



D2.1 / OUTPUT 1

Comprehensive Research Report on Bullying in Sports

WP2 • COMPREHENSIVE RESEARCH

Team Up for Respect: Promoting Bully-Free Zones
in Grassroots Sports

LEAD BENEFICIARY

Hacettepe University

PROJECT COORDINATOR

Oslo Orcas IF

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ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

Deliverable D2.1, Output 1 – Comprehensive Research Report on Bullying in Sports, presents the research evidence developed within Work Package 2 (WP2) of B-FREE. It brings together the literature review, field-study findings and examination of cyberbullying to explain the forms, contexts and consequences of harmful behaviour in grassroots youth sport.

The report is intended for the project partnership, coaches, club managers, sport federations, athlete-support professionals, researchers and organisations developing prevention activities. It provides an evidence base for training, awareness-raising and organisational responses, while retaining the experiences of young athletes as a central reference point.

Hacettepe University leads WP2 and the scientific preparation of this deliverable. Oslo Orcas IF coordinates B-FREE and has prepared the project-context and introductory contribution presented here, drawing on the project proposal, the Grant Agreement and the WP2 research report. This contribution connects the research with the objectives and implementation structure of the wider partnership.

D2.1 should be read alongside D2.2, Data Collection Tools and Methodologies Documentation, for the detailed methodological account, and D2.3, Best Practices and Guidelines for Mitigating Bullying in Sports, for the dedicated translation of evidence into practical guidance. The curriculum framework included in D2.1 sets out research-informed directions for subsequent educational development; it does not demonstrate the effectiveness of a completed training intervention.

The reported survey results describe the participating samples. They should not be interpreted as national prevalence estimates or as an estimate for European youth sport as a whole. The report also distinguishes behaviour-specific experiences from a single diagnostic measure of bullying.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

B-FREE addresses bullying as a challenge to young people's safety, participation and development in grassroots sport. Funded through Erasmus+ Sport and coordinated by Oslo Orcas IF, the project connects research with awareness-raising, coach education and club-level prevention. D2.1 provides the research foundation for this work.

The report combines a literature review with an explanatory sequential mixed-methods study. A descriptive survey was followed by qualitative inquiry involving young athletes, coaches, parents and club managers. The survey generated 2,039 records from Türkiye, Slovenia, Croatia and Portugal. After exclusion of one record without the required consent, the analytic sample comprised 2,038 participants aged 10–18. Qualitative analysis explored how harm is experienced, interpreted, normalised and reported within sporting environments.

In the analytic sample, 60.7% of participants (1,237 of 2,038) reported personally experiencing at least one of the twelve behaviours examined during the preceding year. Among participants who answered all twelve items, the corresponding proportion was 58.4% (1,079 of 1,849). These are indicators of reported behaviour-specific experiences in the sample, rather than national estimates or a single measure establishing that all experiences meet every definitional criterion of bullying.

Help-seeking emerged as a central concern. Among the 1,190 participants who answered the help-seeking question, 53.9% reported telling no one or trying to resolve the situation alone. Qualitative accounts help explain this pattern through fear of social labelling, dependence on coaches and clubs, uncertainty about whether a complaint will be taken seriously and the perceived cost of speaking out.

The analysis develops six connected themes: the blurred boundary between joking and harmful behaviour; hazing and expectations that newcomers endure what senior athletes previously experienced; gendered and masculinity-related pressures; the personal and institutional costs of reporting; the persistence and circulation of digital harm; and forms of socioeconomic exclusion that are difficult to name or document. Together, they suggest that prevention requires attention to the conditions that make harm appear ordinary, acceptable or unreportable.

The practical implications concern both interpersonal behaviour and organisational responsibility. Priorities include recognising harmful conduct, supporting bystander intervention, improving coaches' responses, replacing humiliating initiation practices, establishing digital conduct expectations, involving parents and creating credible reporting pathways. The report's curriculum framework organises these directions into seven areas addressing recognition, bystanders, coaching, welcoming practices, digital environments, parents and club accountability.

The evidence must be interpreted within its methodological limits. Survey data are self-reported, country samples differ in composition and qualitative accounts vary in depth. The thematic framework was developed primarily from the Turkish data, with partner-country material used for comparison and examination of recurring patterns. The findings therefore inform context-sensitive prevention and subsequent project activities without establishing causal effects or the effectiveness of interventions that have yet to be evaluated.



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1. INTRODUCTION AND PROJECT BACKGROUND

Sport can offer young people belonging, confidence and opportunities to learn cooperation. These benefits depend on the quality of relationships and the environments in which participation takes place. Humiliation, exclusion, intimidation and harmful digital behaviour can undermine that experience, particularly when they are treated as normal features of competition, discipline or team membership. B-FREE responds to the need to understand these processes and to develop practical, evidence-informed ways of preventing them.

1.1. The B-FREE Project: Rationale and Approach

B-FREE – Team Up for Respect: Promoting Bully-Free Zones in Grassroots Sports – is a 24-month Erasmus+ Sport cooperation project (Project No. 101245037). Coordinated by Oslo Orcas IF, it brings together sport organisations, coaching expertise, research capacity and community networks to strengthen respectful and inclusive youth-sport environments.

The proposal identifies a connected set of needs: young athletes require support to recognise and respond to harmful conduct; coaches need practical preparation; clubs require clear policies and reporting structures; and sporting communities need to challenge norms that trivialise bullying. The project addresses behaviour in physical sporting spaces as well as in digital communication associated with sport.

The project's approach links research, educational development and organisational action. It combines the collection and interpretation of evidence with awareness activities, coach and club capacity-building, practical resources and dissemination. Cooperation across countries and sporting disciplines allows partners to examine shared problems while taking account of differences in language, culture and club organisation.

1.2. Project Objectives

Empower young athletes to recognise and respond to bullying. Strengthen their understanding of harmful behaviour, empathy, constructive conflict resolution, help-seeking and support for peers. The proposal places particular emphasis on athletes aged 14–18.

Build the capacity of coaches and sport staff. Develop the knowledge and practical skills needed to recognise early warning signs, intervene appropriately and create respectful training environments.

Equip sports clubs and organisations with policies and support structures. Support clear responsibilities, accessible reporting pathways and consistent responses so that prevention is embedded in everyday club practice.

Promote a culture of respect and integrity through education and advocacy. Challenge the normalisation of humiliation and exclusion and engage sporting communities through educational resources, awareness activities and shared learning.

D2.1 contributes to these objectives by identifying the experiences, mechanisms and institutional conditions that prevention must address. The proposal's intended outcomes provide the direction for action; the research findings help determine the content and priorities of that action.



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1.3. The Consortium and Partner Contributions

The Grant Agreement identifies eight beneficiary organisations across seven countries: Norway, Malta, Slovenia, Portugal, Croatia, the Netherlands and Türkiye. Oslo Orcas IF serves as coordinator. The partnership combines academic research with coaching, federation, club, community and digital-resource expertise.

Partner	Country	Contribution
Oslo Orcas IF (OOIF)	Norway	Project coordinator and WP1 lead; overall coordination, partner cooperation and coherence across the project.
Hacettepe University (HU)	Türkiye	Leads WP2 and deliverables D2.1 and D2.2; provides the scientific framework and research leadership.
Judo zveza Slovenije (Slovenian Judo Federation)	Slovenia	Federation and club perspectives; contributes access to sporting communities and the Slovenian research context.
Associação de Futebol de Bragança (AFB)	Portugal	Football-sector expertise and club networks; contributes the Portuguese research context and practical adaptation to football.
Riječki sportski savez (Rijeka Sports Association, RSS)	Croatia	Local multisport networks and the Croatian research context; leads WP5 on dissemination and visibility.
Sport Singularity B.V.	Netherlands	Leads WP4 on coach and club empowerment and D2.3 on best practices and guidelines; contributes digital-resource and sport-innovation expertise.
Spor Gönüllüleri Derneği (Sports Volunteers Association, SVA)	Türkiye	Leads WP3 on the awareness campaign; contributes volunteering, community engagement and awareness-raising expertise.
Sport Coaching Europe	Malta	Coach-development expertise and European coaching networks; connects research and educational content with coaching practice.

The consortium's geographical coverage should be distinguished from the empirical coverage of the study. The prevalence survey reported in WP2 was undertaken in Türkiye, Slovenia, Croatia and Portugal. Participation in the partnership does not imply that every country contributed an equivalent survey or qualitative sample.

For this deliverable, the value of the partnership lies in bringing research interpretation into contact with the settings where prevention must operate. Sporting organisations contribute contextual knowledge, coaching expertise supports educational relevance and the coordinator connects the research with the wider project programme.



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1.4. The Role of WP2 and Links to Other Work Packages

WP2, Comprehensive Research, is led by Hacettepe University. It examines the nature, extent and consequences of bullying in youth sport through literature review, field research and attention to cyberbullying. D2.1 brings the resulting evidence together; D2.2 documents how the field research was undertaken; and D2.3 develops dedicated best-practice guidance under the leadership of Sport Singularity B.V.

The work packages form a connected pathway from evidence to practice. Under WP1, Oslo Orcas IF coordinates implementation and cooperation. WP3 uses the research to inform culturally adapted awareness activities. WP4 translates the evidence into coach and club empowerment, training resources and the Sportera platform. WP5 supports visibility, dissemination and access to project learning through sporting networks.

For D2.1, the practical connection is the selection of priorities for action. Findings on normalisation inform recognition and awareness content; findings on silence and reporting inform club procedures; findings on coach behaviour inform educational activities; and digital experiences inform guidance on online conduct. These links establish the relevance of the research without treating proposed activities as already evaluated solutions.

The report therefore serves as a shared evidence base for partners making educational and organisational decisions. Its recommendations and curriculum framework should be developed and assessed through the subsequent project activities, with attention to age, sport, country context and the voices of participating young people.



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2. LITERATURE

2.1. Transition from Interpersonal Violence to the Concept of Bullying

In this section of the research, the conceptual framework underlying the phenomena of violence and bullying is examined in order to place the problem on a structural foundation. In particular, how organised settings and peer dynamics shape these concepts is explored in light of current debates in the existing literature. In this context, a thorough examination of the phenomenon of interpersonal violence is a primary and important requirement for understanding bullying more clearly and for grasping its structural underpinnings and dynamics (Hartill et al., 2021).

Sport has long been an indispensable part of social life as a domain in which individual discipline, team spirit, and physical excellence are promoted. Yet in the shadow of this positive potential lies the reality that sports environments can be sites in which various forms of interpersonal violence emerge and are sometimes institutionally normalised (Hartill et al., 2023; Gomez & Schoch, 2026). Indeed, interpersonal violence—encompassing physical abuse, psychological harm, sexual abuse, harassment, and neglect in its various forms and dimensions—has remained a blind spot for sports organisations (Mountjoy et al., 2016), which have frequently been reluctant or unwilling to address this issue (Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2024; Bright et al., 2026). Furthermore, for young athletes particularly in the 15–20-year-old transition period from adolescence to adulthood, the sports environment constitutes both a developmentally critical context and one that is highly vulnerable to different forms of violence (Hurst & Kavussanu, 2025; Elmas et al., 2025). The hierarchical structures inherent in sport, physical contact, intense emotional attachment, authoritarian leadership models, and result-oriented coercive systems may create a fertile ground for violence to emerge, persist, and remain invisible (Constandt et al., 2024; Vertommen et al., 2018).

In the last decade, sexual abuse cases that occurred at the very pinnacle of elite sport and came to the attention of the international public have starkly exposed how structural and pervasive violence is, even alongside adolescence (Dallam et al., 2024; Maranhão et al., 2025). Studies conducted on athletes in this age group show that violence can originate not only from coaches but also from dynamics between peer athletes, and that such forms of victimisation may have deeper effects on young athletes' identity development (Elmas et al., 2025). The sporting culture that enables this violence has only very recently been recognised as a problem in international sport, and has simultaneously become an urgent call for violence against athletes—encompassing physical, psychological, and sexual dimensions—to be addressed in a comprehensive, interdisciplinary, and



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bold manner (Mountjoy et al., 2016; Fogel & Quinlan, 2021). The IOC's most recent consensus report (2024) reinforces this urgency, acknowledging that this issue affects athletes of all ages and levels, remains insufficiently researched, and requires systematic interventions (Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2024).

2.1.1. Types and Boundaries of Violence in Sport

Defining violence in sport presents conceptual and operational challenges. On one side lies the physical combat and competitive physicality accepted within the rules of certain sports; on the other are deliberate acts of harm that transgress ethical and human boundaries (Gomez & Schoch, 2026; Bright et al., 2026). To clarify this distinction, the World Health Organisation's (WHO) general definition of violence and Article 19 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child may serve as reference points. According to the shared/similar definition of these two organisations, interpersonal violence is defined as 'the intentional use of physical force or power by an individual or a small group of individuals against other persons' (Krug et al., 2002, p. 5). This definition centres not only on physical force but also on the abuse of 'power' arising from a position of authority, pointing to the dynamics within the coach–athlete relationship (Elmas, 2025). That said, although violence is closely related to abuse, violence encompasses a broader range of behaviours, some of which are not technically classified as abuse. Acts such as harassment, peer bullying, verbal intimidation and/or humiliation also fall within the definition of violence (Vertommen et al., 2016). The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child states that even seemingly minor behaviours such as whistling, uncomfortable staring, or teasing should be included within the scope of violence:

'All violence against children, however light, is unacceptable. Frequency, the seriousness of the harm, and the intent to harm are not prerequisites of definitions of violence. States parties may refer to such factors in intervention strategies for the purpose of intervening in the best interests of the child, but definitions must not be used so as to compromise children's absolute right to human dignity and physical and psychological integrity by describing some forms of violence as legally and/or socially acceptable.' (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2011, p. 8).

Similarly to the WHO and UN typology of violence, the IOC has extended the definition of violence against athletes in the context of interpersonal violence in sport: 'the intentional use of threat or actual physical force or power against oneself, another person, or a group or community, which results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation' (Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2024, p. 1326). At the same time, violent acts such as hazing—



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occurring between peers with the aim of gaining acceptance into a group, acquiring status, or reinforcing traditional masculinity norms—are also considered another form of interpersonal violence (Elmas et al., 2025). The diversity in terms of definitions, categories, and age contexts is reflected in the literature as well. In studies dealing with interpersonal violence, terms/concepts such as 'violence', 'abuse', 'maltreatment', 'neglect', 'harm', 'bullying', 'aggression', 'harassment', 'torment', and/or 'prejudice' are observed to be used (Parent et al., 2024). In the framework adopted in the IOC's 2024 consensus report (Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2024), interpersonal violence is classified under four main headings: physical violence, psychological violence, sexual violence, and neglect.

Physical violence encompasses not only direct assaults but also deliberate acts of harm such as making athletes compete while injured, imposing excessive punitive exercise, or administering doping; and particularly in hazing rituals, it may be used—partly due to the paternalistic and male-dominated nature of the environment—to reinforce hegemonic masculinity norms (Elmas et al., 2025; Gomez & Schoch, 2026). Psychological violence is the most prevalent yet least recognised form, which distorts an athlete's self-perception through constant humiliation, exclusion, gaslighting, and destructive criticism, and is typically normalised under the guise of 'mental toughness' (Constandt et al., 2024). Sexual violence, extending from sexual harassment and abuse to sexualised joking and homophobic discourse, is one of the most destructive manifestations of abuse within power relations and the least reported domain due to sport's code of silence (Krug et al., 2002; Hurst & Kavussanu, 2025). Finally, neglect manifests as a passive yet destructive form of violence, appearing as the intentional or negligent failure to fulfil fundamental responsibilities concerning an athlete's safety, health, and holistic development. Such behaviours, particularly within the 15–20-year-old peer group in their search for identity, carry destructive effects under the banner of 'team spirit' and 'tradition' and can deeply wound self-esteem (Constandt et al., 2024).

These forms of violence are not independent of one another; on the contrary, they frequently occur together and reinforce each other. In this context, the likelihood and continuity of violence are, according to the UN, shaped by risk factors operating across four nested levels (Krug et al., 2002). At the individual level, factors such as young age (15–20), LGBT+ identity, disability, or being an elite athlete increase vulnerability (Vertommen et al., 2016), while the relational level constitutes the most critical ground for violence. The deep power imbalance and dependency between coach and athlete facilitates abuse (Parent & Fortier, 2018; Mountjoy et al., 2015), and the power differential between senior and novice athletes forms the basis for peer violence practices such as hazing (Krug et al., 2002; Elmas et al., 2025). At the organisational level, weak oversight mechanisms, lack of

ethical codes, a 'winning is everything' culture, and the normalisation of practices such as hazing under the label of 'tradition' create a structural environment that sustains violence (Mountjoy et al., 2015). At the deepest sociocultural level, beliefs that violence is normal or necessary, a powerful 'code of silence' (Elmas et al., 2025), a tendency to blame victims, a 'sporting ethic' that glorifies sacrifice and pain (Parent & Fortier, 2017), and hegemonic masculinity norms within patriarchal ideologies emerge as the most powerful factors legitimising and perpetuating violence (Bright et al., 2026).

This interlocking structure also provides the reading key followed throughout the report. The report addresses bullying in sport at four levels: the athlete level, the coach and team level, the club and organisational level, and the country and cultural level. The phenomena discussed in the sections below are located at one or several of these levels, and the field findings of the research are interpreted through the same levels.

Multilevel (Ecological) Risk Model of Violence in Sport

Adapted from the World Health Organization ecological framework (Krug et al., 2002).

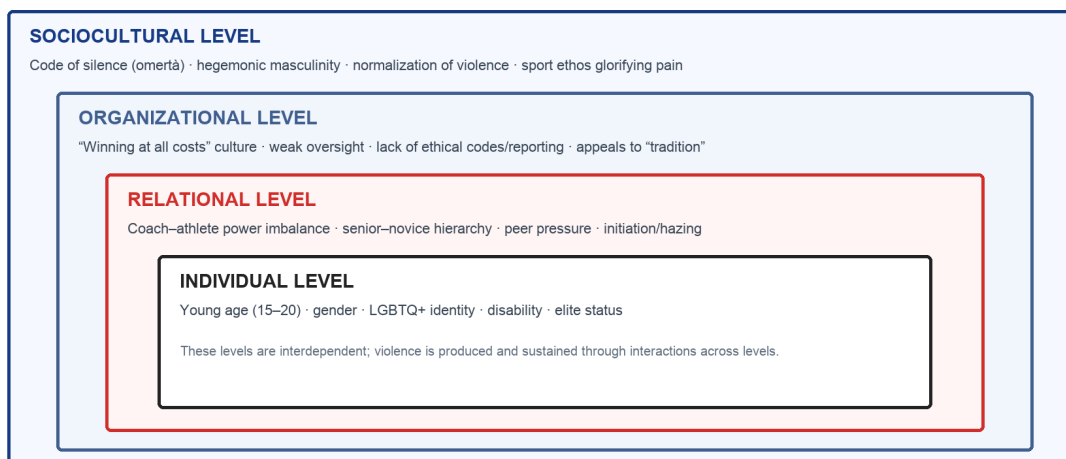


Figure 1. Multi-level (ecological) risk model of violence in sport. The emergence of violence is considered within an ecological structure in which individual, relational, organisational, and sociocultural levels are intertwined (adapted from Krug et al., 2002).

2.1.2. The Concept of Bullying: Definition, Historical and Evolutionary Roots

Under this broad umbrella of interpersonal violence, bullying is one of the most frequently encountered and most complex manifestations in peer relations. In its most widely used definition, bullying is aggressive behaviour intentionally and repeatedly carried out on a foundation of power imbalance, causing harm to the targeted individual (Olweus, 1999; Smith & Sharp, 1994). Although

the three criteria distinguishing bullying from other forms of aggression—intent to harm, the repetitive nature of the act, and the physical or psychological power asymmetry between the parties—enjoy broad acceptance in the literature, current theoretical approaches re-read this tripartite criterion within a goal-directed framework: bullying is a functional exercise of power aimed at obtaining social gains such as resources, status, and visibility (Volk et al., 2022; Volk et al., 2014).

This functional reading proposes that bullying is not merely a modern pathology but an ancient pattern of power with evolutionary and historical roots. Volk's (2025) comprehensive study tracing the history of youth bullying in Western civilisation shows that peer bullying—particularly in the form of initiation/hazing rituals in educational institutions—existed as a structural feature of life throughout Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance; indeed, the level of violence in bullying of those periods frequently surpassed its modern forms. This continuity implies that attributing bullying solely to contemporaneous cultural factors such as 'neoliberalism' is insufficient, and that the behaviour possesses a far more deep-rooted and traditionalist character based on the pursuit of power and resources (Volk et al., 2022). These deep historical and evolutionary roots of bullying make modern prevention efforts more challenging.

Nevertheless, history documents not only the continuity of bullying but also the possibility of profound cultural change: the abandonment of slavery, child labour, and duels resulting in death among young people is closely related to societies' growing intolerance of youth violence and their increasing sensitivity towards child welfare (Volk, 2025). Accordingly, the key to combating bullying lies in understanding that this behaviour generates more costs than benefits for young people and adults; in dismantling the entrenched false belief that bullying is 'a rite of passage that builds character'; and in providing children with safer, more inclusive, and fairer pathways through domains such as sport (Volk et al., 2022).

A significant paradigm shift has also occurred at the definitional level. Current theoretical approaches have moved away from viewing bullying merely as an isolated, dyadic violation between a perpetrator and a victim, repositioning it as a group-based phenomenon directly fed by the social networks in which it occurs, peer norms, and the moral climate (Hymel & Swearer, 2015; Salmivalli, 2010). Hierarchical structures within a group, shared cognitive distortions, and moral deviations create an ecosystem legitimising aggression, ensuring the sustainability of violence (Hymel & Bonanno, 2014). Understanding bullying in all its contours therefore requires not so much focusing on the perpetrator of the act as comprehensively analysing the socio-moral foundation that enables, normalises, and



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sustains the violation. This analysis is also the starting point for the dynamics of power, hierarchy, masculinity, and silence discussed in the second part of the report.

2.2. Bullying: From General Settings to Sport

Bullying, as it can be seen in many social organisations such as schools and workplaces, is also widespread and structurally produced in organised sports environments with their own rigid rules, hierarchies, and rituals. Sports settings are spaces where intense peer interaction is mandatory and where achievement pressure, competition, and intra-team status struggles intersect. To concretise this intensity, a young athlete spends the greater part of the week with the same peer group: on the training ground, in the locker room, on the shuttle bus, during away-game journeys, and at training camps. This continuous and closed togetherness can foster solidarity and, equally, create a social pressure environment from which there is no escape. Bullying—which manifests across a broad spectrum from training grounds and locker rooms to away journeys and preparation camps—is therefore shaped not only by formalised coach–athlete relations but also by invisible norms of compliance (Elmas et al., 2025; Nery et al., 2019; Shannon, 2013).

2.2.1. Structure, Prevalence, and Consequences of Bullying in Sport

Bullying in a sporting context manifests in various forms. These include direct physical bullying (hitting, kicking), verbal bullying (insults, mockery, degrading nicknames), and relational/social bullying (deliberately leaving someone out of play, spreading rumours, exclusion from the group) (Nery et al., 2019; Shannon, 2013). These forms frequently intertwine: for instance, a player who is constantly called by the nickname 'useless' on the field being the last to be selected for training groups and not being invited to social activities illustrates how verbal and relational bullying feed off each other. Research indicates that team sports are particularly risky from the perspective of peer bullying; Vveinhardt and Fominiene (2020) found that the bullying rate in team sports (26.7%) is significantly higher than in individual sports (19.1%). This gap is important for demonstrating how team dynamics, hierarchical structures, and strong group norms can trigger bullying; because whereas in individual sport the rival is largely 'outside', in team sport the status struggle is experienced directly between teammates sharing the same locker room.

Prevalence data clearly demonstrate the scale of the problem. A study conducted across six European countries within the CASES project reported that approximately 65% of youth sport participants experienced psychological violence in childhood, and that peers were the primary source (62%) of this violence (Hartill et al., 2021). In a retrospective study on community sport in Australia,



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approximately 82% of participants reported experiencing violence in sport during childhood, with the most common form being psychological violence (76%), followed by physical (66%) and sexual violence (38%). Critically, the highest rate of perpetrators of psychological violence were peers (69%) (Pankowiak et al., 2022). A current, large-scale survey conducted with sports club members in Germany (N = 4,367) also confirms that interpersonal violence is prevalent at all levels from recreational to international (Greither et al., 2026). Current scope reviews, along with methodological variations, reveal that lifetime prevalence of interpersonal violence remains high, with psychological forms leading the way (Bright et al., 2026; Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2024).

The consequences of bullying are not limited to athletic development or performance decline; they produce outcomes that profoundly undermine holistic well-being, including psychosomatic complaints, burnout, intense anxiety, fear, loss of confidence, depression, and even complete withdrawal from sport (Dussich & Maekoya, 2007; Lazarević et al., 2015; Rios et al., 2022; Smith, 2011). The cumulative nature of these consequences is concretised when a 'high-potential' athlete abandons the field entirely due to systematic intra-team pressure, despite years of effort. What makes bullying even more destructive and lasting in these environments is the rendering invisible or legitimisation of harmful actions by taking refuge behind the 'mental toughness' or 'team spirit' myths that sporting culture brings.

