

Religious Values and Sports Ethics: Analysis of Junior High School Student-Athletes' Ethical behaviour and Moral Decision-Making in Effutu Municipality, Ghana

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ABSTRACT:- This study explored how religious values shape Junior High School student-athletes' ethical behaviour and moral decision-making during sports activities in Effutu Municipality, Ghana. Grounded in the Moral Development Theory by Kohlberg (1984), this study employed the interpretivist paradigm where qualitative research approach and phenomenological research design was employed to capture students lived experiences. The instrument for data collection included semi-structured interview and non-participant observations of thirteen (13) student-athletes participating in football, basketball, and athletics. Findings indicated that religious teachings provided a moral framework that guided adherence to rules, promoted respect for opponents, and facilitated prosocial actions such as assisting teammates and acknowledging fair play. However, ethical behaviour was context-dependent; competitive pressures occasionally led to minor lapses, while social influences from peers and coaches interacted with internalised values to shape decision-making. Triangulation of interview and observational data confirmed that students' internalisation of religious values greatly influenced the consistency of moral conduct. The study recommended the integration of values-based education and ethical training in school sports, linking religious teachings with fair play, moral decision-making, and prosocial behaviour among Junior High School student-athletes.

Keywords: Religious Values, Sports Ethics, Moral Decision-Making, Moral Development

I. INTRODUCTION

Sport is widely recognised as a critical component of education, contributing not only to physical development but also to social, emotional, and moral growth of adolescents (Shields & Bredemeier, 2011). Within school settings, organised sports provide structured environments where learners are expected to demonstrate ethical values such as fairness, respect for rules, self-control, and sportsmanship. Participation in competitive sports exposes young athletes to real-life ethical dilemmas, including cheating, aggressive play, and gamesmanship, which require deliberate moral reasoning and decision-making (Boardley & Kavussanu, 2007; Kavussanu, 2008). Despite the assumed moral benefits of sport participation, evidence suggests that ethical conduct cannot be taken for granted, as competitive pressures may encourage moral disengagement even among adolescents with strong value systems (Shields & Bredemeier, 2011).

Religion plays a central role in the moral socialisation of children and adolescents, particularly in the Ghanaian society. Gyekye (2010) asserts that religious teachings from the three main regions in Ghana (Christianity, Islam & Traditional Indigenous Religion [AIR]) provide moral frameworks that define right and wrong while emphasising accountability, obedience, honesty, and self-discipline. King and Furrow (2004) further demonstrate that religiosity can positively influence adolescents' prosocial behaviour, moral reasoning, and self-regulation. Given that both sport and religion are influential social institutions in adolescents' lives, understanding the intersection of these domains offers a crucial perspective on moral behaviour, particularly in contexts where ethical dilemmas are frequent and socially consequential. From a developmental perspective,

adolescents usually operate within the conventional stages of moral reasoning, where behaviour is guided by rules, social norms, and authority expectations (Kohlberg, 1984). Religious instruction often reinforces these moral frameworks, offering students guidance on ethical conduct that may shape their decisions in sports, such as balancing the desire to win with the need to play fairly. Nevertheless, the relationship between religious values and moral behaviour in sports is not straightforward. Research indicates that external value systems, including religion, do not automatically translate into ethical conduct in competitive settings, highlighting the importance of context-specific investigation (Boardley & Kavussanu, 2007; Kavussanu, 2008).

In Ghana, research on school sports has predominantly focused on participation, performance, curriculum, and instructional challenges (Ammah & Kwaw, 2005; Ammah, 2012; Hayford, 2016), while studies on religion have largely examined its broader influence on social behaviour and moral development (Gyekye, 2010; Assimeng, 2010; Arthur, 2014). Few studies, however, have explored the intersection of religious values and sports ethics, particularly regarding their influence on moral decision-making among Junior High School student-athletes. This gap is evident in Effutu Municipality, where students actively participate in school sports across diverse religious backgrounds, yet anecdotal reports from teachers and sports coordinators suggest varying patterns of ethical behaviour, which remain largely undocumented and unexplored.

