

Understanding and Perceptions of Deviance among University Athletes: A Social Control Perspective

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Abstract

This study aims to comprehensively explore the perceptions, understanding, and engagement of university athletes with deviant behaviors and social control mechanisms within the sports environment in Pakistan. Focusing on a critical gap in sports ethics research within this specific demographic, the study addresses how athletes identify various forms of deviance, their attitudes toward such behaviors, their awareness of institutional rules and disciplinary policies, and their perceptions of the fairness and effectiveness of these control measures. Furthermore, it seeks to gather athletes' suggestions for improving sports ethics and social control. A quantitative descriptive research design was employed, involving 101 university athletes (both male and female, representing diverse sports, demographical backgrounds, and experiences) recruited through a convenience sampling approach across various universities in Pakistan. Data were collected using an online Google Forms questionnaire consisting of five distinct instruments, each utilizing a 5-point Likert-type scale (ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree"). These questionnaires covered athletes' understanding of deviance (cheating, aggression, substance use, gamesmanship), attitudes toward deviant behavior, awareness of institutional rules, perceptions of social control policies, and suggestions for improvement. Ethical considerations including informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality were strictly maintained. Data will be analyzed using SPSS Version 28, employing descriptive statistics to summarize responses and inferential statistics (e.g., one sample t-test) to explore difference of opinions of sample. This research is anticipated to provide valuable insights into the ethical landscape of university sports in Pakistan, informing targeted interventions and policy enhancements to foster a culture of integrity and fair play among student-athletes.

Keywords: Deviance, Social Control Theory, University Sports, Sports Ethics, Accountability, Discipline, Integrity, Fair Play

Introduction

University sports are integral to the student-athlete experience, fostering athletic development, personal growth, teamwork, and social engagement while also influencing institutional culture and community identity (Han & Ha, 2025). However, the competitive nature inherent in university athletics can also inadvertently foster environments where deviant behaviors, such as cheating, aggression, and doping, may emerge, thereby challenging the integrity of sportsmanship and fair play (Dziubiński, 2009). This study, therefore, aims to delve into the multifaceted understanding and perceptions of deviance among university athletes, exploring their

awareness of existing rules and disciplinary measures within their institutions ([Dziubiński, 2009](#)). Furthermore, it investigates athletes' opinions on the effectiveness and fairness of current social control policies, ultimately seeking their suggestions for enhancing ethical conduct and institutional support in sports. Given that sport often mirrors broader societal issues, understanding how athletes perceive and respond to deviance is crucial for maintaining the ethical framework of University athletics ([Dziubiński, 2009](#)). This exploration is particularly salient as deviant behavior can lead to significant social losses, including physical harm, financial burdens, and a decline in the axionormative order, which ultimately encourages further non-conforming behaviors within the sporting community ([Dziubiński, 2009](#)). Consequently, investigating the perspectives of university athletes provides critical insights into the prevailing ethical climate and the efficacy of current regulatory frameworks designed to uphold sports integrity within academic institutions ([Han & Ha, 2025](#)). This research employs a comprehensive questionnaire to gather quantitative and qualitative data from 101 university athletes across Punjab Province, Pakistan, examining their understanding of various forms of deviance, including cheating, aggressive behavior, doping, and gamesmanship.

Background of Deviance in Sports

Deviance in sports encompasses a wide range of behaviors that violate established norms, rules, or ethical standards, spanning from individual athlete misconduct to systemic issues within athletic organizations ([Dziubiński, 2009](#)). These behaviors can include, but are not limited to, doping, aggressive conduct, match-fixing, and various forms of unsportsmanlike conduct, all of which challenge the integrity and spirit of competition ([Gray & Porreca, 2023](#)). More broadly, deviance can manifest as milder offenses such as gambling and public drunkenness, or severe transgressions like bribery and white-collar crime within the sporting context ([Dziubiński, 2009](#)). Understanding how university athletes perceive and interpret these deviant behaviors is crucial for developing effective preventative measures and reinforcing ethical conduct in collegiate sports. This study specifically investigates the understanding, perceptions, and awareness of rules and disciplinary actions among university athletes in Punjab regarding deviant behaviors, alongside their opinions on the efficacy and fairness of current social control policies.

University Athletes and Ethical Conduct

This nuanced exploration aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse surrounding sports ethics by providing a localized yet generalizable perspective on how young athletes navigate the complexities of fair play, aggressive behavior, and the acceptance of gamesmanship within their competitive environments. The research also examines the influence of teams and coaches on deviant behaviors, athletes' moral judgments, and their awareness of university policies and social control mechanisms. Furthermore, it probes into the athletes' perceptions of clarity, fairness, and effectiveness of these policies, and their overall satisfaction with existing frameworks, ultimately soliciting their suggestions for improvements in ethical education, accountability, enforcement, and institutional support to combat deviance in sports. Such an investigation is vital, as sport is widely recognized as a "laboratory of human experience," capable of teaching competition, cooperation, role-playing, and discipline while also shaping moral competencies ([Ludwiczak & Bronikowska, 2022](#)). However, within this environment, the potential for unethical conduct, influenced by factors such as coaching behaviors and team dynamics, significantly impacts athletes' perceptions of fair play and their willingness to engage in deviant acts ([Yukhymenko-Lescroart et al., 2014](#)) ([Ludwiczak & Bronikowska, 2022](#)).

Statement of the Problem

Despite the established importance of ethical conduct in university sports, there remains a significant gap in understanding how athletes themselves perceive and internalize concepts of deviance, particularly concerning the efficacy and equity of existing social control mechanisms. This oversight can lead to a disconnect between

policy implementation and athlete adherence, potentially undermining efforts to foster a fair and disciplined sporting environment. Furthermore, a lack of athlete input in policy formation can lead to reduced legitimacy of anti-doping regulations and other ethical guidelines, ultimately impacting their perceived effectiveness ([Woolway et al., 2020](#)).

