

## SPORTS AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES IN ISLAM: REFLECTIONS OF MUSLIM PARTICIPATION

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### Abstract

*In this article, we examine the understanding of sports and physical activities from the Islamic perspective. We aim at discussing the scholarly views on sports, from both the Muslim as well as Western researchers. We also scrutinise the selected interpretation from the Qur'an and Hadith as well as debates on barriers in sports and physical activities faced by the practising Muslim. To obtain relevant information for this paper, we have analysed selected articles in strengthening our views. This article is projected to Muslim as we are inevitably participating in sports and physical activities. In a shell, we hoped to contribute to the enrichment of literature in sports and physical activities literature in Islam and used as a guideline for stakeholders in formulating the proper policies for sports and physical activities in the multi-religious and multi-ethnic environments like Malaysia.*

**Keywords:** Sport, Physical Activity, Islam, Dilemma

### Abstrak

*Dalam artikel ini, kami memeriksa kefahaman mengenai aktiviti sukan and fizikal daripada perspektif Islam. Matlamat kami adalah untuk membincangkan kepelbagaian pandangan sarjana mengenai sukan, daripada sarjana Muslim dan juga barat. Kami juga meneliti tafsiran daripada al-Qur'an and Hadith, dan juga perdebatan mengenai halangan-halangan dalam menjalankan aktiviti sukan dan fizikal dalam kalangan Muslim. Untuk memperoleh data yang relevan untuk penulisan ini, kami telah menganalisis beberapa artikel bagi mengukuhkan pandangan kami. Artikel ini jelas menunjukkan bahawa orang Muslim tidak dapat mengelak daripada melibatkan diri dalam aktiviti sukan dan fizikal. Kesimpulannya, kami berharap dapat menyumbang kepada memperkaya literatur untuk aktiviti sukan dan fizikal dalam Islam dan digunakan sebagai garis panduan kepada pihak berkepentingan dalam membina polisi aktiviti sukan dan fizikal yang bersesuaian dalam iklim pelbagai agama dan pelbagai etnik seperti di Malaysia.*

**Kata Kunci:** Sukan, Aktiviti fizikal, Islam, Dilema

### INTRODUCTION

Sports and physical activities are not something new to the human race. Since the creation of Adam, man is subjected to various physical movements that required physical strength and energy. The outlook of sports and physical activities have evolved throughout the years from

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different civilisations, cultures, and manifestations. Sports and physical activities are essential for human living. They contribute to the wellbeing of physical health and help us to remain healthy and fit. Indeed, over many decades, sports and physical activities have evolved and become more professional. We witnessed the emergence of many career opportunities in these areas. The professions such as sports or physical education teachers, coaches, nutritionist, sports scientists, sports researchers, and athletes were the result of this evolvement. Their roles have since expanded and not confined to leisure purposes. In the context of Muslims community around the world, they have no option because sports and physical activities are mandatory at the school levels. Either they like it or not, they are required to engage in sports, as these activities are part of the education curricular (Hartmann, 2008; Morgan, 2006; Abd Rahim & Mohammad Diah, 2019). However, we realised that the participation of the community in Muslim-majority populated countries in sports and physical activities is not only at schools. Some of them, mainly Muslim individuals who have become professional athletes and earning money for their living.

For this paper, we used the term Muslim-majority populated countries to explain the participation of Muslim athletes in sports. We do not use the term Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to avoid confusion among the readers. Indeed, the term Muslim-majority populated countries are self-explanatory and suitable in this context. Based on the statistics, the number of Muslim-majority populated countries participation in sports events, especially the Olympics, is significant and has evolved from one edition to another. This participation indicates the commitment among Muslim-majority populated countries in the global sports program, as illustrated in the below table:

Table 1 Participation of Muslim-majority populated countries in the Olympic Games (2004 – 2016)

HOST(S)	Athens '04	Beijing '08	London '12	Rio '16
<b>Muslim-majority populated countries</b>	1058	1080	1218	1222

*Note:* Data of Muslim-majority populated countries participation in Athens (2004), Beijing (2008), London (2012) and Rio (2016) were taken from <http://www.olympics.org>

Based on Table 1, Muslim-majority populated countries have increased their participation from 2004 to 2016. To compete in the Olympics, athletes must meet a certain standard. The increasing number means a significant improvement in their sports standard that enables them to compete. However, knowing the given data is too general; we are researching the issues by focusing on the Muslim participation context.