The existing literature, therefore, demonstrates a clear research gap: while religion and moral behaviour have been studied in general contexts, and school sports have been investigated in terms of participation and curriculum, there is limited empirical evidence examining how religious values shape ethical behaviour and moral decision-making in sport-specific situations among Junior High School students. Addressing this gap is essential for understanding whether religious values function as effective moral reference frameworks in competitive sports and for informing policies and programmes that integrate values education, religious instruction, and sports ethics within Ghana's basic education system.

Purpose of the Study

The study examined how religious values influence ethical behaviour and moral decision-making among Junior High School student-athletes in sporting activities in Effutu Municipality, Ghana, to provide context-specific evidence on the interplay between religion and sports ethics at the basic school level.

Research Question

The guiding research question for this study was:

1. How do religious values shape Junior High School student-athletes' ethical behaviour and moral decision-making during sports activities in Effutu Municipality, Ghana?

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Moral Development Theory, precisely Kohlberg's theory of moral development, as the most suitable framework for examining how religious values influence ethical behaviour and moral decision-making among JHS student-athletes in sports activities in Effutu Municipality of Ghana. Moral Development Theory explains how individuals' reason about moral issues and makes judgments about right and wrong across developmental stages (Kohlberg, 1984). Junior High School students typically function at the conventional level of moral reasoning, where ethical decisions are guided by conformity to social rules, authority expectations, and the desire to maintain social order. In sports contexts, this includes adherence to rules, respect for referees, fairness toward opponents, and loyalty to team norms. Religious values are particularly influential at this stage because they provide clear moral codes, sanctions, and justifications for ethical conduct. Religious teachings often reinforce obedience, honesty, self-discipline, and respect for authority, values that closely align with the moral expectations embedded in organised school sports. When student-athletes face ethical dilemmas such as cheating, aggressive play, or unfair advantage, their moral reasoning is shaped by how they interpret these actions within religiously informed conceptions of right and wrong.

Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory is the most appropriate framework for this study because it unswervingly addresses moral reasoning and ethical decision-making, which constitute the central focus of the investigation. The theory allows for a systematic analysis of how student-athletes justify their actions when confronted with morally challenging situations in sports, rather than merely describing value transmission processes. It is also developmentally aligned with the early adolescent group, where moral judgments are largely shaped by adherence to rules, respect for authority, and conformity to socially approved behaviour areas strongly reinforced through both religious instruction and organised school sports. In addition, the theory offers a clear analytical lens for understanding how religious values operate as moral reference frameworks, as religious teachings often reinforce conventional moral reasoning by presenting ethical conduct as both a social and moral obligation. This alignment makes the theory particularly relevant within the Ghanaian context, where religion plays a significant role in shaping adolescents' moral outlooks. This theory, thus, provides a focused,

developmentally and conceptually appropriate coherent framework for examining how religious values influence ethical behaviour and moral decision-making among adolescent athletes in school sports settings.

Conceptual Foundations of Sports Ethics and Moral Decision-Making

Sports ethics refers to the set of moral principles that guide behaviour in sport contexts, including fairness, respect for rules and opponents, integrity, and responsibility (Shields & Bredemeier, 2011). Moral decision-making in sport is the cognitive process through which individuals evaluate ethical dilemmas such as whether to cheat, engage in aggressive play, or challenge referees' decisions and choose actions aligned with internalised values (Kavussanu, 2008). Participation in competitive sports exposes adolescents to real-life ethical dilemmas that require the application of moral reasoning and self-regulation, making sport an important context for moral development (Boardley & Kavussanu, 2007). Despite these expectations, studies indicate that ethical behaviour is not guaranteed; competitive pressures and the prioritisation of winning can promote moral disengagement, even among athletes with well-developed moral values (Shields & Bredemeier, 2011). Kavussanu (2008) emphasises that ethical decision-making in sports is influenced by cognitive, motivational, and social factors, including perceptions of moral norms and potential consequences of actions. Similarly, Boardley and Kavussanu (2007) highlight that adolescents may apply different moral reasoning in sports compared to general life situations, underlining the need to examine sport-specific contexts when assessing ethical behaviour. These studies collectively demonstrate that while sports provide opportunities for moral development, adolescents' ethical decisions are shaped by complex interactions between individual values, social norms, and situational pressures.

