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## MORAL DECISION MAKING IN SPORTS: A CASE STUDY ON BEHAVIOURS AMONG JOHOR SUKMA ATHLETES

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### ABSTRACT

*Unethical decision-making among athletes has become a much-discussed topic in the sports world today. This practice is definitely caused by the lack of emphasis on sportsmanship and an overemphasis on the mentality of “winning at all cost” that motivates them to commit unethical conduct. The main objectives of this study were to determine the differences of the moral decision – making on behaviours among Johor SUKMA athletes based on gender. This study was carried out on 214 of Johor SUKMA athletes. The data were obtained through a questionnaire containing 24 items which was administered to measure the domains of athletes’ moral decision-making in sports which covered acceptance of cheating, acceptance of gamesmanship and keeping winning in proportion. The Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient value of the instrument was above 0.70 for each domain. The data was analysed using inferential analysis (Mann-Whitney Test). The findings showed that “keeping winning in proportion” was the main domain for the athletes’ moral decision-making in sports and that there is no significance different in the mean score for the moral decision-making based on gender for the two domains which are “acceptance of cheating proportion” ( $p = 0.68 > 0.05$ ) and “keeping winning in proportion” ( $p = 0.18 > 0.05$ ). Meanwhile there is a significance different in “acceptance of gamesmanship” based on gender ( $p = 0.02 < 0.05$ ). Thus, understanding about the moral decision-making among Johor SUKMA athletes may help Johor National Sports Council (MSNJ) and coaches to encourage a more positive decision-making towards sportsmanship conduct among athletes.*

**Keywords:** moral decision-making, SUKMA athletes, gamesmanship

## INTRODUCTION

The sports development in Malaysia nowadays has become one of society's most essential aspects. Sports has become a factor for achieving its goal in the aspects of self-achievement, power, self-direction, or stimulation (Jadzeviciene, 2018). A negative factor leads to inappropriate attitudes such as cheating, lying, theft and fraud. According to Alemdag (2019), in the study on young athletes' moral growth and behaviour is noteworthy, various aspects of sports and morality have been discussed. Many researchers focused on sports in their studies to investigate the negative behaviour such as injuring an opponent, verbally abusing other opponents, and cheating (Kavussanu, 2008). Furthermore, decision making is one of the central management activities and is seen as a massive part of any implementation process (Kaya, 2014). Besides that, Light et al., (2014) stated that infer decision making cannot be interpreted by laboratory-based analysis as it is a complicated decision-making situation in a game that requires socio-cultural sense. To win a game, athletes should know how to make a fast decision despite a critical situation without being known. Previous studies have shown that moral decisions implicit values of the person. For instant, a study by Hodge & Gucciardi (2015) said that a person would act and evaluate their behaviour with their norms according to the condition.

Sports and moral arguments have led to dishonourable movements, violent tendencies and unethical behaviour by athletes in sports. This is supported by Hodge & Gucciardi (2015), on the development of moral agency, where individuals engage in a self-regulatory process in which they embrace right and wrong principles that serve as guidelines for their behaviours. Besides, decision-making could be the cognitive process that leads to choosing a belief or course of action with several alternative scenarios (Kaya, 2014). According to Stranger et al., (2018), an individual's behaviour is often driven by moral decision-making acquired by personal experiences and socialization mechanisms, including learning and interactions with others. According to Gunia et al., (2012), moral decision-making has affected a diverse range of important individual and contextual variables, including gender, rewards and punishments, moral strength, and moral ideologies. This is echoed in the study by Calmeiro et al., (2018) in which highlighted the relationship between

sport and morality is influenced by several variables in example age, gender, and types of sport.

Previous research has indicated that some athletes engaged in gamesmanship practice that is related to their attitudes, value and behaviour. These problems also occur due to a lack of emphasis on sportsmanship and pressure by extrinsic factors that motivates them to commit unethical conduct (Champion et al., 2019). Athletes put much effort into making their team successful and earn extrinsic reward and popularity. Thus, it was significant because many philosophers agree that cheating in any form of sport involves an intentional rule violation to urge offered extrinsic reward. In a recent study, Whysall (2014) found that the behaviours of athletes have become less sportsmanlike due to the extreme pressures of commercialization and professionalization of modern competitive sport. It is also caused by "winning at all costs" perception that has become a commonplace which has led the athletes to show poor sportsmanship and gamesmanship during athletic competitions (Strand & Ziegler, 2010). This is also found in a report by New Strait Times (2018) that reported on youth athletes' cases related to gamesmanship practice. The incident involved four athletes from the Johor and Terengganu contingents that were being given a red card by a referee following a brawl at a SUKMA football match. The fighting incident was a result of provocation due to shoving and pushing and kicking among athletes that cause uncontrolled situations.