Over many years, we found that only a little serious and credible academic discussion relating to sports and Muslim participation. Western researchers dominantly study them. This trend might be due to a few barriers, which we will discuss in the final part of this paper. A few empirical studies focused on Muslim women and sports. To understand the status of Muslim women in sports and physical activities, Sfeir (1985) reported variations of responses while studying Muslim women participation and role in those activities. Sfeir (1985) cited in Kahan (2003) also reported a low number of professional male and female Muslim athletes in the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics. In a similar vein, a study conducted among 27 Egyptian Muslim women found that the participants admitted that Islam allows them to participate in sports (Walseth & Fasting, 2003). In the cross-national research between Greek and British

Muslim women, Dagkas and Benn (2006) revealed that both Muslim women of different nationalities held a positive perspective towards physical education. The British, however, were more observant of Islamic requirements.

Additionally, the study among 16 participants of British Muslim women footballers discovered that samples still hold to their traditional Asian beliefs on femininity and their participation in mainstream made them distinct from others (Ahmad, 2011). However, in the research conducted among Muslim girls in a non-Muslim majority populated countries, Hamzeh and Oliver (2012) found more findings that are liberal where the Muslim girls seek their mothers' explanation on the prohibition to participate in swimming and basketball activities and participate in those activities as an unveiling opportunity. In the comparative case studies conducted in England and Denmark, Benn and Pfister (2013) reported some differences and similarities of cultural practices and realities of Muslim girls' experiences in sports. Also, the study among 108 Muslim in Tartastan, Bashkortostan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Ukraine, Galimov (2016) claimed that all their respondents have positive attitudes towards sports activities except for few extreme sports that might potentially harm their health and life.

Though the attempts by sports scholars in understanding Islam were critically appreciated, they focused much on the reality of Muslim participation in both, Muslim and non-Muslim majority countries. These two contexts were different in terms of social and cultural settings, which generalised almost impossible. While all of these scholars made some empirical efforts to understand Islam and Sports, no single work highlights the content of Islamic teachings, which is based on Qur'an and Hadith. Besides, we also found that the apparent gap of the existing literature lies in the focus of women by most western researchers.

Furthermore, we make it clear that the usage of the term 'Muslim' in the whole context of discussion refers to the practising Muslim, who observe their duties and responsibilities, either in specific or general observation of Islamic teachings. Thus, we understand that the discussion might not fit those Muslim who adopt the liberal and secular approaches in deciding their choice in life, including sports and physical activities.

In that matter correspondingly, we start the article with the working definitions of related terms apart from sports and physical activities. To understand the nature of our discussion, we also examine the general benefits of sports and physical activities. Besides, we even explore selected evidence from Qur'an and Hadith to show that Islam recognises those activities. Finally, we include the discussion on barriers and propose strategies and alternative to Muslim participants in sports and physical activities.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Defining sports and physical activities**

In this section, we explain the multiple meanings and confusions about sports and physical activities. Many people are confused with the terms. While narrating about sports and physical activities, few words are also associated. Those terms are games, exercise, and physical fitness.

Tomlinson (2010) defines sport as a form of "human activity, usually associated with a degree of physical exertion, in which a skill is accomplished in performance and contest, and for which there is either a competitive outcome (winner, loser, or position), a measurable

achievement (logged by rowing-machine or the timer's stopwatch), or some other or further perceived benefits (health, fitness, pleasure/fun)" (p.131). This definition involves the elements of human activity, skills, measurable, and beneficial. These criteria are different from other related terms. For example, to differentiate between physical activity, exercise, and physical fitness, we need to examine a few works from sports and physical activities research. According to Caspersen, Powell, and Christenson (1985), physical activity involves skeletal muscle and energy consumption. Exercise is something planned, structured, and repetitive, while physical fitness can be either skill or health-related.