Religion as a Moral Socialisation Agent

Religion is a widely recognised socialising institution that provides moral norms, sanctions, and behavioural guidance, shaping adolescents' moral reasoning and ethical behaviour (Gyekye, 2010; King & Furrow, 2004). Religious teachings emphasise accountability, obedience, honesty, respect, and self-discipline, which are central to moral development (Hardy & Carlo, 2011). Empirical studies indicate that adolescents who engage in religious activities tend to exhibit higher levels of prosocial behaviour, self-regulation, and ethical reasoning (King & Furrow, 2004). However, the effect of religion on behaviour is context-dependent and mediated by individual interpretation, social reinforcement, and situational factors (Ponseti et al., 2016; Storch et al. 2013). While religious values may provide moral guidance in daily life, their influence on ethical behaviour in competitive sports is less clear. Evidence from studies involving elite athletes suggests that religious beliefs can offer ethical frameworks and coping mechanisms for moral dilemmas, but this influence may be limited outside structured or supportive religious environments (Roy & MacDonald, 2010; Stephenson & DeLorme, 2012, Watson & Nesti, 2005). These findings highlight the importance of examining the influence of religious values on ethical decision-making in youth sports contexts, which are less formal and often peer-driven.

Moral Development and Adolescence in Sport

Kohlberg's (1984) theory of moral development provides a framework for understanding ethical decision-making among adolescents. According to the theory, adolescents typically operate at the conventional level of moral reasoning, where behaviour is guided by adherence to rules, social norms, and authority expectations. In sports contexts, these developmental stages suggest that adolescents may base ethical decisions on compliance with rules and respect for coaches, referees, and peers. Religious instruction can reinforce these frameworks by providing clear moral guidance and normative expectations.

Nevertheless, studies in sports psychology indicate that moral reasoning in sports can differ from general moral reasoning. Adolescents may make pragmatic or situationally influenced ethical choices in competitive settings, sometimes prioritising success over fairness (Boardley & Kavussanu, 2007; Lucidi, 2017). This divergence underscores the need to examine how adolescents navigate sport-specific ethical dilemmas, particularly when influenced by both religious values and competitive pressures.

Empirical Evidence on Religion and Sports Ethics

While international research suggests that religion can influence ethical behaviour in sport, empirical studies remain limited and largely focus on elite or Western athletes. Watson and Nesti (2005) found that spirituality provided elite football players with ethical frameworks for handling moral challenges. Roy and MacDonald (2010) observed that faith-informed values promoted fairness and integrity among competitive athletes. Stephenson and DeLorme (2012) reported that faith-based sport programmes enhanced ethical awareness, although behaviour outside structured programmes remained inconsistent. These studies imply a potential link between religiosity and ethical conduct but are contextually constrained. Their findings may not

be generalisable to everyday youth sport settings, particularly in Ghana, where cultural, religious, and educational contexts differ significantly from Western or elite sporting environments.

In Ghana, research on religion has primarily explored its broader influence on social behaviour, ethics, and moral development. Gyekye (2010) emphasises that religious and cultural values shape moral reasoning and guide behaviour, while Assimeng (2010), and Luke (2014) discuss religion's role in social cohesion and youth socialisation. Separately, studies on school sports and physical education have focused on participation, curriculum implementation, teacher preparedness, and instructional challenges (Ammah & Kwaw, 2005; Ammah, 2012; Hayford, 2016). Despite these contributions, there is a paucity of research investigating the intersection between religious values and sports ethics among adolescents in Ghana. Few studies have explored how religious beliefs influence moral reasoning and ethical decision-making in school sports, leaving questions about whether religion functions as an effective moral framework in competitive youth sports unanswered. This gap is particularly evident in Effutu Municipality, where students from diverse religious backgrounds actively participate in school sports, yet anecdotal evidence suggests variability in ethical behaviour that has not been systematically examined.