Research Objectives

1. To examine university athletes' understanding of various forms of deviance in sports.
2. To explore university athletes' attitudes and perceptions toward deviant behaviors in sports.
3. To assess university athletes' awareness of institutional rules and disciplinary policies related to deviance.
4. To analyze university athletes' opinions on the effectiveness and fairness of existing social control policies.
5. To identify and gather suggestions from university athletes for enhancing sports ethics and social control within their teams and institutions.

Significance of the Study

This study will contribute to the development of more effective and athlete-centric social control policies, fostering a culture of integrity and fair play in university sports. It will also provide valuable insights for sports administrators, coaches, and policymakers to design targeted interventions and educational programs that resonate with the lived experiences and ethical frameworks of collegiate athletes. Specifically, by exploring how athletes perceive issues such as cheating, aggression, and doping, this research endeavors to illuminate the complex interplay between individual moral judgment, team dynamics, and institutional regulations ([Ludwiczak & Bronikowska, 2022](#)). Moreover, understanding these perspectives is crucial for developing robust educational frameworks that address emerging concerns like interpersonal violence and maltreatment, ensuring a holistic approach to athlete welfare and ethical development ([Parent et al., 2024](#)) ([Gurgis et al., 2022](#)). Additionally, by incorporating athlete feedback, universities can refine their social control mechanisms to better align with the athletes' lived experiences and moral obligations ([Efverström et al., 2016](#)).

Literature Review

This section synthesizes existing academic discourse on sports deviance, ethical conduct in university athletics, and the efficacy of social control mechanisms within university settings. It delves into theoretical frameworks explaining deviant behaviors in sports, such as the theory of planned behavior and social control theory, to contextualize the current study's approach ([Kang et al., 2021](#)). The moral atmosphere and motivational climate fostered by teams and coaches significantly influence athletes' pro-social and anti-social behaviors ([Schmid et al., 2024](#)). Coaches and peers exert considerable influence on athletes' adherence to rules and ethical conduct, sometimes encouraging minor rule-bending ([Matthews, 2012](#)). An individual's moral awareness, coupled with the observed behaviors of peers and coaches, predicts engagement in deviant sports behaviors ([Kang et al., 2021](#)). For instance, a higher moral obligation among female and younger athletes correlates with fewer instances of deviant behavior, whereas contact sports tend to exhibit more actual deviant behaviors ([Kang et al., 2021](#)). Social variables and moral disengagement profoundly shape prosocial and antisocial behaviors in athletes, underscoring the complex interplay of individual psychology and environmental factors in sports ethics ([Christensen et al., 2024](#)).

Understanding of Deviance in Sports

The phenomenon of deviance in competitive sport is a complex subject that sociologists attempt to explain through various theoretical lenses, primarily functionalist/structuralist approaches and symbolic interactionism ([Dziubiński, 2009](#)). These frameworks offer distinct perspectives on how societal structures and individual interpretations shape an athlete's understanding and engagement with behaviors that deviate from established norms and rules in sports ([Gray & Porreca, 2023](#)). Additionally, the moral atmosphere and motivational climate perceived by athletes from their teams and coaches are instrumental in shaping their antisocial and prosocial behaviors ([Rossing et al., 2024](#)). While such behaviors are condemned, they are an unavoidable aspect of contemporary sports, and understanding their underlying causes is crucial for controlling their incidence ([Dziubiński, 2009](#)). Although public awareness has shifted towards valuing fair play over winning, deviant behaviors persist in sports, often influenced by coaches and team dynamics ([Kang et al., 2021](#)).

Perception of Deviant Behavior

The perception of what constitutes deviant behavior can vary among athletes, influenced by factors such as cultural background, competitive environment, and the specific sport played ([Kang et al., 2021](#)). For example, individual-sport athletes may have different ethical decision-making processes compared to team-sport athletes, whose choices are often influenced by collective ethical standards ([Kang et al., 2021](#)). These perceptions are further shaped by the influence of social agents like coaches and teammates, as well as broader community cultures, which can create pressure leading to various forms of deviance, including doping ([Weber et al., 2021](#)). This includes instances where athletes may engage in performance-enhancing substance use due to perceived norms or pressures within their sporting environment ([Gray & Porreca, 2023](#)). Moreover, athletes' individual moral compass and impulsivity also play a significant role in predicting their engagement in unethical behaviors, highlighting the multifaceted nature of deviant conduct in sports ([Kang et al., 2021](#)). The concept of deviance itself can be ambiguous, as actions considered deviant in one context, such as national elite cycling, may not be perceived as such in another, like international elite cycling, where doping might be normalized ([Lentillon-Kaestner, 2014](#)).

Awareness of Rules and Discipline

However, despite widespread anti-doping education, athletes sometimes do not perceive doping as cheating, highlighting a disconnect between policy and individual understanding ([Gray & Porreca, 2023](#)). This gap underscores the necessity for comprehensive educational strategies that not only disseminate rules but also cultivate a deeper internalization of ethical principles among athletes ([Dziubiński, 2009](#)) ([Kang et al., 2021](#)). Moreover, the effectiveness of rules and disciplinary actions is heavily reliant on consistent enforcement and the perceived fairness of sanctions, which can significantly impact an athlete's willingness to comply ([Dziubiński, 2009](#)). Furthermore, athletes' perceptions of behavioral control and their moral obligations are key factors influencing their intentions regarding deviant behaviors, suggesting that interventions should target these aspects to promote adherence to regulations ([Kang et al., 2021](#)).

