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Superstitious Rituals Among University-Level Men Athletes and Footballers: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

Superstitious rituals repetitive, formalised behaviours that athletes believe influence the outcome of competition independent of their technical or physical preparation are a widely reported feature of competitive sport. This study examined whether the use of such rituals differs between two groups of university-level male sportspersons whose competitive demands differ in structure: footballers, who compete as part of an interacting team, and athletes (track and field), who compete largely as individuals. Sixty male sportspersons (30 footballers, 30 athletes) aged 18–25 years, drawn from Calicut University-affiliated colleges that had won medals at intercollegiate tournaments, completed the Superstitious Ritual Questionnaire (Bleak & Frederick, 1998), a 42-item, five-point Likert-type instrument spanning six subscales: Clothing and Appearance, Fetish, Pre-Game Activity, During-Game Activity, Team Rituals, and Coach. Independent-samples t-tests compared group means on each subscale and on the total score. No statistically significant differences emerged between footballers and athletes on any subscale or on the total superstitious-ritual score (all $p > 0.05$), indicating comparable reliance on superstitious behaviour regardless of whether the sport is team-based or individual. These findings suggest that superstitious ritual use in this population is better explained by shared competitive and cultural context than by sport type, and they support continued use of the Bleak and Frederick instrument for assessing ritual behaviour in Indian collegiate sport. Recommendations for extending this line of research to larger, mixed-gender, and multi-institutional samples are provided.

Keywords: Superstitious rituals, sports psychology, university athletes, footballers, ritual behaviour, performance

INTRODUCTION

Sport occupies a prominent place in modern society: it shapes identity at the level of the individual, the community and the nation, and its appeal cuts across age and gender. Football and athletics, the two disciplines examined here, both trace long histories football's codified rules emerged in nineteenth-century England before spreading worldwide under FIFA, while athletics (track and field) descends from the Ancient Olympic Games and remains one of the most widely accessible competitive sports because it requires little specialised equipment. Despite their different competitive structures football is played interactively by two eleven-a-side teams, whereas most athletics events are contested by individuals both disciplines place athletes under considerable performance pressure, and both have long been associated with the use of superstitious rituals.

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Superstitious belief, in its popular sense, is the conviction that a ritual or action can influence future events despite the absence of any causal mechanism linking the two. Adam Smith described science as “the great antidote to the poison of enthusiasm and superstition”, while Francis Bacon observed that “the root of all superstition is that

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men observe when a thing hits, but not when it misses" an early statement of the confirmation bias that underlies much superstitious learning. Historically, the term was used pejoratively for practices considered irrational or backward, and it resurfaced during the Reformation when Protestant reformers accused Catholic devotional practices of being superstitious.

Modern psychology reframed superstition as a learned behaviour rather than a moral failing. Skinner's classic demonstration that pigeons develop idiosyncratic "rituals" around a fixed-interval feeder despite no causal link between their behaviour and the delivery of food showed that superstition can emerge from ordinary operant conditioning: whatever an organism happens to be doing when reinforcement arrives is more likely to be repeated [1]. In athletes, an analogous process occurs when a particularly good or bad performance leads the athlete to search for a cause, settle on an incidental circumstance (a meal, an item of clothing, a piece of music), and then repeat that circumstance before future competitions in the hope of reproducing the earlier outcome.

A ritual in sport can therefore be defined as a specific, repeated behaviour that a performer believes has the power to influence competitive outcomes, distinct from any technical or physical contribution the behaviour might make. Schippers and Van Lange's concept of "ritual commitment" showed that elite performers are most likely to persist with pre-game rituals when uncertainty and the stakes of the competition are high, and that performers with an external locus of control show greater ritual commitment than those with an internal locus of control [2]. Building on this, experimental work has shown that activating a good-luck superstition a common phrase, a gesture, or a lucky charm can improve subsequent performance on golf, motor-dexterity, memory and anagram tasks, an effect attributed to a boost in perceived self-efficacy that in turn increases task persistence [3].