2.2.2. Peer Bullying (Peer Abuse / Peer victimisation)

Peer bullying (peer abuse / peer victimisation) is the systematic abuse of power that an individual experiences from peers or teammates who are expected to hold an equal hierarchical status. In organised sports, peer dynamics constitute one of the most significant pillars of violence. Peer bullying is most commonly not a random outburst of anger but a set of acts instrumentalised to gain acceptance in the group, prove masculine norms, or maintain intra-team status. The intense psychological need for peer approval during adolescence and young adulthood pushes young athletes towards submitting to harmful group norms. Exclusion, mockery, and physical intimidation coming directly from teammates—that is, from the most fundamental social support points of the athlete—rather than from adult authority figures, cause far deeper fractures in the victim's identity construction and self-esteem; for an adolescent, peer rejection is a far more threatening social wound than an adult's reprimand (Elmas et al., 2025).

The literature on psychological violence and psychological bullying has developed in frequently disconnected 'silos'; however, Clerincx, Schaillée, and Spaaij (2025), in their systematic review



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covering 25 studies from 2008–2022, argue that these two domains must be addressed in an integrated manner. The authors emphasise the need to consider a broader spectrum of psychological violence beyond traditional verbal and relational behaviours—such as peers encouraging each other towards doping or harmful weight gain/loss practices. This point shows that sport produces its own distinctive forms of psychological violence: a teammate persistently pushing another into chronically restrictive eating by saying 'you are at your best form right now, you shouldn't eat until tomorrow' represents a sport-specific form of psychological violence that standard school bullying scales cannot capture. The authors also note that effective prevention must address the roles of victim, perpetrator, and bystander together, distributing responsibility among coaches, athletes, and parents.

Examining the predictors of peer bullying, the quality of the coach–athlete relationship is found to be central. Maydon et al. (2023), in a study conducted with 190 semi-professional team sport players from 16 different nationalities in Northern Cyprus, found that the coach's negative personal rapport significantly predicted both bullying victimisation and bullying perpetration, while age and nationality predicted victimisation. This finding suggests that the relational climate established by the coach directly permeates athlete-to-athlete relationships: it is hardly surprising that bullying finds a legitimate ground in a team where the coach favours or belittles certain players. Similarly, Nichifor et al. (2023), in a Romanian context, showed that bully/perpetrator behaviour could be explained by pre-competition negative emotions (anxiety, sadness, anger), perceptions of male gender normativity, and coach–teammate relationships, with bully-victim behaviour playing a mediating role in this relationship. These studies position peer bullying not as an individual deviance but as a relational phenomenon shaped at the intersection of coach behaviour, emotion regulation, and masculinity norms.

2.2.3. Hazing / Initiation Rites: A Group-Based Form of Bullying

The most institutionalised and least questioned form of peer violence is the initiation rite, commonly known as hazing. Hazing is defined as the sum of degrading, abusive, and sometimes physically/sexually violent rituals to which an individual is subjected in order to be accepted into a team, gain a sense of belonging, or 'earn' their membership (Crow & MacIntosh, 2009; Hoover & Pollard, 2000; Kirby & Wintrup, 2002). Although these rituals are presented as 'traditions', 'jokes', or 'character tests', they most often contain psychological, physical, and sexual abuse practices (Lipkins, 2006). Typical examples include a young athlete newly joining a team being forcibly given a haircut, being compelled to wear humiliating clothing, or being subjected to a 'traditional' dangerous game at



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a training camp overnight; such acts are also normalised with the discourses of 'it's always been done this way', 'that's just how it is', or 'even worse was done to us' (Johnson, 2011; Elmas et al., 2025).

Although hazing is conceptually presented as a team-building activity, it is functionally a group-based form of bullying. Smokowski and Evans (2019) demonstrate that bullying's three definitional components (repetition, power imbalance, and intent to harm) are directly applicable to hazing dynamics. Even if compressed into a single night, subjecting new arrivals to multiple dangerous and humiliating practices clearly makes hazing a form of bullying; the absolute power that senior members exercise over the right of access to 'group membership', through knowledge, age/experience, makes the new arrival—consumed by a need for belonging—vulnerable; and harm is intentionally produced both as a blind transmission of tradition ('I went through it too, it wasn't that bad') and as a test of loyalty (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Cimino, 2011). Moreover, the widespread belief that hazing 'strengthens the team' is not empirically supported; the more hazing athletes experience, the less cohesive they perceive their team to be (Van Raalte et al., 2007), and no meaningful relationship between hazing and team cohesion has been found (Lafferty et al., 2017).

Prevalence data also reinforces the seriousness of the picture. In a study conducted with 1,105 suburban middle school and high school athletes in the United States, 17.4% of youth athletes experienced hazing; notably, these practices had already begun at sixth-grade level, where early specialisation and performance pressure accelerate (Gershel et al., 2003). At the national level, 45% of collegiate athletes reported hazing occurring on campus, with university sport teams constituting the organisational structure with the highest prevalence at 74% among student groups (Allan & Madden, 2012; Hoover, 1999). The perceived seriousness of hazing has been shown to vary according to individual and organisational factors, with harm being potentially minimised in high-risk contexts such as athlete and fraternity/sorority membership (McCoil, 2026).

The institutional and legal dimension of hazing becomes strikingly visible in the example of the Canadian Hockey League (CHL). Dennie et al. (2024) document the systematic abuse—which players call 'big-boy bullying'—conducted by senior players and team personnel through rituals described as 'too physical and far from fun'. Allan and Kerschner (2020) propose that hazing occurs on a continuum with 'mild/covert', 'harassment-involving', and 'violence-involving' forms. The critical point the authors emphasise is that consent becomes ineffective under such intense peer pressure and institutional coercion: the assent of a young person who says 'yes' to a ritual driven by the dream of being drafted to a higher league cannot be considered given through free will; participation is not



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'voluntary' but is effectively compulsory and is rendered legally invalid (vitiated). When this situation is combined with leagues' and clubs' failure to fulfil their 'duty of care' towards young players, it produces not only a moral but a legal negligence picture (Dennie et al., 2024). The power hierarchy, hegemonic masculinity, and normalisation mechanisms feeding hazing are then addressed theoretically in the second part of the report.

2.2.4. Literature Matrix: Findings Directly Related to Violence and Bullying

To complement the conceptual framework outlined above with an empirical foundation, the thematic literature review conducted by the project team shows that studies directly related to violence and bullying cluster around four recurring key concepts: emotional abuse, the coach–athlete relationship, normalisation of violence, and the code of silence. This clustering reinforces the thesis that bullying in sport is not an individual deviation but a structural pattern sustained by relational power imbalance and institutional indifference.

In terms of impact, Stirling and Kerr (2013) show that emotional abuse directed at elite athletes produces destruction across three axes—psychological, training, and performance—and that some athletes' rationalisation of this as 'mental toughness' discourse constitutes a dangerous form of normalisation. The cost of peer bullying is quantified in Hawker and Boulton's (2000) meta-analysis encompassing twenty years of cross-sectional studies: the variable most strongly linked to victimisation (contrary to expectations, not social anxiety but) depression, and this effect remains robust even when measurement source is independent. Manley et al. (2016) analyse the roots of silence as knowledge deficiency, power imbalance, fear, and institutional resistance, arguing that the solution lies in empowerment that enables athletes to participate in decision-making processes.

The most striking findings on how silence is produced concern euphemism and boundary ambiguity. Vveinhardt et al. (2019) document an omertà culture in which coaches mask aggression with positively connoted concepts such as 'combateness' and 'sporting anger'. Lozano-Esparza (2021) shows that abuse operates not suddenly but gradually and deliberately within a grooming process, hidden beneath a 'dome of silence'. Mierzewski (2018) points to the bodily origin of this pattern, revealing that bullying constitutes a 'power exercise' of hegemonic masculinity habitus. In the Turkish context, attention is drawn to the consequences—extending to depression, isolation, and psychosomatic complaints—of bullying and hazing-based violence that becomes invisible within sport's tough and masculine practices (Çelik & Yancar-Demir, 2016; Elmas, 2022).



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Table 1. Key concepts and representative studies in the literature directly related to violence/bullying.

Key concept	Representative studies	Core contribution
Emotional abuse and coach–athlete relationship	Stirling & Kerr (2013); Adams et al. (2024); Kavanagh et al. (2017)	Abuse is destructive across psychological, training, and performance dimensions; legitimisation through 'tough coaching' discourse is risky.
Normalisation of violence	Stirling & Kerr (2013); Vveinhardt et al. (2019)	'Mental toughness' and oblique language are the primary mechanisms rendering harm invisible.
Code of silence / omertà	Vveinhardt et al. (2019); Lozano-Esparza (2021)	Fear of retaliation and institutional resistance systematically suppress reporting; the solution lies in athlete participation in decision-making.
Grooming and blurred boundaries	Lozano-Esparza (2021)	Abuse is not sudden but gradual; it is hidden in the ambiguity of 'joke' and 'closeness' boundaries.
Hegemonic masculinity	Mierzwinski (2018)	Bullying functions as a bodily 'power exercise' of the masculinity habitus.
Giving voice to those exposed	Hawker & Boulton (2000); Çelik & Yancar Demir (2016); Salim & Winter (2022); Çetin (2023); Marsollier & Hauw (2022)	Victim narratives render lasting and traumatic effects visible beyond prevalence statistics.

The following matrix has been prepared to fully reflect the project team's detailed reading of the literature on this theme (each study's citation, method, core findings, and key concepts).

Table 2. Detailed matrix of studies directly related to violence and bullying (project team's literature reading).

Study / Country	Method	Core findings	Key concepts
Stirling, A. E., & Kerr, G. (2013) Canada	Grounded Theory design was used.	This study examines in a multidimensional manner the experiences of emotional abuse (psychological bullying) that elite athletes are exposed to in the context of the coach–athlete relationship, and the perceived effects of this pattern of violence on athletes. The effects of the systematic abuse applied by coaches are grouped under three main categories:	Athlete Welfare · Emotional Abuse · Coach Athlete Relationship · normalisation of Violence · Qualitative Study



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Study / Country	Method	Core findings	Key concepts
		psychological, training, and performance effects. Addressing the psychological dimension first: almost all participants reported experiencing deep emotional collapse and trauma as a result of their coaches' belittling, demeaning, and aggressive attitudes.	
Hawker, D. S. J., & Boulton, M. J. (2000) United Kingdom (Global Literature Meta-Analysis)	Systematic meta-analysis methodology examining cross-sectional quantitative research designs was used.	This landmark meta-analysis, bringing together twenty years of accumulated knowledge in the peer victimisation literature, synthesises the internalising problems experienced by bullied children with concrete statistical evidence. Analysis of data collected from many different cultural geographies around the world and across a wide age range demonstrated unambiguously that bullying victims experience more intense internalising problems and psychosocial distress than their peers.	Giving Voice
Vveinhardt, J., Fominiene, V. B., & Andriukaitiene, R. (2019) Lithuania	Semi-structured interviews with 8 coaches representing team, individual, and dual sports.	The evolutionary theory's interpretation in sport—'only the strongest survive'—shows direct similarity with the 'law of silence' (omertà) unique to the criminal world, which prohibits negative information from leaving the group. This deeply rooted sports culture creates enormous psychological pressure on athletes to endure bullying and comply with this law of silence. In the long term, this is defined as a social sustainability threat and as a fundamental precondition for an unsafe environment due to its negative consequences for the individual.	Silent culture · Coaching Culture · Social Sustainability · normalisation of Violence
Lozano-Esparza, V. (2021) Mexico	In-depth semi-structured interviews with 7 female athletes and 7 coaches (6 male, 1 female).	This study, conducted with elite semi-professional and professional athletics athletes and coaches in Mexico's Jalisco state, demonstrates that bullying and harassment in sport is not merely an individual deviance but a multidimensional phenomenon deeply embedded in organisational culture. Thematic findings from in-depth interviews with a total of 14 participants are gathered under four main conceptual	Silent culture · Grooming



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Study / Country	Method	Core findings	Key concepts
		headings: 'Boundaries', 'Grooming and Transgression', 'Dome of Silence', and 'Safety Culture'.	
Mierzwinski, M. (2018) United Kingdom (Swiss Conference Paper)	Ethnographic data analysis (qualitative ethnographic observations conducted within the figurational analysis and Norbert Elias's civilising process theory framework).	This academic research examines in depth the bodily construction of 'masculinity', power relations, and bullying dynamics through men's experiences in physical education lessons. Based on ethnographic data and Norbert Elias's 'figurational analysis' approach, the study critically evaluates the process of young males developing civilised bodies in physical education lessons. Findings show that certain bodily practices and performances are highly determinative when young males express their own gender identities.	Hegemonic Masculinity
Çelik, V. O., & Yancar Demir, E. (2016) Türkiye	Review/literature survey in nature.	This review shows that bullying in sport is not simply a transfer of school or workplace bullying into sport, but acquires its own distinctive manifestations due to sport's competitive structure, power relations, and performance-oriented culture. The article addresses the fundamental elements of bullying as repetition, intent, and power imbalance; however, it emphasises that even a single serious victimisation can produce long-lasting destructive effects. The normalisation of physical contact in sports settings, rough training language, winning pressure, and the hierarchical coach–athlete relationship can make it difficult to recognise certain behaviours as bullying.	Giving Voice
Vveinhardt, J., & Kaspars, M. (2024) Lithuania	Quantitative, cross-sectional online survey.	The study's core finding is that martial arts do not automatically provide protection against bullying. Of the Kyokushin karate athletes participating in the study, 75.5% reported experiencing at least one instance of unethical/bullying behaviour from their coaches or other athletes. The most common form is harm through communication: 42.6% of athletes reported experiences of being prevented from expressing their	Giving Voice



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Study / Country	Method	Core findings	Key concepts
		opinions, being shouted at, insulted, subjected to abusive language, or having dialogue with coaches cut off. This dimension has a statistically significant but weak association with symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression.	
Adams, K. V., Alexander, K. N., & Dorsch, T. E. (2024) United States	Qualitative interpretive description study.	This study shows that former collegiate athletes identified emotional abuse not by looking solely at the coach's individual behaviours, but by evaluating the context and continuity of the behaviours, their own emotional responses, and the relationship they built with the coach together. Participants described competing in college sport as an intense context associated with high performance, scholarships, school identity, family pride, and winning pressure. This context led to initial ignoring of red flags; athletes either kept quiet or normalised behaviours because they felt indebted to the team, their scholarships, family expectations, or the programme's success.	Giving Voice
Kavanagh, E. J., Brown, L., & Jones, I. (2017) United Kingdom	A qualitative, interpretive study was conducted.	This article reveals not only the harm experienced by elite athletes exposed to emotional abuse, but also how they attempted to cope with this harm. All participants encountered verbal and physical manifestations of shouting, humiliation, belittling, insults, threats, angry outbursts, and equipment throwing by coaches in the performance environment. These behaviours were often seen as part of 'tough coaching' or the natural part of a high-performance culture, and athletes focused on sustaining performance rather than naming the abuse. Findings show that coping is a temporal process. The first level is 'immediate coping'.	Giving Voice
Salim, J., & Winter, S. (2022) United Kingdom	Qualitative, interpretive and reflexive thematic analysis study.	This study shows that the maltreatment experienced by female artistic gymnasts as child and adolescent athletes leaves strong psychological marks even years after retirement. Findings are presented under three themes: 'What did we experience?', 'How does it	Giving Voice



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Study / Country	Method	Core findings	Key concepts
		affect us now?', and 'Will anything change?'. The first theme reveals that maltreatment in gymnastics culture is multiple and intertwined. Participants stated that they trained approximately 30 hours per week and spent more time with their coaches than with their parents and friends. For this reason, the coach is a critical figure expected to be a carer and source of trust for the child athlete.	
Gözmen Elmas, A., Elmas, S. & Aşçı, F.H. (2026) Türkiye	Cross-sectional quantitative research designs were used.	Research findings show a statistically significant association between moral courage and young athletes' bystander behaviours in bullying situations. As moral courage increases, defending behaviours tend to increase while passive bystanding and bullying-supporting behaviours tend to decrease. Moral disengagement was identified as the prominent cognitive-moral mechanism in explaining bystander behaviours; as this variable increases, passive bystanding and bullying-supporting behaviours increase while defending behaviours decrease. Additionally, antisocial behaviour was found to be independently associated with bullying-supporting behaviours from the effect of moral disengagement. Indirect effects show that moral disengagement plays a partial mediating role in the relationship between moral courage and bullying-supporting behaviours. These findings suggest that considering moral courage and moral disengagement processes in interventions aimed at preventing bullying in youth sport may be beneficial.	Moral Courage · Bystander Behaviour
Çetin, E. (2023) Türkiye	Conducted in a qualitative phenomenology design.	The study shows that elite female athletes experience body shaming both in the sports arena and in socio-cultural relations outside sport. In sport, the body is seen as the primary criterion of performance and suitability for the discipline. For this reason, athletes are continuously observed and interpreted in terms of weight, muscle, fat ratio, weight	Giving Voice



Study / Country	Method	Core findings	Key concepts
		category, agility, or aesthetic expectations. Participants recounted pressure-laden words from coaches and people in the sports environment such as 'it won't work at that weight', 'why are you still eating', 'without losing weight it won't happen'; and being subjected to insults and humiliation when they did not conform to discipline-specific body measurements.	
Marsollier, É., & Hauw, D. (2022) Canada context/French-speaking...	In-depth qualitative single case study.	This study shows that maltreatment in the coach–athlete relationship is not a sharply recognised boundary encountered all at once, but a gradually escalating process within a 'grey area'. In Erika's story, the coach's initial proposal to change weight category was given meaning through Olympic potential and better results targets. The athlete trusted the coach's expertise and authority and saw the weight loss as an acceptable sacrifice for her career. However, as the process progressed, the weight-loss demand turned into pressure repeated at every training session, an expectation of losing weight within a few hours, fluid and calorie restriction, and compulsion to change nutritionist.	Giving Voice

2.3. Dynamics of Bullying in the Context of Power, Hierarchy, and Social Dominance

Bullying in sports environments is a socio-moral phenomenon produced at the intersection of power, hierarchy, and cultural norms, rather than an individual character flaw. This section addresses, within a theoretical framework, the structural mechanisms that enable and sustain bullying—social dominance, hegemonic masculinity, liminality and normalisation, the 'joke–bullying' ambiguity, and the culture of silence.

2.3.1. Social Hierarchy, Power Dynamics, and Social Dominance

Sports teams are 'by their very nature' built upon a particular social hierarchy. Factors such as age, seniority, physical performance, position, heterosexism, and status within the team produce visible or invisible power relations among athletes. These relations are often legitimised in the name of team cohesion and discipline, while in some cases forming the foundation of systematic pressure and bullying (Elmas et al., 2025). Social dominance-based approaches explain hazing within this



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framework too: according to Cimino's (2011) dominance-based model, hazing is the deliberate manipulation of power imbalance by existing group members in order to maintain their position in the social hierarchy and keep potential 'threats' newly joining the group in a subordinate position. This reading also explains why toughness towards new arrivals is often directed most strongly at the most talented new additions: the senior whose status is under threat targets the most capable newcomer in order to preserve their place in the hierarchy.

In this context, hazing-related bullying acts are the clearest indicator of how peer violence becomes institutionalised under the illusion of 'tradition' (Crow & MacIntosh, 2009; Hoover & Pollard, 2000; Kirby & Wintrup, 2002; Lipkins, 2006). Waldron et al. (2011) showed that in American male sport teams, initiation rites are sustained through a culture of 'deviant overconformity'; athletes internalise physical pain, humiliation, and violence as a 'natural' process in order to gain acceptance by the group. The most tragic consequence of this internalisation is yesterday's victim assuming the role of perpetrator the following season and perpetuating the cycle (Elmas, 2022). Similarly, Booth et al. (2024) demonstrated that in male youth football, the boundary between 'joking' and bullying is consciously blurred, and that participants legitimise harmful behaviours through mechanisms of euphemistic labelling and moral disengagement.

2.3.2. Hegemonic Masculinity and the Homosocial Sports Culture

One of the fundamental cultural structures behind bullying and initiation practices is hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity, as conceptualised by Connell (1995, 2005), refers to the dominant masculinity model centring physical strength, endurance, emotional control, aggression, and heterosexuality. Team sports in particular are among the most powerful homosocial spaces in which these norms are reproduced (Messner, 2002); homosocial sports culture is shaped through men's solidarity and competitive relations (Bird, 1996). In this structure, emotionality, vulnerability, or help-seeking may be belittled as signs of weakness, while toughness and endurance towards pain are glorified as ideal athletic qualities. In practice, this becomes visible in everyday scenes such as a player being told 'don't act like a girl' when injured, or an athlete being mocked by teammates when they express fear. In the Turkish context, Çetin and Hacısotaoğlu's (2020) study with elite athletes also shows how the masculine sports culture and power relations feed the ground enabling child abuse.

This culture paves the way for misogynist, homophobic, and sexist discourses to become normalised within teams; the pressure to 'prove one's masculinity' contributes to the legitimisation of bullying



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(Kimmel, 2008). Abell et al. (2024), examining banter experiences in university sports clubs, document that in these environments humour serves on one hand as a prosocial bonding function and on the other is used to excuse inappropriate behaviours such as heavy alcohol use, homophobia, and the sexualisation of women. Steinfeldt et al. (2012) show that young footballers who embrace traditional masculine norms and perceive a weak moral climate are significantly more likely to endorse bullying; Walsh et al. (2021) show that excessive conformity to these norms elevates depressive symptoms and low self-worth. Green's (2024) figural ethnography conducted in secondary school physical education reveals the locker room as a critical space where gendered peer hierarchies and masculinity policing through 'banter' are intensified. Elmas et al.'s (2025) 'liminal athletes' study in the Turkish sample characterises team sports as a field in which ritualistic acts of violence are intertwined with masculinity performance and masculine 'comradeship' is constructed.

2.3.3. Liminality, Normalisation, and Learning of Violence

Van Gennep's (1960) rites of passage approach and Turner's (1969) concept of liminality offer powerful theoretical tools for understanding bullying in sports environments. Athletes newly joining a team enter a 'threshold' period in which they have not yet gained full membership; they are compelled to conform to team norms in order to earn belonging. According to Johnson (2011), violence operates precisely in this liminal process; individuals are reshaped through de-identification and submission and are most often normalised as 'team culture', 'tradition', 'discipline', or a 'toughening process'. Discourses such as 'we went through it too' and 'it builds character' serve to transmit violence from generation to generation (Waldron et al., 2011; Elmas et al., 2025). Hughes and Coakley's (1991) concept of 'overconformity to the sport ethic' explains the infrastructure of this normalisation: a value system that places performance before well-being reframes tolerance of pain, playing while injured, and submitting to pressure as 'dedication', thus transforming harmful behaviours into virtues.

Environments where violence is normalised are also environments where it is learned. González-Hernández et al. (2025), in a study conducted with 503 adolescent athletes in Spain, show that a 'climate of violence' can be spoken of in grassroots sport; that exposure to violence (both direct victimisation and witnessing) interacts with competitiveness and aggressive tendencies to predict aggressive behaviour; and that moral disengagement plays a central role in this process. Importantly, the same study emphasises that prosocial behaviours (empathy, solidarity) serve a protective function in both genders and that developing these skills at an early age can break the cycle of violence. Pinheiro (2025) uses figural sociology to explain normalisation through networks of



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interdependence between individuals and habitus: abuse in sport is a product of dynamic power relations between athletes, coaches, peers, and parents, and athletes' widespread tolerance of these experiences can only be understood when this relational network and the habits that have become a 'second nature' produced by it are analysed.

2.3.4. Blurred Boundaries: 'Joke or Bullying?'

The discourse that most effectively masks bullying in sports culture is 'banter'. Although banter is defined at a conceptual level as a playful and reciprocal form of humour that strengthens relationships (Steer et al., 2020), in practice it can create an 'interpretative grey area' that legitimises verbal and relational bullying. Newman et al. (2022), in a study conducted with 18 professional footballers in England using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, conceptualise this boundary as 'a very fine line'. The striking findings of the study are as follows: the acceptability of a behaviour is most often framed from the perpetrator's perspective ('you would have to be in his shoes to understand what he meant'), thereby making the victim's perspective secondary; some players obscure the intent criterion by suggesting that bullying can also occur 'accidentally' or 'without awareness'; and most critically, even discriminatory statements such as everyday racism can be passively accepted within a 'joke' framework. The victim learning to respond with a smile to conceal their vulnerability leads to the situation remaining invisible until it 'goes too far', reflecting the fundamental rule of ritualised violence: to know how to 'take' the joke and to 'give back' (Elmas, 2022; Hickey & Roderick, 2024).