Apart from those terms, the word sport is also associated with games (Thomas, 1976). In the content analysis study by Meier (1981) over 50 articles, monographs, and books, we have seen variations of interpretations of games and sports. He concluded that:

*Although not all games are sports, all sports are games; that is, a game may also be termed a sport if it possesses the additional characteristic of requiring physical skill and prowess to be demonstrated by the participants (both games and sports) in the pursuit of its goal. (p.94)*

### **The benefits of sports and physical activities**

Sports and physical activities provide various benefits. Thus, we identified numerous benefits of sports and physical activities. Those benefits are related to the concept of sport for all and sport for the elite (Van Bottenburg, 2002), which is practised throughout the globe.

The concept of sport for all caters for all population of a particular country. We engage in sport for health, psychological, and social benefits. In the study by Shephard et al. (1995), they found that the respondents were interested in participating in sports and physical activities because of health benefits. Meanwhile, in the study conducted by MacDonald et al. (2011) reported that the positive personal experiences gained in sports and physical activities has an affiliation with peers, self-referenced competency, expenditure, and climate.

Undoubtedly, sports and physical activities have benefited many people as tools for inclusion. The benefits are applicable in the context of minority groups when they enter new places. In the study of inclusion conducted by Abd Rahim, Mohamad Diah and Aman (2018), they found that the refugees' athletes who participated in Rio Olympics 2016 used sports as tools to regain pride and dignity. For instance, this happened when they move from their homes to host countries due to many reasons. In another stand, Bailey (2005) expressed her views over the volume of data to support the positive aspects of physical and mental health activities, and the necessity to engage in more related research among researchers in the area.

Also, based on the interviews among 88 participants of different professions, Kelly (2011) identified four various aspects of social inclusion namely; sport for all, social cohesion, a pathway to work and giving voice. These aspects are interrelated in the context of sports-based intervention. In seeking to understand the role of sport in the community, Edwards (2015) analyzed several dimensions of sport for development. He found that sport provides soft skills, enhances cohesion among social members, and spurs civic participation.

While the program of sport for all tailors the sporting needs for the entire population, the agenda of sport for elite focuses on a specific segment of society. The sport for the elite program is not something new as man has competed in sports competition throughout the history of human civilization (Reid, 2006; Manning, 1917). The program of sport for elite

involves huge investment from training to competing aspects, fulfils the needs of athletes who represented their countries.

## STUDY DESIGN

This paper is exploratory and descriptive in nature. We have analysed secondary sources in obtaining meaningful information about Islam and sport. Indeed, we have primarily referred to the Holy Qur'an and Hadith as primary sources. We have examined relevant information on related articles from various platforms, especially from the indexed articles in getting the initial idea about the discourse. The data from the Holy Qur'an and Hadith were extracted and analysed.

## RESULTS

### i) Sports and physical activities: selected lessons in the scriptures

We understand the different interpretations of Islam by many people. The differences occurred due to the existence of different mazhabs (denomination), which leads to a different way of understanding. There are certain quarters of Muslim who perceive Islam solely from the specific rites and rituals such as salat, fasting, shahadah, giving alms, and performing the pilgrimage. Even among Muslims, we can see various way of thinking when it comes to worship. The concept of worship needs to be conceptualised because it is a part of our existence in this universe. It has been mentioned in the al-Qur'an:

*And I did not create the jinn and mankind except to worship.*

(Surah adh-Dhariyat: verse 56)

We can conclude that the concept of worship is broader than the one that we previously understood. Apart from specific ibadah that is based on the five pillars of Islam, sports and physical activities can also be viewed as a form of worship. The critical requirement is through a noble intention, observing Islamic regulations, impact for family's rations, and most importantly, observing the five pillars of Islam. Islam is pure as good practice in our life can quickly be rewarded. This notion is supported by Syaikhul Islam Ibnu Taymiyyah (R.A) when he explained the meaning of worship. He said that the idea of worship in Islam encompasses all things that Allah favours. He also added that worship is a form of obedience to Allah and the message delivered by our Prophets (al-Matroudi, 2004).