Effectiveness and Fairness of Social Control Policies

The perceived fairness and efficacy of social control policies are critical in mitigating deviant behaviors, as athletes are more likely to adhere to regulations they deem just and consistently applied. Conversely, policies perceived as inequitable or inconsistently enforced can erode trust and compliance, potentially fostering an environment where deviance is more likely to occur ([Kang et al., 2021](#)). This implies that transparent and robust social control mechanisms are essential for maintaining ethical conduct and promoting a culture of

integrity within university sports ([Dziubiński, 2009](#)). Moreover, athletes' satisfaction with these policies directly correlates with their willingness to abide by them, indicating that participatory approaches in policy formulation may enhance adherence. For instance, athletes expect opportunities to explain their perspectives before sanctions are issued and consistent enforcement across various teams. This underscores the importance of clear communication regarding policy guidelines and disciplinary procedures, as outlined in readily accessible codes of conduct and regularly reviewed by coaches and administrators. Such frameworks are crucial for fostering an environment where athletes perceive policies as legitimate, thereby enhancing their sense of duty and obligation to adhere to anti-doping regulations and other codes of conduct ([Woolway et al., 2020](#)). Legitimacy, as perceived by athletes, is critical for the effectiveness of anti-doping systems and compliance with rules, influencing their acceptance and adherence ([Woolway et al., 2020](#)).

Social Control Mechanisms in Sports

These mechanisms encompass a range of strategies, from formal sanctions to informal peer pressure and educational initiatives, all aimed at guiding athlete conduct within the established norms of fair play and ethical competition ([Ludwiczak & Bronikowska, 2022](#)). Effective social control, therefore, requires a multi-faceted approach that integrates clear policy communication, consistent enforcement, and athlete involvement in policy development to foster a shared commitment to ethical behavior. For instance, implementing peer mentorship programs can help integrate newcomers into a responsible team culture, while establishing a council to address ethical concerns allows for athlete input and promotes consistent application of rules. The efficacy of such social control strategies is further enhanced by fostering a moral community within sports, where shared beliefs about morality among athletes contribute to a more ethical environment and increased trust in enforcement bodies ([Blank et al., 2021](#)). This collaborative approach, wherein athletes are seen as stakeholders rather than adversaries, bolsters the legitimacy of anti-doping policies and other regulations ([Macedo et al., 2017](#)).

Methodology

The present study utilized a qualitative research design to explore university athletes' perceptions of deviance, rules, and social control policies in sports. This approach allowed for a broad assessment of attitudes and beliefs regarding ethical conduct, disciplinary measures, and the effectiveness of current interventions across a diverse athletic population. Specifically, a cross-sectional survey was administered to gather data on various aspects of athlete understanding and perception, employing a structured questionnaire to ensure consistency and facilitate statistical analysis. The questionnaire was designed to capture a comprehensive understanding of athletes' perspectives, ranging from their personal ethical stances to their views on the broader institutional frameworks governing sports integrity. This methodological choice facilitated the collection of standardized data from a large sample, enabling statistical inferences regarding the prevalence and correlates of specific perceptions among university athletes.

Research Design

The study employed a descriptive survey design, allowing for the comprehensive assessment of variables without manipulation, thereby providing insights into existing phenomena within the athletic community. This design is particularly suitable for exploring subjective experiences and attitudes, which are central to understanding athletes' complex relationship with rules, deviance, and social control mechanisms in university sports. Such a design is instrumental in quantifying prevalent opinions and perceptions concerning fair play, aggressive behavior, and the influence of team dynamics and coaches on ethical conduct ([Ludwiczak & Bronikowska, 2022](#)). The research design further enabled an exploration of athletes' awareness of university

policies, social control mechanisms, and the perceived fairness and effectiveness of these policies, along with their satisfaction with existing structures .

Participants

There were 101 university athletes from across Punjab participated in this study, selected through convenient random sampling. This cohort comprised a diverse representation of athletes across various sports, encompassing both urban and rural backgrounds, as well as graduate and undergraduate academic levels. The sample included male and female athletes competing in sports such as cricket, hockey, badminton, basketball, handball, fencing, and table tennis. Data collection was conducted using a structured questionnaire disseminated via an online Google Form, designed to comprehensively assess their understanding, perceptions, and opinions on various aspects of deviance in sports and social control mechanisms . The questionnaire specifically targeted insights into their comprehension of cheating, aggressive behavior, doping, and the distinction between gamesmanship and sportsmanship ([Erickson et al., 2019](#)). Moreover, it probed their attitudes towards fair play, aggressive conduct, and the acceptance of gamesmanship, alongside the influence of teammates and coaches on deviant behaviors and moral judgment ([Sipavičiūtė & Šukys, 2020](#)) ([Kang et al., 2021](#)).

Sampling Technique

Convenience sampling, as utilized in this study, relies on the accessibility and willingness of participants, which can introduce selection bias but is often practical for large populations (Astuti et al., 2024). Despite this limitation, the diverse representation of athletes across various demographics and sporting disciplines within the sample helps mitigate some potential biases. Furthermore, the broad spectrum of sports represented within the sample ensures a richer understanding of how perceptions of deviance and social control may vary across different athletic contexts. This approach, while expedient, necessitates careful consideration of generalizability, acknowledging that participants' easy availability may not fully capture the complete spectrum of university athletes' experiences (Liu et al., 2023).

Data Collection Instrument

A multi-faceted survey instrument, comprising five distinct questionnaires, was employed to gather comprehensive insights into university athletes' understanding, perceptions, awareness, and opinions concerning sports deviance and social control policies. Items used a Five-Point Likert scale to measure agreement, allowing for an assessment of awareness of policies, mechanisms, sanctions, perceived fairness and effectiveness, and overall satisfaction . Athletes also provided suggestions for improving ethical education, accountability enforcement, and institutional support to prevent deviance. The study adhered to strict ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and compliance with institutional review board guidelines and the Declaration of Helsinki ([Andreu et al., 2023](#)). Prior to full-scale deployment, the questionnaire underwent a pre-test with a smaller sample of athletes to identify and rectify any potential ambiguities or weak wording, ensuring the clarity and validity of the instrument ([Blank et al., 2021](#)).

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection procedure involved distributing the online Google Form link to athletes through sports coordinators and coaches, who facilitated access to the target population while ensuring voluntary participation ([Ludwiczak & Bronikowska, 2022](#)). Participants were given clear instructions about the study's purpose, the estimated time required for completion, and their right to withdraw at any point without

consequence ([Marsollier et al., 2021](#)). Prior to data analysis, all collected responses were meticulously checked for completeness and consistency to ensure data quality and reliability.