This ambiguity is not confined to the field itself. Newman, Mahmood and Rumbold (2025), in a study examining media representations in England, show that the label of 'banter' is used even in news coverage to minimise and legitimise bullying, thereby also trivialising the problem at a public level. Booth (2025), with a pragmatist grounded theory approach, reveals that in young male football the boundary between banter and bullying lies 'in the eye of the beholder', and that this subjectivity is strategically used by perpetrators. At the application level, the literature converges on two core recommendations: educating all stakeholders on the fact that the boundary is not binary but fluid and that exclusionary banter cannot be justified; and building a culture in which acceptability is assessed through the well-being of the victim rather than the perpetrator (Lawless & Magrath, 2021; Newman et al., 2022).

2.3.5. Culture of Silence (Code of Silence)

When hegemonic masculinity, the continuity of bullying, and normalisation converge, a powerful culture of silence is constructed that isolates victims. Under this unwritten code in sport, athletes feel



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compelled to silently endure the bullying they experience for fear of exclusion or being removed from the team. Discourses such as 'snitch', 'selling out the team', or 'taking outside what should be resolved internally' suppress victims' help-seeking behaviour (Elmas et al., 2025; Vveinhardt & Fominiene, 2020). Fear of retaliation and the risk of status loss lead to bullying continuing unreported and unpunished; 'pack mentality' creates a ground where even individuals without direct malicious intent become complicit in the crime by remaining silent to avoid becoming the next victim (Booth, 2025; Dennie et al., 2024).

Another factor reinforcing this silence is 'blind spots' where adult supervision is weak. Locker rooms, showers, shuttle vehicles, and camp environments are spaces where power displays are invisibly intensified; Green's (2024) ethnography shows that the locker room is for this very reason a 'backstage' area where peer hierarchies operate most harshly. This spatial invisibility, combined with the code of silence, systematically makes both the detection and reporting of bullying difficult—a situation that also explains why the bystander dynamics and protection mechanisms discussed in the following sections of the report are so critically important.

2.4. Bystander Dynamics and Moral Processes

Peer bullying in sport is not a dyadic violation occurring solely between a perpetrator and a victim; it is a collective process in which the entire peer group participates through their bystander position. One of the most important conceptual achievements of contemporary bullying theory is the understanding that witnesses are not passive and ineffective elements but central actors who directly determine the course, intensity, and longevity of bullying (Salmivalli, 2010). For this reason, bullying prevention efforts are increasingly moving away from the perpetrator–victim axis to centre the moral-cognitive mechanisms that drive bystanders towards action or inaction and the group dynamics themselves. This section first examines bystander roles and the group processes shaping them; it then addresses in depth the two contrasting psychological mechanisms underlying bystander behaviour—moral courage and moral disengagement.

2.4.1. Bystander Roles and Group Processes

Salmivalli's (2010) participant roles approach reveals the different positions that individuals within a peer group adopt in the face of bullying. Within the group dynamic, bystanders typically adopt one of three main roles: the defender, who tries to help the victim and stop the perpetrator; the passive bystander, who avoids becoming involved in the incident and remains silent; and the pro-bullying bystander, who reinforces bullying directly or indirectly—by laughing, cheering, or provoking



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(Jungert et al., 2016; Salmivalli, 2010). These roles are not fixed personality traits but context-sensitive positions shaped by group norms, status relations, and the moral climate of the environment. The same athlete may shift to a pro-bullying position by laughing during a mockery initiated by a strong leader, while in another context may assume the role of defender.

Two structural features of sports environments distinguish bystander behaviour from other contexts such as school. The first is the hierarchical structure of sports teams carrying high compliance expectations: since defending a victim can produce predictable social costs such as loss of intra-team status, exclusion, a 'snitch' label, or conflict with senior/leader athletes, most athletes prefer to remain silent rather than intervene in behaviour they find ethically wrong (Elmas et al., 2025). The second is that sports culture's glorification of values such as 'toughness', 'resilience', and 'team loyalty' can frame pro-bullying and passive bystander roles as legitimate or even 'correct' forms of behaviour. Clerinx, Schaillée, and Spaaij (2025) therefore advocate an integrated prevention approach for combating (psychological) violence in which victims, perpetrators, and bystanders are addressed together; young people are encouraged to use peer influences constructively rather than destructively; and responsibility is distributed among coaches, athletes, and parents.

2.4.2. Moral Courage and Moral Disengagement: A Two-Directional Protective Shield

The fundamental psychological building block enabling an athlete to break the silence and shift to an active defender role is moral courage. Moral courage is the will of the individual to translate ethical principles into action despite foreseeable social costs such as loss of intra-team status, exclusion, or retaliation (Sekerka et al., 2009). Research shows that individuals with high moral courage capacity prioritise the victim's well-being even at the risk of their own safety; they steer decisively away from passive bystanding and pro-bullying behaviours and directly put positive social behaviours into practice (Osswald et al., 2010; Stewart, 2020). In this sense, moral courage is the fundamental motivational force that both drives athletes to defend the victim against the team's destructive norms and triggers resistance to injustice.

At the opposite pole of this mechanism, serving as the main cognitive barrier making bystander intervention difficult and ensuring the continuity of peer violence, is moral disengagement. Moral disengagement, conceptualised by Bandura (1991, 2016), encompasses a set of cognitive strategies that selectively deactivate an individual's internal conscience control mechanisms: diffusion or displacement of responsibility, covert re-labelling of the action ('it was just a joke'), trivialisation of consequences, and blaming or dehumanisation of the victim. Research shows that observers who use

these strategies can easily justify their inaction or complicity with the perpetrator, which in turn directly increases passive bystanding and pro-bullying attitudes (Gini et al., 2020; Hymel & Bonanno, 2014). Moreover, moral disengagement is not merely an individual process; collective moral disengagement shared by groups such as a class or team also shapes bystander behaviour, reducing the likelihood of intervention by relieving the individual's moral distress (Gini et al., 2020; Sjögren et al., 2021).

At this point, moral courage and moral disengagement emerge as two mechanisms operating in opposite directions. Baumert et al. (2024) show that individuals with high levels of moral courage resort significantly less to moral disengagement fallacies (cognitive rationalisations). In other words, moral courage not only pushes athletes to defend the victim but also blocks the cognitive distortions that normalise violence, functioning as a two-directional protective shield against interpersonal violence in sport. How this dual process operates can be analysed in detail through Rest's (1984) Four-Component Model of Moral Behaviour: for an individual to be able to take moral action, they must successively recognise the moral dimension of the situation (moral sensitivity), determine what is right (moral judgement), place ethical values ahead of other motivations (moral motivation), and finally be able to sustain the action in the face of social costs (moral character/implementation). The culture of silence and moral disengagement in sports environments can drive even athletes with sound moral judgements into inaction, particularly by severing the last two links of this chain (motivation and implementation).

An important extension of this framework concerning bystander dynamics is the fact that adult stakeholders—especially coaches—are themselves bystanders. Verhelle et al. (2022), examining the determinants of positive coach-bystander behaviour in preventing sexual violence in sport, show that intervention intention is shaped not only by awareness but also by perceived responsibility, self-efficacy, and organisational support. Furthermore, according to Gözmen Elmas et al.'s (2026) studies from Türkiye, moral courage is seen to be an important psychological resource for understanding the bystander behaviours of young athletes in the face of bullying. As moral courage increases, athletes' tendency to defend teammates experiencing bullying strengthens, while passive bystanding and bullying-supporting behaviours decrease. By contrast, moral disengagement emerges as one of the primary cognitive-moral mechanisms shaping athletes' responses in the face of bullying. As moral disengagement increases, athletes' tendencies to remain passive or support bullying rather than intervening increase (Gözmen Elmas et al., 2026). When this finding is combined with González-Hernández et al.'s (2025) finding on the protective role of prosocial skills, it points to a clear policy



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implication: bullying prevention efforts in sport should not remain limited to superficial empathy training but should focus systematically on building the moral courage, sense of responsibility, and intervention self-efficacy that enable both athletes and coaches to resist wrong team norms.

2.4.3. Literature Matrix: Sociological and Cultural Background

The dynamics of power, hierarchy, masculinity, and bystanders—addressed theoretically in the third and fourth sections—are empirically supported in the project team's review of sociological-cultural background literature through five thematic clusters: organisational factors and normalisation, hegemonic masculinity and homophobia, hazing, culture of silence and reporting, and institutional (country-based) testimonies.

On the organisational axis, Roberts et al. (2020) and MacIntosh et al. (2020) show that the most powerful predictors of intentional violence are 'organisational tolerance of abuse' and 'belief in the instrumental effects of violence', and that the problem is cultural-structural rather than 'bad apples'. Güler et al. (2024) map the risk layers extending from microsystem to macrosystem in the Turkish context with an ecological analysis. The hegemonic masculinity cluster is the densest strand of the literature: from Messner's (1990) concept of the 'body as a weapon' to Drobny's (2025) and Alsarve's (2021, 2024) analyses of ice hockey, to Steinfeldt et al.'s (2012) findings on moral atmosphere, a series of studies reveal that norms of toughness and penalising weakness facilitate bullying. The intersection of these norms with homophobia (Denison et al., 2020, 2023; Klim, 2015; Lucyk, 2011) shows that homophobic language functions as a peer control tool operating under the guise of 'locker room joke'.

In the hazing cluster, Anderson et al. (2012) document that hazing rituals are shaped according to the masculinity regime of the period; Diamond et al. (2016) and Allan et al. (2020) document that these practices are concealed under the discourse of 'tradition' and 'character building'. For Türkiye, Elmas et al. (2021) conceptualise the triangle of homosociality–hegemonic masculinity–hazing. On the silence culture axis, Manley et al. (2016) show that silence is actively produced in academies through discipline and identity; Tak et al. (2024) note that reporting systems are necessary but insufficient on their own; and Komaki and Tuakli-Wosornu (2021) advocate a protective culture based on positive reinforcement rather than punishment. Finally, regarding institutional testimonies, the Human Rights Watch (2020) report on abuse of child athletes in Japan and Canada's Future of Sport Commission (2025) report most loudly articulate that maltreatment is systemic rather than isolated. Table 3



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summarises the main thematic clusters emerging from the reviewed literature, selected studies representing these clusters, and the core contributions of these studies to the literature.

Table 3. Thematic clusters and selected studies on the sociological-cultural background.

Thematic cluster	Selected studies	Core contribution
Organisational factors and normalisation	Roberts et al. (2020); MacIntosh et al. (2020); Güler et al. (2024)	The most powerful predictor of violence is organisational tolerance; the problem is structural and multi-layered.
Hegemonic masculinity	Messner (1990); Steinfeldt et al. (2012); Alsarve (2021, 2024); Drobny (2025); MacDonald (2014)	Norms of toughness and penalising weakness directly fuel bullying.
Homophobia and exclusion	Denison et al. (2020, 2023); Klim (2015); Lucyk (2011)	Homophobic language is a gendered policing tool operating under the guise of 'jokes'.
Hazing / initiation rites	Anderson et al. (2012); Diamond et al. (2016); Allan et al. (2020); Elmas et al. (2021); Grigore et al. (2023)	A form of bullying woven with masculinity and hierarchy, concealed under 'tradition' discourse.
Culture of silence and reporting	Manley et al. (2016); Tak et al. (2024); Krieger & Parks Pieper (2023); McDevitt (2022); Komaki & Tuakli-Wosornu (2021)	Reporting channels are necessary but the power asymmetry and federation monopoly suppress reporting.
Institutional and country testimonies	Human Rights Watch (2020); Future of Sport in Canada Commission (2025); Pinheiro et al. (2014)	Maltreatment is systemic rather than isolated; it is sustained under 'discipline' and 'results' discourse.
Protective factors	Kalina et al. (2024); Brackenridge (1998)	Supportive coaching, inclusive climate, and informed parental involvement are protective.

The following matrix has been prepared to fully reflect the project team's detailed reading of the literature on this theme (each study's citation, method, core findings, and key concepts).

Table 4. Detailed matrix of studies on the sociological and cultural background (project team's literature reading).

Study / Country	Method	Core Findings	Key Concepts
Roberts, V., Sojo, V., & Grant, F. (2020) — "Systematic Review"	Conducted in accordance with the PRISMA framework.	The study comprehensively examined organisational factors triggering non-incidental violence (psychological, physical, and sexual	Social dominance · Normalisation of violence · Power dynamics ·

Study / Country	Method	Core Findings	Key Concepts
		abuse) in sport. Findings show that violence in sport cannot be explained solely by individual deviance ('bad apples') but is rooted in sport's own structural and social culture. The strongest factors common to all types of abuse were: 'organisational tolerance for abuse' (31.9%), 'belief in the instrumental effects of violence' (23.2%), and 'conformity to dominant values in sport' (19%). The study also highlights that psychological abuse can be used by coaches as a deliberate tool of control, not merely as a side effect of poor coaching.	Culture of silence / Code of silence
Güler, D., Güler, Y., Cengiz, C., Tuncel, S., & Karayığit, R. (2024) — Türkiye	Phenomenological qualitative research design.	At the microsystem level (child's direct relations with coach and peers), four fundamental phenomena were identified: physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, and neglect. Physical abuse is not limited to contact acts such as hitting and pushing; non-contact forms such as leaving children without water, forcing them to work on unsuitable/hard surfaces, forcing them to play while injured, and encouraging doping are also common. Within emotional abuse, coaches throwing objects in anger, motivating children through fear, and peer-to-peer bullying were reported.	Power dynamics · Social dominance · Normalisation of violence · Hegemonic masculinity · Culture of silence / Code of silence · Experiencing Emotions
Flores Aguilar, G., Prat Grau, M., Ventura Vall-Llovera, C., & Ríos Sisó, X. (2021) — Spain (Catalonia)	Multiple case study design with focus groups.	Participant accounts reveal that various types of bullying are widely experienced in youth football. The most common type is verbal bullying in the form of insults and name-calling. In addition, social bullying (excluding and ignoring teammates), indirect physical bullying (hiding belongings or soaking them in the toilet), cyberbullying (filming players in the bathroom and sharing online), and homophobic bullying cases that caused players to quit sport were also identified.	Normalisation of violence · Social dominance · Bystander effect / Bystander intervention
Brackenridge, C. (1998) — United Kingdom	Two-phase design with 93 elite young female athletes (ages	This research examined the risk of sexual abuse in sports environments supported by parents for their	Normalisation of violence



Study / Country	Method	Core Findings	Key Concepts
	13-19) from 13 different sports and their parents.	children's 'health', and the level of knowledge about the coaching context. Results show that despite parents providing great material and moral support for their daughters' sports participation, they do not have sufficient knowledge about the dynamics and dangers of the training environment. When it came to questions of physical boundaries and safety, fathers were generally more sceptical than mothers. For example, while 96% of mothers were 'completely comfortable' with their daughters travelling in a coach's car, the same was true for only 42% of fathers.	
Pinheiro, M. C., Pimenta, N., Resende, R., & Malcolm, D. (2014) — Portugal	Snowball and convenience sampling; 6 former international female gymnasts aged 25–33, who began sport at ages 5–6 and trained 3–4 hours daily.	Weight control: Coaches, believing that pre-adolescent small and thin bodies are more advantageous in gymnastics, established a strict surveillance mechanism by constantly weighing athletes. Athletes resorted to going to the bathroom beforehand or removing all clothing to avoid showing even a few extra grams on the scale. Banning lunch or dinner by the coach as punishment became routine. This led to eating disorders, deep shame, low self-esteem, and 'body complexes' created by coaches mocking athletes' physical features.	'Code of silence' · Power dynamics · Normalisation of violence · Social hierarchy
Fortier, K., Parent, S., & Lessard, G. (2020) — Canada	Narrative review; four categories defined (physical, sexual, psychological abuse, and neglect).	Physical abuse was defined narrowly based solely on the purely physical nature of the assault rather than the psychological consequences the act might cause. Direct-contact acts such as shaking, pushing, hitting, choking, or injuring with a hard object were included. By contrast, acts previously counted as physical violence in earlier research — such as 'training to exhaustion or vomiting', 'forcing to train despite injury against medical advice', 'forcing unhealthy eating to lose weight', or 'imposing doping' — were classified under the Psychological Abuse category.	'Code of silence' · Bystander effect



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Study / Country	Method	Core Findings	Key Concepts
Ríos, X., Ventura, C., & Mateu, P. (2022) — Spain, Catalonia	Post-positivist paradigm; 11 participants (4 female, 7 male) selected via criterion and snowball sampling.	Characterisation: Victims generally attributed the bullying they experienced to internal causes (as if it were their own fault): having poor sports skills, being more talented than others and creating jealousy, obesity, shyness, or physical disabilities (visual impairments). Many participants noted that the same bullies were classmates at school, emphasising double victimisation between school and sports club. Coping: Victims mostly remained unresponsive and took refuge in the 'law of silence'. Fear of retaliation and hopeless acceptance of the situation were the main reasons for silence. Rather than helping, teammates supported the perpetrators either by remaining silent or by laughing along.	'Code of silence' · Bystander effect · Normalisation · Victims' emotions and experiences
Volk, A. A., Camilleri, J. A., Dane, A. V., & Marini, Z. A. (2012) — Canada / USA (Universal Anthropological Dimension)	Theoretical compilation and evolutionary analysis.	The authors argue that bullying's consistent appearance on every continent, in every historical era, and even in various animal species shows it cannot be a developmental defect. On the contrary, it is strongly argued that bullying may be a 'facultative adaptation' that provides somatic (survival/resource acquisition), sexual (reproduction/partner finding), and status (dominance) goals for those who successfully engage in it. The research synthesises the adaptive functions of bullying along three main axes.	Hegemonic masculinity
Anderson, E., McCormack, M., & Lee, H. (2012) — United Kingdom	Seven-year longitudinal multi-method ethnography.	The study shows that hazing/initiation practices in male team sports are not a fixed tradition but a ritual shaped according to the period's masculinity and homophobia regime. In earlier years rituals were built around homophobic same-sex humiliation practices, later centering on excessive alcohol consumption. This finding reveals that hegemonic masculinity is produced not only through physical toughness or aggression but through management of the body, shame, and risk for intra-team belonging. Hazing places	Hazing · Hegemonic masculinity



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Study / Country	Method	Core Findings	Key Concepts
		new arrivals in the hierarchy while reproducing the status of senior men.	
Allan, E. J., Hakkola, L., & Kerschner, D. (2020) — United States	Evaluation study on hazing prevention education.	Findings suggest that young people receiving sports education can in some cases see hazing practices as a natural part of being a team, a test of endurance, or a traditional acceptance process. This shows that bullying can be normalised not as overt violence but as a socialisation practice embedded in sports culture. The important point from a masculinity perspective is that expectations of enduring pain, obedience, accepting seniors' authority, and showing loyalty to the group feed hazing attitudes. The study notes that prevention programmes need to target not only individual behaviour but also the broader norms embedded in sports education.	Hazing
Alsarve, D. (2024) — Sweden	Historical qualitative analysis; no direct human participants.	The article shows that toughness, bruising, bodily risk-taking, and will to win in ice hockey are not merely sporting techniques but cultural symbols historically laden with masculinity ideals. It is emphasised that while violence appears to be an individual player's choice, it is fed by coach expectations, club economics, spectator culture, media narratives, and game rules. Therefore bullying or rough intervention is read not as individual deviance but as the reproduced result of the hegemonic masculinity order at different levels.	Hegemonic masculinity
Denison, E., Bevan, N., & Jeanes, R. (2020) — Multi-country (quantitative online survey)	Multi-country quantitative online survey.	The study shows that homophobic language and behaviour in youth team sports is a significant exclusion mechanism limiting LGB athletes' safe participation. The experience of coming out is not merely a matter of individual courage; it is determined by team culture, peer support, and the intensity of homophobic norms. The finding from a hegemonic masculinity perspective is that the construction of heterosexuality as the assumed and superior position	Hegemonic masculinity



Study / Country	Method	Core Findings	Key Concepts
		within the team renders different sexual orientations invisible or risky. Homophobic bullying, even without direct physical violence, perpetuates inequality in sport through loss of belonging and psychological pressure.	
Denison, E., Faulkner, N., Jeanes, R., & O'Brien, K. S. (2023) — Australia	Two-arm cluster randomised controlled intervention study.	The study emphasises that homophobic language in young male sports teams is often legitimised as a 'joke' or ordinary locker-room language, yet carries exclusionary and bullying-producing effects. The educational intervention helped athletes recognise the harm of homophobic expressions and develop team norms that counter such language. The research demonstrates that structured educational interventions can produce measurable change in language use and team climate.	Hegemonic masculinity
Diamond, A. B., Callahan, S. T., Chain, K. F., & Solomon, G. S. (2016) — United States	Qualitative review; no direct participants.	The review notes that hazing in sport is often concealed under discourses of tradition, team bonding, or character building, which leads to delayed recognition of physical, psychological, and social harms. The core finding is that in settings where institutions fail to develop clear policies, training, and rapid intervention mechanisms, hazing continues to be reproduced and the burden of harm falls on new arrivals.	Hazing · Hegemonic masculinity
Drobny, J. (2025) — United Kingdom / ice hockey context	Qualitative thesis study.	The study reveals that hegemonic masculinity in youth ice hockey is constructed from early ages through expectations of physical toughness, emotional control, competitiveness, and suppression of weakness. These norms fuel not only in-game aggression but also intra-team forms of bullying such as mockery, belittling, exclusion, and status competition. Young athletes are pushed to normalise bodily risk and conceal pain in order to gain acceptance. In this way, hegemonic masculinity becomes both a performance standard and a tool of social control. The study	Hegemonic masculinity



Study / Country	Method	Core Findings	Key Concepts
		underscores the importance of early cultural intervention in youth sport.	
Elmas, S., Hacısöftaoğlu, İ., & Aşçı, F. H. (2021) — Türkiye	Theoretical/qualitative literature review; no direct field participants.	The article argues that hazing in male team sports is not merely a recognition or entertainment ritual for new members, but a ground for bullying where hegemonic masculinity, homosociality, and intra-team hierarchy operate together. Athletes must endure humiliation, physical coercion, or acts of submission in order to belong to the team. In this process, senior athletes reinforce their power while newcomers accept being tested in exchange for belonging. These experiences are frequently framed as 'tradition', making them difficult to question.	Hegemonic masculinity · Hazing · Homosociality · Team sport
Grigore, V., et al. (2023) — Romania	Quantitative survey research.	The study shows that bullying in sport is not solely a problem carried over from school or general peer relations; it is also associated with sport's own competitive and hierarchical structure. Team climate, coach behaviour, athlete status, and group norms can increase bullying risk. The presence of male athletes in the environment and competitive pressure are identified as risk factors specific to sport.	Hegemonic masculinity · Hazing
Kalina, L., O'Keeffe, B. T., O'Reilly, S., & Moustakas, L. (2024) — International / multi-country	Scoping review; no direct participants.	The review shows that bullying in sport is a multi-level problem shaped more by team, coach, institution, and sport culture than by individual characteristics. Risk factors include negative coach influence, toxic team atmosphere, power imbalance, performance pressure, and hazing practices common in some team sports. Protective factors include positive team climate, fair leadership, and athlete voice.	Protective factors · Toxic masculinity · Sport bullying
Klim, E. D. (2015) — Canada / North American context	Theoretical article / literature-based sociological analysis; no direct participants.	The article argues that hegemonic masculinity produces an invisible barrier in sport that excludes LGBT individuals. Homophobia is treated not merely as individual prejudice but as a structural mechanism protecting the boundaries of 'real masculinity' in sport. Homophobic	LGBT · Homophobia · Hegemonic masculinity · Exclusion · Sport institution



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Study / Country	Method	Core Findings	Key Concepts
		jokes, insults, locker-room language, and the demand to prove heterosexuality are analysed as forms of bullying.	
Lucyk, K. (2011) — Canada	Theoretical and historical literature analysis; no direct participants.	The study shows that sport institutions reproduce homophobia while reinforcing masculine ideals. The warning against 'acting gay' operates in sport like a disciplinary sentence associated with failure, weakness, or femininity. This language can turn into direct bullying among athletes, and also produces self-surveillance, self-elimination, and identity concealment among non-heterosexual athletes who do not conform to the dominant norm.	Hegemonic masculinity
MacDonald, C. A. (2014) — Canada	Literature review; no direct participants.	The review shows that Canadian male ice hockey is a primary socialisation environment for young men, where hegemonic masculinity is associated with toughness, emotional silence, aggression, competitiveness, and homophobia. Hazing rituals, locker-room practices, and in-game violence are described as mechanisms by which players learn and transmit hegemonic masculinity.	Hazing · Homophobia · Hyper-masculinity
Messner, M. A. (1990) — United States	Feminist theoretical analysis and interpretive study based on qualitative interview data.	This classic study interprets sport violence not merely as an in-game rule violation or aggression, but as a social practice in which the male body is weaponised to construct hegemonic masculinity. For male athletes, violence, pain, and injury are often coded as proof of respect, endurance, and masculinity. The study shows that sport structures masculinity not by training the body but by disciplining it.	Hegemonic masculinity
MacIntosh, E., et al. (2020) — International / multi-country	Systematic review; no new direct participants.	The review shows that violence and abuse in sport cannot be explained solely by individual perpetrator psychology; it is sustained by organisational silence, power hierarchies, performance pressure, closed team culture, and inadequate reporting mechanisms. Hegemonic masculinity, in this organisational context — especially through submission to authority,	Hazing · Hegemonic masculinity