A substantial body of applied research has examined superstition and related belief systems specifically within football and other team sports [4]. Positive associations have been reported between footballers' religious orientation and their psychological well-being , and between religious practice prayer and mantra use in particular and footballers' self-reported performance and anxiety regulation in Zambian soccer [5]. Among adult club footballers, superstition scores have been linked to overall sporting success, with "team ritual" emerging as the most heavily weighted subscale [6]. Meanwhile, amateur footballers have demonstrated gender- and age-related differences across several ritual dimensions, including lucky objects, pre-game behaviours, and team behaviours [7]. Qualitative work with Indian intercollegiate team-sport players has similarly documented the nature, origins, and perceived impact of superstitious beliefs and has explicitly called for further research examining how such beliefs might be incorporated into coaching practice in the Indian context [8]. Furthermore, the psychological benefits of ritual commitment identified by Schippers and Van Lange have been corroborated in related samples of top-level sportspersons [9].

A second strand of literature connects superstitious behaviour to personal control, coping and locus of control. Among British and Ghanaian student-athletes, personal control, coping style and control strategy each predicted superstitious behaviour, with superstition interpreted as a secondary control strategy used to manage the stress of competition [10]. Among NCAA Division I athletes, superstitious behaviour was not related to optimism, pessimism or locus of control, although individual-sport athletes showed a more internal locus of control than team-sport athletes and female athletes reported different ritual habits from males [11]. Consistent with this, experimentally induced stress has been shown to increase superstitious behaviour more strongly among individuals with a high desire for personal control than among those with a low desire for control, suggesting that superstition functions, at least in part, as a response to reduced perceived control [12].

A third strand has focused on measurement and underlying mechanism. Factor-analytic work has produced a three-component Belief in Superstition Scale spanning belief in bad luck, belief in good luck, and the belief that luck can be changed, with a 'chance' locus of control the strongest predictor of all three components, while a parallel Chinese Superstitious Belief Scale has identified culturally

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specific dimensions such as homonym-based luck, feng-shui and gambling luck that are not captured by Western instruments [13, 14]. Laboratory studies of "superstitious perception" have shown that judgments can be reinforced by outcomes that do not actually depend on them, providing a mechanistic account of how spurious cause-and-effect beliefs are learned and maintained, and an evolutionary model has argued that natural selection can favour error-prone causal inference including beliefs that are, strictly, superstitious whenever the rare correct inference carries a large fitness benefit [15-17].

A further group of studies situates superstition alongside related belief systems and clinical phenomena. Superstitious beliefs have been found to correlate positively with religious and delusion-like beliefs in non-clinical samples [18]. Superstitious traditional Chinese beliefs about death have been associated with elevated death anxiety [19]. Superstitious tendencies can also be experimentally demonstrated in children as young as three to five years old using a simple conditioning paradigm [20]. Furthermore, a behavioural–belief dichotomy has been proposed to distinguish ordinary superstition from superstition-like symptoms observed in obsessive-compulsive disorder [21]. Case reports have also documented the physical harms that can follow from superstitious folk remedies [22]. Within elite and professional sport specifically, pre-competition hormonal and psychological states have been shown to differ between home and away fixtures among hockey players [23]. However, a comparable study of junior female footballers did not find evidence of a home advantage in either performance or anxiety [24]. Adhesive ankle taping has been shown to provide a psychological, confidence-related benefit for collegiate athletes, independent of its physical support function [25]. Furthermore, smiling has been associated with lower perceived dominance and prestige among both football players and fashion models [26]. Superstitious cognition has also been documented in gambling contexts adjacent to sport, including problem gambling on electronic gaming machines [27] and long-standing football-pools betting markets, where sales patterns resemble those observed in lottery play [28]. Related research has examined how laypeople themselves define a "superstitious person," finding that religious belief is perceived as distinct from superstition, even though the two are empirically correlated among individuals [29]. Furthermore, superstitious beliefs and negative death beliefs have each been independently associated with health anxiety in both religious and non-religious samples [30].

Taken together, this literature establishes that superstitious ritual use is widespread across sports and cultures, is systematically related to uncertainty, stress and perceived control, and can be reliably measured with standardised instruments but it leaves open whether the demands of team versus individual competition themselves produce different levels of ritual use [31]. Football requires athletes to coordinate with teammates and to share in collective pre-game and team-level rituals, whereas athletics is contested predominantly by the individual competitor. Whether this structural difference in competitive format translates into a difference in the psychological reliance on superstition has not been directly tested in an Indian university sporting context [32]. The present study was therefore designed to compare superstitious ritual use, across all major subscales of the Bleak and Frederick instrument, between university-level male footballers and athletes drawn from the same institutional and cultural setting, with the hypothesis that no significant difference would be observed between the two groups [33].