The review of literature highlights several critical gaps that justify the need for this study. First, much of the existing research on sports ethics focuses on adult or elite athletes, leaving limited evidence on moral decision-making among adolescents in school sports contexts. Second, the specific influence of religious values on ethical behaviour in sports remains underexplored, particularly in non-Western settings where cultural and religious dynamics may differ substantially from those in prior studies. Third, within the Ghanaian context, research has examined religion, moral development, and school sports largely as separate domains, with minimal attention to how their intersection shapes ethical decision-making among Junior High School students. Fourth, there is a lack of empirical insight into how adolescents navigate sport-specific ethical dilemmas such as cheating, rule-breaking, or aggressive behaviour through the lens of religious values. Finally, this gap limits the ability of educators, coaches, and policymakers to develop and implement values-based sports education programmes that effectively foster ethical conduct and moral development in school sports settings. These gaps underscore the necessity of examining how religious values influence ethical behaviour and moral decision-making among Junior High School student-athletes, providing context-specific evidence to inform both theory and practice.

II. METHODOLOGY

Consistent with the interpretivist paradigm, this study employed the qualitative research approach and phenomenology research design. The interpretivist paradigm aligns with the notion that it recognizes the complexity of human interactions, which includes human behaviors, and it views knowledge as being created through interpretation of what people make of the constructs of society (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019). Thus, the interpretivist paradigm views knowledge as the subjective reality of the social actors. Additionally, Creswell and Poth (2018) asserted that qualitative research aims at issues that need exploration through the identification of variables that are not easily measurable, or listening more closely to silenced voices. Consequently, an in-depth study of the experiences of student-athletes on their ethical behaviour and moral decision-making. The qualitative research approach and the phenomenology research design was deemed suitable to the study since the researchers are interested to gain deeper insights on student-athletes on their ethical behaviour and moral decision-making.

Phenomenological methodology is a scientific investigation that aims to explore and describe a common phenomenon or reality which has been experienced by many individuals. Thus, phenomenology research design was best employed in this study in light of the fact that the aim of the research was to explore the common realisms which have been experienced by individuals who have experienced a common phenomenon such as student-athletes who have experienced the phenomenon of religious values and sports ethics. Additionally, the qualitative approach gives this study the impetus to formulate themes in order to answer the research question. Unlike quantitative approaches, which primarily focus on measuring variables and establishing statistical relationships, qualitative research facilitates rich, contextualised insights into the complex interplay between religion, morality, and sports ethics. A phenomenological design was employed to capture the lived experiences of student-athletes, focusing on how their religious beliefs inform and guide their moral choices in sport-specific situations.

The population for this study comprised student-athletes from public Junior Schools in Effutu Municipality who actively participate in school sports activities. The purposive sampling was employed to select participants who could provide relevant and information-rich insights on the phenomenon under investigation. Specifically, students who had participated in inter-school competitions or regularly engaged in team sports were considered eligible, as their experiences were most likely to include ethical dilemmas typical of competitive sports. A total of thirteen (13) student-athletes, aged between thirteen (13) and seventeen (17) years, were selected from four schools, ensuring a balanced representation of gender, religious affiliation, and type of

sport (football, athletics, basketball). This sample size was deemed sufficient to achieve data saturation, where additional interviews are unlikely to yield new themes or insights.