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Study / Country	Method	Core Findings	Key Concepts
		prioritisation of team loyalty, and suppression of weakness — creates fertile ground for violence.	
Fogel, C., & Quinlan, A. (2020) — Canada	Qualitative content analysis; no direct participants.	The article emphasises that sexually explicit hazing practices in the locker room are often trivialised as 'jokes', 'team tradition', or 'male play', when in fact they constitute forms of sexual violence and bullying. From a hegemonic masculinity perspective, these practices function to establish control over the body, humiliate the newcomer, and reinforce male dominance within the group.	Sexual violence · Locker room · Hazing · Hegemonic masculinity
Steinfeldt, J. A., Vaughan, E. L., LaFollette, J. R., & Steinfeldt, M. C. (2012) — United States	Quantitative cross-sectional survey study.	The study is one of the most direct empirical sources showing that bullying among adolescent male football players is associated with masculine norms and the team's moral atmosphere. As conformity to masculine norms such as toughness, aggression, emotional control, and dominance increases, bullying behaviours may also increase. The team's moral atmosphere appears as a moderating variable.	Hegemonic masculinity
Alsarve, D. (2021) — Sweden	Qualitative case study.	The study shows that male team sports can foster aggressive, sexist, and violence-supporting attitudes; but the same environments also carry transformative prevention potential. In Swedish ice hockey, while competitiveness, tough play, emotional endurance, and team loyalty are presented as positive values, these norms can simultaneously legitimise harassment and bullying towards those who fail to perform them.	Hegemonic masculinity
Vveinhardt, J., Bite Fominiene, V., & Andriukaitiene, R. (2019) — Lithuania	Qualitative research design was used.	The study demonstrates that bullying and harassment in sport do not stem solely from individual misbehaviour; they are normalised through cultural meanings constructed around performance, competition, and team loyalty. The study's strongest finding is that violent or demeaning behaviours in sport environments are often perceived as 'part of the game' and redefined as necessary or natural.	Culture of silence



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Study / Country	Method	Core Findings	Key Concepts
Manley, A., Roderick, M., & Parker, A. (2016) — England / United Kingdom	Qualitative organisational culture study conducted in a U18 elite football academy of an English Premier League club.	The article shows that silence in elite football academies is not a passive void but an active organisational outcome produced through discipline and identity construction. Young players are incorporated into continuous processes of measurement, observation, comparison, and evaluation from the moment they enter the academy. Performance tests, monthly reviews, training reports, body measurements, technical assessments, and coaches' observations monitor not only players' football skills but also whether they display the "right attitude".	Culture of silence
Komaki, J. L., & Tuakli-Wosornu, Y. A. (2021)	This publication is not an empirical field study but a theoretical and practice-oriented opinion article.	The article emphasises why punishment-based systems alone remain insufficient in explaining the cultural structure that sustains abuse in sport. The authors' core argument is that many sports organisations only bring safety onto the agenda when a scandal, complaint, or disciplinary event emerges. The article advocates building a protection culture in sport through positive reinforcement and proposes practical strategies for organisations.	Safeguarding · Positive reinforcement · Safe sport · Culture change · Abuse prevention · Elite sport
Krieger, J., & Parks Pieper, L. (2023) — United States	Qualitative document analysis examining governance problems that facilitated sexual abuse in the US Olympic and Paralympic sport system from an athlete perspective.	The article shows that sexual abuse in sport cannot be explained solely by the individual power differential in perpetrator-athlete relationships; structural features of national sport governance also make abuse possible. Athletes' court petitions and Congressional testimonies document how federations in the US Olympic sport system used institutional authority to silence athletes and systematically obstructed reporting.	Safe sport · Culture of silence
Human Rights Watch. (2020) — Japan	The report is based on a human rights investigation conducted between January and June 2020.	The report reveals that physical, verbal, and sexual abuse directed at child athletes in Japan has historically been normalised under the name of 'training method' or 'discipline'. The most visible finding is that physical violence has persisted across many sports from	Safe sport · Culture of silence



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Study / Country	Method	Core Findings	Key Concepts
		the past to the present. Athletes interviewed recounted being beaten by coaches, being sexually assaulted, and reporting receiving no institutional response.	
McDevitt, A. (2022) — Germany, Mexico, Romania and Zimbabwe	The report combined desk research and semi-structured interviews to understand the phenomenon of sextortion in sport and discuss prevention, reporting, and enforcement measures.	The report's core finding is that sextortion — the abuse of a position of power to obtain sexual benefit — is a particularly invisible form of abuse in the sport sector. Sport, with its hierarchical relationships, intense competition, control over the body, and limited career opportunities, creates a closed system especially vulnerable to sextortion. The report emphasises that athletes are at risk from multiple actors, not only coaches.	Culture of silence
Tak, M., Kim, Y. J., & Rhind, D. J. A. (2024) — South Korea	Qualitative study examining how safe sport reporting systems are used in the context of youth high-performance sport in South Korea.	The article presents a balanced picture showing that reporting systems are necessary to break silence in sport but insufficient alone. The research identifies three different modes of use of safe sport reporting channels in South Korea: good use, non-use, and misuse. Regular reminders of reporting channels in schools, training sessions, surveys, and the visibility of disciplinary processes communicate to athletes, parents, and coaches that norms are changing.	Culture of silence
Future of Sport in Canada Commission. (2025) — Canada	This source is the third chapter of the Future of Sport in Canada Commission's final report and constitutes a comprehensive commission evaluation rather than an independent empirical article.	The report chapter states that maltreatment in Canadian sport is not a matter of isolated incidents; it is a systemic problem sustained by power relations, a self-governance model, a win-first priority, and a culture of silence. The Commission received accounts of sexual assault, physical and psychological abuse, neglect, racism, and homophobia from victims and witnesses across a wide range of sports.	Culture of silence

2.5. Cyberbullying and the Role of Digital Platforms in Sport

Today, bullying behaviour does not end at the physical boundaries of the training ground or locker room; it has migrated onto digital platforms that have become an inseparable part of athletes' social lives. The rise of technology and social media has shifted traditional bullying towards a form of



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cyberbullying in which the victim cannot easily defend themselves (Rusillo-Magdaleno et al., 2024). The IOC's current consensus framework also explicitly includes cyber/online violence as one of the forms of interpersonal violence that must be recognised (Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2024). This section first addresses the nature of cyberbullying and the features that distinguish sport from other contexts; it then analyses how the digital domain reconstructs power relations within sport and their effects.

2.5.1. The Nature and Distinctive Features of Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying, in its broadest definition, is the use of electronic technologies, internet sites, digital platforms, or messaging services with the intention of deliberately causing harm to an individual or group (Gudmundson et al., 2024). Like traditional bullying, cyberbullying may involve verbal harassment or threats of physical harm; however, the anonymity and depersonalisation provided by the internet and mobile devices significantly amplify the reach and impact of the act (Rusillo-Magdaleno et al., 2024). The European Cyberbullying Intervention Project Questionnaire (ECIPQ), developed by Del Rey et al. (2015), demonstrated that this phenomenon is a widespread problem among adolescent groups and can be systematically measured in both victimisation and perpetration dimensions. Prevalence data lay bare the scale of the problem: international literature reports cyberbullying victimisation between 13.99% and 57.5%, and perpetration between 6% and 46.3% (Rusillo-Magdaleno et al., 2024); a cross-sectional analysis covering forty-two countries also shows that, with the proliferation of social media use, cyberbullying has become an international public health problem among young people (Craig et al., 2020).

An important conceptual challenge of this phenomenon for sport is that the boundary between cyberbullying and 'banter' (joking) becomes even more blurred in the digital environment. Steer et al. (2020), in a study examining adolescents' perceptions of the relationship between humour, banter, and cyberbullying, showed that many digital posts framed by young people as 'a joke that everyone does' in fact involve repetitive and hurtful targeting; for this reason, focus should be placed on the effect of the behaviour on the victim rather than the intent of the perpetrator. This finding is a direct extension into the digital domain of the banter–bullying ambiguity discussed in section 2.3.4 of the report.

2.5.2. Cyberbullying in Sport: Social Media, Hazing, and Power Relations

In the sporting context, digital platforms have become new arenas for both positive social interaction and bullying. Gudmundson et al. (2024), examining the relationship between social media and hazing in university sport, demonstrate that although these two phenomena have been studied separately,



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they are increasingly intertwined; social media has become both a showcase in which hazing rituals are displayed and documented, and a medium raising public awareness of these practices. The interviews the authors conducted with coaches, athletes, and administrators show that the digital domain has both complicated the supervision of hazing and bullying and—paradoxically, when posts become visible—potentially facilitated it. Since hierarchy, power structures, and masculinity norms lie at the foundation of hazing (Gudmundson et al., 2024), refusing to participate in a ritual also carries the risk of exclusion and peer bullying in the digital domain, making refusal increasingly difficult (Johnson, 2011, as cited in Gudmundson et al., 2024).

In the sporting context, cyberbullying most often operates as the transference of on-field power relations to the digital domain: exclusion in team group messages, sharing of humiliating content, demeaning nicknames, and attacks conducted through social media can constitute a digital extension of on-field hierarchy (Gudmundson et al., 2024). To make this dynamic concrete—for example—a mocking 'meme' shared in a team's WhatsApp group before a match about a player's error in a previous game may, on the surface, appear a 'joke', yet can undermine that athlete's sense of belonging and psychological readiness; similarly, demoralising comments arriving on an athlete's social media account intertwine on-field performance with digital reputation. Such examples are manifestations in daily sporting life of the core mechanism emphasised in the literature—that anonymity and depersonalisation amplify the impact of the attack (Rusillo-Magdaleno et al., 2024).

A particularly noteworthy feature of the digital domain is its potential to weaken traditional hierarchies based on physical power. The operation of cyberbullying through anonymity and depersonalisation (Rusillo-Magdaleno et al., 2024) theoretically creates grounds for an athlete who is not physically dominant on the field to shift to a dominant, or even bullying, position in the digital domain. The B-FREE project's field research also aims to examine this possible transformation empirically—how the digital domain reconstructs the balance of power within sport—from the perspectives of athletes, coaches, and administrators. The digital domain can similarly be read as an extension of the 'blind spots' where adult supervision is weak: this time, the space free from oversight consists of closed messaging groups to which adult access is almost impossible (Gudmundson et al., 2024).

2.5.3. Effects and the Two-Way Relationship: Threat and Protective Potential

The psychosocial consequences of cyberbullying overlap with those of traditional bullying and sometimes aggravate them: low self-esteem, anxiety, and depressive symptoms are among the



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primary such consequences (Rusillo-Magdaleno et al., 2024). The fact that anonymity and the permanence of content amplify the reach and impact of attacks (Rusillo-Magdaleno et al., 2024) can make it difficult for the athlete to retreat to an offline safe space, potentially deepening the intensity of the pressure. In sports environments, this situation can lead to the transference of on-field power relations to the digital domain and the transformation of bullying into a continuous experience (Gudmundson et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, the sport–digital relationship should not be read solely on the threat axis. Rusillo-Magdaleno et al. (2024), in their systematic review covering 29 studies, show that properly structured physical activity and sporting participation is associated with significant reductions in bullying and cyberbullying, regression of depressive symptoms, and strengthening of social relations, sense of responsibility, and self-esteem. This finding points to a critical nuance: sport is not inherently either purely a risk or purely a source of protection; what is decisive is the moral climate of the environment (section 2.4.2 of the report), coaching behaviours (section 2.6.4 of the report), and institutional protection mechanisms (section 2.6.2 of the report).

2.5.4. Digital Ethics and Institutional Responsibility

All of these dynamics show that sports clubs' limiting of their protection approach to physical safety alone is insufficient. Gudmundson et al. (2024) recommend developing educational and informational resources that address the intersection of social media and hazing/bullying, and including athletes, coaches, and administrators together in this process. Since the limits of oversight in the digital domain entail serious ethical dilemmas in terms of the coach's sphere of authority and privacy, an effective approach requires a proactive culture-building rather than reactive oversight: digital communication ethics codes, club rules regulating digital behaviour, and educational modules that encourage young people to use their digital influence capacity constructively rather than destructively (Gudmundson et al., 2024; Rusillo-Magdaleno et al., 2024). How to design a safe sporting environment against cyberbullying is directly connected to the safe sport, safeguarding, and psychological safety framework addressed in the following section of the report.

2.5.5. Literature Matrix: Cyberbullying and Digital Violence

The theoretical framework of the fifth section is concretised in the targeted review of digital violence along three axes: **the distinctive nature of cyberbullying, digital aggression originating from fans/spectators, and targeted harm directed at women and elite athletes**. Baştürk Akca and Sayımer (2017) define the qualities distinguishing cyberbullying from traditional bullying—



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anonymity, speed, permanence, and spreadability—while Kavanagh and Mountjoy (2024) argue that the digital environment is not merely a mirror of physical abuse but an **intersectional** and uniquely distinctive violence ecosystem in its own right.

Normalisation is also powerful in this domain. For example, Chhikara (2018) emphasises that more than 78% of professional footballers see cyberbullying as 'a normal part of athlete life that must be endured'. Türkiye-focused studies localise this pattern. Doğar (2019) finds significantly higher cyberbullying tendencies among male sports students, while Yüçetürk and Ağın (2022) and Öğraş and Kara (2025) show that usage exceeding five hours a day and high visibility expose athletes to fan and anonymous user attacks; Karaca (2019) shows that verbal bullying among football fans extends into the cyber domain. Kniffin and Palacio (2018), with the conceptual bridge between trash-talk and trolling, point out that digital aggression is intertwined with competitive communication.

The most current institutional evidence reveals that the problem has shifted in scale and target. Hayday et al. (2024) document that online abuse directed at Olympic athletes concentrates around 'trigger events' (content analysis of 243,276 tweets); Safe Sport International (2026) and Tweedie et al. (2026) emphasise that forms such as deepfakes, image-based abuse, doxxing, and coordinated pile-on attacks constitute a safeguarding problem. Toffoletti et al. (2026), meanwhile, reframe online harm directed at elite women athletes as a matter of gender-based violence and workplace safety. By contrast, Lee et al. (2025) show that structured sporting participation can serve a protective function by strengthening emotion regulation in disadvantaged adolescents, supporting the two-way relationship described in section 2.5.3 of the report.

Table 5. Prominent axes in the literature on cyberbullying and digital violence.

Axis	Selected studies	Core contribution
Distinctive nature of cyber abuse	Baştürk Akca & Sayımer (2017); Kavanagh & Mountjoy (2024)	Anonymity, permanence and intersectionality; the digital domain is a violence ecosystem in its own right.
Normalisation and coping	Chhikara (2018)	Professionals internalise cyberbullying as a norm 'to be endured'.
Turkish context and	Doğar (2019); Yüçetürk & Ağın (2022); Karaca (2019); Öğraş & Kara (2025)	High visibility and fan culture expose young athletes to digital attack.



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Axis	Selected studies	Core contribution
fan aggression		
Targeted harm against women and elite athletes	Hayday et al. (2024); Toffoletti et al. (2026); Tweedie et al. (2026); Safe Sport International (2026)	Online harm is a protection, gender, and workplace safety issue.
Protective potential	Lee et al. (2025); Kniffin & Palacio (2018)	Structured participation can strengthen emotion regulation; the boundaries of competitive communication are unclear.

The following matrix has been prepared to fully reflect the project team's detailed reading of the literature on this theme (each study's citation, method, core findings, and key concepts).

Table 6. Detailed matrix of studies on cyberbullying and digital violence (project team's literature reading).

Study / Country	Method	Core findings	Key concepts
Chhikara, J. (2018) India	Cross-sectional mixed-method design.	This study strikingly reveals professional footballers' perceptions, experiences, and coping strategies regarding cyberbullying in the context of sports sociology and psychology. One of the most striking sociological findings is that athletes view cyberbullying as an integral and 'endurable' normative part of modern sports culture today. More than 78% of participants accepted cyberbullying as a normal element of professional athletic life. This situation shows how violence and abuse in sport is desensitised and 'normalised' in the digital environment.	normalisation of Violence · Code of Silence · Cyberbullying · Athlete Coping Mechanisms · Fan Aggression · Digital Abuse
Doğar, Y. (2019) Türkiye	General survey model from quantitative research methods.	This research analyses the cyberbullying tendencies of university students studying sport education through sociodemographic and sport-specific variables, deeply examining how the culture of sport spectatorship intertwines with digital violence. While age and family income level did not create significant differences in cyberbullying, male students were found to display significantly higher cyberbullying behaviour compared to female students. This is closely related to hegemonic masculinity norms in Turkish society, males' greater freedom in digital	Fan Aggression · Social Media Abuse · Group Dynamics · Gender Roles · Parental Education · Deindividuation



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Study / Country	Method	Core findings	Key concepts
		spaces, and aggression-involving acts being seen as more tolerable within masculinity roles.	
Kavanagh, E., & Mountjoy, M. (2024) International (Canada/UK-based review)	Editorial and review article synthesising existing literature in sport psychology, sports medicine and sociology.	This academic review addresses the concept of '#CyberAbuse' in sport with a multidisciplinary approach, arguing that digital environments are not merely a mirror reflecting physical abuse but a uniquely distinctive violence ecosystem in their own right. The researchers define cyber abuse as an aggressive, manipulative form of online communication designed to create fear, psychological collapse, or feelings of inferiority in an individual. Sociologically, this type of violence often has an intersectional nature; it is layered and amplified through belongings such as gender, race, sexual orientation, religion, and nationality.	Cyber Abuse · Fluid Boundaries · Online Grooming · Coercive Control · Safeguarding in Sport · Intersectionality
Baştürk Akca, E., & Sayımer, İ. (2017) Türkiye; literature coverage multi-country	Review study.	The study's core finding is that cyberbullying, although deriving from traditional peer bullying, differs markedly from it in terms of time, space, anonymity, speed, permanence, and spreadability. The authors emphasise that cyberbullying is not limited to school environments or face-to-face relations; it can reach the victim at any moment of the day via mobile phones, e-mails, messaging applications, forums, gaming platforms, and social networks. For this reason, the victim cannot protect themselves by moving away from the environment as in physical bullying; online content can be multiplied, recorded, and disseminated to wide audiences.	Types of cyberbullying · Literature review · Children and young people · Media literacy · Risk factors
Yüçetürk, C., & Ağin, B. (2022) Türkiye	Qualitative research.	The study shows that young athletes use social media as a natural and intensive part of their daily lives. Most participants spend five hours or more per day on the internet or social media; they explain this as entertainment, following the agenda, making personal posts, acquiring technical knowledge about their discipline, and learning by watching other athletes. This visibility, while bringing athletes into greater contact with fans, spectators, and anonymous users, also makes them vulnerable to cyberbullying. According to findings, 10 of 15 athletes encountered cyberbullying rarely or frequently.	Athletes · Social media · Qualitative interview · Awareness · Club and federation responsibility
Karaca, Y. (2019) Türkiye	Causal comparative model.	The thesis addresses the bullying behaviour of football spectators not only as stand violence but as a broad social behaviour	Football fan · Sport spectator · Cyberbullying



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Study / Country	Method	Core findings	Key concepts
		pattern with verbal, physical, and cyber dimensions. Findings show that the highest level among football fans appears in verbal bullying, followed by physical and cyber bullying. This result suggests that behaviours such as insults, humiliation, mockery, profanity, and belittling opponents in the football environment can become a more visible and more easily justified spectatorship practice.	scale · Verbal bullying · Demographic variables
Öğraş, E. B., & Kara, M. (2025) Türkiye; compiled literature international	Traditional literature review.	The article evaluates the effects of social media on athletes not as a unidirectional risk narrative but as a two-way domain with psychological, social, developmental, ethical, and performance-based dimensions. The core finding is that social media offers opportunities for athletes such as visibility, personal branding, direct connection with fans, sponsorship, and access to motivational content; while simultaneously producing cyberbullying, digital violence, privacy violations, social comparison pressure, attention disruption, and self-perception problems.	Sports psychology · Social media · Young athletes · Digital identity · Psychological resilience
Lee, I., Chang, Y., Yoo, T., & Plunkett, E. (2025) United States	Quantitative research; online survey and administrative school records.	The study makes an original contribution in examining the effects of cyberbullying on emotion regulation, school adjustment, and well-being of economically disadvantaged adolescents in the context of sport spectatorship. First, it was confirmed that emotion regulation could be modelled as a four-dimensional structure: evaluating others' emotions, evaluating one's own emotions, expressing emotions, and emotional control. The measurement model demonstrated acceptable fit, providing a reliable basis for the subsequent structural analyses in the study. The overall finding is that cyberbullying victimisation significantly weakens emotion regulation, particularly in students without sport spectatorship.	Cyber victimisation · Sport spectatorship · Emotion regulation · Economic disadvantage · Structural equation model
Kniffin, K. M., & Palacio, D. (2018) United States	Quantitative field research.	The article examines verbal aggression directed at opponents in sport and its similarities to 'trolling', rather than direct social media cyberbullying. For this reason, it provides an important conceptual foundation for understanding online harassment in sport contexts. The first core finding is that trash-talk is not solely about performance. While athletes are expected to talk about the opponent's playing skills and athleticism, topics such as physical	Trash-talk · Trolling · Verbal aggression · Contact sports · Competitive communication



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Study / Country	Method	Core findings	Key concepts
		appearance, partners, sexual behaviour, parents, and school/institution are also widely used.	
Hayday, E., Geurin, A., Burch, L., & Smith, A. C. T. (2024) UK-based research on Olympic athletes	Two-stage mixed research.	The report shows that online abuse directed at Olympic athletes can rapidly intensify around trigger events and constitutes a complex safeguarding problem for sports organisations. In the content analysis, 243,276 tweets were examined across six cases, and virtual maltreatment was found to be clearly present in five cases. The rate of virtual maltreatment varied between approximately 2% and 30% across cases. This variation shows that online abuse does not operate at a fixed level; it is triggered by the athlete's identity, the context of the event, the media agenda, and social/political discussions. In terms of content, the negative posts consisted primarily of hate speech, discrimination, and emotional abuse.	Olympic athletes · Online abuse · Trigger events · Virtual maltreatment · Protection policy
Safe Sport International. (2026) International	Discussion/guidance report.	The report's core finding is that online abuse is a growing, multiform safety problem at every level of sport that cannot be reduced solely to an individual 'bad comment' issue. Athletes encounter many different forms of attack, including insults, threats, sexual harassment, racist and misogynistic discourse, deepfakes, image-based abuse, doxxing, stalking, impersonation, coordinated pile-on, and disinformation, especially as their visibility increases. The report notes that this abuse can affect not only elite professionals but also rising talents, esports players, officials, volunteers, and support personnel.	Online abuse · Athlete safety · Moderation · Safeguarding · E-sports
Tweedie, J., Smith, A. C. T., & Ordway, C. (2026) Australia	Qualitative research report.	The report reveals that Australian sports organisations increasingly view online abuse as a serious integrity and safeguarding problem. Although female sport participants are at the centre of the study, the findings are noted to be relevant also for athletes, referees, officials, personnel, and people with disabilities in sports organisations. The first major finding from interviews is that online abuse manifests in a wide variety of forms. Participating organisations reported categories including misogynistic, racist, antisemitic, sexualised, homophobic, transphobic, nationalistic, body shaming, impersonation, slander,	Australia · Sports organisations · Good practice · Female athletes · Policy recommendations

Study / Country	Method	Core findings	Key concepts
		blackmail/extortion, threatened violence, and targeting of family members.	
Toffoletti, K., McGrane, C., & Reddan, S. (2026) Australia	Mixed method.	The article positions online harm directed at elite women athletes not merely as 'troll comments' but as a serious workplace safety issue intertwined with the body, working life, performance, economic opportunities, and institutional support structures.	Female athletes · Online harm · Gender-based violence · Workplace safety · Feminist embodiment

2.6. Safe Sport, Safeguarding, and Athletes' Rights

The conceptual and institutional foundation of the struggle against bullying and interpersonal violence in sporting environments is shaped under the headings of 'safe sport' and 'safeguarding'. This section first addresses the terminological evolution of these concepts and their human rights dimension (2.6.1); it then examines in depth safeguarding mechanisms (2.6.2), the lived reality of athletes' rights (2.6.1), psychological safety (2.6.3), coaching behaviours (2.6.4), and the voice of those exposed (2.6.5).