Sports and physical activities are also vital in maintaining physical condition and wellness. We stress that Islam encourages its followers to become active and healthy. Keeping our body in good shape is essential. We will be able to prevent ourselves from any deadly threat. These threats come in many forms. They could be wild animal and men (enemy of Allah), as it is clearly stated in the Holy Qur'an:

*And prepare against them whatever you are able of power and of steeds of war by which you may terrify the enemy of Allah and your enemy and others besides them whom you do not know [but] whom Allah knows. And whatever you spend in the cause of Allah will be fully repaid to you, and you will not be wronged.*

(Surah al-Anfal: verse 60)

Also, based on our readings, we identified several general ayahs in the scripture that generally relates to the nature of man's creation. Man's creation is dynamics and movable. Our ability and existence are unique. We have been given the faculties of emotion, spirituality, intellectuality, and physical prowess. Hence, when we engage ourselves in sport, we fulfil all the requirements that are bestowed by the Almighty Allah:

*We have certainly created man in the best of stature.* (Surah at-Tin: verse 4)

*And when I have proportioned him and breathed into him of My [created] soul, then fall to him in prostration.* (Surah al-Hijr: verse 29)

With those faculties that are given by God, we can feel, hear, and listen to our activities. This is essential in the practice of a sport. In the Holy Qur'an, Allah mentioned these three abilities. We need to use them decently and gratefully. As indicated in our scripture:

*Then He proportioned him and breathed into him from His [created] soul and made for you hearing, vision, and hearts; little are you grateful.*

(Surah al-Sajdah: verse 9)

In the context of Hadith, Muslims need a healthy body to perform their daily activities. It can be achieved through sports and physical activities. Hence, sports activities can benefit physical wellness based on the guideline of al-Qur'an and the Sunnah. As the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said:

*From Abu Hurairah Radhiyallahu 'anhu he narrated, Rasûlullâh (PBUH) said the strong believer is more beloved to Allah than the weak believer, but there is goodness in both of them. Be eager for what benefits you, seek help from Allah, and do not be frustrated. If something befalls you, then do not say: If only I had done something else. Rather say: Allah has decreed what he wills. Verily, the phrase 'if only' opens the way for the work of Satan.*

(Hadith no. 2664, Sahih Muslim)

In another context, Allah said:

*O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted.* (surah al-Hujurat: verse 13)

Based on the above ayah, we realise that sport is a global phenomenon and is practised regardless of race and nationalities. As Muslim, the sport is unavoidable because many Muslim athletes are participating in multi-sport events such as the Olympics and the Asian Games. These mega-sports events are similar to pilgrimage activities that gather all athletes from different nationalities and faiths. In these events, we saw the involvement of many nations across the globe, including the Muslims.

In short, Islam encourages its followers to participate in sports and physical activities. To participate, we are required to follow the regulations based on Islamic principles. We can participate in sports and physical activities as stipulated by the scripture and follows the basic rules of Shariah, such as observing the principle of modesty and being just to others.

## **ii) Dilemmas of sport and physical activity: some reflections**

Muslim communities around the world face different barriers while participating in sports and physical activities. Those barriers are multidimensional depending on local context and culture. We found that differences in world-view are a significant issue that led to this barrier. We express our reflection on the problems and propose some alternatives to all Muslim. Before we begin, let us understand the social realities of the Muslim community around the world. The primary concern is about the literal misunderstanding of the religious concept of Islam and Muslim.

The terms Muslim and Islam are misinterpreted and are often used in a confusing context. Muslim refers to the follower of the Islamic religion. Thus, portraying the characteristics of a Muslim does not reflect the identity of Islam as religion. Islam, as a religion, has set-up rules and regulation, which is based on al-Qur'an and Hadith. We also stressed that by becoming a Muslim, it does not necessarily mean practising the religion of Islam. They might observe their duties as practising Muslim at a personal level, especially when they live in the non-majority Muslim populated areas. In the Majority-Muslim populated place, the expression and manifestation towards the practice of Islam are different. However, we understand that this situation is contextual and depending on the policies of those areas.