METHODS

Research Design

This study used a cross-sectional, between-groups comparative design to evaluate differences in superstitious ritual use between university-level male footballers and athletes. All participants completed a single standardised questionnaire; no baseline or follow-up assessment was undertaken, and data were collected within a single testing period to minimise variability introduced by the competitive calendar.

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Participant Recruitment

Sixty male sportspersons were recruited from Calicut University-affiliated colleges whose teams had won medals at intercollegiate (ICT) tournaments and were divided equally into two groups of 30: footballers and athletes (track and field). Footballers were recruited from St. Thomas College, Thrissur, and EMEA College, Kondotty (15 from each institution); athletes were recruited from St. Thomas College, Thrissur, and Christ College, Irinjalakuda (15 from each institution). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 25 years and were required to have at least one year of active competitive experience with their college team. The purpose, procedure and voluntary nature of participation were explained to each participant before data collection, and participants completed the questionnaire without external influence from coaches or teammates.

Data Collection and Tools Used

Superstitious ritual use was measured using the Superstitious Ritual Questionnaire, a self-administered instrument comprising 42 items grouped into six subscales: Clothing and Appearance (18 items), Fetish (7 items), Pre-Game Activity (6 items), During-Game Activity (4 items), Team Rituals (4 items), and Coach (3 items). Each item is rated on a five-point scale ranging from 1 ("not at all effective") to 5 ("very effective"), so that possible subscale and total scores range from a minimum of 46 to a maximum of 230 across the full instrument. The questionnaire was administered in a group setting by the investigator, who read the instructions aloud while participants followed silently, to standardise comprehension across testing sessions before responses were recorded.

Statistical Methods

Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and standard errors) were computed for both groups on each of the six subscales and on the total score. Independent-samples t-tests, with Levene's test used to check the assumption of equality of variances, were used to compare footballers and athletes on each subscale and on the total score. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.(Figure-1)

RESULTS

Table 1 summarises the between-group comparison for Clothing and Appearance. Footballers (M = 57.70, SD = 13.41) scored marginally higher than athletes (M = 54.33, SD = 11.54), but the difference was not statistically significant (p = 0.302), indicating comparable reliance on clothing- and appearance-related rituals across the two groups (Table-1).

Table 1. Comparison of clothing and appearance scores between footballers and athletes.

Variable	Group	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error	F	T	p
Clothing & Appearance	Football	30	57.70	13.41	2.45	0.51	1.40	0.302
	Athletics	30	54.33	11.54	2.11			

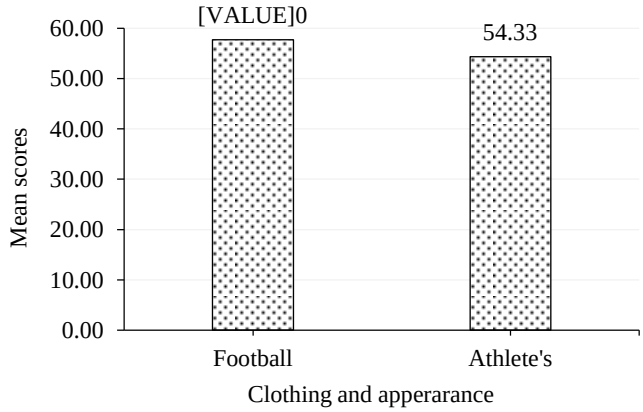


Figure 1. Mean clothing and appearance scores by group.

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Table 2 presents the comparison for the Fetish subscale, covering the use of lucky charms and mascots. Footballers scored slightly higher (M = 23.00, SD = 5.94) than athletes (M = 21.10, SD = 5.53); this difference was not significant (p = 0.517) (Table-2) (Figure-2).

Table 3 shows the comparison for Pre-Game Activity. Athletes scored marginally higher (M = 20.23, SD = 4.70) than footballers (M = 19.60, SD = 4.10); the difference was not significant (p = 0.408) (Table-3) (Figure-3).

Table 4 presents the comparison for During-Game Activity. Footballers (M = 13.33, SD = 3.06) scored marginally higher than athletes (M = 12.40, SD = 2.98); the difference was not significant (p = 0.901) (Table-4) (Figure-4).

Table 2. Comparison of fetish scores between footballers and athletes.