2.6.1. Athletes' Rights, Athlete Welfare/Well-Being, and Athlete Voice

Sports scientists and authorities have used different words to define the harm experienced by athletes, a situation that has made the global struggle against bullying, hazing, and abuse more difficult (Hayhurst et al., 2015; Owusu-Sekyere et al., 2022): For example, maltreatment is a broad term summarising the exploitation and abuse experienced by children that must be prevented under the safeguarding umbrella (Owusu-Sekyere et al., 2022; Rhind & Owusu-Sekyere, 2017). Non-accidental violence, another important term on the subject, defines harms that are not accidental, applied by coaches or other athletes (Roberts et al., 2020). Interpersonal violence, yet another important related term, is defined as a global public health problem that directly includes physical, psychological, and sexual abuse as well as exclusion, bullying, hazing, grooming, and cyber violence (Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2024). The explicit recognition of bullying under the heading of 'interpersonal violence' is a vital step in terms of emphasising the seriousness of systematic pressure between athletes or between coach and athlete.

Difficulties similar to those experienced in defining the harmful and violent acts to which athletes are subjected are also found in defining the mechanisms to prevent them. For example, ensuring the welfare of athletes in the sports ecosystem has historically been expressed through complex concepts on which full consensus has not been reached. Studies addressing the ambiguities in the definitions

of key concepts such as 'Safe Sport' and 'Safeguarding' reveal the critical role of this terminological evolution in the struggle against bullying and other forms of violence in sport (Gurgis et al., 2023). While bullying in sport manifests as systematic pressure and abuse of athletes through physical, emotional, or cyber means (Booth, 2025; Fletcher, 2025), each of the concepts presented in the text is essentially a different name for the effort to build an ecosystem that will prevent bullying from taking root.

The term 'SafeSport', trademarked by the United States Olympic Committee in 2012, is an umbrella concept that causes confusion about what it does and does not cover (Gurgis & Kerr, 2021). Various definitions made by academics and institutions describe a safe environment that rejects all forms of violence (physical, emotional, verbal). Definitions related to safe sport include but are not limited to the following:

An athletic environment that is respectful, equitable and free from all forms of non-accidental violence to athletes (Mountjoy et al., 2016).

A firm belief that harassment and abuse have no place in sport or in society, whilst advocating for safe sport, as the safety and wellbeing of athletes are paramount, is the description of Safeguarding offered by the IOC (International-Olympic-Committee, 2017; Gurgis et al., 2023).

Physical and environmental safety (e.g., injury free), fair play and drug-free sport (Mountjoy et al., 2020).

Sport that not only includes environmental and relational safety elements but also the optimisation of sport experiences (Gurgis et al., 2023).

Creation and maintenance of a sport community where all persons who participate can do so in an environment free of emotional, physical and sexual misconduct (Gurgis & Kerr, 2021).

These definitions sketch a 'Safe Sport' ideal in which bullying and other forms of violence cannot exist in the sporting environment. However, the lack of clarity in the terms has created legal and practical gaps in combating specific problems such as bullying (Gurgis et al., 2023). In this context, the concept of safeguarding has over time become the most proactive tool for combating bullying, discrimination, and abuse in sport (Hedges, 2015). Initially focused only on sexual abuse and harassment, this concept has evolved today to cover a much broader spectrum of harmful behaviours such as eating disorders, self-harm, psychological/physical abuse, and bullying (Bekker & Posbergh, 2022). The protection approach aims to protect not only children but also vulnerable adults from all



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forms of violence and exploitation in sport (British-Judo-Association, 2023; Rhind & Blair, 2018). The prevention of bullying, and the elimination of psychological pressure applied by coaches or peers, falls directly within the jurisdiction of these proactive protection policies (Hedges, 2015). To resolve the terminological confusion and clarify the potential distinction between them, the IOC produced a consensus statement (Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2024). In this context, the fundamental goal of safeguarding can be expressed with the simple interpretation that it is in fact to ensure 'safe sport'. This evolution shows the transition to a structure in which the athlete also feels psychologically safe and bullying is prevented. Looking at the IOC's current and past definitions in the context of Table 7, we can clearly observe this conceptual change (Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2024):

Table 7. Evolution of IOC's Safe Sport and Safeguarding Definitions (2016–2024).

Year	Concept	IOC's Official Definition and Its Relationship with Bullying
2016	IOC Safe Sport definition	A respectful and equitable athletic environment free of all forms of intentional violence (physical bullying and abuse) against athletes. The focus is on the absence of violence.
2024	IOC Safe Sport definition	A physically and psychologically safe and supportive athletic environment where participants can develop and fully experience the benefits of sport. The focus has shifted to a structure in which emotional bullying is prevented and well-being is supported.
2024	IOC Safeguarding definition	All proactive measures taken to prevent and appropriately respond to harassment and abuse in sport (including peer or authority bullying), as well as the promotion of holistic approaches to athlete welfare.

Approaches to child protection (safeguarding) in the world of sport are also undergoing a clear paradigm shift from the past reactive understanding that focused on analysing violence and abuse incidents to a proactive management model aimed at preventing all forms of abuse before they occur (Kavanagh et al., 2020; Rhind & Owusu-Sekyere, 2020). This transformation makes it mandatory, in freeing sport from child abuse, bullying, and violence, to go beyond individual behavioural codes and adult-child interactions, and to adopt a multi-faceted and consistent approach that takes into account the institutional, cultural, and social factors contributing to the perpetuation and cover-up of interpersonal violence (Rhind et al., 2015; Owusu-Sekyere et al., 2022). In this framework, the principles of cultural sensitivity (adaptation to local norms), holistic approach (integration throughout the institution), incentives (work motivation), leadership (management support), dynamic structure (continuous improvement), resources (financial and human support), stakeholder participation

(democratic dialogue), and networking (inter-institutional cooperation)—developed by the United Nations and forming the foundation of protection mechanisms—help create an organisational culture (Rhind et al., 2017; Fletcher, 2025). As emphasised by Gurgis and Kerr (2021)—and aimed at in the B-FREE project—these approaches, which centre the perspectives of sports managers and all stakeholders in the ecosystem, demonstrate that a comprehensive implementation model is vitally important, one that involves designing a universal safe sport framework, providing regular training, establishing independent oversight and complaint mechanisms, and continuously conducting scientific research to keep strategies current.

Considering that sport is not only a physical activity but also a commercial and legal ecosystem at the global level, its intersection with human rights is critically important. The Olympic Charter, which defines sport as a universal human right, aims to guarantee every individual's participation in the sports environment with dignity and safety, free from discrimination (International Olympic Committee, 2026). On this plane, phenomena such as interpersonal violence, bullying, sexual abuse, harassment, and discrimination in sports environments are not merely 'discipline problems' but direct violations of fundamental human rights (Tuakli-Wosornu & Kirby, 2022). An athlete not feeling safe, or being subjected to sexual, physical, or psychological violence, is diametrically opposed to sport's promise of 'health and inclusivity'. Therefore, building safe sports spaces is not merely an operational task of sports management but an ethical and legal obligation. Aligning sports culture with a human rights framework is essential for creating safe and inclusive sports environments free from bullying and all other forms of interpersonal violence. In this process, sports managers must involve stakeholders with democratic transparency and must apply a zero-tolerance policy against all forms of violence (Chappelet, 2016; Gurgis & Kerr, 2021). In conclusion; for sport to remain a dignified space for all, it is possible only through the systematic monitoring, prevention (through training), and surrounding with deterrent sanctions of violence and bullying. The physical integrity and psychological well-being of athletes—a principle on which the B-Free project is also based—is a right that is far superior and indispensable to any 'rule of the game' or 'institutional interest'.

2.6.2. Functionality of Protection Mechanisms: From Policy to Practice, from Right to Action

While the adoption of a proactive protection approach is necessary, it is not sufficient; what is decisive is the extent to which policies are made functional in practice. Fletcher (2025), concretely demonstrating this gap, critically evaluates the International Judo Federation's (IJF) protection policies within the 'Five R' framework—Readiness, Recognition, Reporting and Disclosure, Response, and Remedy. The analysis highlights the federation's proactive steps such as creating a



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protection policy and appointing Safeguarding Officers as strengths, while pointing to improvement areas such as strengthening independent reporting mechanisms and extending the statute of limitations for reporting protection violations. Fletcher (2025) also proposes the concept of 'Reach' to address the scope and applicability of protection policies, emphasising the importance of using consistent and clear language in all institutional documents. These findings constitute a direct reference point for the club-level policy tools and independent reporting channels that the B-FREE project targets within WP4.

Nevertheless, there is an important gap between the formal recognition of athletes' rights in official texts and the actual ability to exercise these rights. Tuakli-Wosornu et al. (2022), in their study examining athletes' perceptions of their own human rights, meaningfully titled it 'knowing we have these rights does not always mean we feel free to use them'. This finding is the institutional-level reflection of the culture of silence addressed in section 2.3.5 of the report. Even if reporting mechanisms exist on paper, fear of retaliation, concern about status loss, and power asymmetry can prevent athletes from using these mechanisms (Gurgis & Kerr, 2021). An effective protection system must therefore establish not only the existence of rights and channels but also the psychological and organisational climate in which athletes can use these channels safely (Owusu-Sekyere et al., 2022).

2.6.3. Psychological Safety

The fundamental construct conceptualising the psychological dimension of the safe sport ideal is psychological safety. Vella et al. (2022), in their systematic review and concept analysis on psychological safety in sport, define psychological safety as individuals feeling safe in the face of interpersonal risks (expressing opinions, making mistakes, seeking help, voicing concerns) and reveal that this is decisive for team functionality and athlete welfare. Athlete safety is one of the cornerstones of a team's/group's psychological safety. Psychological safety plays an important role in creating a more sustainable high-performance environment that encompasses not only the athlete's physical performance but also their emotional and social needs (Bergeron et al., 2024). This is directly related to academic achievement and athletic achievement. Success is achieved not only with performance-based criteria but also with players' confidence in themselves (Wasserman, 2024). Ethical standards within the team (open communication, mutual respect, knowing boundaries, etc.), social support, and the mutual trust between teammates allow athletes to take to the field with higher motivation (Vargas-Mendoza et al., 2018). The atmosphere created by ethical codes/values and positive social support helps athletes cope with stress, develop resilience in the face of challenges, and progress more healthily alongside the desire to win (Abroms, 2021). This holistic approach reveals the importance



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of psychological safety in the athlete's overall success. In this context, in teams with high psychological safety, athletes are more inclined to speak out against bullying or injustice, report, and assume the role of defender; in environments where it is low, silence and passive bystanding are reinforced (Elmas, 2025). Hurst and Kavussanu (2025) also show that psychological safety plays a mediating role in the relationship between authentic leadership and athlete well-being, and that interpersonal violence regulates this relationship negatively. For this reason, psychological safety occupies a central variable position in B-FREE research as both a consequence of bullying and a precursor to help-seeking behaviour.

2.6.4. Coaching Behaviours: Between Ethical Leadership and Abusive Coaching

The coach is, for the young athlete, not only an athletic guide but also a central role model from whom moral attitudes and views on bullying are learned. Franklin (2024), building on Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, addresses coaching behaviour in a study on high school athletes along a two-pole spectrum: ethical leadership, characterised by mutual trust, respect, and principled conduct, and abusive coaching—encompassing non-contact hostile behaviours (humiliation, discouraging discourse) (Yukhymenko-Lescroart et al., 2015). The study's two core findings are clear: athletes who perceive their coach as an ethical leader feel significantly more belonging to the team; and low ethical leadership combined with high abusive coaching together significantly elevates the athlete's tendency to endorse physical, verbal, social, and cyberbullying (Franklin, 2024). This finding is consistent with earlier studies showing that coaching behaviour predicts bullying endorsement; Bolter and Weiss (2013) showed that the coach's 'placing winning above sportsmanship' feeds antisocial behaviour, while coach behaviour that models good sportsmanship increases positive social behaviour.

The fundamental mechanism underlying this dynamic is that the coach–athlete relationship has an unequal distribution of power. Because coaches hold positions of expertise and leadership while athletes are in the position of learner and follower. Coaches possess various power sources such as legitimate, coercive, reward, referent, expert, and informational power, and this power can turn into abuse when it is misused to align the athlete's behaviour with their own interests (Jowett, 2017). Stirling and Kerr (2009), categorising this abuse under three headings—physical behaviours, verbal behaviours, and deprivation of support—give the concept of 'abusive coaching' concrete content. At the positive pole of this axis is the coach's creation of a psychological safety environment for athletes through open communication and appreciation; this environment reduces athletes' anxiety while strengthening trust and belonging (Owusu-Sekyere et al., 2022). A relationship supported by open communication and cooperation reinforces psychological safety, supporting closeness, commitment,



and complementarity elements (Jowett, 2017). In conclusion, a coach–athlete relationship based on trust, support, and open communication, while empowering the individual and team, makes an important contribution to autonomy and psychological safety (Owusu-Sekyere et al., 2022).

On the other hand, the quality of the coach–athlete relationship affects not only bullying endorsement but also directly bullying dynamics. Complementing the findings reported in Section 2.2.2 of the Literature section, Maydon et al. (2023) showed that the coach's negative personal rapport predicts both bullying victimisation and bullying perpetration. Self-determination theory-based studies also reveal that supportive coach attitudes elevate the athlete's sense of competence and satisfaction, while obstructive/oppressive attitudes work in reverse and can become a significant predictor of early sport dropout (Pulido et al., 2020; Rocchi & Pelletier, 2018). In this framework, coach education, feedback mechanisms regarding the impact of their behaviours, and improvement of selection/oversight policies are among the priority targets for B-FREE's intervention design.

2.6.5. Giving Voice to Athletes Experiencing Harm: Experience, Dropout, and Well-Being

The ultimate criterion of the safeguarding framework is the athlete's subjective experience and well-being. Studies centring the voice of athletes exposed to bullying reveal, beyond statistical prevalence, the destructive and lasting effects of this experience. Rios et al. (2022), in their study examining retrospective experiences of bullying victims in youth sport, reveal that some athletes quit sport entirely due to the bullying they experienced and never returned. This shows that bullying directly threatens not only individual well-being but also the continuity of sport participation. It is important to note that in these studies the bullying experiences behind the decision to leave sport cannot be reduced to a single source: authority-based abuse from the coach as well as exclusion, mockery, or physical harassment among teammates and opposing athletes can trigger the same dropout process. This destructive effect also calls into question the widespread assumption that 'sport is protective against bullying'.

Vveinhardt and Kaspare (2024), in a study conducted with adult karate athletes in Lithuania, strikingly demonstrate that martial arts training does not provide direct protection against bullying from other practitioners. Of the participants, 75.5% reported experiencing at least one instance of unethical behaviour from their coaches or other athletes; as the levels of communication harm, social isolation, and physical/performance-oriented bullying increased, symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression rose dramatically. This finding is critical in showing that the source of bullying does not always come from a hierarchical (coach-athlete) relationship, and that horizontal relations between



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athletes of equal status can also create a similarly destructive pressure environment. In this direction, Evans et al. (2016), examining the prevalence of peer bullying among adolescent athletes, showed that the bullying-victimisation dynamic mediated the relationship between the weak bond athletes formed with their coaches and bullying/aggression behaviour; this finding provides an empirical bridge to the fact that a breach of trust in the coach-athlete relationship can directly transform into peer bullying. The fact that the frequency of competition participation significantly increases bullying risk points to the fact that the intensive competitive environment can create a structural abuse space in both coach-athlete and athlete-athlete relations.

The geographic scope of listening to the voice of those exposed is also a critical matter. Maranhão et al. (2025), emphasising that research in this area has largely focused on Global North countries, examined the prevalence of childhood interpersonal violence, gender differences, and risk factors with 857 high-performance athletes in Brazil. This study shows that interpersonal violence needs to be addressed from the victim's perspective, sensitively to geographic and cultural contexts—which constitutes one of the fundamental justifications for B-FREE's six-country, comparative, and multi-stakeholder design, and is directly connected to the literature gap addressed in the following section of the report. The 'voice of those exposed' axis established in this section is deepened by the rich qualitative corpus in the project team's review. Studies converge on a common finding: harm most often originates from a breach of trust in the coach-athlete relationship, but does not stop there; it spreads through peer relations on this ground of vulnerability, and its effects carry over beyond careers. Salim and Winter (2022) show that the maltreatment experienced by female artistic gymnasts continues even years after retirement with nightmares, body obsession, and post-traumatic symptoms; athletes carry the coach's voice as an internalised 'I am inadequate' narrative. This internalised narrative can also shape the athlete's position within the team; athletes continuously criticised or humiliated by the coach may also experience similar status loss and exclusion among their peers. Kerr et al. (2016), in a qualitative study with university team captains, found that bullying within teams largely takes place in relational (relational) forms—mockery, ignoring, exclusion—and that factors such as the athlete's performance level and experience gap (newcomer-senior distinction) are the primary factors triggering peer bullying. This finding concretises how the abuse cycle initiated by the coach is reproduced within athlete-to-athlete relations. Adams et al. (2024) and Kavanagh et al. (2017) reveal how emotional abuse is first rendered invisible within a 'tough coaching' culture, and then how athletes' coping strategies only increase their endurance capacity without eliminating the



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source of abuse. This culture is also seen to pave the way for peer bullying by normalising intra-team competition and practices of 'weeding out' each other.

Marsollier and Hauw (2022) document that maltreatment is not a sharp boundary but a gradually escalating process within a 'grey area'; the athlete often recognises the abuse retrospectively. This gradual and ambiguous boundary applies as much to coaching behaviours as to behaviours with the appearance of 'joking', 'ritual', or 'discipline' among teammates; athletes can often only label these behaviours as bullying years later (Elmas et al., 2025). Çetin (2023), in the Turkish context, shows that body shaming is a symbolic form of psychological violence operating both on the field and in social life, directed at the athlete's identity and professional value; this practice is known to be initiated by the coach but also operates among teammates as a common tool of exclusion and mockery. These qualitative findings justify why B-FREE's qualitative component needs to monitor not only coach behaviour but also the athlete's sense-making process, peer dynamics, early warning signs, and the absence of independent support networks. In this context, athlete interviews in the qualitative phase concretise the project's stance of centring the voice of those exposed (giving voice).

FIELD VOICE

"Knowing that we have these rights does not mean we always feel free to exercise them."

Athletes' statements remind us that formal mechanisms alone are insufficient; a psychological and organizational environment in which these mechanisms can be used safely must be established.

Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2022; Adams et al., 2024

2.6.6. The Dual Role of Parents: Protector and Potential Perpetrator

In safeguarding discussions in sport, the parent is most often positioned as the child's natural protector by their side. By contrast, the literature indicates that the parental role is two-directional. Kerr and Stirling (2012) showed that parents who witness coaching practices involving emotional abuse most often interpret these behaviours as a performance requirement and find it difficult to intervene. This finding suggests that parents may remain silent not only due to lack of knowledge but also to the extent that they share sport's achievement-oriented norms. By contrast, educational programmes aimed at parents show that this role can be transformed. McMahon, Knight and McGannon (2018) demonstrated that parents' capacity to recognise and name abuse in sport can be increased through a



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narrative pedagogy-based programme. This approach positions parents not as passive recipients of information but as subjects re-evaluating their own experiences. The dual role of parents constitutes the justification for including parents in the research as the project's fourth subject group.

2.7. Gap in the Literature and the Necessity of the Research

2.7.1. Synthesis of a Multi-Layered Problem Area

The conceptual and empirical accumulation presented in this report shows that peer bullying and interpersonal violence in sports environments is a multi-layered problem operating simultaneously at individual, relational, organisational, and sociocultural levels. The hierarchical structure of sport, hegemonic masculinity norms, homosocial team culture, initiation rites (hazing), normalisation and silence mechanisms, and power relations reproduced through digital platforms facilitate the emergence and perpetuation of bullying (Booth, 2025; Elmas et al., 2025; González-Hernández et al., 2025; Gudmundson et al., 2024). This situation directly affects not only athletes' psychological well-being but also the continuity of sport participation, team belonging, and sense of safety (Rios et al., 2022; Vveinhardt & Kaspars, 2024), and in some cases can lead the athlete to abandon sport entirely. Although existing literature has produced an important body of knowledge, studies that address bystander behaviours, moral courage, psychological safety, help-seeking behaviour, and cyberbullying dynamics together in a multi-level manner remain limited.

2.7.2. Measurement and Methodological Limitations

Despite contributions in the existing literature, several core limitations that directly shape the B-FREE project's research design draw attention. The first is retrospective memory bias. The vast majority of studies collect data retrospectively from adults; indeed, a significant portion of the prevalence data in the field relies on adults retrospectively reporting childhood experiences (Bright et al., 2026; Greither et al., 2026; Pankowiak et al., 2022). This approach introduces a methodological weakness by affecting the accuracy of memory for events experienced particularly in childhood, and largely renders invisible the current experiences of adults in elite sport (Parent et al., 2024; Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2024).

The second is a narrow focus. Research on violence in sport has largely concentrated on the coach-athlete axis; the roles of peers and parents as potential perpetrators or protective actors have not been sufficiently covered (Vertommen et al., 2016). Yet peers have repeatedly been shown to be the primary source of psychological violence in particular (Hartill et al., 2021; Pankowiak et al., 2022). The third is the overlooking of neglect. Neglect, a passive but destructive dimension of violence,



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remains an overlooked shortcoming in many studies (Vertommen et al., 2025). The fourth is a narrow geographic and cultural scope. The knowledge base in the field largely rests on Global North countries; comparative data production in different cultural contexts remains limited (Maranhão et al., 2025). Additionally, the fact that a standard framework for classifying the severity of interpersonal violence has not yet been established makes comparison between studies difficult (Bright et al., 2026).

2.7.3. The Contribution of the B-FREE Project and Research Questions

All these gaps clearly reveal the core deficit that the research targets: in the B-FREE partner countries including Türkiye, a systematic research study addressing the perspectives of young athletes, coaches, parents, and administrators in a multi-level and comparative manner does not yet exist. The B-FREE project, in order to close this gap, is adopting a multi-country, multi-stakeholder, and mixed-methods design to be conducted simultaneously in Türkiye, Malta, Slovenia, Portugal, Croatia, Poland, the Netherlands, and Norway. The research aims to collect both quantitative and qualitative data directly from young athletes in order to reduce retrospective memory bias; to include the roles of coaches, administrators, and parents and neglect within the scope; and to examine bystander behaviour, moral courage, psychological safety, and cyberbullying in an integrated framework. The Poland and Netherlands data included in this section are presented as comparative European evidence outside the B-FREE partnership. These studies have been included to see how prevalence indicators in partner countries are positioned at the European scale and do not fall within the data collection scope of the project.

The project's research questions, aiming to collect quantitative and qualitative data from both young athletes and other stakeholders within this framework, have been formulated in a way that is consistent with the project's predominantly qualitative design. In this direction, the research's core questions have been defined along the following axes:

(RQ1) What is the distribution of the prevalence, types, and frequency of peer bullying and cyberbullying in sports environments?

(RQ2) How do athletes exposed to bullying make sense, as a whole, of their psychological well-being, psychological safety perceptions, and thoughts of leaving sport?

(RQ3) How do the coach-athlete relationship, coaches' personal perceptions regarding violence and bullying, and team norms play a role in the emergence of bullying?



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(RQ4) How are anti-bullying policies and reporting mechanisms established within sports clubs perceived, experienced, and functioning?

(RQ5) What are parents' awareness and attitudes regarding bullying; how is parental behaviour made sense of by athletes?

While RQ1 meets the descriptive focus of the first phase, RQ2–RQ5 are oriented towards sense-making processes and correspond to the four subject groups of the multi-stakeholder design. The results reflecting the answers to the questions are presented as thematic findings in the ninth section of the report.

2.7.4. Current State of Partner Countries and Europe: A Comparative Overview and the Need for the Project

The theoretical and methodological gaps listed above can be concretely observed in the national literature of the countries forming the B-FREE partnership and other countries. The country reports prepared by project partners reveal both the cross-country prevalence of the problem and why a comparative and multi-stakeholder research study is urgently needed. The following overview makes a common pattern visible at the international level.



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Prevalence of Interpersonal Violence in Sport: Cross-Country Overview

Rates are not directly comparable because studies use different measures, samples, and time frames.

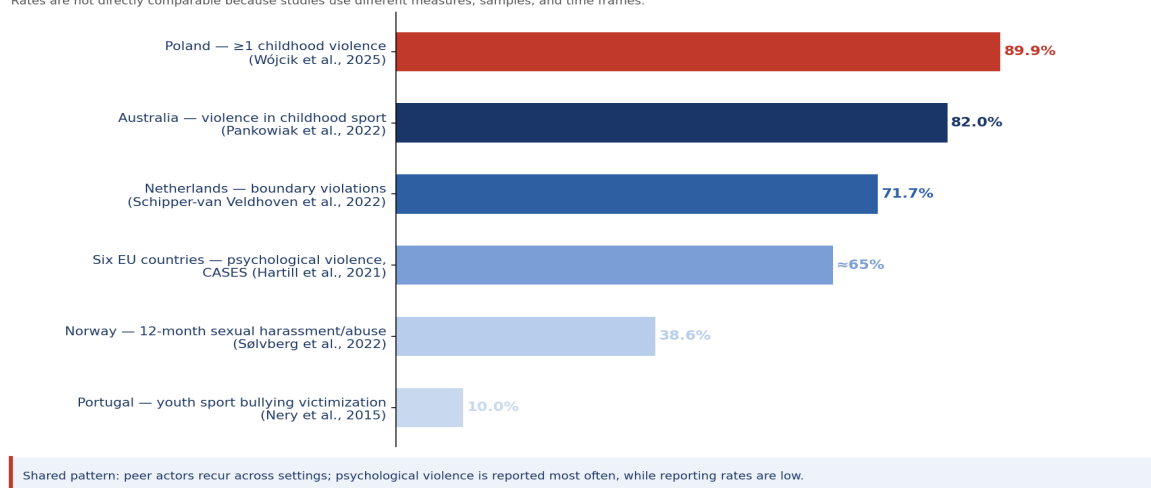


Figure 2. Indicators relating to the prevalence of interpersonal violence in sport in selected countries and regions. Rates are presented not for the purpose of direct comparison but to show the scale of the problem, as they were obtained using different measurement definitions, sample structures, and time intervals.