Data were collected primarily through semi-structured interviews and observation allowing participants to express their experiences and perspectives in their own words while providing the researcher with the flexibility to probe for deeper understanding. The interview guide included open-ended questions designed to explore participants' religious values, their experiences with ethical dilemmas in sports, and the ways in which religion influenced their decision-making during competitions and practice sessions. To complement the interviews, non-participant observations were conducted during training sessions and school sports events to capture students' behaviour in situ. This method provides contextual evidence of ethical conduct and allowed triangulation of data, enhancing the credibility of the findings (Denzin, 2012; Patton, 2015). Observational attention was given to cases such as adherence to rules, interactions with peers and referees, and responses to conflicts or perceived unfairness during gameplay.

Data from the interviews and observations were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) suits this study because it flexibly handles rich, subjective qualitative data from diverse cultural contexts. The process involved several steps: first, all interviews were transcribed verbatim, and observation notes were compiled into detailed field reports. Second, transcripts and notes were read repeatedly to achieve familiarity with the data. Third, initial codes were generated to capture meaningful units of information related to ethical behaviour, moral reasoning, and religious influence. Fourth, codes were grouped into broader themes, such as "religious guidance in decision-making," "responses to ethical dilemmas," and "peer influence on moral choices." Finally, themes were reviewed, refined, and interpreted in relation to the research objectives and existing literature. The analysis emphasised participants' perspectives and experiences, providing an interpretive understanding of the ways religious values shape moral conduct in school sports.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant educational and institutional authorities in Effutu Municipality. Participants and their parents or guardians provided informed consent prior to participation, with assurances that their involvement was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by using pseudonyms and securely storing data. Care was also taken to avoid exposing participants to harm or discomfort during interviews and observations, particularly when discussing sensitive moral or religious issues. To ensure the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings, several strategies were employed. Triangulation was achieved by using multiple data sources (interviews and observations) to corroborate findings. Member checking was conducted, allowing participants to review and confirm the accuracy of their interview transcripts and interpretations. A detailed audit trail documented the research process, including sampling decisions, data collection procedures, and analytical steps, ensuring transparency and reliability. Additionally, thick description was used to present participants' experiences and contextual details, enabling readers to evaluate the transferability of the findings to similar contexts.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of interviews and observations revealed how religious values shape moral decision-making and ethical behaviour among Junior High School student-athletes in Effutu Municipality. Data were triangulated to enhance credibility, providing a nuanced understanding of the intersection between religion, morality, and sports ethics. Five (5) major themes emerged: Religious Guidance, Ethical Dilemmas in Competition, Peer and Coach Influence, Internalisation of Religious Values, and Religion as a Framework for Prosocial Behaviour.

Theme 1: Religious Guidance in Ethical Decision-Making

Students frequently described religious teachings as central to their understanding of right and wrong in sports contexts.

Student-athlete A (football) stated,

Yeah, I always try to play fair because my religion teaches me honesty.

Observations during inter-school football matches confirmed that Student A consistently followed rules, acknowledged fouls, and refrained from disputing referee decisions, even in high-stakes situations.

Student-athlete B (athletics) said,

Hmm, even if I can win by cheating, I remind myself that God sees everything, so I play by the rules.

Observations corroborated this, as Student B corrected a miscounted lap during a competitive track race, showing that religious accountability directly influenced real-time ethical decisions.

Student-athlete C (basketball) explained,

I treat my opponents with respect because my church teaches me to value others, yes! So that is what I do.

Observations confirmed prosocial acts, such as helping opponents after accidental collisions and providing encouragement during tense moments.

These responses indicate that religious values provide both normative guidance (rule-following) and relational ethics (respect for others). This triangulation of interviews and observations aligns with prior studies showing that religiosity fosters self-regulation, fairness, and prosocial behaviour among adolescents (King & Furrow, 2004; Hardy & Carlo, 2011). Religious teachings serve as a robust framework guiding both compliance with sports rules and interpersonal conduct. The findings confirm that ethical behaviour is actively applied in practical sports settings, demonstrating the tangible influence of faith-based moral guidance.

