

# SUCCESS AND FAILURE IN SPORTS: A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

Mohd. Sofian Omar-Fauzee  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
dromarfauzee@yahoo.com

Shamsharizal Abd-Aziz  
Bangi Teacher Teaching College  
Sham\_azizBTTC@gmail.com

Rozita Abd Latif  
Universiti Teknologi MARA  
Rozita@uitm.salam.edu.my

Mariani Md. Nor  
Universiti Malaya  
marinih@um.edu.my

## **Abstract**

*The purpose of this study was to determine adolescence football players' tendencies in explaining the causes of their success and failures in football matches. A sample of 16 male football players (Mean age = 18.3, sd =1.4) from one of the matriculation college in Malaysia agreed to participate in this research. All of them agreed to signed the inform consent letter to be tape recorded during the interview. A semi-structured questionnaire was built and validated by experts in the area to ensure the study focused on the attribution theory. The findings showed that adolescence football players have a tendency to explain that their success were due to stable and unstable internal factors (ability and effort) rather than stable and unstable external factors (task, difficulty and luck). Suggestions and recommendations are also discusses in this paper.*

**Key words:** *Adolescence football players, attributions, success and failure, and sports performances.*

## **I.INTRODUCTION**

The prediction of one performance should be identified earlier so that players and coaches can manipulate the tools of their training scheme, as well as improving the strategies in football. Therefore, the understanding of the processes on behavioural prediction, and the expectation to win should be learned by athletes in order to re-schedule their training program that accumulated from their own perceptions and predictions (Weiner, 1986). The importance of it as explained by Weinberg and Gould (2007) is that it will affect their expectations and emotional reactions. This will influence their future achievement and motivation. The Attributional Theory will be used as a basic to determine those factors.

The Attributional Theory was also a cognitive approach towards motivation that requires individual to explain, understand and predict something that will happen using their cognitive perceptions (Cox, 1998). Furthermore, according to this theory, the individuals' intentions will explain their actions in expecting the outcomes. Heider (1958) who pioneered this field clarified the theory as a 'common sense' or 'naïve psychology'. However, according to Weiner (1985) and Roberts (1982), this theory was different from the motivational expectation theory. It was a complex theory where the perception towards success and failure was visualised as a huge influence on individuals' actions, feelings, confidences and

motivations. Therefore, how an athlete feels about himself was related to his perception about why things happened (Cox, 1998). Many studies that used this theory tried to determine when and why an individual chose a category from the theory. For example, when an athlete said that his failure was due to bad luck, we can assume that he was unable to hold the responsibilities given to him. Therefore, the category in the Attributional Theory chosen by the athlete to explain his success and failure reflects the structure of his motivation. That is why we can say that there was a relationship between motivation and the Attributional Theory (Cox, 1998). For example, some young athletes felt that their failures were due to their lack of ability. As ability is seen as a permanent and consistent factor, so it was difficult for the young athletes to rectify this weakness in the future. However, if they were made to understand that the failures were due to bad luck or lack of effort, situation can be reversed as luck is always changing and an individual can always strive for improvement. To find out how far these words were true among adolescence athletes, yet to be explored. Sports orientated researchers usually focused on explanations forwarded by athletes on success-failure experience they went through (Roberts, 1982). In general, this theory focused on the process where individuals interpret their daily happenings, and later try to explain why it happened (Jones, et.al., 1971).

The achievement motivation of the Attributional Theory Model specifically reflects that the individuals' interest in the search of the explanations of their achievements they had acquired (Weiner, 1979; 1985). To explain this, Weiner (1972) combined four main factors, consisted of ability, effort, task difficulty and luck. These factors were classified as the causes of success and failures, which later transformed into two dimensions of the main causes. These two dimensions were labelled as stability and locus of control. The stability dimension consists of stable and unstable while the locus of control dimension consists of internal and external. Locus of control means that individuals believed whatever had happened were caused by themselves or by other people. Athletes who are fond of internal control believed that whatever had happened was caused by their own actions. On the other hand, athletes who are inclined of external control said that their achievements were mainly influenced by factors such as luck, opportunities and other people. Ability is classified as stable internal factor while effort is classified as unstable internal factor. Ability is consistent and stable while effort is unstable and always changes. Meanwhile, task difficulty and luck are the external entity in the locus of control dimension. Task difficulty (opponents' ability) is always stable and consistent while luck is an unstable factor.