Variable	Group	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error	F	T	p
Fetish	Football	30	23.00	5.94	1.08	0.43	1.28	0.517
	Athletics	30	21.10	5.53	1.01			

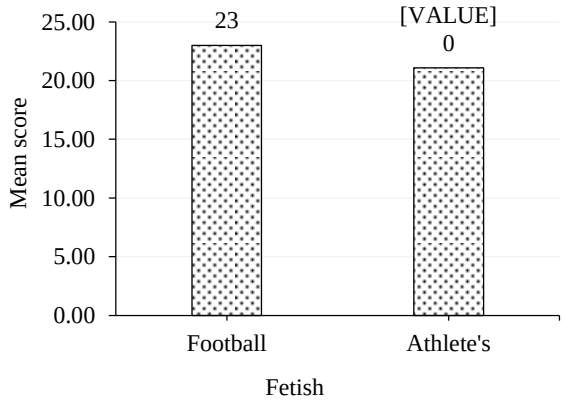


Figure 2. Mean fetish scores by group.

Table 3. Comparison of Pre-game activity scores between footballers and athletes.

Variable	Group	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error	F	t	p
Pre-Game Activity	Football	30	19.60	4.10	0.75	0.70	-0.56	0.408
	Athletics	30	20.23	4.70	0.86			

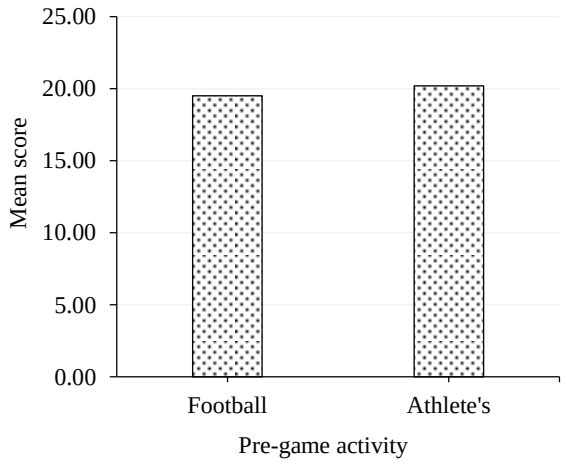


Figure 3. Mean Pre-game activity scores by group.

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Table 5 shows the comparison for Team Rituals. Footballers scored somewhat higher (M = 14.50, SD = 3.28) than athletes (M = 13.70, SD = 3.34); the difference was not significant (p = 0.665) (Table-5) (Figure-5).

Table 6 presents the comparison for the Coach subscale. Athletes scored somewhat higher (M = 11.63, SD = 2.92) than footballers (M = 10.23, SD = 3.31); the difference was not significant (p = 0.419) (Table-6) (Figure-6).

Table 7 presents the comparison of total superstitious-ritual scores across all subscales combined. Footballers (M = 136.03, SD = 26.12) and athletes (M = 135.73, SD = 27.69) obtained almost identical total scores, and the difference was not significant (p = 0.476), confirming the pattern of no meaningful group difference observed on every individual subscale (Table-7) (Figure-7).

Table 4. Comparison of During-Game Activity Scores Between Footballers and Athletes.

Variable	Group	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error	F	t	p
During-Game Activity	Football	30	13.33	3.06	0.56	0.16	1.20	0.901
	Athletics	30	12.40	2.98	0.54			

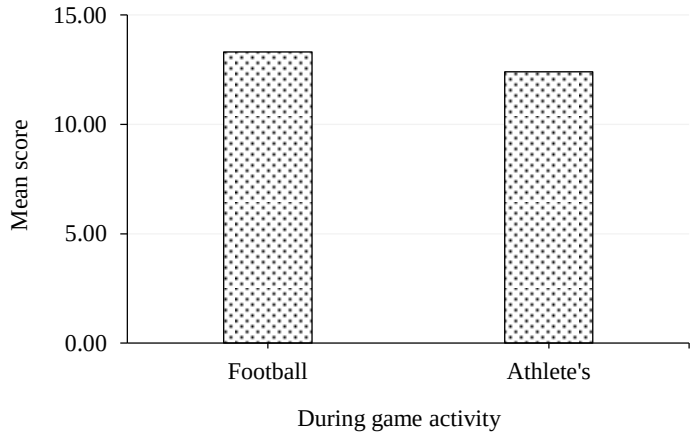


Figure 4. Mean During-Game Activity scores by group.