Theme 2: Negotiating Ethical Dilemmas in Competitive Sports

Participants frequently reported encountering ethical challenges under the intense pressures of competitive sports, revealing a clear tension between personal morality and the drive to succeed.

Student-athlete D (basketball) reflected,

Hmmm, sometimes I feel angry when my opponent is rough, and I want to retaliate, but I try to remember my faith.

Observations of Student D during high-stakes matches confirmed several instances where the student was provoked such as aggressive fouls or unsportsmanlike comments from opponents but consciously chose to refrain from retaliation, illustrating the moderating effect of religious values on impulse control and moral decision-making (Boardley & Kavussanu, 2007).

Student-athlete E (football) admitted,

During inter-school matches, everyone wants to win, and it is hard to avoid bending the rules sometimes.

Observational notes captured minor infractions, including brief verbal disputes with referees, attempting to exploit referee oversights, and momentary bending of rules, indicating that situational pressures can challenge adherence to ethical norms (Kavussanu, 2008).

Similarly, *Student-athlete F* (athletics) stated,

It is tempting to argue with referees when they make mistakes, but I know it is wrong in the eyes of God.

This athlete was observed pausing before making decisions in contentious moments, demonstrating conscious reflection and application of moral principles even when immediate advantage could be gained.

Analysis of these findings indicates that ethical decision-making among adolescent athletes is highly context-dependent. Religious values offer a consistent moral compass, guiding students toward ethical choices, yet the intensity and immediacy of competitive pressures can induce lapses in behaviour. Triangulation of interview and observational data confirms that ethical conduct is dynamic, influenced by the interplay of internalised faith and situational factors such as peer behaviour, competitive stakes, and referee decisions. While religious guidance significantly mitigates unethical tendencies, it does not entirely eliminate the influence of competitive stressors. This nuanced understanding is critical for informing targeted interventions in school sports programmes. Strategies such as values-based coaching, structured moral reflection exercises, and moral resilience training could help students translate internalised ethical principles into consistent behaviour under pressure, thereby promoting fair play, integrity, and sportsmanship among Junior High School athletes.

Theme 3: Peer and Coach Influence on Ethical Behaviour

Social influences emerged as a significant factor affecting moral decision-making among student-athletes, with peers and coaches shaping ethical choices in school sports.

Student-athlete G (football) noted,

If my teammates argue with the referee, I sometimes feel I have to join them but I'm afraid too.

Observations confirmed that during a competitive match, Student G initially mirrored peers' reactions by verbally contesting referee calls but subsequently corrected their behaviour, choosing to follow the rules. This demonstrates a negotiation between the pull of social conformity and the guiding influence of internalised religious principles (Hardy & Carlo, 2011).

Similarly, *Student-athlete H* (basketball) reported,

When the coach shouts at us to be fair, I listen and try not to cheat.

Observational data supported this claim, showing that students adjusted their behaviour immediately after coach interventions, indicating that authority figures reinforce ethical conduct alongside personal moral frameworks (Kavussanu, 2008).

Student-athlete C (basketball) further illustrated resistance to peer pressure, stating,

Sometimes my friends pressure me to win at all costs, but I remember what I was taught in church and resist. Hmm! it is difficult though.

Observations during gameplay confirmed that Student C maintained ethical restraint, even when teammates engaged in minor unsportsmanlike acts, such as contesting fouls or aggressively challenging opponents.

Analysis of these experiences indicates that social influences create moral tension in competitive sports settings, but internalised religious values act as a regulatory mechanism, allowing students to maintain ethical behaviour despite external pressures (Tawiah et al., 2025; Adam et al., 2024). This interplay highlights how ethical decision-making in school sports is shaped by both social context and personal moral frameworks. The findings underscore the importance of integrating moral and religious education into sports programmes, as doing so equips student-athletes with internalised ethical guidance capable of mediating peer and coach pressures, ultimately fostering a culture of fair play and integrity in school sports environments.