Even where measurement bases differ, peers hold the primary perpetrator position in all contexts, psychological violence is the most frequently reported form, and reporting rates remain consistently low. Poland provides the most striking new evidence of this gap. In Wójcik et al.'s (2025) first large-scale dataset for Central and Eastern Europe, 89.9% of participants reported experiencing at least one form of violence in sport during childhood; peer-sourced violence (83.3%) led the way, and exposure to violence significantly increased the risk of self-harm and suicide attempts. In the Netherlands, Schipper-van Veldhoven et al. (2022) found that boundary violation behaviour persisted at the 71.7% level and was concentrated in athletes with disabilities and elite athletes; this picture, consistent with earlier national data, shows the persistence of structural problems despite increased awareness (see also Vertommen et al., 2016, 2017). Norway, while being the cradle of school bullying research through the Olweus tradition, has relatively limited sport-specific evidence; Sølvberg et al. (2022, 2023) measured a 12-month sexual harassment/abuse prevalence of 38.6%, identified peers as the primary perpetrators (83.1%), and showed that only 11.4% of athletes were aware of formal reporting systems, pointing to a strong culture of silence. In Portugal, Nery et al. (2015), in a study with 1,458 young male athletes, found approximately 10% to be victims and 34.6% to be bystanders; 'conservative training culture' was identified as lying at the root of bullying (Vaz et al., 2022; Pereira et al., 2009). In Croatia, the literature has historically focused on fan violence and the athlete's

experience has been relatively neglected; Tomić (2020) and Antonini et al. (2019) emphasise the normalisation of pain and injury as 'part of sport', Novosel (2025) the gendered patterns of hazing, and Milanović et al. (2011) the paradox of tolerance of abuse in successful athletes and the lack of qualified coaches (Čulin, 2025; Bolarić, 2020). UK-based partner Sport Coaching Europe has strengthened the comparative foundation by bringing to the project the European-wide corpus on peer bullying, hazing prevention, and policy tools (e.g., Alexander & Meter, 2025; Kerschner & Allan, 2025; Parent & Vaillancourt-Morel, 2021).

In Türkiye, the literature has acquired an important dimension with the research data of Gözmen Elmas et al. (2026) addressing peer bullying dynamics in the context of moral courage. According to these research findings, moral courage was found to be associated with defender responses against bullying, lower passivity, and lower bullying-supporting behaviour, while moral disengagement emerged as an important explanatory mechanism in this relationship, and antisocial behaviour also contributed independently to the tendency to support bullying. Results show that bystander behaviours are closely related to individual moral processes as well. The study by Öztürk et al. (2026a) with current national-scale data, although not focusing on peer violence, shows based on athlete-report data that 78.9% of athletes under 18 years of age and 79.0% of those 18 years and over experienced at least one instance of psychological abuse during their career; this was followed by physical abuse (50.5%/49.7%), neglect (49.2%/44.3%), and sexual abuse/harassment (38.5%/27.9%). The most common response was not taking the incident seriously; formal reporting rates remained low (1.5%–3.7%). Data obtained from coaches by Öztürk et al. (2026b) revealed psychological abuse (70.1%) as the most commonly perceived type in Türkiye's general sports environment, but showed that coaches systematically reported these rates as lower for their own discipline (the 'not here, elsewhere' pattern). Çetin and Hacısöftaoğlu's (2020) qualitative study, based on retrospective interviews with 36 elite athletes over 18 years of age, documented experiences of physical (beating, compulsion to train despite injury, weight pressure), emotional (humiliation, career threat, being ignored), and sexual abuse (sexist jokes, uncomfortable approaches, compulsion to sexual relations) and neglect (hygiene/nutrition deficiency, disruption of education) during childhood/youth. The study's principal contribution is its revelation of the structural factors facilitating these experiences: authoritarian coach-athlete hierarchy, societal conservatism, unsupervised sporting spaces, and the absence of institutional complaint mechanisms—that is, the cultural-institutional ground answering the 'why' question behind prevalence data. This ground directly overlaps with the quantitative findings of Öztürk et al. (2026a, 2026b). The central perpetrator role of coaches, normalisation through the



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'like a family' environment discourse, and low reporting rates mean the confirmation of the structural patterns Çetin and Hacısoftaoğlu pointed to five years ago with large-scale data, and represents the transition in Turkish literature from a qualitative explanatory framework to national prevalence estimation. Furthermore, the qualitative questioning of peer violence (hazing) by Elmas et al. (2021, 2025) has made an important contribution to the in-depth understanding of bullying dynamics. In particular, the conceptual relationship of bullying and hazing with contexts such as masculinity, power, homosociality, cyclicity, and cultural silence culture/cycle has emerged thematically in a powerful way (Elmas et al., 2025). All of these studies confirm that Türkiye's conceptual accumulation is expanding, that it overlaps with the European prevalence pattern of 72–90% (Netherlands, Poland), and that the low reporting culture (similar to the 11.4% awareness in Norway) is also valid here; providing a solid national foundation for B-FREE's WP2 comparative design.

Table 8. Current state of partner countries: selected national evidence and implications for B-FREE.

Country / Partner	Selected evidence	Current state and gap	B-FREE implication
Türkiye (Hacettepe Univ.)	Çelik & Yancar Demir (2016); Elmas et al. (2021, 2025); Çetin (2023); Öztürk et al. (2026a, 2026b); Gözmen Elmas et al. (2026)	Conceptual accumulation strong; however multi-stakeholder, large-sample field data limited. 78–79% psychological abuse prevalence and low reporting (1.5–3.7%) in two new national-scale studies.	WP2 leader; coordinates measurement set and comparative design. Existing national data constitutes the foundation for B-FREE's comparative framework.
Norway (Oslo Orcas IF)	Fasting et al. (2003); Sølvsberg et al. (2022, 2023)	Pioneer in school bullying; sport-specific evidence and reporting awareness low.	Project coordinator; focus on low reporting and culture of silence.
Portugal (Bragança FA)	Nery et al. (2015); Vaz et al. (2022)	Approximately 10% victimisation; conservative training culture decisive.	Need for intervention targeting coaching behaviour and bystander role.
Croatia (RSS)	Tomić (2020); Novosel (2025); Milanović et al. (2011)	Focus historically on fan violence; athlete voice and qualified coach lacking.	Protection tools targeting hazing and normalisation.
Netherlands / Poland	Schipper-van Veldhoven et al. (2022); Wójcik et al. (2025)	72–90% prevalence; peer violence and mental health connection prominent.	Evidence for policy tools and reporting mechanisms (WP4).

Country / Partner	Selected evidence	Current state and gap	B-FREE implication
UK/Malta (SCE)	Alexander & Meter (2025); Parent & Vaillancourt-Morel (2021)	Rich European-wide theoretical/prevention corpus.	Support for comparative framework and capacity building (WP3).

This comparative overview clarifies the project's rationale. High prevalence is similar across all partner countries; but in no country does there exist a multi-level research study that addresses young athletes, coaches, parents, and administrators simultaneously, concurrently, and comparatively. B-FREE's six-country, mixed-methods design is positioned precisely at the intersection of these national gaps, aiming both to produce evidence and to transform this evidence directly into educational (WP3) and policy (WP4) tools.

2.7.5. Actionable Mechanisms

The conceptual accumulation presented in the report reveals not only the dimensions of the problem but also mechanisms open to intervention. These mechanisms can be addressed at two levels: individual and organisational. At the individual level, moral courage (Baumert et al., 2024), psychological flexibility, psychological safety perception (Vella et al., 2022), and bystander intervention intention (Salmivalli, 2010; Verhelle et al., 2022) stand out. Interventions in this domain focus on developing individuals' capacities to recognise problematic behaviours, intervene, and seek support when necessary. At the organisational level, coaching behaviours (Franklin, 2024; Bolter & Weiss, 2013), codes of conduct, the functionality of club policies (Fletcher, 2025; Tak et al., 2024), independent reporting mechanisms (Gurgis & Kerr, 2021), the clear definition of safeguarding responsibility, and the determination of the limits of coach authority stand out (Rhind et al., 2017; Owusu-Sekyere et al., 2022).

This distinction presents an important implication for the design of the project's educational programme and policy tools. When awareness and intervention skills developed at the individual level are not supported by policy, accountability, and reporting mechanisms operating at the organisational level, the responsibility of protection is again loaded onto the individual and intervention capacity is limited. Therefore, intervention must be based not only on teaching individuals what to do, but also on creating the organisational conditions that will make this behaviour possible and safe. This framework will directly determine the content priorities related to individual



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capacity development in WP3 curriculum modules and the direction of development of policy, accountability, and reporting tools within WP4.

2.7.6. Integration of Research Findings into the Educational Programme

One of the B-FREE project's core objectives is to transform scientific findings into applicable prevention and empowerment interventions. The project timeline envisages obtaining quantitative and qualitative research findings after the literature report, and subsequently developing the educational programme (curriculum) in line with the objectives of empowering coaches and clubs. In this respect, the literature report constitutes the first foundation for transforming research findings into educational content and institutional intervention tools. This section aims to demonstrate how the theoretical and empirical accumulation established in the report can be used for the online resource platform and educational modules. The WP and T codes given in parentheses in the following sub-sections refer to the work package and task numbers in the project application file. 'WP' indicates the work package and 'T' indicates the task within the relevant work package. For example, T4.2 is the second task of the fourth work package. These codes are used not for the classification of thematic findings but to show how research outputs will be transferred to project activities.

2.7.6.1. Existing Strong Foundations and Module Alignments for the Curriculum

The core themes addressed in the literature report constitute the content foundation of interventions to be developed for coaches, clubs, and parents within WP4. This relationship is built on each theme corresponding to a specific educational or institutional intervention domain.

- Moral courage and moral disengagement (Section 2.4.2): Provides a foundation for developing the awareness and intervention skills necessary for individuals to recognise problematic behaviours, intervene, and not remain silent. This content can be used particularly within T4.2, which supports coaches' skills in creating positive and safe environments.
- Culture of silence and reporting mechanisms (Section 2.3.5): Contributes to understanding the mechanisms preventing the reporting of bullying and other harmful behaviours and to making help-seeking pathways visible. This theme is also important for developing tools for clubs to evaluate their current practices (T4.3).
- Coaching behaviour and ethical leadership (Section 2.6.4): Reveals the role of the coach's daily behaviours, team norms, and prevention of the normalisation of harmful behaviours. For this reason, it can constitute one of the core content domains of coach training to be developed within T4.2.



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- Cyberbullying and digital communication (Section 2.5): Addresses the forms of bullying in online environments, group communication, and digital risks, directly feeding into digital safety and digital ethics content. This content can also be used in creating the online resource platform (T4.1).
- Safeguarding and institutional protection mechanisms (Sections 2.6.1–2.6.2): Provides content aimed at structuring the responsibilities, reporting channels, and protection processes in clubs clearly. This framework can also be used for work within T4.6 scope that supports the development and evaluation of club policies as well as systemic cooperation between coaches, parents, and educators.

These alignments reveal that the literature report does not merely provide a conceptual background; it also shows which problem areas the curriculum can address, through which target groups, and with the aim of developing which intervention capacity.

2.7.6.2. Pedagogical Foundation for the Curriculum

In addition to determining the contents, transforming research findings into practically usable knowledge in the field requires an appropriate pedagogical approach. In this direction, particularly narrative pedagogy and culturally sensitive content design principles should be taken into account in the curriculum development process.

Narrative pedagogy allows experiences in the sporting domain to be addressed not only through abstract concepts but through the lives of athletes and coaches. McMahon et al. (2023) demonstrate that athlete and coach narratives in educational programmes on abuse in sport can be directly transformed into instructional materials. This approach makes it possible to transfer the narratives obtained in the project's qualitative research phase to educational content and to use the situations participants may encounter as case, scenario, or discussion materials. In this respect, narrative pedagogy provides a functional method particularly for pilot applications (T4.4) and workshops (T4.6).

Culturally sensitive content design supports the applicability of the curriculum in different sports disciplines, age groups, and national contexts. Considering the activities to be conducted in B-FREE's six partner countries, it is necessary that the content not be designed based on a single sports culture or institutional structure; that while core protection principles are preserved, examples and applications can be adapted according to the local context. This approach can support the



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comparability and transferability to different contexts of pilot applications to be conducted within T4.4.

Prevention of dropout is another area that needs to be connected with the curriculum's protective objectives. Creating safe, inclusive, and supportive sporting environments is important not only for preventing bullying and harmful behaviours but also for supporting young people's continuity in sport. For this reason, findings related to dropout can be integrated into the curriculum either as a direct separate module of educational content, or as a complementary framework explaining the effect of a safe sporting environment on sports continuity.

In this framework, the fundamental function of the literature report is not to transform research findings directly into ready-made educational materials but to determine the content and method priorities of the curriculum development process. Findings obtained from quantitative and qualitative research will complete this foundation; thus, through the combined evaluation of literature, research data, and application experience, the content of educational modules will be shaped. In conclusion, the report presents a content pool that connects core areas such as bullying dynamics, silence and bystander behaviour, cyberbullying, coaching behaviour, safeguarding, and institutional protection with educational and intervention headings. This accumulation, while forming the starting framework for the development and piloting of the curriculum within WP3/WP4, also provides an evidence-based foundation that can be used for the online resource platform (T4.1) and related dissemination activities.

2.7.7. Overview of the Research Design

Drawing from the theoretical framework and literature gap established above, the research component of the B-FREE project (WP2) adopts a mixed-methods design to address peer bullying in the sporting environment from a holistic perspective. The research is conducted with an explanatory sequential mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018); the quantitative phase describes prevalence, while the qualitative phase analyses the mechanisms behind this picture. The weight distribution of the design is in the form *quan* → *QUAL*. This section summarises the rationale of the design and the link between the two phases; the technical details constituting the design (sample, data collection tools, analysis procedures, ethical process, and limitations) are presented in detail in the eighth section of the report.



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The first phase (quantitative) collects data from young athletes with a cross-sectional survey model. This phase aims to describe the prevalence of bullying in its physical, emotional, sexual, and digital dimensions; to map the environments in which incidents occur, reported perpetrators, and help-seeking behaviour. The prevalence form developed by the project team consists of twelve behavioural items derived from the conceptual framework developed across the first through sixth sections of the report. Data were collected in partner countries' own national languages and translated into English prior to analysis. The second phase (qualitative) is structured to go into the subjective experience of bullying, normalised practices of violence, and obstacles to institutional intervention. Qualitative data are analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021, 2022); a critical realist ontology and a contextualist epistemology are adopted. Participants were determined from the first-phase data in consideration of the maximum variation criterion; in this way, the two phases are linked at the sample level. Interviews cover four subject groups: young athletes, coaches, parents, and club managers. Researcher subjectivity is positioned not as a source of bias to be controlled but as the very instrument through which the analysis operates; theoretical lenses are explicitly stated. This holistic data collection strategy makes it possible to understand not only the prevalence of bullying and interpersonal violence in the sporting environment but also the underlying psychosocial, cultural, and organisational mechanisms. The field findings of the research are interpreted together with the conceptual framework established in this report; the patterns obtained constitute the evidence base for the educational programme to be developed in the project's third work package. The findings of the two phases are presented in the ninth section of the report by being combined under a shared analytical framework.



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3. FIELD STUDIES

3.1. Findings and Overview of Findings

This section presents together the findings produced from the two phases of the research. First, the results of the prevalence survey are presented descriptively then the six themes produced from the qualitative phase are detailed. The sequence follows the research's explanatory sequential design: prevalence data describe in what forms and at what frequency the phenomenon is reported; thematic findings, meanwhile, provide an explanatory framework concerning through which mechanisms this picture may have been formed.

Prevalence findings are descriptive in nature. Since country samples were not selected through probability methods, rates should not be interpreted as national population estimates; cross-country comparisons should also be read bearing in mind possible differences in sample composition, data collection channel, and the threshold at which behaviours are labelled as harm. Qualitative findings aim to provide an analysis at the level of mechanism rather than generalisation.

3.2. Prevalence Survey Findings

In this section, the results of the prevalence survey constituting the first phase of the research are presented descriptively. The full wording of item codes is given in Table 1, and the analytic meaning of response categories is given in Table 2. Cross-country comparisons are descriptive in nature; samples should not be interpreted as national population estimates.

3.2.1. Incident Items and Codes

Twelve behavioural items are included in the survey form. Throughout the findings, items are referred to using abbreviated codes (Q1–Q12); the full question wording is given below.

Table 1. Incident items used in the analysis.

Item	Short name	Full question wording
Q1	Hurtful nickname and demeaning mockery	I was given hurtful nicknames or was mocked in a demeaning way.
Q2	Exclusion from peer groups within the team	I was deliberately excluded from peer groups within the team or treated as if I did not exist.
Q3	Humiliation and verbal abuse following error	When I played badly or made a mistake, I was humiliated, shouted at, or verbally mistreated in front of others.
Q4	Embarrassing comment about body or appearance	I was subjected to uncomfortable, embarrassing comments about my body or appearance under the guise of jokes.

Item	Short name	Full question wording
Q5	Comment or rumour about private life	I was subjected to embarrassing comments or rumours about my private life.
Q6	Deliberate physical harm outside game rules	I was deliberately physically harmed outside the rules of the game or training.
Q7	Throwing of objects or damage to belongings/equipment	Something was deliberately thrown at me, or my personal belongings or equipment were damaged.
Q8	Demeaning task assigned to new/younger athlete	Because I was new to the team or younger in age, I was forced to perform demeaning tasks.
Q9	Unwanted touching or boundary violation	I was touched in an uncomfortable way against my will, or my boundaries were violated.
Q10	Unwanted sexually-tinged behaviour or comment	I was subjected to unwanted sexually-tinged jokes, conversations, suggestive glances, or explicit comments.
Q11	Digital rumour, unauthorised sharing, or mocking content	Hurtful rumours about me were spread on social media or in team messaging groups, my photos or videos were shared without my consent, or content mocking me was created.
Q12	Deliberate exclusion in digital environments	I was deliberately excluded in digital environments.

Table 2. Response categories of incident items and their analytic meaning.

Response category	Analytic meaning
Within the last 1 week	Indicates that the behaviour was personally experienced within the last one week
Within the last 1 month	Indicates that the behaviour was personally experienced within the last one month
Within the last 3 months	Indicates that the behaviour was personally experienced within the last three months
Within the last 6 months	Indicates that the behaviour was personally experienced within the last six months
Within the last 1 year	Indicates that the behaviour was personally experienced within the last one year
I witnessed it	Calculated as a separate witnessing indicator without being counted in the personal experience share
Never experienced	Indicates that the relevant behaviour was not reported

3.2.2. Participants and Data Integrity

A total of 2,039 survey records were obtained from four countries. In the Türkiye file, one record without participant and parental consent was excluded from analysis; analyses were conducted on 2,038 participants. The analytic sample consists of 779 participants from Türkiye, 486 from Slovenia, 401 from Croatia, and 372 from Portugal. Of participants, 686 (33.7%) are in the 10–13 age group and 1,352 (66.3%) in the 14–18 age group. The sample includes 874 girls (42.9%), 1,136 boys (55.7%), and 28 participants (1.4%) in the other category or not wishing to state gender. Over 2,012 numerically evaluable responses, the median years of licensed sport experience is 5 years with an interquartile range of 3–7 years. The number of missing responses on incident items ranged between 0–6 per item in Türkiye, 1–66 in Croatia, 0 in Slovenia, and 0–3 in Portugal. The highest numbers of



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missing responses were determined in Croatia as 66 for Q4, 48 for Q6, and 36 for Q9. For this reason, item rates were calculated using the number of valid responses for each question.

Table 3. Sample profile and general indicators by country.

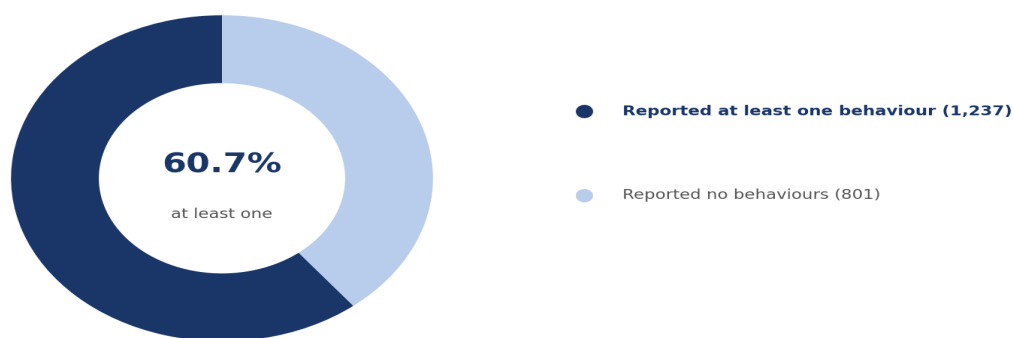
Indicator	Türkiye	Croatia	Slovenia	Portugal
Analytic sample	779	401	486	372
Age 10–13	24.1%	38.4%	40.9%	39.0%
Age 14–18	75.9%	61.6%	59.1%	61.0%
Girls	44.9%	44.6%	47.3%	30.9%
Boys	54.8%	54.9%	47.7%	69.1%
Other or did not wish to state	0.3%	0.5%	4.9%	0.0%
Years of licensed sport experience	Median 4.0; IQR 3.0–5.0; n=760	Median 5.0; IQR 3.0–6.0; n=399	Median 6.0; IQR 4.0–8.0; n=486	Median 6.0; IQR 3.0–8.0; n=367
Most frequent five sports disciplines	Football 171 (22.0%); Volleyball 165 (21.2%); Basketball 135 (17.3%); Water polo 84 (10.8%); Judo 74 (9.5%)	Basketball 79 (19.7%); Volleyball 67 (16.7%); Water polo 60 (15.0%); Taekwondo 52 (13.0%); Judo 34 (8.5%)	Judo 316 (65.0%); Handball 28 (5.8%); Football 24 (4.9%); Basketball 19 (3.9%); Volleyball 18 (3.7%)	Football 214 (57.5%); Futsal 72 (19.4%); Basketball 46 (12.4%); Swimming 21 (5.6%); Kickboxing 14 (3.8%)
At least one personal experience	57.3%	86.5%	75.7%	20.4%
At least one personal experience in complete response	57.9%	81.4%	75.7%	20.7%
At least one instance of witnessing	49.8%	33.9%	86.8%	34.7%

3.2.3. Overall Prevalence

In the analytic sample, 1,237 participants reported having personally experienced at least one of the twelve behaviours examined within the past year. Accordingly, the observed prevalence of at least one personal experience is 60.7% (1,237/2,038). In analysis limited to 1,849 participants who answered all twelve items, the rate is 58.4% (1,079/1,849). The rate of witnessing at least one behaviour is 52.7% (1,075/2,038); the rate of witnessing at least one incident without reporting personal experience is 15.9% among complete-response participants (294/1,849).

Personally Experienced at Least One Behaviour in the Past Year

Analytical sample (n = 2,038)



Approximately three in five athletes reported at least one of the 12 behaviours in the past year.

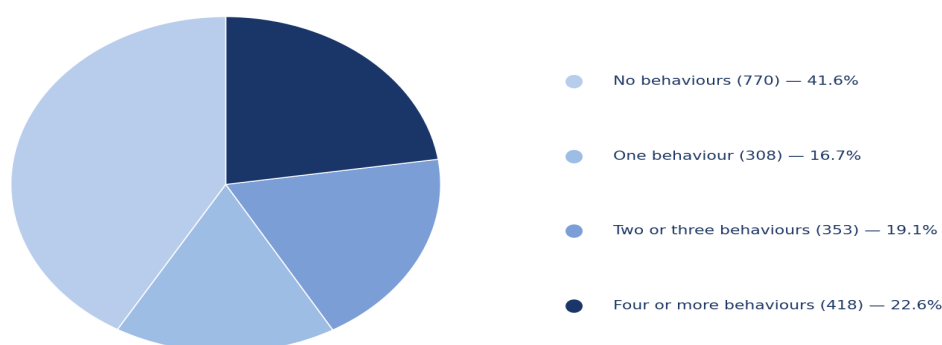
Figure 1. Rate of personally experiencing at least one behaviour within the past year.