Although ordinarily defined as a religion, Islam is a way of life (al-Din) and ideology (al-Qaradawi & Higab, 1997). The teaching of Islam comprises every single aspect of man's life from rites and rituals to legislation. Due to the holistic approach of Islam, it has been manifested and practised in every detail of Muslim deeds, including in sports and physical activities. This is in the opposite of secularism that holds to the idea of separation between the worldly affair and religious life. From the perspective of European history, Calhoun, Juergensmeyer, and VanAntwerpen (2011) have interpreted the historical development that leads to modern Europe by narrating cases of French and Turkey. He describes the problematic segments created by the church authority that leads to many problems in society, during those periods. To explain secularism, Bilgrami (2014) associated the term with three solid points. First, secularism is a human position about religions. Second, it is related to political doctrine, and the third is associated with religious institutions. In supporting Bilgrami's idea, we look into a concise understanding of the terminology as proposed by Jakelić (2010):

*Secularism may indicate a worldview, an ideology, a political doctrine, a form of political governance, a type of moral philosophy, or a belief that the scientific method is sufficient to understand the world in which we live. (49)*

We found that the understanding of Jakelić towards secularism reflects the current situation in our global system. Many indirectly advocate a hidden ideology under the other

form of worldly ‘isms’ such as socialism, communism, and liberalism. To our understanding, these ‘isms’ promotes indirectly to the separation between religion and other aspects of life. In fact, in the West, all forms of spiritual and cultural are alienated in the space of sports.

We assume that this issue occurred due to the differences in ideas of human nature. Those non-religiosity idealisms such as atheism and liberalism have their philosophical foundations. They may argue that those who refused to follow their concept as backward and less developed. Similarly, we believe that Islam is also not imposing their rules to everyone, even to the Muslims. It is an option to the Muslims either to follow or not to follow the regulations imposed on them. As researchers, we should not put a label on them even they are not in line with our favors. The polemics of human rights, when it comes to Muslim’s option in choosing their way of sporting to practice, should be handled wisely. We believe in the idea of ‘choosing’ rather than ‘imposing.’

Also, while explaining about human nature, al-Attas (2002) argued that the term of al-Din as the reflection of religious practice in life. To understand al-Din, he associated this term with related concepts such as indebtedness, submissiveness, justice, and natural inclination. The adapted framework of al-Din is essential in understanding the Muslim participation in sport as illustrated below:

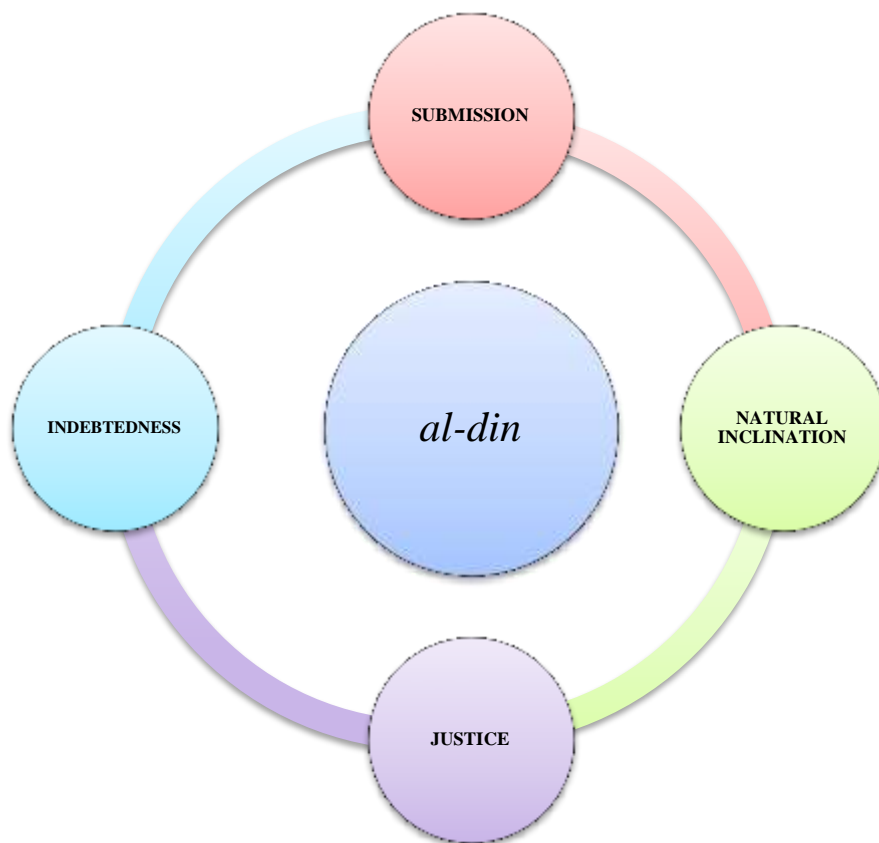


Figure 1 The framework of al-Din and Muslim participation in sports and physical activities