Table 5. Comparison of Team Rituals Scores Between Footballers and Athletes.

Variable	Group	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error	F	t	p
Team Rituals	Football	30	14.50	3.28	0.60	0.19	0.94	0.665
	Athletics	30	13.70	3.34	0.61			

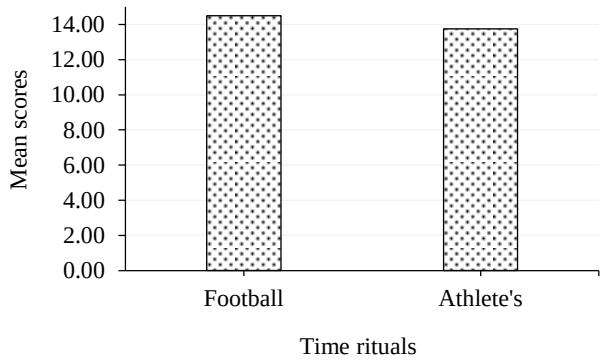


Figure 5. Mean Team Rituals scores by group.

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Table 6. Comparison of coach scores between footballers and athletes.

Variable	Group	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error	F	t	p
Coach	Football	30	10.23	3.31	0.60	0.66	-1.74	0.419
	Athletics	30	11.63	2.92	0.53			

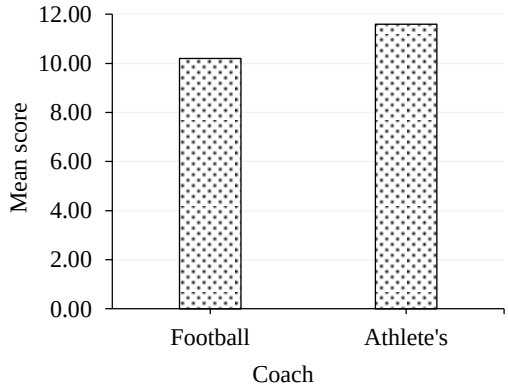


Figure 6. Mean coach scores by group.

Table 7. Comparison of total superstitious ritual scores between footballers and athletes.

Variable	Group	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error	F	t	p
Total Score	Football	30	136.03	26.12	4.77	0.52	0.04	0.476
	Athletics	30	135.73	27.69	5.52			

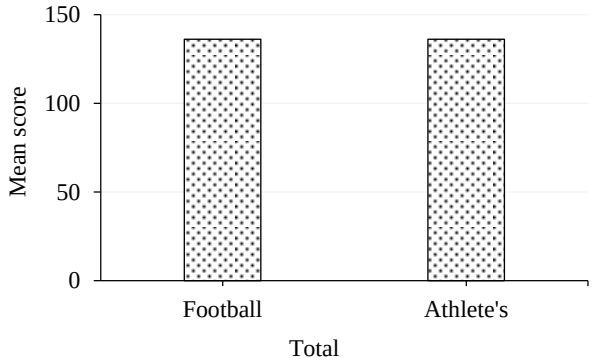


Figure 7. Mean Total superstitious ritual scores by group.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to compare superstitious ritual use between university-level male footballers and athletes across six subscales of the questionnaire and on the combined total score. Across every comparison, footballers and athletes obtained statistically indistinguishable scores, and the formulated null hypothesis that no significant difference would be found between the two groups was supported at the 0.05 level throughout.

This pattern is broadly consistent with the wider literature reviewed above, in which superstitious ritual use is repeatedly linked to the uncertainty and psychological stakes of competition and to individual characteristics such as locus of control and desire for personal control, rather than to the format of the sport itself [2, 3, 10, 12]. Football and athletics both expose competitors to significant uncertainty and high perceived stakes, particularly at the intercollegiate level where team and individual medals affect selection for higher representative honours; it is plausible that this shared competitive pressure, rather than any difference in team versus individual structure, is the dominant

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influence on ritual use in this sample. This interpretation is compatible with Burke et al.'s finding that locus of control, rather than sport type per se, was the more consistent predictor of superstitious behaviour among Division I athletes and with Dutt et al.'s call for further Indian research into how superstition operates across different team sports [8, 11].