Note. The rate was calculated over the entire analytic sample (n = 2,038).

Of complete-response participants, 770 (41.6%) reported no behaviour, 308 (16.7%) reported one, 353 (19.1%) reported two or three, and 418 (22.6%) reported four or more different behaviours.

Distribution of the Number of Distinct Behaviours Reported

Participants who answered all 12 items (n = 1,849)



The measure is the number of distinct incident types reported, not a scale score.

Figure 2. Distribution of the number of different behaviours reported.

Note. This indicator is not a scale score but the number of different types of incidents reported. Analysis is limited to participants who answered all twelve items (n = 1,849).

3.2.4. Prevalence by Form of Behaviour

On a behaviour-by-behaviour basis, the most prevalent personal experience is Q1 (37.5%; 764/2,037). This was followed by Q3 (32.3%; 648/2,008) and Q2 (30.3%; 615/2,032). The rate for Q4 was calculated as 27.1% (534/1,969) and for Q6 as 23.3% (462/1,985). Lower rates were observed for



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items Q9 (14.5%; 289/1,995), Q10 (13.3%; 267/2,014), Q11 (12.4%; 251/2,024), and Q12 (11.2%; 227/2,033).

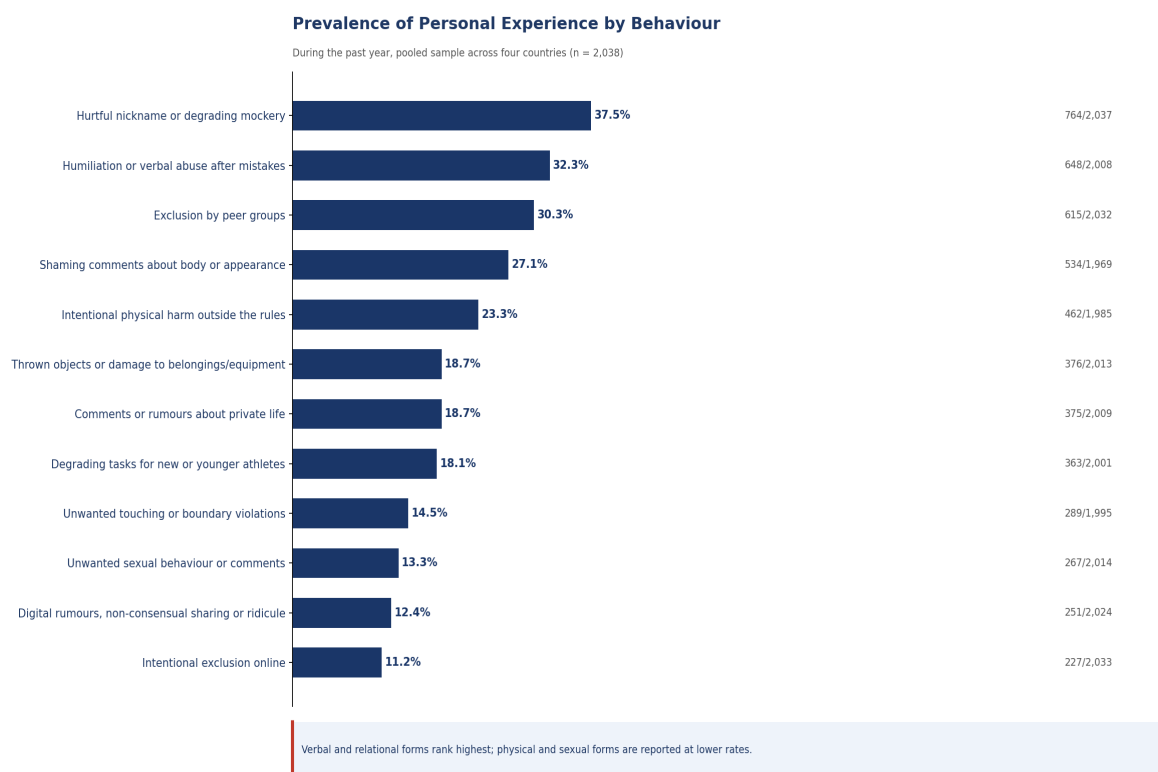


Figure 3. Overall personal experience prevalence by behaviour.

Note. Each question is a separate prevalence indicator. Percentages show the proportion of those reporting personal experience within the past year to those giving valid responses to the relevant item.

3.2.5. Prevalence by Country

The rate of at least one personal experience varied across a wide range between countries; the highest rate was observed in Croatia (86.5%) and the lowest in Portugal (20.4%). Rankings differ for witnessing rates, with Slovenia at the top (86.8%) and Croatia at the bottom (33.9%).

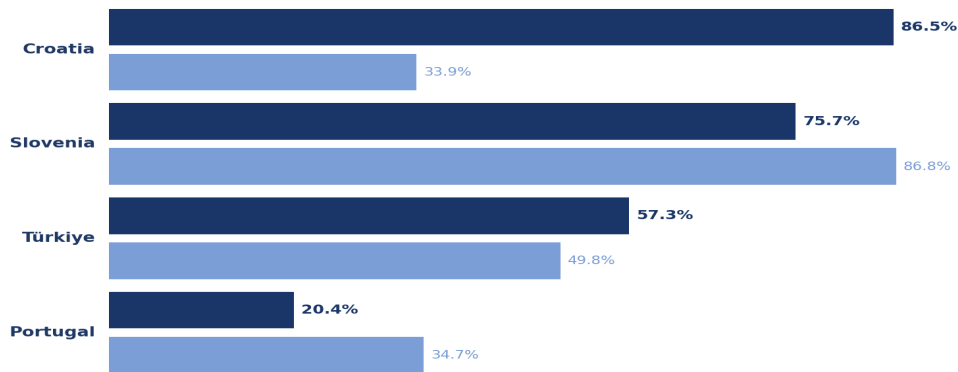
Table 4. At least one personal experience and witnessing by country.

Country	Personal (all sample)	Personal (complete response)	At least one witnessing
Türkiye	446/779 (57.3%)	439/758 (57.9%)	388/779 (49.8%)
Croatia	347/401 (86.5%)	197/242 (81.4%)	136/401 (33.9%)
Slovenia	368/486 (75.7%)	368/486 (75.7%)	422/486 (86.8%)
Portugal	76/372 (20.4%)	75/363 (20.7%)	129/372 (34.7%)

Personal Experience and Witnessing of at Least One Behaviour, by Country

Descriptive rates; samples should not be interpreted as national population estimates.

■ Personal experience ■ Witnessing



Personal experience and witnessing rates do not move in the same direction in every country: while witnessing exceeds personal experience in Slovenia, the reverse pattern is observed in Croatia. This difference may point to country-level variation in awareness and naming thresholds.

Figure 4. Prevalence of at least one personal experience by country.

Note. The observed rate for the entire analytic sample and the rate for those who completely answered all twelve items should be evaluated together. Samples should not be interpreted as national population estimates.

Country rates by item are presented below. In Türkiye, the highest rates were observed in items Q3 (43.6%), Q4 (39.7%), Q6 (39.6%), Q9 (33.0%), and Q10 (30.4%); in Croatia, items Q1 (75.8%), Q2 (57.3%), and Q3 (48.7%). In Slovenia, Q1 (24.9%) and Q3 (22.6%) stand out, and in Portugal, Q1 (11.0%) and Q4 (7.6%).

Table 5. Personal experience and witnessing rates by country and item.

Item	TR personal	HR personal	SLO personal	PT personal	TR witness	HR witness	SLO witness	PT witness
Q1	38.4%	75.8%	24.9%	11.0%	10.9%	7.2%	21.6%	19.6%
Q2	37.1%	57.3%	18.9%	1.9%	11.0%	8.3%	19.5%	5.7%
Q3	43.6%	48.7%	22.6%	4.6%	10.1%	7.4%	24.1%	10.0%
Q4	39.7%	36.1%	15.6%	7.6%	9.8%	4.5%	22.0%	13.2%
Q5	22.7%	33.5%	11.5%	4.6%	14.9%	2.7%	17.5%	3.2%
Q6	39.6%	30.3%	5.8%	5.4%	5.5%	3.1%	13.8%	4.6%
Q7	31.9%	25.2%	5.3%	1.6%	8.6%	5.8%	13.6%	1.4%
Q8	32.8%	17.8%	7.8%	1.4%	9.3%	14.6%	14.0%	1.9%
Q9	33.0%	4.1%	3.1%	1.1%	4.0%	0.3%	6.8%	0.8%
Q10	30.4%	4.7%	1.2%	1.9%	7.1%	2.4%	4.7%	1.3%
Q11	21.0%	7.7%	11.3%	0.8%	17.8%	2.0%	19.8%	3.5%
Q12	16.0%	8.0%	14.2%	0.5%	14.9%	2.2%	16.3%	2.7%



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Note. Full wording of item codes is given in Table 1. Country-specific valid response denominator was used for each item.

Table 6. 'Never experienced' rates by country and item.

Item	Türkiye	Croatia	Slovenia	Portugal
Q1	50.7%	17.0%	53.5%	69.4%
Q2	51.9%	34.3%	61.5%	92.5%
Q3	46.4%	43.9%	53.3%	85.4%
Q4	50.5%	59.4%	62.3%	79.2%
Q5	62.4%	63.8%	71.0%	92.2%
Q6	54.9%	66.6%	80.5%	90.0%
Q7	59.5%	69.0%	81.1%	97.0%
Q8	57.9%	67.7%	78.2%	96.8%
Q9	63.0%	95.6%	90.1%	98.1%
Q10	62.5%	92.9%	94.0%	96.8%
Q11	61.2%	90.3%	68.9%	95.7%
Q12	69.1%	89.8%	69.5%	96.8%

Table 7. Personal experience, witnessing, and 'never experienced' rates by item in the combined sample.

Item	Personal experience	95% CI	Witnessing	Never experienced
Q1	764/2,037 (37.5%)	35.4–39.6%	292/2,037 (14.3%)	981/2,037 (48.2%)
Q2	615/2,032 (30.3%)	28.3–32.3%	235/2,032 (11.6%)	1,182/2,032 (58.2%)
Q3	648/2,008 (32.3%)	30.3–34.3%	260/2,008 (12.9%)	1,100/2,008 (54.8%)
Q4	534/1,969 (27.1%)	25.2–29.1%	247/1,969 (12.5%)	1,188/1,969 (60.3%)
Q5	375/2,009 (18.7%)	17.0–20.4%	223/2,009 (11.1%)	1,411/2,009 (70.2%)
Q6	462/1,985 (23.3%)	21.5–25.2%	138/1,985 (7.0%)	1,385/1,985 (69.8%)
Q7	376/2,013 (18.7%)	17.0–20.4%	160/2,013 (7.9%)	1,477/2,013 (73.4%)
Q8	363/2,001 (18.1%)	16.5–19.9%	201/2,001 (10.0%)	1,437/2,001 (71.8%)
Q9	289/1,995 (14.5%)	13.0–16.1%	68/1,995 (3.4%)	1,638/1,995 (82.1%)
Q10	267/2,014 (13.3%)	11.8–14.8%	92/2,014 (4.6%)	1,655/2,014 (82.2%)
Q11	251/2,024 (12.4%)	11.0–13.9%	255/2,024 (12.6%)	1,518/2,024 (75.0%)
Q12	227/2,033 (11.2%)	9.9–12.6%	214/2,033 (10.5%)	1,592/2,033 (78.3%)

Note. Rates were calculated in the combined analytic sample of four countries using the valid response denominator for each item.



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3.2.6. Cross-Country Descriptive Comparisons

Cross-country differences vary by form of behaviour. The largest difference was seen in Q1; the gap between Croatia and Portugal reached 64.8 percentage points. The difference between the same two countries is 55.4 percentage points for Q2 and 44.1 for Q3. Türkiye has the highest rates on most of items Q4 and Q6–Q12; by contrast, Q9 rates are 4.1% in Croatia, 3.1% in Slovenia, and 1.1% in Portugal; Q10 rates are 4.7%, 1.2%, and 1.9% respectively.

Country Comparison by Behaviour
Country-specific valid-response denominators were used for each item.

	Turkey	Croatia	Slovenia	Portugal
Hurtful nicknames and demeaning mockery	38.4%	75.8%	24.9%	11.0%
Exclusion from peer groups	37.1%	57.3%	18.9%	1.9%
Belittlement after mistakes	43.6%	48.7%	22.6%	4.6%
Comments about body/appearance	39.7%	36.1%	15.6%	7.6%
Rumours about private life	22.7%	33.5%	11.5%	4.6%
Deliberate physical harm	39.6%	30.3%	5.8%	5.4%
Objects thrown, belongings damaged	31.9%	25.2%	5.3%	1.6%
Demeaning chores (seniority)	32.8%	17.8%	7.8%	1.4%
Unwanted touching, boundary violation	33.0%	4.1%	3.1%	1.1%
Unwanted sexual behaviour	30.4%	4.7%	1.2%	1.9%
Digital rumours / unauthorised sharing	21.0%	7.7%	11.3%	0.8%
Digital exclusion	16.0%	8.0%	14.2%	0.5%

The largest difference appears in hurtful nicknames (Croatia-Portugal, 64.8 points). Turkey has the highest rate on most items involving the body, boundaries, and sexual content; on digital items, Slovenia exceeds Croatia.

Figure 5. Personal experience prevalence by behaviour and country.

Note. Country-specific valid response denominator was used for each item. The graph presents a descriptive comparison; no adjustment was made for differences in sample composition.

3.2.7. Distribution of Behaviours by Reported Time Category

Response options are mutually exclusive time categories; a participant can select only one time period for each item. For this reason, columns are not cumulative and the row total corresponds to the personal experience rate of the relevant item. Distributions by country are presented below.

Table 8. Distribution of behaviours by reported time category in the combined sample.

Item	Last 1 year	Last 6 months	Last 3 months	Last 1 month	Last 1 week	Time unclear
Q1	264/2,037 (13.0%)	244/2,037 (12.0%)	158/2,037 (7.8%)	65/2,037 (3.2%)	33/2,037 (1.6%)	0/2,037 (0.0%)
Q2	168/2,032 (8.3%)	204/2,032 (10.0%)	169/2,032 (8.3%)	61/2,032 (3.0%)	13/2,032 (0.6%)	0/2,032 (0.0%)
Q3	196/2,008 (9.8%)	191/2,008 (9.5%)	149/2,008 (7.4%)	83/2,008 (4.1%)	29/2,008 (1.4%)	0/2,008 (0.0%)

Item	Last 1 year	Last 6 months	Last 3 months	Last 1 month	Last 1 week	Time unclear
Q4	171/1,969 (8.7%)	171/1,969 (8.7%)	114/1,969 (5.8%)	52/1,969 (2.6%)	26/1,969 (1.3%)	0/1,969 (0.0%)
Q5	150/2,009 (7.5%)	107/2,009 (5.3%)	69/2,009 (3.4%)	33/2,009 (1.6%)	16/2,009 (0.8%)	0/2,009 (0.0%)
Q6	124/1,985 (6.2%)	136/1,985 (6.9%)	111/1,985 (5.6%)	65/1,985 (3.3%)	26/1,985 (1.3%)	0/1,985 (0.0%)
Q7	131/2,013 (6.5%)	121/2,013 (6.0%)	64/2,013 (3.2%)	49/2,013 (2.4%)	11/2,013 (0.5%)	0/2,013 (0.0%)
Q8	132/2,001 (6.6%)	130/2,001 (6.5%)	62/2,001 (3.1%)	31/2,001 (1.5%)	8/2,001 (0.4%)	0/2,001 (0.0%)
Q9	80/1,995 (4.0%)	103/1,995 (5.2%)	75/1,995 (3.8%)	19/1,995 (1.0%)	12/1,995 (0.6%)	0/1,995 (0.0%)
Q10	73/2,014 (3.6%)	90/2,014 (4.5%)	59/2,014 (2.9%)	35/2,014 (1.7%)	10/2,014 (0.5%)	0/2,014 (0.0%)
Q11	106/2,024 (5.2%)	75/2,024 (3.7%)	39/2,024 (1.9%)	16/2,024 (0.8%)	14/2,024 (0.7%)	1/2,024 (0.0%)
Q12	104/2,033 (5.1%)	65/2,033 (3.2%)	31/2,033 (1.5%)	17/2,033 (0.8%)	10/2,033 (0.5%)	0/2,033 (0.0%)

Table 9. Türkiye — distribution of behaviours by reported time category.

Item	Last 1 year	Last 6 months	Last 3 months	Last 1 month	Last 1 week	Time unclear
Q1	8.9%	13.5%	10.5%	3.7%	1.8%	0.0%
Q2	10.0%	15.1%	9.1%	2.2%	0.6%	0.0%
Q3	9.3%	15.2%	11.7%	5.4%	1.9%	0.0%
Q4	10.4%	14.3%	9.0%	4.0%	2.1%	0.0%
Q5	9.1%	7.3%	3.1%	1.3%	1.8%	0.0%
Q6	9.5%	13.3%	9.9%	4.9%	1.9%	0.0%
Q7	11.3%	10.9%	4.6%	4.1%	0.9%	0.0%
Q8	10.6%	12.8%	6.2%	2.7%	0.5%	0.0%
Q9	8.4%	12.4%	8.8%	2.2%	1.2%	0.0%
Q10	6.6%	11.2%	7.2%	4.1%	1.3%	0.0%
Q11	7.9%	6.6%	3.2%	1.7%	1.7%	0.0%
Q12	7.6%	4.9%	1.9%	0.8%	0.8%	0.0%

Table 10. Croatia — distribution of behaviours by reported time category.

Item	Last 1 year	Last 6 months	Last 3 months	Last 1 month	Last 1 week	Time unclear
Q1	32.5%	26.0%	12.0%	3.8%	1.5%	0.0%
Q2	14.6%	14.1%	20.2%	7.8%	0.5%	0.0%
Q3	20.5%	11.2%	9.8%	6.6%	0.5%	0.0%
Q4	14.0%	9.3%	6.9%	5.4%	0.6%	0.0%
Q5	13.6%	9.6%	7.2%	3.2%	0.0%	0.0%
Q6	9.9%	6.5%	6.2%	4.8%	2.8%	0.0%
Q7	8.4%	7.6%	4.7%	3.9%	0.5%	0.0%
Q8	10.2%	3.8%	1.1%	1.6%	1.1%	0.0%
Q9	2.2%	1.4%	0.3%	0.0%	0.3%	0.0%
Q10	3.7%	0.3%	0.3%	0.5%	0.0%	0.0%
Q11	3.3%	3.1%	1.0%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%
Q12	4.8%	1.8%	0.5%	1.0%	0.0%	0.0%



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Table 11. Slovenia — distribution of behaviours by reported time category.

Item	Last 1 year	Last 6 months	Last 3 months	Last 1 month	Last 1 week	Time unclear
Q1	8.2%	6.0%	5.1%	3.1%	2.5%	0.0%
Q2	6.2%	5.6%	3.3%	2.7%	1.2%	0.0%
Q3	6.8%	6.0%	4.3%	3.3%	2.3%	0.0%
Q4	5.3%	4.9%	3.5%	0.6%	1.2%	0.0%
Q5	3.9%	2.3%	3.1%	1.9%	0.4%	0.0%
Q6	1.0%	1.6%	1.4%	1.4%	0.2%	0.0%
Q7	1.6%	1.2%	1.9%	0.2%	0.4%	0.0%
Q8	2.1%	3.1%	1.9%	0.8%	0.0%	0.0%
Q9	0.8%	0.2%	1.2%	0.4%	0.4%	0.0%
Q10	0.8%	0.2%	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%
Q11	6.2%	2.5%	2.1%	0.4%	0.2%	0.0%
Q12	5.1%	4.1%	2.7%	1.4%	0.8%	0.0%

Table 12. Portugal — distribution of behaviours by reported time category.

Item	Last 1 year	Last 6 months	Last 3 months	Last 1 month	Last 1 week	Time unclear
Q1	6.7%	1.6%	0.8%	1.6%	0.3%	0.0%
Q2	0.5%	0.8%	0.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Q3	3.8%	0.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	0.0%
Q4	4.6%	1.4%	1.1%	0.0%	0.5%	0.0%
Q5	2.4%	0.8%	0.8%	0.5%	0.0%	0.0%
Q6	2.7%	0.5%	1.4%	0.8%	0.0%	0.0%
Q7	0.8%	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%
Q8	0.5%	0.5%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Q9	0.8%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Q10	1.1%	0.3%	0.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Q11	0.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%
Q12	0.3%	0.0%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

Note. Time options are mutually exclusive response categories. The 'last 1 year' column is not cumulative. Full wording of item codes is given in Table 1.

3.2.8. Results by Age and Gender

The rate of reporting at least one personal experience is 51.5% (353/686) in the 10–13 age group and 65.4% (884/1,352) in the 14–18 age group. A pattern of increase with age was observed in all four countries. In the combined sample, the rate is 62.0% for girls (542/874) and 59.2% for boys (673/1,136); the direction of the gender pattern varies by country.

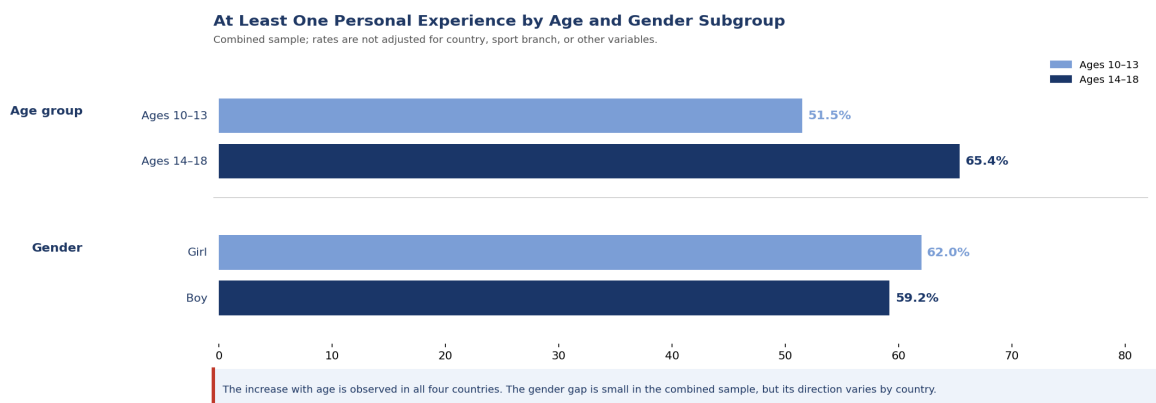


Figure 6. Age and gender distribution of at least one personal experience in the combined sample

Note. Rates are descriptive in nature; no adjustment was made for country, sport discipline, or other variables. The numerically small 'other or did not wish to state' gender group was not included in the graph.

Table 13. Rate of at least one personal experience by scope and subgroups.

Dimension	Sub-group	General	Türkiye	Croatia	Slovenia	Portugal
Age	10–13	51.5%	33.5%	85.1%	71.9%	11.0%
Age	14–18	65.4%	64.8%	87.4%	78.4%	26.4%
Gender	Girls	62.0%	56.3%	81.0%	75.2%	23.5%
Gender	Boys	59.2%	57.8%	91.4%	75.9%	19.1%

Note. Sub-group rates are descriptive in nature; no adjustment was made for age, gender, sport discipline, or country composition.

3.2.9. Perpetrators, Incident Settings, and Help-Seeking Pathways

Follow-up questions were addressed only to participants who reported at least one personal experience. Perpetrators, incident settings, and reasons for not reporting are multiple-choice; for this reason, the sum of percentages may exceed 100. The help-seeking question is single-response.

Among 1,192 participants who answered the perpetrator question, a teammate or peer of the same age group was indicated at 53.9% ($n = 643$), teammates or peers as a group at 48.8% ($n = 582$), and an older or more senior athlete at 33.4% ($n = 398$).

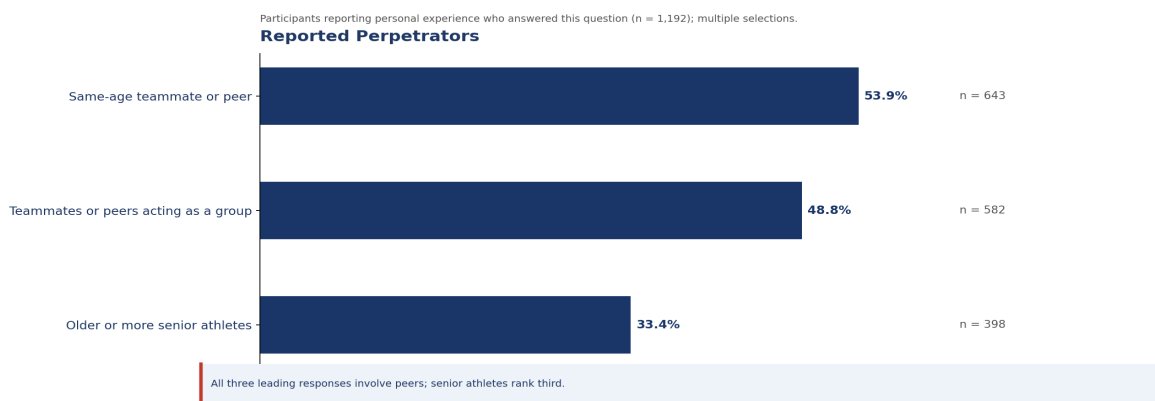


Figure 7. Reported perpetrators in the combined sample.