According to Weiner (1972), in general, individual explains the reasons of their success and failure based on the four factors, which are contained in the framework mentioned in diagram 1. Frieze's study (1976) supported the four categories system, which was stated by Weiner. He found that 85% of the respondents said that it was easy for them to categorize the causes of their success and failure based on stabilization and locus of control. On the other hand, Robert and Pascuzzi (1979) reported that only 45% said that it was easy to categorize the causes of their success and failure based on the four factors. As it is difficult to classify the causes of success and failure based on Robert and Pascuzzi's research (1979), Russell (1982) introduced the Causal Dimension Scale. Specifically, this scale enables individual to participate actively in classifying the causes of their success and failure because it is more liberal for athletes to give their point of views. The pioneered research in sports using the Causal Dimension Scale showed that respondents explained that their success and failures were due to unstable and uncontrollable external factors (McAuley & Gross, 1983). However, there were a few exceptions to this finding where a few evidences showed that the team who won explained that their achievements were caused by stable and controllable factors compared to the team who lost the match (Gill, Ruder & Gross, 1982).

		Locus of Control	
		Internal	External
Stability	Stable	Ability	Task Difficulty
	Unstable	Effort	Luck

**Diagram 1: Weiner's Attribution Model (1972)**

Source: Cox, R. H. (1998). *Sport psychology: Concepts and application* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York: WCB

A few studies showed that women tend to explain their success and failure were caused by external factors compared to men (Bar-Tal & Frieze, 1977; Feather, 1969; Simon & Feather, 1973). Meanwhile, there are also studies showing that women have a tendency to explain that their successes were due to external factors while their failures were caused by internal factors compared to men (Deaux, 1976; Nicholls, 1975; Simon & Feather, 1973). Gender differences have not been highlighted in sports but there are evidences showing that men and women have significant differences in terms of their explanations of success and failures (Duquin, 1978). In the meantime, White (1993) carried out a study on the effects of gender and age on softball players regarding their explanations on success and failure. The respondents for this research consisted of 22 softball players with mixture of boys and girls aged between 14 to 16 years old and 22 adult softball players. They were asked to complete the Causal Dimension Scale right after they had finished their games. The results showed that girl players have a tendency to explain that their achievements were caused by stable factors compared to the other three groups. Meanwhile, the boy's respondents were more likely to relate their success to the internal factors compared to the girl's respondents. The female respondents attribute their success to control factor. Younger softball players were more likely to attribute their success to the stable factors compared to adult softball players.

Over all, the purpose of this study was to determine the fondness of young football players in explaining the causes of the success and failure in football. The causes of success and failure were based on Weiner's Attributional Theory (1972), which consists of ability, effort, task difficulty and luck.

## II.METHODOLOGY

A sample of 16 male football players (Mean age = 18.3, sd =1.4) from one of the matriculation college in Malaysia was identified as the respondents. They were the main players often chosen to represent the college in friendly matches. The instrument used for the purpose of this study was through interview session. The questionnaires were prepared to enable the researcher to gain information on the subjects' perceptions towards the causes of their success and failure in football matches, according to Weiner's Attributional Theory (1972).