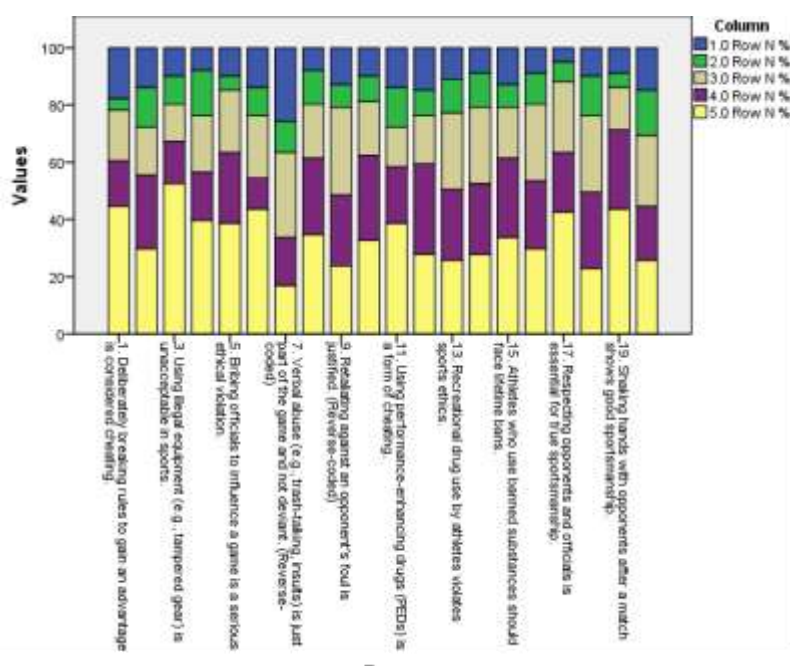
Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data was analyzed using descriptive statistics to summarize participant demographics and their overall perceptions, alongside inferential statistics such as regression analysis to examine relationships between variables and identify potential predictors of athletes' understanding and opinions regarding deviance and social control in sports. This comprehensive analytical approach will allow for a robust interpretation of the findings, shedding light on areas requiring targeted interventions and policy adjustments within university athletic programs. This approach will also help in understanding how factors such as moral atmosphere and perceived behavioral control influence deviant behaviors, providing a nuanced perspective for developing more effective intervention strategies ([Schmid et al., 2024](#)) ([Kang et al., 2021](#)). Furthermore, advanced statistical modeling, such as structural equation modeling, may be employed to explore complex relationships between athletes' moral judgments, impulsivity, and their predisposition towards deviant behaviors, as suggested by previous research ([Kang et al., 2021](#)).

Results

The subsequent sections detail the findings derived from these analyses, presenting both quantitative measures of athletes' understanding and qualitative insights into their perceptions of deviance and social control within their athletic environments. This comprehensive presentation will illuminate the efficacy of current university policies and identify critical areas for improvement in fostering an ethical sporting culture. This detailed examination will specifically address how factors like coaches actively enforcing university policies and athletic administrators taking rule violations seriously contribute to the perceived fairness and effectiveness of social control mechanisms. Such insights are crucial for refining existing frameworks and developing new strategies to mitigate deviant behaviors, fostering a more integrity-driven athletic environment.

