyle in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ethical Considerations

Compliance with ethical guidelines

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Department of Sports Science, Tarbiat Modares University. All ethical principles are considered in this article. The participants were informed about the purpose of the research and its implementation stages. They were also assured about the confidentiality of their information and were free to leave the study whenever they wished, and if desired, the research results would be available to them. The Helsinki declaration (Ethical principles in medical research on humans) was also observed.

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Authors' contributions

All authors equally contributed to preparing this article.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.