According to Kamis et al., (2016), cheating can be characterized as a breach of rules and regulations, whether authorized or implied despite being acknowledged by the athletes as per the sport guidelines. Some athletes seek to realize an unfair advantage by cheating or completely ignoring the set of rules and norms set (Matthews & Heinemann, 2012). This is evident in Sailors et al., (2017), which stated that certain cheating actions happen freely, where there is no attempt to cover it, and where the player only hoped at the chance that it would go missing. Consequently, athletes might be less bound to adhere to fairness standards, but it may be acceptable to obtain their personal share by cheating (Schwieren & Weichselbaumer, 2010). According to a study by Sukys (2013), male athletes are more likely to accept cheating conduct in sports compared to female athletes. This partly confirmed the findings of other previous

researchers claiming that attitudes of males and females towards antisocial behaviour in sports activities might be different, or that moral values in sports for female athletes are more important (Sukys & Jansoniene, 2012). Meanwhile, researchers have recently found that gamesmanship behaviours are accepted by 58.7% of athletes, while fewer than 32.1% of athletes favoured cheating during games (Ponseti et al., 2016). These acts do not infringe the rules of the sport; however, they affect the spirit of the game and may even be used to gain inappropriate advantages.

In the modern sporting world, gamesmanship has now gained varying degrees of approval and involves values ranging from 'we are playing equally' to 'winning at the least cost' (Hill, 2012). Besides that, Ponseti et al., (2016), stated that gamesmanship is seen to be the purpose of verbally abusing or attacking the opponent by physical contact, or the motive of using gamesmanship to trick and threaten the opponent. Teams also play certain design tricks that neglect the values and humiliate an opponent team purposely deceiving the opponent players on a team. The previous studies showed that deception can be more subtle, ethically questionable actions that conflict with sports ethics and attempts to abuse the opponent's psychological state without opposing the rules (Lucidi et al., 2017). According to a previous study by Zorba (2018) the result found that male athletes are more prone than female athletes to gamesmanship behaviours. The underlying reason for this, is that male athletes have a higher sense of justice than female athletes.

The concept of "win at all cost" is a deliberate and intentional act of participating in reasonable and inappropriate activities to win sports competition (Elendu & Dennis, 2017). According to Watson & White (2007), the reduction of fair play and sportsmanship is rooted in the mentality of "win at all cost". Moreover, researchers concluded that a "win at all cost" attitude caused by the benefits of winning combined with additional external performance pressures may influence an athlete to act unethically while competing in a game (Prudhomme, 2020). Researchers believed that the modern sports environment is tense during a competition because of the winning mentality as nobody wants to be associated with failure. According to the previous study by Gurpinar (2014), female athletes accepted cheating and gamesmanship behaviours less than male athletes, however they are seen to have a more continuous win in

proportion. The underlying reason was that female athletes like to participate in a sport competition that abides by the rules and do not take advantage of others.

This study is conducted to identify the main moral decision-making behaviours in sports among Johor SUKMA athletes. In addition, this study is also conducted to determine the differences of the moral decision – making behaviours in sports among Johor SUKMA athletes between gender. This study's result may not be as a generalisation on all athletes in other places and locations. However, the data from this study can be used as a potential roadmap for helping sports leaders determine what type of moral dilemmas that needed to be recognized and analysed by the athletes when deciding on the types of sports.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The population of Johor SUKMA athletes is the focus of this scientific query. Simple random sampling was used in this study as it allowed exploration and investigation of the difference in moral decision-making among Johor SUKMA athletes. The sample size of this research is N=214 respondents. Out of the 214 respondents, 117 (54.7%) were female and 97 (45.3%) were male. The items used in the instrument of questionnaire were adopted from previous research done by Lee et al., (2007) and were applied to investigate the main moral decision-making among Johor SUKMA athletes and to analyse the difference in moral decision-making of Johor SUKMA athletes based on the gender. The questionnaire consists of two section; section A presents the respondent's demographic background and section B includes the domains that make up moral decision-making as represented in the 24 items. All the items in section B use a 5-point-Likert Scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