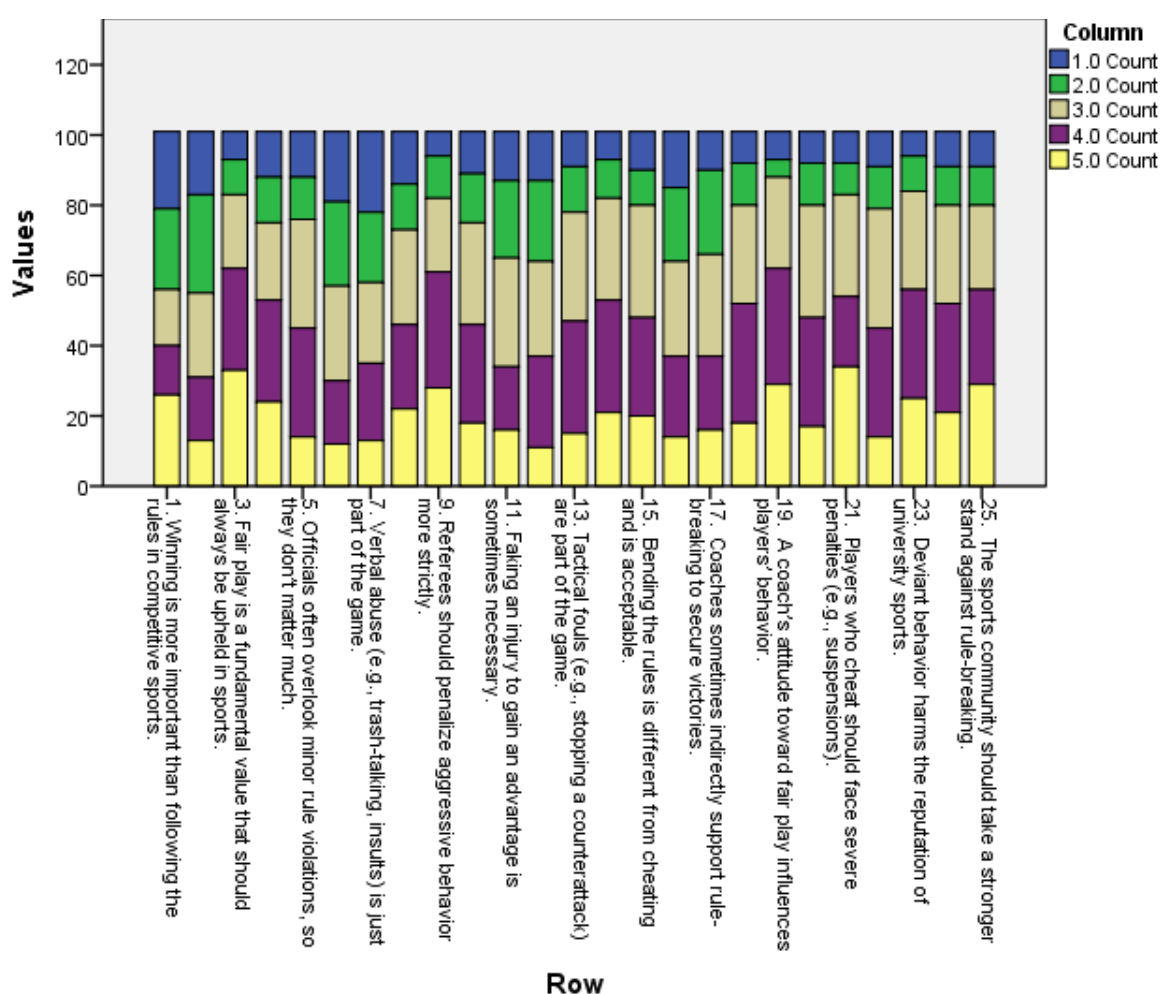
Athletes' Understanding of Deviance



Interpretation

The results of the one-sample t-test revealed a strong and consistent ethical stance among participants, who overwhelmingly condemned deviant behaviors in sports. Actions such as bribing officials, using illegal equipment, and doping were met with significant disapproval, as were aggressive behaviors like intentionally injuring opponents, with participants strongly endorsing strict punishment for such violations. Conversely, respondents firmly rejected rationalizations that justify deviance, such as the notion that "winning by any means" is acceptable. Instead, the findings demonstrated a powerful consensus in favor of sportsmanship, with the highest levels of agreement reserved for values like respecting opponents and officials and shaking hands after a match, underscoring a collective commitment to fairness, integrity, and mutual respect as the foundational principles of athletic competition.

Perception of Deviant Behavior in Sports

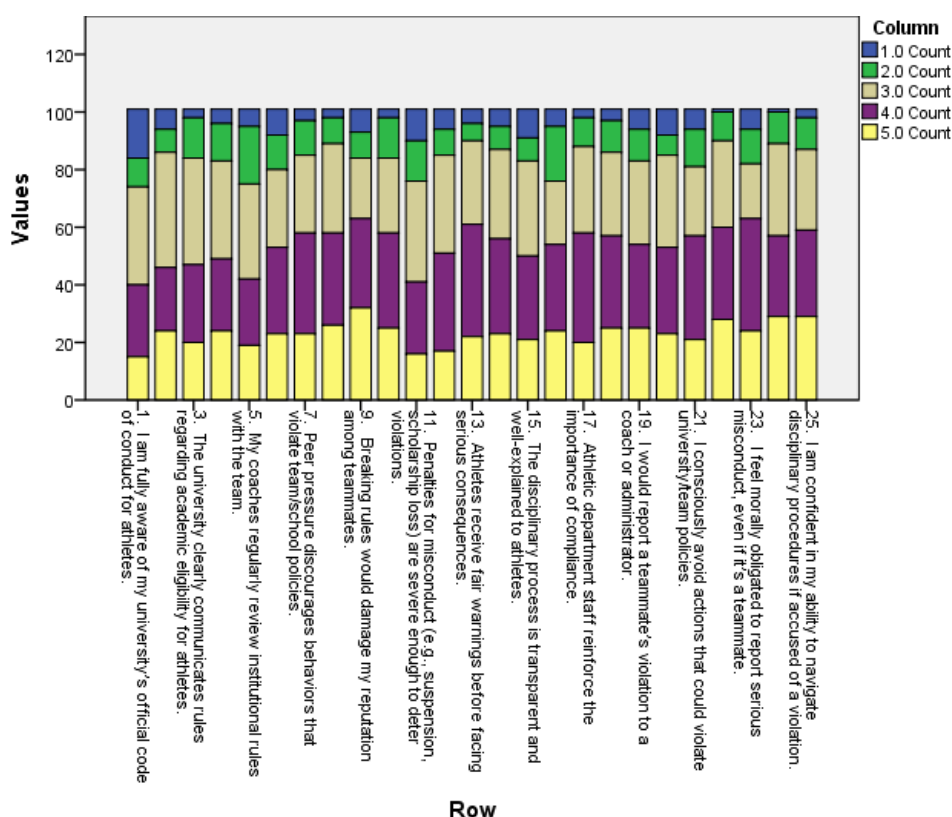


Interpretation

Based on the second dataset, participants demonstrated a strong yet nuanced ethical stance, valuing fair play and safety while acknowledging the contextual tensions within competitive sports. Although there was some recognition that winning can create pressure to bend minor rules, respondents overwhelmingly upheld the principle of fair play and expressed strong disapproval of aggression, verbal abuse, and intentional harm.

