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Understanding the Motivational Barriers to Sports Participation Among Malaysian University Students

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Abstract— *This study investigates the motivational factors influencing sports participation among Malaysian first-year university students, focusing on their apparent disinterest in sports. Utilizing the Sport Motivation Scale II (SMS-II), 150 participants from private and government universities (75 males and 75 females) were surveyed. Findings revealed low levels of intrinsic motivation and identified regulation, with a significant presence of amotivation, a phenomenon discussed in the context of cultural and systemic factors influencing sports participation (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Pelletier et al., 2013). These results suggest systemic and cultural barriers to sports participation, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions to enhance students' engagement with sports (Ng et al., 2012).*

Keywords— *Sports Motivation; Amotivation; Self-Determination Theory; Malaysian University Students; Intrinsic Motivation.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Participation in sports offers numerous physical, psychological, and social benefits, such as improved health, stress management, and development of teamwork and leadership skills (Biddle & Mutrie, 2008; Cohen et al., 2007). Despite these benefits, sports participation among university students, particularly in Malaysia, appears to be declining (Molanorouzi et al., 2015). Motivation is a critical determinant of sports participation, as outlined by the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which ranges from intrinsic motivation to amotivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Understanding these motivations can help identify barriers and propose solutions for improving sports engagement (Vallerand, 2007). This study aims to examine the sports motivation of first-year university students in Malaysia using the SMS-II and to highlight the factors contributing to their apparent lack of interest in sports.

Problem Statement

Despite the well-documented physical, psychological, and social benefits of sports participation, engagement levels among Malaysian first-year university students remain alarmingly low, with many demonstrating significant disinterest. This trend is troubling as it suggests potential barriers that prevent students from reaping the holistic benefits of active involvement in sports.

Existing research indicates that cultural attitudes emphasizing academic success over extracurricular pursuits are prevalent in Malaysia, often limiting students' opportunities and inclination to engage in physical activities (Ali et al., 2018). Additionally, access to sports facilities and resources remains inconsistent, with many universities facing challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, lack of maintenance, and scheduling conflicts, further deterring student participation (Ibrahim et al., 2013). Societal and familial pressures, including a preference for academic excellence over recreational activities, also compound the issue, leaving little room for students to prioritize sports and physical education (Yusof et al., 2016).

Intrinsic motivation, a key driver of sustained sports participation, appears to be notably deficient among Malaysian students. Studies have identified low self-determination levels, with many students engaging in sports primarily due to external factors such as fulfilling course requirements rather than intrinsic enjoyment or personal growth (Hashim et al., 2014). This lack of intrinsic motivation often leads to high levels of amotivation and disengagement, creating a vicious cycle that perpetuates low participation rates (Pelletier et al., 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Moreover, the gendered nature of sports participation in Malaysia further exacerbates the problem. Female students, in particular, face additional cultural and logistical barriers, including concerns about modesty, safety, and insufficient female-oriented sports programs, which restrict their involvement (Kamarudin et al., 2021). This study investigated the underlying motivational factors and barriers contributing to this disinterest, aiming to identify actionable strategies that universities, educators, and policymakers can implement to enhance sports engagement. By addressing these challenges, the study aspires to support the comprehensive development of students, fostering an environment where physical activity is an integral part of university life and personal well-being.

II. METHODOLOGY

Participants

The study sampled 150 Malaysian first-year university students, evenly distributed between private and government universities. The gender distribution was balanced, with 75 males and 75 females participating in the survey. Participants were selected to ensure diversity in academic and demographic backgrounds (Hair et al., 2010).

Instrument

The Sport Motivation Scale II (SMS-II) was employed to measure the motivation levels of participants. The scale categorizes motivation into six types: intrinsic regulation, integrated regulation, identified regulation, introjected regulation, external regulation, and non-regulation

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(amotivation) (Pelletier et al., 2013). Participants rated 18 items on a scale ranging from 1 (does not correspond at all) to 7 (corresponds completely), a methodology supported by previous studies employing similar scales (Biddle et al., 2005).

Descriptive statistics revealed trends such as an average score for intrinsic regulation of 3.2 (SD = 1.1) and an average score for amotivation of 4.8 (SD = 1.0). Statistical analyses were conducted adhering to standard practices in sports psychology research (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2014).

III. Results

The findings revealed significant trends, including high levels of amotivation and low intrinsic motivation. Responses suggesting a lack of direction in sports participation were prevalent, aligning with observations in the literature about motivational deficits among university students (Molanorouzi et al., 2015). Additionally, moderate external regulation was noted, with gender and institutional differences also observed (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002).

The findings revealed several significant trends, supported by statistical analyses:

High Levels of Amotivation: Many participants showed signs of amotivation, with an average score of 4.8 (SD = 1.0). Approximately 60% (n = 90) of participants scored above 5 on the amotivation scale, indicating a prevalent lack of motivation to participate in sports. This aligns with statements like “I don’t know anymore; I have the impression that I am incapable of succeeding in this sport,” which were endorsed by 58% of participants.