Theme 4: Internalisation of Religious Values

The degree to which students internalised religious teachings significantly influenced the consistency of their ethical behaviour in competitive sports.

Student-athlete B (athletics) reported,

No! no! no!, I don't cheat even when I am losing because my faith teaches me honesty

This reflecting a deeply internalised moral framework. Observations confirmed this commitment, as Student B consistently adhered to race rules, including maintaining proper lane discipline and acknowledging false starts, even under high-stakes competition.

Similarly, *Student-athlete D* (basketball) described using religious practices to manage emotional impulses, stating,

I sometimes get angry and feel like arguing, but I pray and calm down.

Observational data supported this claim, showing moments where Student D successfully regulated frustration after contested referee decisions, demonstrating reflective engagement with moral principles.

Conversely, *Student-athlete E* (football) acknowledged occasional difficulty in acting in accordance with religious values under pressure:

I know what my religion says, but sometimes it is difficult to act on it under pressure.

Observations recorded minor infractions, such as brief disputes with referees and momentary unsportsmanlike gestures, highlighting that partial internalisation of religious principles may lead to situational lapses in ethical conduct.

These findings suggest that the depth of internalisation plays a critical role in moral regulation and ethical consistency among adolescent athletes. When religious values are fully internalised, they function as reliable guides for ethical decision-making across sports contexts, whereas partial internalisation renders athletes more susceptible to situational pressures and competitive temptations (Storch, Kolsky, & Silvestri, 2013). Triangulation of interviews and observations underscores the dynamic interplay between internalised faith and behavioural outcomes, highlighting the importance of fostering deep, reflective engagement with moral principles in sports education programs.

Theme 5: Religion as a Framework for Prosocial Behaviour

Religious teachings also appeared to foster prosocial behaviours among student-athletes that extended well beyond mere compliance with formal rules.

Student-athlete C (basketball) explained,

I always help my teammates when they are tired or hurt; it is what my church teaches,

demonstrating a clear translation of religious moral principles into practical, cooperative actions. Observations corroborated this, as Student C was frequently seen supporting teammates by providing encouragement, assisting with water breaks, and helping recover from minor injuries during training and matches.

Student-athlete F (athletics) emphasized a similar perspective, stating,

If someone falls, I pick them up even if they are my opponent.

Observational data recorded multiple instances during races where Student F actively helped competitors regain balance, demonstrating that prosocial conduct motivated by faith extended to opponents, not just team members.

Similarly, *Student-athlete H* (basketball) remarked,

Encouraging others and congratulating them feels right because God wants us to be kind.

Observations confirmed consistent expressions of encouragement and recognition of opponents' efforts, including verbal praise and celebratory gestures, even during highly competitive situations. This triangulation of interview and observational data indicates that religious values encourage empathy, cooperation, and sportsmanship, extending ethical considerations beyond mere rule compliance. Triangulation demonstrates that

prosocial behaviours are consistently observable across football, athletics, and basketball, highlighting the practical relevance of faith-based moral guidance. These findings align with the work of Roy and MacDonald (2010) and Watson and Nesti (2005), who reported that faith-informed values in athletes promote fairness, ethical awareness, and prosocial engagement, suggesting that religion functions as a practical framework guiding moral behaviour in youth sports contexts. Religious teachings foster empathy, teamwork, and ethical sportsmanship, confirming their role as a practical moral framework in school sports. Across all three sports categories, religious values operate as both a moral compass and prosocial motivator. Triangulated interviews and observations confirm that these values guide ethical decision-making, mediate social influences, regulate behaviour under competitive pressure, and promote empathy and sportsmanship. This demonstrates that religious beliefs have tangible, observable effects on moral conduct among adolescent student-athletes in Ghanaian school sports contexts.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