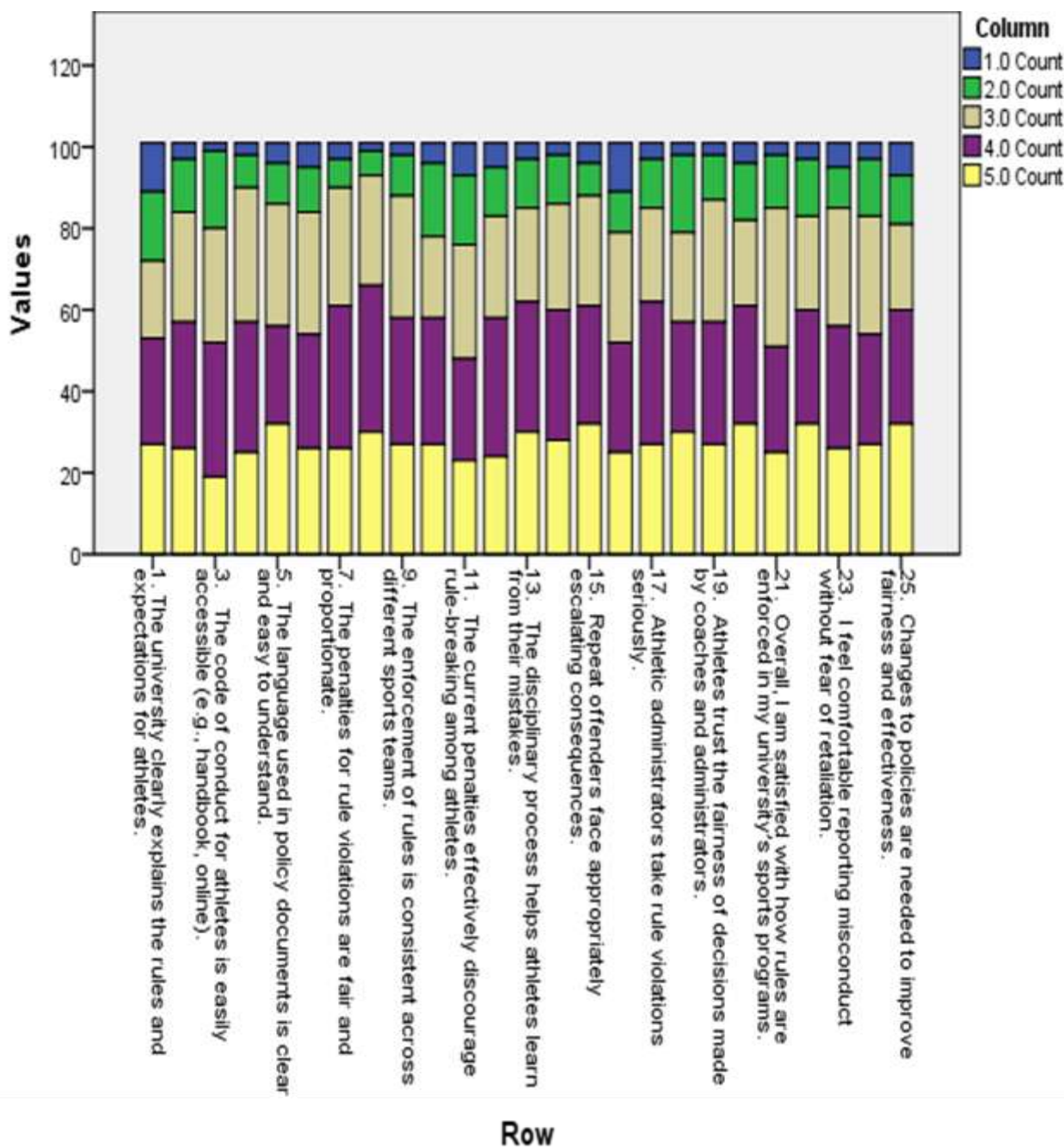
Cheating and deception were largely rejected, though participants distinguished between outright cheating and more ambiguous behaviors like tactical fouls, suggesting a graded perception of deviance. The data highlighted the powerful influence of social dynamics, particularly from coaches and teammates, in either encouraging or discouraging unethical behavior, and emphasized the need for accountability, stricter penalties, and collective responsibility to uphold integrity. Overall, the results reflect a complex ethical landscape where a commitment to sportsmanship persists despite the perceived competitive pressures that can sometimes undermine it.

Awareness of Rules and Discipline



Interpretation

The third dataset indicates a robust and well-integrated ethical framework within the athletic program, characterized by high awareness and internalization of institutional codes of conduct among athletes. Respondents demonstrated clear familiarity with policies and penalties, strongly affirming that coaches actively reinforce rules and model appropriate behavior, while peers foster a culture of mutual accountability and mentorship. This environment is further strengthened by a shared belief in the fairness and transparency of disciplinary procedures and a deep personal conviction that adhering to rules is a matter of integrity. Overall, the results depict a climate where institutional norms are consistently upheld through effective leadership, peer influence, and a strong alignment between personal ethics and organizational expectations, creating a culture where compliance is viewed as both a social responsibility and a moral imperative.



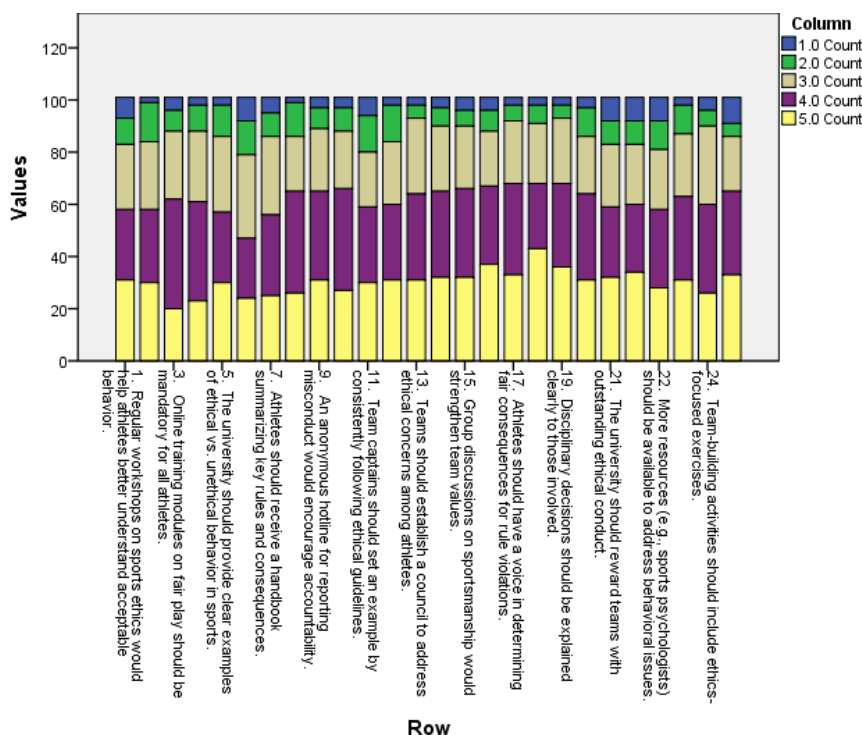
University Athletes Opinions on Effectiveness and Fairness of Social Control Policies