As indicated in Figure 1, Muslim needs to realise the concept of al-Din in every aspect of his life, including in sports and physical activities. Since the beginning of our creation in this world, we are indebted to our existence in this world. Knowing our state of indebtedness,



logically, we need to repay. The form of repayment, in the context of Islamic religious life, is through submission as the concept of ibadah, which is not confined, only to specific rituals but also other aspects of life. When we abide by this principle, we are fair to ourselves as servants to Allah. This portrays our natural inclination (fitrah) status in this permanent life.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

We want to indicate our dedication and engagement in recommending the fellow practising Muslim in sports and physical activities. This recommendation applies to Muslims who wish to participate in the sports program either sports for all or elite sports, and at the same time observing their role as a servant of Allah. First, as we mentioned earlier, Islam has not prohibited its followers from engaging in sports and physical activities. Therefore, we need to be quite selective in terms of the events that we want to join or participate. If the activities potentially expose Muslim participants to harmfulness, we advise them to avoid those activities. Harmful in this context refers to the damage that certain sports could bring to Muslim dignity and physical wellness (as a Muslim to the eyes of Allah). We have illustrated a few examples to narrate the situations. With regards to dignity, as the practising Muslims noticed about the prohibition of exposing aurat in public, they should participate in the free engagement of aurat-exposing sports or physical activities. Indeed, this is the biggest challenge faced by the practising Muslims, especially those who live in the non-majority Muslim populated areas because they are confined to the majority rule.

It is an irony that in certain sports, participants are bound to their specific clothing rules. These clothing rules are human-made and changeable. We have been brainwashed for many years that the less cloth attached to the body, the more efficient the movements would be. This is indeed another issue that needs to be seen as a practising Muslim. The attire is made to meet the scientific regulations and to help the participants to perform better. We have no problems with the regulations as long as the principle of modesty and covering the bodies apply. However, how many sports are bound strictly in these rules? Are they accommodating with the cultural and religious requirements of specific segments of athletes? We believe that this matter will surely give an impact to the practising Muslim families to allow their children (primarily female) to participate in sports like swimming and gymnastics.

Muslims participation in sports and physical activities may be seen as mere participation by Western scholarships (Pfister, 2010). It is due to the uniqueness of culture and religious identity that is embedded in the life of practising Muslims. We argued that this stigma of labelling to the Muslims should be abolished if they allow us to embrace our religious observation in the sporting context. If this happened, we anticipate witnessing more participation from the practising Muslim athletes in the future. If the war and conflict of identity in sports and physical activity between practising Muslims and non-Muslims remain unsettled, we should confine ourselves only to the sports program that benefits our personal, physical, and psychological wellbeing.

### **CONCLUSION**

Concisely, Islam encourages its followers to participate in sports and physical activities actively. We agreed that sports and physical activities had benefited our wellness

psychologically, physiologically, and socially. However, we understand and respect the differences of Weltanschauung (world-view) that happened in viewing the sport, as these differences are useful for academic discussion. In our view, Islam has underlined a thorough guideline for us, and it is a way of life that covers all aspects of human life. As practising Muslims, we abide by those rules and regulations, which are based, from al-Qur'an and Hadith. Finally, we also propose that our involvement in sports and physical activities should be selective if the current sports and physical activities' regulations do not accommodate the needs of a practising Muslim. We should keep fit and healthy and at the same time, observe our duties as the servants of Allah. Hence, sports and physical activities are the best platforms to achieve these objectives.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We thank the editorial board of al-Sirat Journal for inviting us to pen issues related to Muslim interest.

We appreciate their effort and hope to keep contributing to the evolvement of this journal in the future. We can be reached at [baidruel@gmail.com](mailto:baidruel@gmail.com) (Baidruel Hairiel Abd Rahim), [haizuran@kuipsas.edu.my](mailto:haizuran@kuipsas.edu.my) (Haizuran Md Jani) and [nurazzura@ium.edu.my](mailto:nurazzura@ium.edu.my) (Nurazzura Mohamad Diah, Ph.D.).

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