### *Procedures*

Firstly, the subject was identified as the respondents for this study. Secondly, the researcher contacted them to have their agreement to undergo the recorded interview session by sending formal letters to them. Then, the interviews took place after the subject had agreed to be interviewed. The interviews were carried out at a suitable place chosen by the respondents. Each interview lasted for ten to fifteen minutes and it was recorded on tape. The answers given by the respondents were classified as 'raw theme'. It was then categorized into the four dimensions of Weiner's Attributional Theory (1972) namely ability, effort, task difficulty and luck.

Figure 1: The semi structured questionnaire used in the research

1. There will be a team that win and a team that lose in a football match. Could you give your comments on this statement?
2. In a match, why do you think your team could win?
3. If your team lost a match, why do you think it happened?
4. Have you ever felt that your team won in a match because it was a strong team?
5. If your team lose, would you relate it to your team's weaknesses?
6. Is there a possibility that your team won or lost a match due to luck?
7. Is there any connection between the effort and the results of the match?

**III.RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

Based on the interview, the researcher managed to identify the attributes of each respondent. First, the raw themes were divided into the higher order themes before including it into the general dimensions (ability, effort, task difficulty and luck) as could be found in Weiner’s Attributional Theory (1972).

Overall, there were 83 raw themes. 60.2 percent were categorized as ability dimension, 21.8 percent as effort dimension, 8.4 percent as task difficulty dimension and 9.6 percent as luck dimension (table 1).

**Table 1: Raw Themes Frequencies and Percentages**

	Win and Lose		Win		Lose	
	Frequencies	Percentage	Frequencies	Percentage	Frequencies	Percentage
Ability	50	60.2%	32	60.4%	18	60%
Effort	18	21.8%	12	22.6%	6	20%
Task Difficulty	7	8.4%	3	5.7%	4	13.3%
Luck	8	9.6%	6	11.3%	6	6.7%
Total	83	100%	53	100%	30	100%

Diagram 2 summarized the respondents’ perceptions towards the causes of their success. There were four general dimensions, which were categorized into eight higher order themes, which consist of 53 raw themes.

**Ability:** Based on the interview questions, the researcher managed to identify and determine that the respondents explained their success based on their abilities. For instance, the respondents said that they won because of many talented players in their team. Talent is a stable internal factor; therefore, it was categorized under the ability dimension. The same thing happens when the respondents said that they won because the strikers were good. Effective strike is stable for each match; therefore, it can be categorized as ability. Generally, there are 60.4 percent or 32 raw themes combined to make three higher order themes in the ability dimension.

**Effort:** There are 22.6 percent or 12 raw themes combined to make two higher themes for effort dimension. One of the raw themes classified into the effort dimension was that the respondents said that their winnings were due to the cooperation given by all the players. Cooperation is unstable because different cooperation was given in each match, so they could win if they give their best cooperation. Thus, cooperation among the teammates was categorized under effort dimension.

**Task difficulty:** For the task difficulty dimension, it only consists of 5.7 percent or 3 raw themes for the causes of success. The weakness of the opponent’s team was one of the raw themes categorized under the task difficulty dimension. Task difficulty is a stable external factor; therefore, the fact that the opponent’s weakness was constant for each match could not be changed. Therefore, it was clear that the opponent’s weakness could be categorized under the task difficulty dimension.

**Luck:** There are 11.3 percent or 6 raw themes, which were categorized into two higher order themes to form the luck dimension. One of the raw themes was ‘I didn’t expect I would do it’. Luck is an unstable external factor. It was stated clearly from the raw theme that the respondents were willing to accept whatever thing caused by their own actions. The willingness of the respondents to accept any situation enables this raw theme to be categorized under the luck dimension.