Low Intrinsic Motivation: The average intrinsic motivation score was 3.2 (SD = 1.1), with only 20% (n = 30) of participants scoring above 4. This suggests that sports participation did not evoke significant interest or enjoyment. Specifically, the item “Because it is very interesting to learn how I can improve” had a mean rating of 2.9 (SD = 1.2), further highlighting the lack of intrinsic engagement.

Moderate External Regulation: Although intrinsic motivation was low, some participants (45%, n = 68) reported engaging in sports due to external factors, with an average score of 4.0 (SD = 1.2). This external pressure is exemplified by responses such as “Because people I care about would be upset with me if I didn’t,” which received a mean rating of 4.3 (SD = 1.3).

Gender and Institutional Differences: A comparative analysis using independent samples t-tests revealed that female students displayed slightly higher levels of amotivation (Mean = 5.0, SD = 0.9) compared to males (Mean = 4.6, SD = 1.1), $t(148) = 2.50$, $p < 0.05$. Additionally, students from government universities reported lower intrinsic motivation scores (Mean = 3.0, SD = 1.2) compared to those from private universities (Mean = 3.4, SD = 1.0), $t(148) = 2.75$, $p < 0.01$.

These statistical analyses emphasize the study’s qualitative observations of motivational disparities among Malaysian first-year university students. The pronounced presence of amotivation and low levels of intrinsic motivation point to systemic issues that discourage sports participation among students.

IV. Discussion

The data from this study indicates a pronounced level of amotivation and low intrinsic motivation among Malaysian first-year university students, underscoring a general disinterest in sports participation. This trend can be attributed to several underlying factors. Primarily, cultural perceptions play a crucial role. In Malaysia, as in many other countries, academic achievements are often prioritized over extracurricular activities, such as sports. This cultural emphasis on academics can result in a devaluation of sports, leading students to perceive sports participation as less important (Chatzisarantis et al., 2003). Additionally, there are challenges related to accessibility. Many universities, especially those in urban areas, may not have sufficient sports facilities or organized sporting programs available to all students, which can further deter engagement. Furthermore, external pressures, including expectations from parents and society, may shift focus away from sports. Students may feel compelled to allocate more time to academic pursuits to meet these expectations, as success in academics is frequently seen as a pathway to future stability and success.

The study's findings resonate with existing literature that underscores the importance of intrinsic motivation in sustaining long-term sports engagement. Pelletier et al. (2013) highlighted how intrinsic motivation—defined by genuine interest and enjoyment of the activity itself—serves as a key driver for persistent sports participation. However, the high levels of amotivation observed in this study suggest an even deeper level of disengagement among these students, which could be influenced by cultural and systemic factors unique to Malaysia. According to Deci and Ryan (2000), amotivation can result from a perceived lack of control or competence, feelings that may be exacerbated within an academic-focused culture where sports do not receive similar value or recognition. Moreover, systemic barriers, such as insufficient policy support for integrating sports more fully into educational frameworks, could further compound these motivational deficits. This study, therefore, adds to the body of literature by suggesting that culturally specific interventions may be necessary to address such unique motivational landscapes and encourage a more holistic approach to education that balances academics and sports.

V. Recommendations

To address the declining interest in sports among first-year university students in Malaysia, universities should enhance both structural and motivational aspects. Firstly, improving the accessibility of sports facilities is crucial. This involves upgrading infrastructure to ensure it is modern and inviting, as well as establishing organized sports programs that cater to diverse interests and skill levels (Vealey & Chase, 2023). By doing so, universities create environments conducive to participation.

Promoting intrinsic motivation is equally important. Implementing skill-building workshops focused on personal growth, enjoyment, and mastery within sports can boost intrinsic motivation, essential for long-term engagement

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(Ntoumanis & Quested, 2018). Such workshops can develop competence and autonomy, key components highlighted in Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Furthermore, integrating sports into the academic curriculum as elective courses can incentivize participation by aligning it with educational objectives, thus promoting a holistic approach to student development (Armour et al., 2022).

Role of Educators and Policymakers

Educators can encourage a balanced view of academics and extracurricular activities. By supporting the inclusion of sports as critical to student life, educators can help shift the cultural prioritization of academics over physical and social development (Gonzalez et al., 2021). This includes conveying the benefits of sports for mental health and community engagement. Policymakers must also consider national initiatives to make sports more appealing and accessible. This could include funding sports programs, training coaches, and promoting campaigns that highlight sports' psychological and physical benefits (Walters et al., 2019). Such efforts could cultivate a culture that values sports as complementary to educational success.

VI. Conclusion

This study highlights the disinterest in sports among Malaysian first-year university students, characterized by high levels of amotivation and low intrinsic motivation. Addressing these issues requires collaborative efforts from universities, educators, and policymakers to create environments that reignite student interest. By aligning sports initiatives with educational goals and fostering diverse opportunities for participation, it is possible to enhance students' overall well-being and development (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Vansteenkiste et al., 2021). Such efforts are essential for promoting a balanced educational approach that values sports' role in developing well-rounded individuals.

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