The absence of a difference on the Team Rituals subscale is worth noting specifically, since this subscale should, in principle, be most sensitive to the team-versus-individual distinction. That footballers did not score significantly higher than athletes on Team Rituals suggests that individual athletes in this sample may also participate in comparable collective practices for example, shared warm-up routines, communal encouragement from training partners, or informal college-level team culture even though their competitive event is nominally individual. Similarly, the absence of a difference on the Coach subscale suggests that coach-related beliefs and behaviours (the coach's own superstitiousness, encouragement of prayer or meditation, or use of a personal lucky charm) are perceived similarly by both groups, which may again reflect a shared institutional coaching culture across the sampled colleges rather than sport-specific dynamics.

These findings should be interpreted within the wider evidence that ritual use itself can be performance-relevant: experimentally activating a good-luck superstition has been shown to improve subsequent performance through increased self-efficacy and task persistence and adhesive taping itself partly a ritual practice has been shown to increase athletes' confidence independently of any physical support it provides [25]. If ritual use carries a genuine, if modest, performance benefit irrespective of sport type, then the comparable levels of ritual use reported here imply that footballers and athletes in this sample may be drawing on a similar psychological resource to manage competitive pressure, even though the physical form the rituals take will necessarily differ between a team sport and an individual one.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. The sample was restricted to 60 male participants drawn from three affiliated colleges within a single university and a single geographic and cultural region, which limits generalisability to female athletes, other sports, other universities, or other cultural settings. Data were self-reported using a single cross-sectional questionnaire administered at one time point, so the findings cannot speak to how ritual use might fluctuate across a competitive season or in response to a specific high-stakes fixture. As with any questionnaire-based design, responses may have been affected by limited engagement or social-desirability bias, and no independent behavioural or physiological measure of ritual use or competitive anxiety was collected to corroborate self-report. Finally, the study did not statistically control for potentially relevant covariates such as years of competitive experience, religiosity, or trait locus of control, each of which has been linked to superstitious behaviour in prior research [10, 12, 13].

CONCLUSION

This study compared superstitious ritual use between 30 university-level male footballers and 30 male athletes using the Superstitious Ritual Questionnaire. No statistically significant difference was found between the two groups on any of the six subscales (Clothing and Appearance, Fetish, Pre-Game Activity, During-Game Activity, Team Rituals, and Coach) or on the total score. These findings indicate that, in this university sporting context, reliance on superstitious ritual is comparable between team-sport (football) and individual-sport (athletics) competitors, suggesting that shared competitive pressure and institutional culture may be more influential in shaping ritual use than the structural distinction between team and individual sport.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the present findings and the wider literature reviewed above, the following recommendations are made for future research and applied practice:

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1. Replicate this comparison with a larger, multi-institutional and multi-state sample, using stratified random sampling, to improve statistical power and generalisability beyond three affiliated colleges.
2. Extend the design to female athletes and footballers, and to mixed-gender teams, given prior evidence of gender-related differences in ritual sub-dimensions such as lucky objects and team behaviours .
3. Compare superstitious ritual use across a wider range of team and individual sports (e.g., basketball, hockey, badminton, swimming) rather than football and athletics alone, to test whether the present null result generalises across other team–individual pairings.
4. Adopt a longitudinal or repeated-measures design that samples ritual use at multiple points across a competitive season (pre-season, mid-season, and immediately before a high-stakes fixture) rather than a single cross-sectional administration.
5. Combine the Superstitious Ritual Questionnaire with validated measures of competitive state anxiety, self-efficacy, and locus of control to enable observed group differences, or the absence thereof, to be interpreted in relation to their psychological correlates.
6. Incorporate qualitative interviews or open-ended items alongside the closed Likert scale, to capture the specific meaning and origin athletes attach to individual rituals information that a standardised subscale score cannot convey.
7. Examine whether coach-endorsed or team-level rituals (communal prayer, pre-match huddles, shared warm-up routines) have a measurable association with team cohesion or match outcome, independent of individually held superstitions.
8. Statistically control for, or stratify by, years of competitive experience, self-reported religiosity, and trait locus of control, each of which has been linked to superstitious behaviour in earlier research to isolate the effect of sport type more precisely.
9. Investigate cross-cultural and cross-national differences in ritual use, building on evidence that culturally specific belief systems (e.g., the Chinese Superstitious Belief Scale dimensions of homonym luck and feng-shui) are not captured by Western-derived instruments.
10. Explore the applied question of whether structured, coach-guided ritual or pre-performance routines can be used deliberately to support self-efficacy and performance, drawing on experimental evidence that activating a good-luck superstition can improve performance through increased task persistence.

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