**Diagram 2. Causes of Success**  
General Dimension

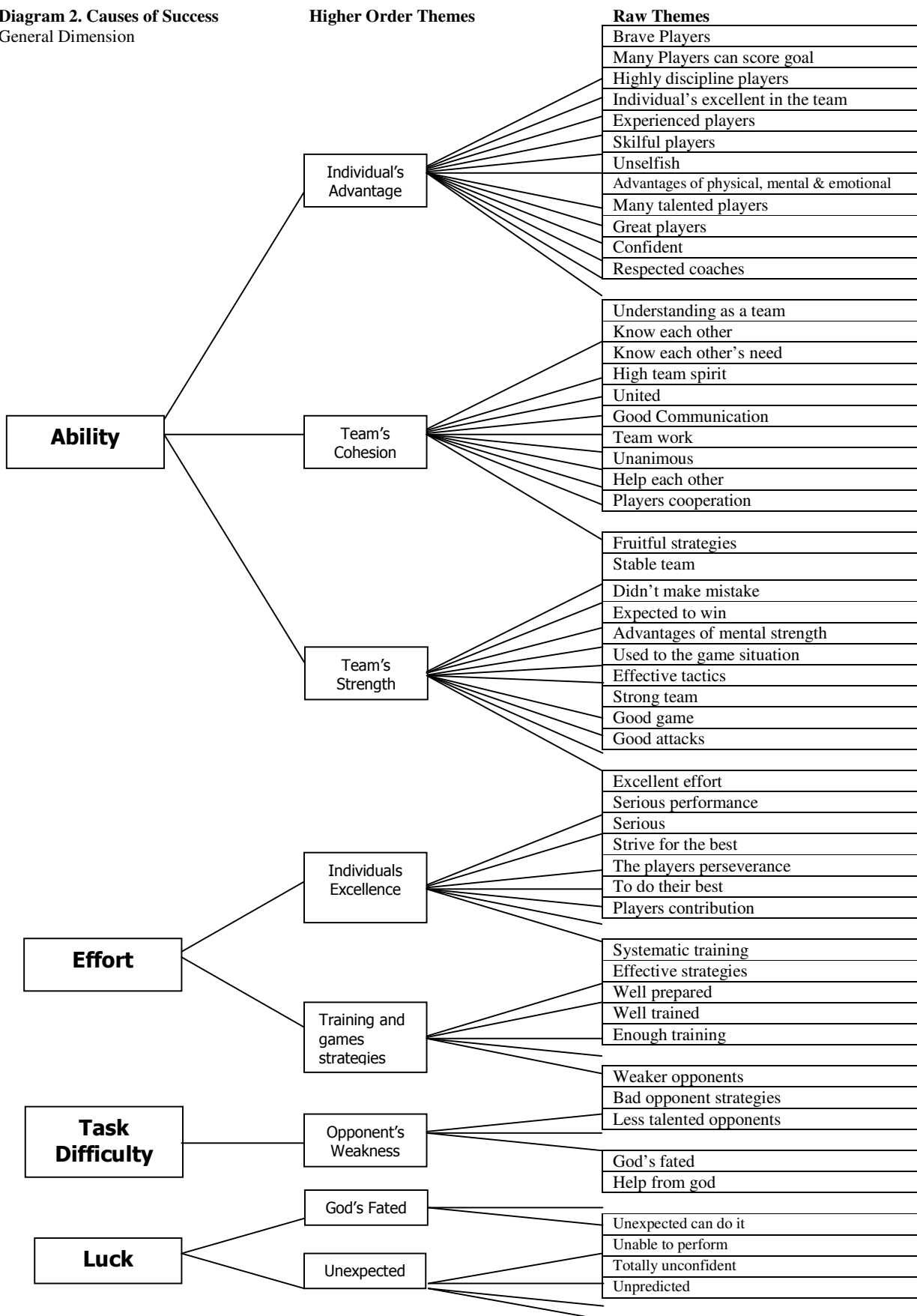
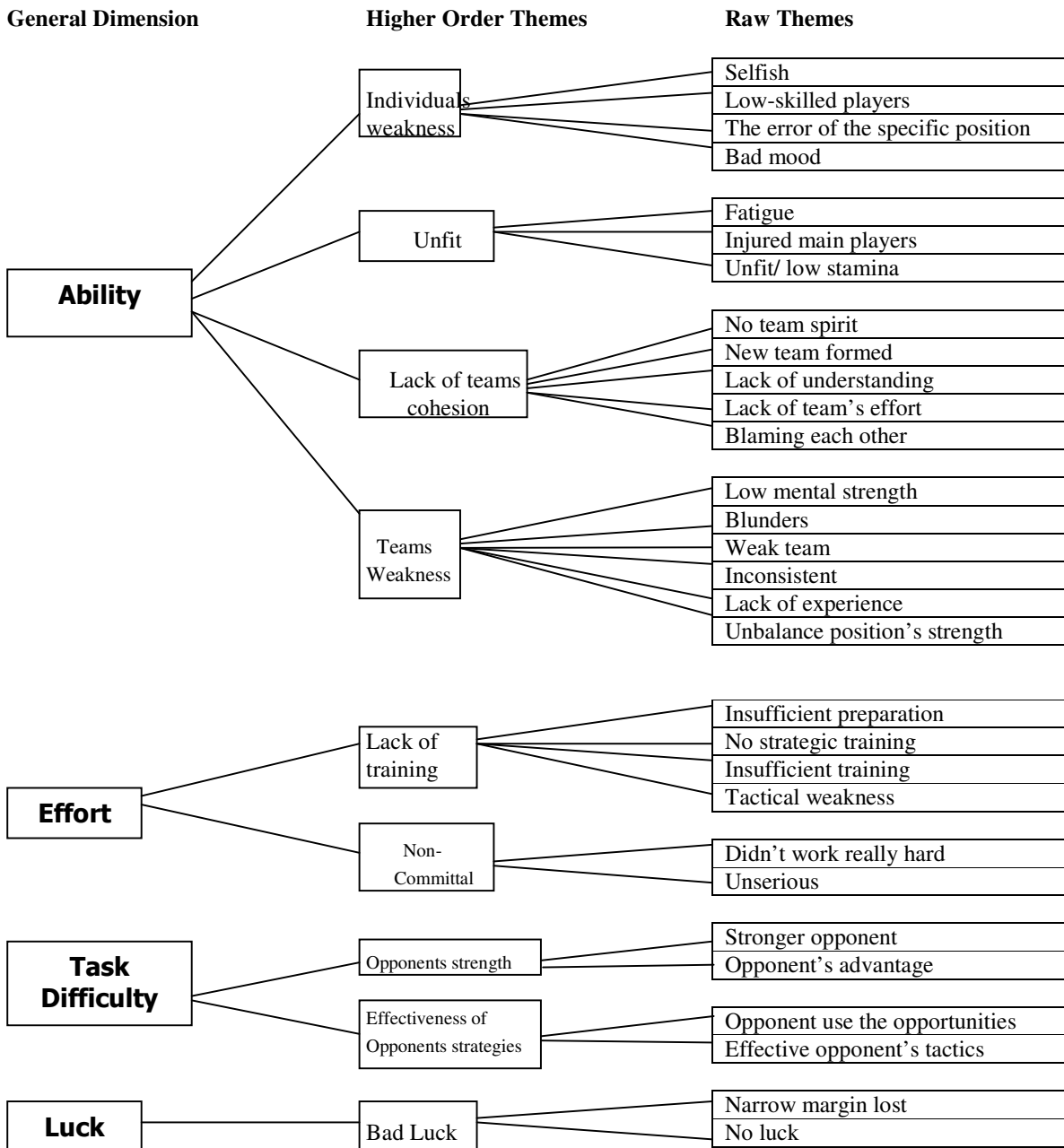