Interpretation

The fourth dataset reveals a strong consensus among athletes that institutional rules and disciplinary processes are clear, fair, and effectively communicated and enforced. Respondents affirmed that policies are highly accessible and well-explained, with coaches and administrators actively modeling and reinforcing compliance, thereby fostering a culture of accountability and trust. The perceived fairness and consistency of disciplinary actions applied equally without favoritism and seen as both proportionate and educational further

reinforce confidence in the system. Additionally, athletes reported satisfaction with the respectful and transparent environment these policies create, though they also acknowledged the value of ongoing input and adaptation to ensure continued fairness and effectiveness. Overall, the findings depict a robust ethical infrastructure where institutional enforcement aligns with educational goals and athlete engagement.

University Athletes Suggestions for Social Control in Teams and Institutions



Interpretation

Based on the results, participants overwhelmingly endorsed a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach to reducing deviance, strongly supporting all 25 proposed institutional and team-level interventions. Key themes included the critical role of structured educational initiatives such as regular workshops and online training to enhance ethical awareness, alongside a pronounced emphasis on peer accountability through mentorship and captains modeling exemplary conduct. Respondents also highlighted the necessity of transparent, consistently applied disciplinary policies free from favoritism, alongside greater access to support resources like sports psychologists and anonymous reporting systems. Collectively, these findings advocate for a strategy that integrates education, social influence, equitable enforcement, and supportive infrastructure to strengthen ethical norms and effectively mitigate deviant behavior in university sports. The data analysis will further explore the interplay between individual athlete characteristics and their engagement with institutional oversight, providing a holistic view of the factors contributing to or deterring deviant behaviors in University sports.

Discussion

This discussion delves deeper into the intricate relationship between athletes' perceptions of deviance and the effectiveness of social control mechanisms, aiming to reconcile the quantitative insights with broader theoretical frameworks of sports ethics and organizational behavior (Agnew et al., 2017). Specifically, it will examine how personal integrity and moral obligations influence athletes' willingness to report misconduct, even when it involves teammates. Moreover, the discussion will analyze how the athletes' awareness of

institutional policies and their perception of the fairness and consistency of disciplinary actions contribute to or detract from their compliance and willingness to engage in pro-social behavior .

Interpretation of Athletes' Understanding of Deviance

The findings suggest that university athletes possess a nuanced understanding of deviance, often differentiating between minor infractions and serious ethical breaches, which aligns with previous research on varying levels of fair play comprehension ([Ludwiczak & Bronikowska, 2022](#)). This differentiation is crucial, as it impacts their likelihood of reporting specific behaviors and their perception of appropriate disciplinary actions ([Ludwiczak & Bronikowska, 2022](#)). For instance, athletes may view gamesmanship as a less severe transgression compared to doping, influencing their willingness to confront or report such behaviors ([Ludwiczak & Bronikowska, 2022](#)). Such distinctions in perceived severity often correlate with the effectiveness of educational interventions, as programs tailored to address specific forms of deviance can more directly influence athletes' moral judgments and behavioral intentions ([Ludwiczak & Bronikowska, 2022](#)).

Discussion of Perceptions of Deviant Behavior

Further analysis indicates that athletes' perceptions of deviant behavior are significantly shaped by their moral reasoning and the influence of their athletic environment, encompassing coaches, teammates, and institutional norms ([Anderski et al., 2023](#)) ([Kang et al., 2021](#)). This aligns with the Theory of Planned Behavior, which posits that attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control predict behavioral intentions, including those related to deviance in sports ([Kang et al., 2021](#)). For example, an extended model of the Theory of Planned Behavior could incorporate an athlete's sense of moral obligation to enhance its predictive power regarding deviant behaviors ([Kang et al., 2021](#)). The strong identification some athletes have with their organizations, even amid public accusations of unethical conduct, can also influence their perception of deviance, potentially leading to a higher sense of organizational ethicality despite external evidence ([Herttalaampi et al., 2024](#)).

Implications of Rule Awareness and Discipline

The consistent application of rules and disciplinary measures is crucial for fostering an environment where athletes internalize ethical standards, thus reducing instances of rule-breaking. This internalization is further enhanced when athletes perceive these rules as legitimate and justly enforced, contributing to a collective sense of accountability and adherence within the athletic community. This aligns with research emphasizing that consistent application of rules and fair play are critical for promoting prosocial behavior and discouraging deviance in sports settings ([Ludwiczak & Bronikowska, 2022](#)). Furthermore, the perceived legitimacy of disciplinary actions, rather than just their existence, significantly influences athletes' willingness to conform to regulations and uphold ethical conduct ([Ludwiczak & Bronikowska, 2022](#)). Conversely, inconsistent or selectively enforced sanctions can erode trust and legitimacy, potentially increasing the prevalence of deviant behaviors as athletes perceive a lower risk of meaningful repercussions ([Blank et al., 2021](#)). This can lead to a phenomenon known as moral disengagement, where individuals rationalize their unethical actions by minimizing consequences or blaming victims, thereby facilitating further misconduct ([Kavussanu & Stanger, 2017](#)). Such disengagement can be exacerbated when coaches, as influential figures, fail to adequately confront doping or other deviant behaviors, inadvertently fostering a climate where such actions are normalized ([García-Grimau et al., 2022](#)) ([Dziubiński, 2009](#)).

Analysis of Social Control Policy Effectiveness

Athletes' evaluations of social control policies are intrinsically linked to their trust in institutional fairness and the transparency of enforcement mechanisms, factors that critically determine policy effectiveness in practice. When athletes perceive anti-doping policies, for instance, as legitimate due to transparent communication and equitable implementation, their adherence to such regulations significantly improves ([Woolway et al., 2020](#)). However, a lack of perceived legitimacy in anti-doping organizations and their rules can hinder compliance, as athletes may feel uninformed or disempowered within the system ([Woolway et al., 2020](#)) ([Qvarfordt et al., 2019](#)). This disempowerment can manifest as a diminished willingness to adhere to regulations, underscoring the importance of athlete empowerment in anti-doping efforts ([Efverström et al., 2016](#)) ([Woolway et al., 2020](#)).