This study examined how religious values influence ethical behaviour and moral decision-making among Junior High School student-athletes in Effutu Municipality, Ghana. The findings indicate that religious teachings serve as a significant moral framework, guiding adolescents in making ethical decisions, promoting fair play, and encouraging prosocial behaviours such as empathy, cooperation, and respect for opponents. Triangulated data from interviews and observations demonstrated that students actively apply religious principles in sport-specific contexts, including competitive scenarios where ethical dilemmas are common. However, the study also revealed that the influence of religious values is moderated by situational pressures, peer behaviour, and the depth of internalisation of these values. While some students consistently acted ethically even under provocation, others experienced challenges balancing competitive desires with moral guidance. Coaches and peers emerged as additional influences, either reinforcing or undermining the application of ethical principles. The study fills a critical gap in Ghanaian research by highlighting the intersection of religion and sports ethics in school contexts, particularly among adolescents. It underscores the importance of integrating values-based sports education and structured moral guidance within school sports programmes.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended sports and School authorities in Effutu Municipality to integrate structured values-based education that explicitly connects religious teachings with ethical behaviour in competitive sports. Coaches and physical education teachers should receive training on incorporating moral and religious principles into practice sessions and competitions, emphasising fair play, respect for rules, self-regulation, and prosocial conduct. Schools could implement reflective activities, such as guided discussions or scenario-based exercises, to help student-athletes navigate ethical dilemmas and internalise moral decision-making frameworks.

Peer mentoring systems may be established, pairing students who consistently demonstrate ethical behaviour with those needing guidance, reinforcing positive conduct through social modelling. Furthermore, collaboration between schools, religious institutions, and sports associations can strengthen moral education by providing consistent messaging on the importance of integrity and sportsmanship across both academic and extracurricular contexts. Policymakers in the Effutu Municipality should consider integrating ethics and character development explicitly into the physical education curriculum, ensuring that students' moral growth is treated as a core outcome alongside athletic skills. Finally, ongoing monitoring and evaluation of ethical conduct during competitions in Effutu Municipality can help identify areas where students require additional guidance, promoting sustained moral development and reducing incidents of unethical behaviour. Implementing these strategies will not only enhance adherence to rules and fair play but also foster holistic development, enabling student-athletes to translate religious values into practical moral action within sports and broader social contexts.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study makes a significant contribution to knowledge by providing context-specific evidence on the intersection of religious values and sports ethics in Ghana, particularly among Junior High School student-athletes. It advances understanding of how religious teachings not only shape general moral reasoning but also directly influence ethical decision-making and prosocial behaviour in competitive sports. The research demonstrates how adolescents internalise moral values and apply them in real-life sports situations, highlighting the interplay between developmental stages, situational pressures, and religious guidance. Furthermore, the study offers practical insights for educators, coaches, and policymakers seeking to promote ethical behaviour and moral development within school sports programmes, emphasizing the importance of values-based education, mentorship, and reflective practices. Finally, by addressing a notable gap in Ghanaian research, this study provides a foundation for future investigations into the role of religion, culture, and institutional

frameworks in shaping moral reasoning and ethical conduct in youth sports across diverse educational and cultural contexts.

Implications for Sports Education

The findings of this study underscore the need to integrate moral and values-based education into school sports programmes to enhance ethical behaviour among Junior High School student-athletes. Religious values were shown to guide students' decision-making, promote fairness, respect for rules, honesty, and prosocial behaviours such as empathy and support for peers. Sports educators and coaches should therefore be trained to model ethical conduct and actively reinforce these principles during practice and competitions, ensuring that moral guidance is both explicit and consistently applied. Additionally, interventions should address peer influence and competitive pressures, equipping students with strategies to navigate ethical dilemmas while maintaining integrity. Structured activities, reflection sessions, and reinforcement of positive behaviours can foster sportsmanship, teamwork, and moral resilience. At a policy level, schools should develop ethical codes of conduct and implement programmes that systematically embed moral and values education into physical education curricula, ensuring that ethical development is an integral part of sports participation rather than a peripheral concern.

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