For this study, the researchers used Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 26 to analyse the data. The data from the pilot study were analysed for its reliability and validity values. The overall reliability for all domains showed a value above 0.60 value set by the researcher. Using Mohd Majid Konting (2005) reference that suggested that the measurement of reliability using Cronbach Alpha coefficient at level 0.6 and above is an Alpha value with

high reliability. After the pilot study was conducted, the research was conducted on the actual number of populations. A normality test is used to test the data and it is not normally distributed. Based on the result, the researcher chose to proceed in analysing the data using a non-parametric testing. In conducting the first objective of this study, table 1 present a descriptive statistical analysis that was used to identify the main moral decision-making among Johor SUKMA athletes while a Mann-Whitney test was used to answer the second research objective which was to identify the differences in moral decision-making among female and male athletes of the same sample.

*Table 1: Specification of Measurement Scale and Data Analysis Procedure*

Section	Details of Measurement	Number of Items	Cronbach Alpha	Statistic Procedure
A	Demographic Profile	1-2 (2 Items)		Descriptive
B	Moral Decision-Making Domains			
	- Acceptance of Cheating	1-9 (9 Items)	.97	Mann- Whitney Test
	- Acceptance of Gamesmanship	10-19 (9 Items)	.93	
	- Keeping Winning in Proportion	20-24 (6 Items)	.75	

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

Table 2 shows the mean scores of moral decision-making among Johor SUKMA athletes. “Keeping winning in proportion” is the highest with a mean score of 3.93 followed by “acceptance of gamesmanship” with a score mean of 3.19 and the lowest mean score of 1.89 is the domain “acceptance of cheating”.

*Table 2: Descriptive of Moral Decision-Making*

	N	Mean	SD
Acceptance of Cheating	214	1.8900	.87563
Acceptance of Gamesmanship	214	3.1900	.92894
Keeping Winning in Proportion	214	3.9315	.88515

Table 3 and Table 4 present the result of moral decision-making. There is a significant difference between Johor SUKMA athletes based on gender for the domain “acceptance of gamesmanship” with the value of .023 which ( $p < 0.05$ ). Meanwhile, there is no significant difference between Johor SUKMA athletes based on gender for the domain "acceptance of cheating" with the value of .684 which ( $p > 0.05$ ) and “keeping winning in proportion” value with a mean score of .176 which ( $p > 0.05$ ).

Based on the results, it shows that the mean rank on male athletes is 109.38, higher than female athletes which is 105.94 for the domain “acceptance of cheating”. Besides that, for the domain “acceptance of gamesmanship” the mean rank on male athletes is 118.04 which is higher than female athletes which is 98.76. Lastly, the domain “keeping winning in proportion” indicate that the mean rank for male athletes is less, with 101.24 as compared to female athletes with 112.69.

*Table 3: Group Statistics for moral decision-making behaviours in sports among Johor SUKMA athletes between gender (N=214)*

	Gender	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Acceptance of Cheating	Male	97	109.38	10610.00
	Female	117	105.94	12395.00
Acceptance of Gamesmanship	Male	97	118.04	11450.00
	Female	117	98.76	11555.00
Keeping Winning In Proportion	Male	97	101.24	9820.00
	Female	117	112.69	13185.00

*Table 3: Mann-Whitney Test for moral decision-making behaviours in sports among Johor SUKMA athletes between gender (N=214)*

	Acceptance of Cheating	Acceptance of Gamesmanship	Keeping Winning In Proportion
Mann-Whitney U	5492.000	4652.000	5067.000
Wilcoxon W	12395.000	11555.000	9820.000
	-.407	-2.270	-1.353
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.684	.023	.176