Diagram 3 summarized the respondents' perceptions towards the causes of their failure. The causes of failure also consist of four general dimensions, which were divided into nine higher order themes and sub-divided into further 30 raw themes.



**Diagram 3: Perceptions towards the Causes of Failure**

**Ability:** For the ability dimension, it consists of 60 percent or 18 raw themes, which can be categorized into four higher order themes. One of the perceptions towards the causes of failure was the player's lack of skills. In each match, the

players' skill level is constant. Therefore, this theme was suitable to be concluded into ability dimension because ability is a stable internal factor.

**Effort:** The effort dimension consists of 20 percent or 6 raw themes, which were divided into two higher order themes. Blaming each other in the team was one of the raw themes classified as the effort factor. Effort is an unstable internal factor. The attitude of blaming each other among the teammates was differing in each situation, so this theme is unstable and categorized under the effort dimension.

**Task difficulty:** This dimension consists of 13.3 percent or 4 raw themes, which were classified into two higher order themes. A few respondents mentioned that they lost the match because the opponents used the opportunities wisely. This showed that the opponents had advantages, which are stable in each match and cannot be controlled by us. Thus, this raw theme could be concluded into the task difficulty dimension, as it was a stable external factor.

**Luck:** Meanwhile, luck is an unstable external factor and uncontrollable. The theme that was categorized into the luck dimension according to the subject was 'luck was not on their side' if they lost with a narrow margin. This is clear that the respondents were unable to control the results of each match and that their loss was due to bad luck.

#### IV.DISCUSSION

This study observed 16 youth footballers on their perceptions towards their success and failure. Their perceptions were listed according to the Weiner's Attributional Theory (1972), which consists of ability, effort, task difficulty and luck. The findings stated clearly that the respondents have a tendency to explain ability as the cause of their success or failure in football matches compared to the other aspects.

According to Cox (1998), some young athletes felt that their failures were due to their lack of ability. This statement supported the findings for this study. There were 18 causes (60%) of failures mentioned by the respondents, which can be categorized under the ability dimension. For instances, among the causes were – low skilled players, blunders, fatigue and lack of understanding among the players. This finding was a bit disappointing because ability is permanent and consistent, according to Weiner (1972). The players felt that their failures were caused by their inability, which was a fact that cannot be changed and therefore they pull out from the game. McAuley and Gross's (1983) research found out that the respondents have a tendency to explain their success and failure were due to unstable external factor. Luck was an unstable external factor, according to Weiner's Attributional Model (1972). This was inconsistent to this study's findings as there was only 6 percent of the raw themes were found to be relevant to luck. This showed that the respondents for this research had insufficient belief in luck in order to determine the match results. Instead, they were more likely to relate their performance with other factors.

Meanwhile, according to Bar-Tal & Frieze (1977), Feather (1969) and Simon & Feather (1973), male athletes have a tendency to explain that their success and failure were caused by internal factors, namely ability and effort. This statement was similar to this study's findings, from which 83 raw themes were regarding the perceptions towards success and failure, 82 percent of these themes were classified as ability and effort. This finding was good enough because the respondents were more likely to explain that their performance was part of their self-achievement. White's research (1993) also supported this finding, which found out that male respondents were more likely to relate their success to the internal factors compared to female respondents. At the same time, the researcher found out that this research was less compatible to the previous research done by Bird and William (1980). That research stated that male youth players explained that their performances were influenced by effort while for this research; it was found that only 21.8 percent of the statements on the causes of performance were based on the effort factor. In conclusion, there was a difference in the findings between studies done by researchers from overseas and the local study done by our researchers. Therefore, more studies need to be carried out locally in the future. It is hoped that that this study's finding would be beneficial in upgrading the sport quality in Malaysia.

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**Bibliography**

Associate Professor Dr Mohd Sofian Omar Fauzee is head, Laboratory of Sports Development at Sports Academy, Universiti Putra Malaysia who taught Sports Psychology for undergraduate and graduate students. The co-authors are Shamsharizal Abd Aziz, Dr Rozita Abd Latif and Dr Mariani Md Nor are lecturer at Bangi Teacher Training College, Malaysia, Universiti Teknologi MARA and Universiti Malaya.