Recommendations for Improving Social Control

To enhance the efficacy of social control mechanisms, it is imperative that universities integrate ethical education programs that transcend mere rule memorization, fostering a deeper understanding of moral principles and their application in competitive environments. These programs should aim to cultivate a strong moral identity among athletes, encouraging self-sanctioning mechanisms that deter deviant behavior from within ([Ring et al., 2018](#)). Additionally, institutions should regularly solicit feedback from athletes regarding policy effectiveness and fairness to ensure continuous improvement and alignment with the athletes' lived experiences. Furthermore, establishing clear lines of accountability for all stakeholders, including coaches and administrators, can significantly bolster the perception of institutional integrity and fairness ([Gray & Porreca, 2023](#)). Such measures can also empower student-athletes with the knowledge and confidence to address substance use and other forms of deviance, fostering an environment of personal responsibility and collective vigilance ([Erickson et al., 2019](#)).

Conclusion

This comprehensive understanding of university athletes' perspectives on deviance, social control, and ethical frameworks is crucial for developing targeted interventions and fostering a culture of integrity within collegiate sports. By exploring these nuanced perceptions, universities can better design policies and educational initiatives that resonate with athletes, promoting a shared commitment to ethical conduct and fair play. This collective effort is essential for cultivating an environment where athletic achievement is not only celebrated but is also inextricably linked to the highest standards of sportsmanship and moral integrity. The study's findings, particularly through a mixed-methods approach, can provide a more holistic understanding by integrating quantitative statistical relationships with qualitative insights into athletes' lived experiences of deviance and control. Moreover, this approach facilitates the development of tailored educational programs that are specifically designed to address the unique challenges and ethical dilemmas faced by university athletes ([Gray & Porreca, 2023](#)) ([Ludwiczak & Bronikowska, 2022](#)). Future research could also delve into how the varying levels of institutional support and resource allocation across different universities impact athletes' perceptions of fairness and the effectiveness of social control mechanisms, potentially revealing disparities in ethical culture development. Furthermore, investigating the influence of cultural background and national sporting traditions on athletes' understanding and acceptance of deviance could offer valuable cross-cultural insights.

Summary of Findings

The present study aimed to comprehensively explore university athletes' understanding and perceptions of deviance in sports, their awareness of institutional rules and disciplinary actions, and their opinions on the effectiveness and fairness of social control policies. Specifically, it investigated how factors such as ethical education, accountability enforcement, and institutional support contribute to mitigating deviant behaviors

and fostering a culture of integrity within university athletic programs. The findings indicate a significant correlation between robust ethical frameworks and a reduction in reported instances of cheating, aggressive behavior, and doping, underscoring the preventative power of comprehensive educational initiatives. Furthermore, athletes who reported a clear understanding of disciplinary procedures and perceived fair application of sanctions exhibited higher levels of adherence to established norms ([Copeland, 2024](#)). This suggests that transparent policies and consistent enforcement are crucial for fostering a sense of procedural justice among student-athletes, which in turn strengthens compliance with regulations ([Han & Ha, 2025](#)). Conversely, a perceived lack of fairness or inconsistent application of rules can erode trust, potentially leading to increased engagement in deviant behaviors ([Dziubiński, 2009](#)). This highlights the critical role of university administrations in cultivating an environment where integrity is not merely aspirational but is actively supported through equitable and consistent governance, aligning with broader discussions on fair play and prosocial behavior in sports ([Ludwiczak & Bronikowska, 2022](#)). Indeed, the durability and persistence of institutional rules significantly influence these perceptions, as evidenced by ongoing scrutiny and debate surrounding the efficacy and integrity of collegiate athletics ([Copeland, 2024](#)) ([Han & Ha, 2025](#)).

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should explore the causal relationships between enhanced coach doping confrontation efficacy and athletes' susceptibility to doping, potentially through longitudinal or experimental mediation designs ([Boardley et al., 2019](#)). Additionally, future studies could investigate the impact of differing motivational climates—mastery versus performance—on athletes' attitudes toward doping and other forms of deviance, considering how these climates are shaped by coaching strategies and institutional values ([Kipchumba et al., 2024](#)). Moreover, further qualitative research could delve into the nuanced experiences of athletes from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds to understand how these factors influence their interpretation and adherence to ethical guidelines within sports ([Ludwiczak & Bronikowska, 2022](#)). Such investigations could also explore the effectiveness of ongoing educational interventions and preventative measures in shaping athletes' long-term attitudes toward doping and other forms of deviance ([Kipchumba et al., 2024](#)) ([Ludwiczak & Bronikowska, 2022](#)).

Practical Implications

The insights from this research can inform the development of targeted intervention programs aimed at promoting ethical conduct and fair play among university athletes. These programs could include mandatory workshops on sportsmanship, integrity, and the consequences of deviant behaviors, as well as establishing clear and accessible reporting mechanisms for misconduct. Moreover, the findings underscore the importance of integrating moral education into athletic curricula, emphasizing the development of moral competencies such as judgment, reasoning, and intentions ([Ludwiczak & Bronikowska, 2022](#)). This holistic approach would not only mitigate immediate deviant behaviors but also cultivate a lasting ethical consciousness in athletes, extending beyond their collegiate careers ([Kipchumba et al., 2024](#)). Furthermore, given that coach attitudes towards fair play significantly influence athlete behavior, universities should invest in training programs for coaches that emphasize ethical leadership and consistent enforcement of disciplinary actions. Such initiatives would enhance the overall ethical climate of university sports, fostering environments where integrity and fair play are paramount ([Ludwiczak & Bronikowska, 2022](#)).

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