= 0.05

## DISCUSSION

Based on the findings, the main domain of moral decision-making among Johor SUKMA athletes is "keeping winning in proportion" with a mean value of 3.93. This shows that Johor SUKMA athletes put “winning at all cost” as their priority while participating in competitive

sports since sports are usually measured and seen significant base on the number of wins. Thus, this research finding is supported by Wagnsson et al., (2016) in which the athletes were more likely to keep winning in competition and less likely to accept gamesmanship or cheating in the games. Furthermore, antisocial, and prosocial aspects of moral decision making among athletes showed that their parents promoted learning, enjoyment, avoid success without-effort attitudes and were deemed beneficial to their performance. Thus, this can be seen as the underlying reason on why athletes were more likely to keep winning in proportion and less likely to accept gamesmanship or cheating.

This research also presented the lowest mean for the moral decision-making in the domain of "acceptance of cheating". This result is supported and echoed in Bermejo et al., (2018) that found the acceptance of gamesmanship and acceptance of cheating did not obtain high averages in moral decision-making among athletes. The results proved that the athletes are more prone to the feeling of excitement and enjoyment during their participation in the sports. Besides that, the findings are similar to that of Ponseti et al., (2016) which stated that "keeping winning in proportion" had the highest mean score meanwhile "enjoyment and acceptance of cheating" were average in scores. This is supported by Verdaguer et al., (2017) in which their findings highlighted that the athletes accepted gamesmanship behaviour rather than cheating because it was permitted by peers and coaches who wanted to have "smart" players on their teams.

Furthermore, the findings of this research also showed that there is a significant difference between Johor SUKMA athletes based on gender for the domain "acceptance of gamesmanship" with a mean rank value of 118.04 for male athletes and 98.76 for female athletes. This means that male athletes were more likely to accept the gamesmanship behaviour in sports rather than female athletes. This result is echoed in the study done by Zorba (2018) that found male athletes to be more prone than female athletes in terms of gamesmanship behaviours. The underlying reason for this, is that male athletes have a higher sense of justice than female athletes. Verdaguer et al., (2017) found similar results which showed the significance of enjoyment in all sports studied and a level of acceptance of gamesmanship and cheating, mostly in male athletes. These behaviours are often reinforced

by the various psychosocial factors surrounding the athletes, including parents, coaches, and peers (Lee et al., 2007). According to the previous study by Karakullukçu (2020), it was found that male athletes have higher scores for the domain “acceptance of gamesmanship”. This is because the male athletes prioritised winning over good sportsmanship which leads to a negative impact in today’s decision-making behaviours to be regarded as common.

Moreover, there is no significant difference for the domain "acceptance of cheating" and “keeping winning in proportion” between Johor SUKMA athletes based on gender. According to the previous research by Zorba (2018), there was also no significant difference found in “acceptance of cheating” between gender since the significance value was  $p = 0.09$  ( $p > 0.05$ ). The analysis on the different ways of cheating appeared that both males’ athletes and female athletes were similarly unjustified in their dishonest acts related to the manipulation of the outcome of the sports contest (Ponseti et al., 2016). This shows that athletes are less likely to cheat in matches, and to waste time trying to rile up their opponents. Furthermore, according to the study by Karakullukçu (2020), the result found that there was no significant difference in “keeping winning in proportion” in terms of gender where the significant value was  $p = 0.15$  ( $p > 0.05$ ). The same finding can also be seen in Atalay (2016), in which there was no significant difference for the domain “keep winning in proportion”. The reason behind this is due to the gender factor which is dominant and determinant concerning participation in sport has not caused a significant difference within the research.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study revealed that “keeping winning in proportion” is a major factor that drives Johor SUKMA athletes in moral decision-making in sports. This can be justified because an athlete believes that winning is all-important for the progress and development of their career. The more successful they are, the more money they can earn. This study has implications for the Johor National Sports Council (MSNJ) to control the performance of athletes through the use of existing development methods and identify the professional level and sportsmanship of athletes. In addition, with this research, the vision of Malaysia's Ministry

of Youth and Sport to create high-quality and talented athletes in bringing national sports success to the international stage can be successfully achieved. This research will also encourage coaches to develop a more ethical conduct and professional perception of coaching towards their athletes in sports participation. Thus, it will inspire existing and future coaches to be further educated in guiding their team to have a better performance and most importantly winning the game, fairly.

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