Note. Analysis is limited to participants who reported personal experience and answered the perpetrator question. The question is multiple-choice; the sum of percentages may exceed 100.

Of 1,194 participants who answered the incident setting question, 76.7% indicated a training ground or sports facility (n = 916), 58.8% a locker room (n = 702), and 33.2% online environments (n = 397).

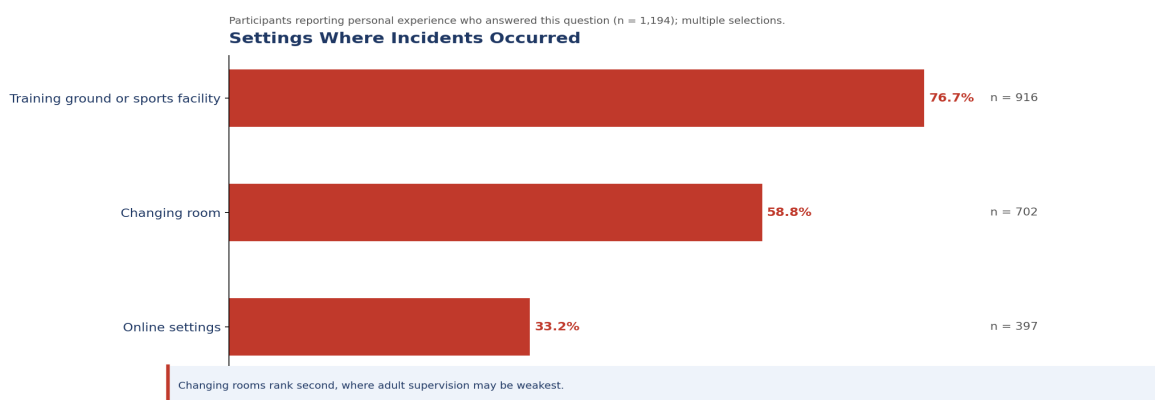


Figure 8. Incident settings in the combined sample.

Note. Analysis is limited to participants who reported personal experience and answered the setting question. The question is multiple-choice.

Of 1,190 participants who answered the help-seeking question, 642 (53.9%) reported telling no one or trying to resolve it alone. This response is at 70.5% (299/424) in Türkiye, 60.9% (206/338) in Croatia, 55.0% (33/60) in Portugal, and 28.3% (104/368) in Slovenia.

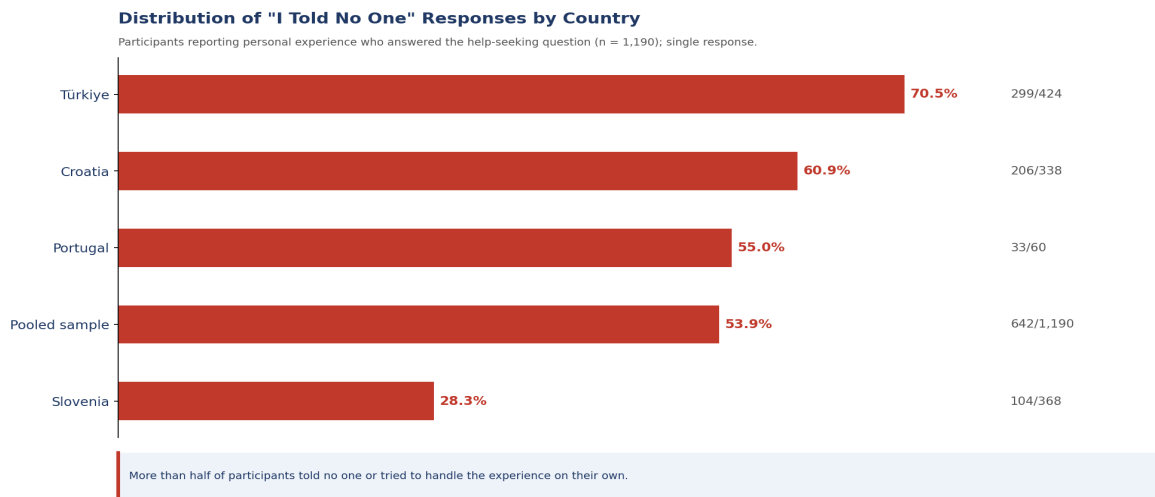


Figure 9. Help-seeking pathways by country.

Note. Analysis is limited to participants who reported personal experience and answered the help-seeking question. The question is single-response.

Among 904 participants who answered the question on reasons for not reporting or hesitating: not considering the situation serious enough 40.3% (n = 364), belief that the complaint would not lead to results or that the person would not be believed 28.4% (n = 257), thinking they could resolve it alone 28.1% (n = 254), fear of being labelled a 'snitch' or excluded 18.1% (n = 164), fear of retaliation 14.6% (n = 132), and fear of losing their place in the team or their sporting career 9.3% (n = 84).

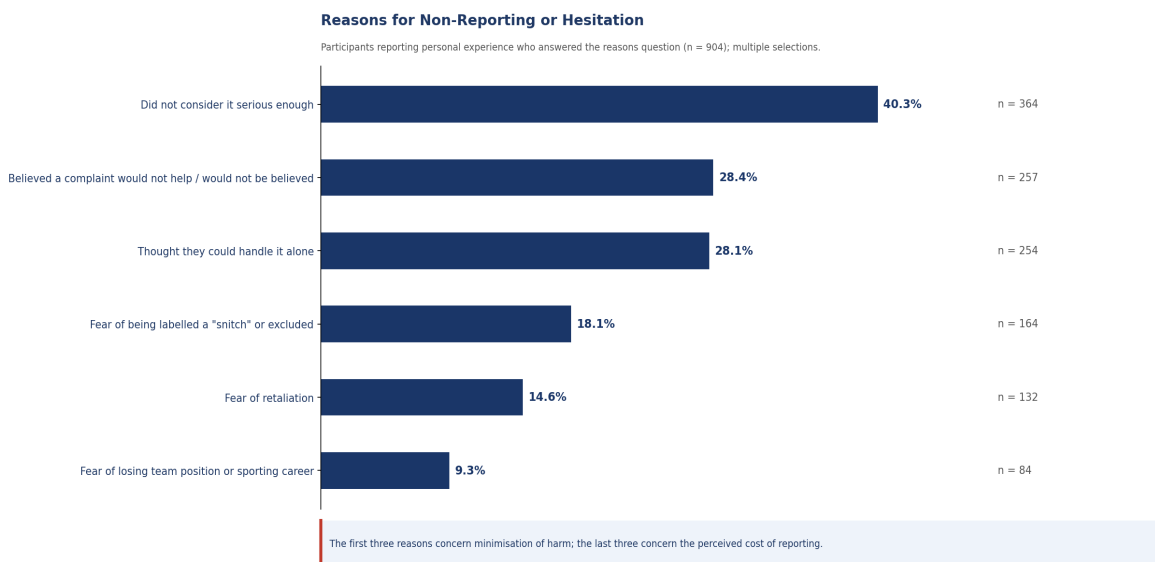


Figure 10. Reasons for not reporting or hesitating in the combined sample.

Note. Analysis is limited to participants who reported personal experience and answered the reasons question. The question is multiple-choice.

Country-based rates for all response options of follow-up questions are presented below.

Table 14. Perpetrators — all response options by country.

Response option	Türkiye	Croatia	Slovenia	Portugal
Teammate or peer of the same age group	28.0%	80.8%	59.0%	50.8%
Teammates or peers as a group	68.2%	36.2%	44.3%	15.9%
An older or more senior athlete	55.7%	11.1%	31.5%	17.5%
Coach or member of technical staff	7.7%	7.3%	4.1%	11.1%
Club manager or administrator	1.0%	0.0%	1.1%	0.0%
Parent or family member	1.2%	0.0%	2.7%	4.8%
Spectator or fan	2.9%	0.6%	17.9%	39.7%
Other (free response)	1.4%	0.3%	0.0%	6.3%
No one / no incident response	1.4%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%

Table 15. Incident settings — all response options by country.

Response option	Türkiye	Croatia	Slovenia	Portugal
Training ground or sports facility	50.0%	84.5%	99.7%	79.0%
Locker room	71.8%	74.6%	35.3%	22.6%
Away bus or means of transport	12.8%	11.1%	20.7%	11.3%
Tournament or camp hotel	31.0%	13.5%	9.0%	6.5%
Online environment	16.1%	43.3%	46.5%	16.1%
Other (free response)	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

Table 16. Help-seeking pathways — all response options by country.

Response option	Türkiye	Croatia	Slovenia	Portugal
Told no one or tried to resolve alone	70.5%	60.9%	28.3%	55.0%
Told a family member or guardian	10.6%	29.3%	27.2%	15.0%
Sought support from teammates	5.7%	5.9%	26.1%	13.3%
Reported to coach or club officials	10.4%	3.3%	18.5%	11.7%
Other (free response)	2.8%	0.6%	0.0%	5.0%

Table 17. Reasons for not reporting or hesitating — all response options by country.

Response option	Türkiye	Croatia	Slovenia	Portugal
Did not consider the situation serious enough	22.7%	62.7%	41.6%	46.5%
Thought they could resolve it alone	21.7%	31.2%	34.7%	34.9%

Response option	Türkiye	Croatia	Slovenia	Portugal
Feared losing their place in the team or sporting career	10.4%	2.9%	17.3%	2.3%
Feared being labelled a snitch or excluded	23.2%	10.9%	18.8%	16.3%
Believed complaint would not lead to results or would not be believed	49.3%	6.5%	22.8%	9.3%
Feared the situation worsening or feared retaliation	26.9%	2.5%	9.9%	4.7%
Other (free response)	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

Note. Follow-up tables are limited to participants who reported personal experience and answered the relevant question. Perpetrators, incident settings, and reasons for not reporting are multiple-choice; the sum of percentages may exceed 100.

3.3. Qualitative Findings: Thematic Framework

This section presents the thematic findings produced from the qualitative phase of the research. A total of six themes were produced as a result of the reflexive thematic analysis. The conceptual framework developed in the first seven sections of the report constitutes the foundation that makes it possible not only to describe these themes but to deepen them analytically and critically. The themes proceed by cutting across rather than collecting the narratives of four subject groups (athletes, coaches, parents, managers) in separate sections: in each theme, the athlete narrative first establishes the phenomenon, then the coach's way of seeing or failing to see it, the parent's observation as it is reflected at home, and the manager's institutional response come into play. This structure is considered to render visible the opportunity offered by the research's multi-stakeholder design — how the same phenomenon is given different names from different positions.

The thematic framework was built on the Turkish data. Partner-country data, which differ from the Turkish data in terms of narrative depth, are positioned not in a separate section but within the relevant themes in a function of comparison and pattern confirmation (see D2.2, Section 2.5.3 and D2.2, Section 2.10). When presenting participant narratives, all participants are referred to using codes containing information on country, role, discipline, gender, and age. Quotations are verbatim; only details that could reveal identity have been removed. Expressions in square brackets indicate non-verbal behaviours (laughter, silence, pause) or translation.

The following table (Table 10) summarises the core claim of each of the six themes and how each theme is given different names in the language of young athletes and in the language of adults. This dual presentation points to one of the research's recurring findings: the same phenomenon is given different names according to the subject's position, and adult naming in most cases softens the harmful nature of the phenomenon.

Table 18. General overview of thematic findings: core claims and naming difference by subject position.

Theme	Core claim	What the athlete says	What the adult says
T1: Deniable Harm: Who Draws the Line?	Joking and exclusion can operate through a similar mechanism: deniability. The line is most often drawn by the group; victims, meanwhile, produce a shared criterion — mockery of something you cannot change. In the narratives, the most lasting harm is experienced not as a blow but as being rendered invisible.	'Can't you take a joke?' · 'Laughter is a kind of shield' · 'They weren't beaten, they were just unseen'	'Let me not call it peer bullying, let me call it grouping' · 'It happens' · 'over-reacting mother' label
T2: 'I Went Through It, You Will Too': The Account That Never Closes	Hazing is not tradition but a debt-transfer regime. Pain changes hands, the account never closes; the regime exhausts the seniors too, which is why no one can throw the first stone.	'A kind of debt' · 'This place isn't yours' · 'The account never closes, it just changes hands'	'That's the nature of this business' · vein / bloodline / blood vocabulary · pedagogicisation of pain
T3: The More They Say 'Man Up': Masculinity's Operating System	'Man up' is not an encouragement but an emotion regime: endure, don't cry, don't complain. The price is not suppressing emotion but becoming unable to recognise it over time. The same regime controls girls through body and visibility.	'be a man / man up' · 'like a girl' · 'I tried to be like stone'	'be a man / man-like' — norm takes on moral guise · 'soft child gets crushed'
T4: The Bruise Fades, the Label Stays: The Cost of Reporting	In the narratives, silence appears not so much as cowardice but as a decision in which possible costs are weighed: harm is experienced as temporary, the 'snitch' label as more lasting. In most of the examples recounted, the institutional response	'snitch' · 'label' · 'my tongue is tied'	'They'll shake hands and move on' (reconciliation) · 'Sort it out among yourselves' · 'Having your name go around is worse than a beating'

Theme	Core claim	What the athlete says	What the adult says
	confirms this calculation; the cost of speaking is highest for the most vulnerable athlete.		
T5: Training Is Forgotten, the Recording Isn't	The digital environment does not reverse hierarchy; it amplifies and archives it. Being deleted from a group translates into being deleted in reality; having no interlocutor eliminates the possibility of responding.	'That video stays in the group' · 'no interlocutor' · meme / montage / comic music	Counting digital matters outside club responsibility · 'I don't get involved in that phone business'
T6: 'Nobody Calls This Bullying': The Invisible Class Intersection	A harm can only be stopped once it can be named; because class is not counted in any definition set, it is neither seen nor reported. The same intersection is both the reason for exclusion and the compulsion to stay in sport.	'broke' · 'you're here for free anyway' · 'are your cleats from the trash?'	'scholarship student' label · making the scholarship invisible · 'natural selection' discourse

3.3.1. T1 — Deniable Harm: Who Draws the Line?

In the report's conceptual framework, the blurred boundary between joking and bullying (2.3.4) and the definitional criteria of bullying (2.1.2) were discussed under separate headings. Field data suggests that these two discussions intersect at the same point: among the harms recounted by young athletes, forms such as nicknaming, public humiliation, withholding passes, not being invited to activities, and being ignored stand out, and an important portion of these forms share a common feature: they are deniable. A 'joke' 'was a joke', while exclusion 'was a tactic', 'we forgot', 'no such thing' — it can be taken back afterwards. The core claim of this theme can be formulated as follows: some of the common forms of peer bullying in sport are constructed in a way that leaves a deniable margin to which the perpetrator can retreat; this may reduce both the visibility and the reportability of these forms. The sub-themes below trace how this margin is produced, read, and in some cases narrowed, by athletes, coaches, parents, and managers.



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3.3.1.1. 'Something You Cannot Change'

The literature generally defines the boundary between joking and bullying using the criteria of intent, repetition, and power imbalance (see 2.1.2). One of the striking findings of this research is that young athletes have produced similar criteria from their own experiences. In the Turkish sample, five athletes — in different disciplines and on different axes of stigma — reached a similar formulation: the line is crossed at the moment when a feature the person cannot change is touched. An athlete in the basketball discipline constructs the criterion through socioeconomic position:

'I think the line is the moment when something you cannot change about yourself is mocked. If someone mocks a bad match I played, I understand that — I can fix it. But if they mock me for not having money, for my old shoes, I can't fix that. That's when it wasn't a joke, because I couldn't change that situation.'

— **TR-Athlete17-Basketball-M-17**

The same criterion is reproduced on different stigma axes. A female athlete in the football discipline constructs the criterion along the gender axis and distinguishes between nicknames related to the body and expressions related to identity:

'Of course there are minor digs about the body — who has muscles, whose weight, fine, but most aren't malicious. But if they say "you're just girls, football isn't your business", that's not a joke, that's an attack on who I am.'

— **TR-Athlete9-Football-F-17**

The same distinction is also made by an athlete in the volleyball discipline on the axis of masculinity norms and sexual orientation. This narrative is also important in terms of its intersection with the emotion regime addressed in T3: the criterion here operates not only as a boundary definition but also as a test that determines the athlete's position in the environment.

'But if they say "you're just like a girl", "are you even a man" — that's not a joke. These are not jokes at all, that's straight-up bullying.'

— **TR-Athlete12-Volleyball-M-16**

On a third axis, the stigma is constructed through origin and accent. A swimmer's narrative suggests that the criterion is not limited only to bodily or gender-related features; it also encompasses indicators related to belonging and origin:

'They'll rib you about your height, it passes; but if they rib you about where you're from, how you talk, that's your origin. When they mocked my accent I couldn't laugh, because that's my truth, my family.'

— **TR-Athlete7-Swimming-F-16**

These four narratives construct a similar analytic distinction on four different stigma axes (class, gender, sexual orientation/masculinity norm, ethnic-regional origin): teasing directed at what can be



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fixed is tolerated, while teasing directed at what cannot be fixed is experienced as an attack on identity. Young athletes here derive a distinction close to the concept of identity-based bullying in the literature from their own experiences. This finding has an important implication for prevention: in the narratives, the problem appears not as the boundary being unknown but as the authority to define the boundary not residing with the victim; the one who sets the criterion is most often the group itself. Another athlete completes the same distinction with a relational criterion; their formulation constructs the difference between reciprocity and one-directionality in a single sentence:

'Joking is first of all reciprocal, bullying is one-sided. In a joke you both laugh; in bullying one laughs and one gets crushed. [...] At first you laugh it off but when it keeps happening every day, that's no longer a joke, that's pressure in my view.'

— TR-Athlete11-Judo-F-16

The second criterion produced by athletes was developed for situations where intent can be hidden. Since behaviours directed at the body are most often presented as 'a joke' or 'an accident', victims have constructed their own tests to examine this labelling. A water polo athlete's narrative gives both the concrete form of the behaviour and the logic of the test together:

'In the water a lot of things look like an accident because there's no proof. But if someone always pulls you from the same place, always pulls at your swimsuit, that's not an accident. For a while they kept doing the joke of pulling my swimsuit down in the water. I'd be very embarrassed, in front of everyone. It was called an "accident" but it happened every training session. An accident can't happen to just me every single day...'

— TR-Athlete5-Waterpolo-M-17

The sentence 'an accident can't happen to just me every single day' can be read as a frequency test in which repetition is used as an indicator of intent. The athlete acknowledges not being able to prove the intent of a single incident, but counts the repetition itself as a sign. The same logic is completed by a football athlete with a contextual criterion: to understand whether a tough tackle is intentional, the athlete looks at whether the perpetrator checked their surroundings immediately before the act — that is, whether they gauged adult supervision. Both criteria indicate that athletes have developed their own standards of evidence in the face of forms of harm that produce no evidence. It is also notable in these behaviours directed at the body that the embarrassment is public: the harm is directed not only at the body but at the body's visibility in front of others ('I'd be very embarrassed, in front of everyone'). It is observed that this form is more frequently narrated in disciplines such as water polo, swimming, and judo where the body is continuously visible or central; additionally, the 'joke' framework can apparently be expanded to include behaviours that constitute boundary violations. The



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dimension of bodily harm that intersects with the gender regime is addressed separately in T3 (see 3.3.3.3).

The question of where the boundary should be drawn is also expressed in adult narratives as an area of ambiguity. An assistant coach in the karate discipline recounts that the rough jokes faced by a newly arrived athlete vary by age, and that intervention capacity decreases in the upper age categories:

'Among the men, if a male player was transferred, first the other side has to get used to their rough jokes, verbal or physical. And when they're quite old — 18, 19, 17, 16 — you can't intervene much.'

— **TR-Coach-FocusGroup1**

This expression suggests that a gap may exist between the criteria produced by athletes and the scope of the adult's application. Athletes can define the boundary; however, the coach, particularly in the upper age categories, sees their capacity to put this boundary into effect as limited. The construction of the sentence is also noteworthy: the obligation to adapt is loaded not on those who make the rough jokes but on the newly arrived athlete ('first the other side has to get used to'). This loading of the burden operates in the same direction as the renaming pattern addressed in 3.3.1.6, and appears to confirm from the adult side the finding that the authority to define the boundary does not reside with the victim. Partner-country data overlap significantly with the Turkish data in terms of the criteria produced by athletes. Croatian and Slovenian athletes, responding to the same question independently, defined three criteria: distribution of laughter, repetition, and reciprocity. A Slovenian athlete grounds the criterion in the distribution of laughter:

A joke is a joke while the person it's about is laughing too. It stops being a joke the second they go quiet and someone keeps pushing anyway.

— **SLO-ATHLETE-01**

The repetition criterion is similarly constructed in both countries: in Slovenia 'once it's a joke, the same dig every training session is something else' (SLO-ATHLETE-02) and 'if it's always directed at the same person' (SLO-ATHLETE-05); in Croatia 'if the same person is targeted repeatedly' (HR-ATHLETE-04) and 'if the same kid keeps getting accidentally hurt' (HR-ATHLETE-08). The reciprocity criterion overlaps with the Turkish data's 'joking is reciprocal, bullying is one-sided' formulation and is also found in Slovenia: 'no problem when a joke is done with someone; not when done to someone who can't respond back' (SLO-ATHLETE-03) and 'whether it's to make you laugh at yourself or to make others laugh at you' (SLO-ATHLETE-07). There is also a similar overlap in terms of the intent criterion; the counterpart of the frequency test from the Turkish data ('an accident can't happen to just me every single day') is expressed in the Croatian sample as follows:



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An elbow called an accident, you tell by whether he does it again to the same guy afterward.

— **HR-ATHLETE-05**

This overlap suggests that boundary criteria are not specific to a single national sports culture; young athletes in different contexts are capable of producing similar distinctions. In the Portuguese coach focus group, the same criterion is addressed as a professional discussion topic; coaches state that a one-time incident can be considered 'a bad joke', but that when it repeats the naming needs to change (PT-COACH-FG). Partner-country data also reveal a pattern not seen in the Turkish data: several athletes describe non-responsiveness as a deliberate strategy and explain their reason as 'not wanting to appear too sensitive or soft' (HR-ATHLETE-02, HR-ATHLETE-06, HR-ATHLETE-10). These expressions can be read as another form of the laughter behaviour addressed in 3.3.1.2; here the shield is not laughter but non-response. In both cases, the victim's visible reaction eliminates the indicator needed for the boundary criterion to be able to operate.

3.3.1.2. Laughing Is a Shield: The Performance of Consent

In the narratives, one of the indicators that most nourishes deniability appears to be the victim's laughter. An important portion of young athletes recount having learned laughter as a defence technique. In these narratives, laughter operates not as consent itself but as an imitation of consent; in the environment, it can sometimes be read as evidence of harm's absence rather than as evidence of harm. An athlete in the karate discipline defines the function of the word 'joke' as a covering device and states that they derive this from their own experience of victimisation:

'You know what teacher, because I was always the one being picked on, I know very well how fake that word "joke" is. Especially at school the kids would always say "it was a joke" after taking my glasses or my money. The word joke is used to hide bad things most of the time. I mean they do something, you get upset, then they say "it was a joke" and get out of it...'

— **TR-Athlete6-Karate-M-15**

The analytic value of this formulation is that it makes visible the fact that the word comes into play after the act: 'joke' here operates not so much as a declaration of intent but as a subsequent act of taking back. The same athlete later in the interview draws attention to a second face of this operation: those who say 'joke joke' were 'both clearing themselves and putting the blame on me, saying I can't take a joke.' From this they also derive their own criterion: 'That's why to understand whether a behaviour is a joke or bullying, you shouldn't look at the one who does it but the one who receives it. The one who does it will say "it was a joke" but if you look at the face of the one who receives it you'll see the truth.' These two sentences suggest that two operations defined in the moral disengagement literature — euphemistic relabelling of the action and attribution of blame to the victim — can operate together within the same word (Bandura, 1991). The athlete's 'look at the face



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of the one who receives it' criterion is consistent with approaches arguing that whether a joke is harmful should be read from the experience of the recipient rather than the intent of the one saying it (Booth, 2025). A water polo athlete recounts how laughter can turn into a mandatory form of participation within the group; here not laughing is synonymous with being left out:

'There are kids who constantly shout, make jokes, tease each other. Because if you don't talk much or don't join every joke, you fall a bit behind. They say something, everyone laughs, then you look and the whole group is revolving around them. I also thought for a while, let me talk more, join the jokes, let me also be inside the group.'

— **TR-Athlete5-Waterpolo-M-17**

A taekwondo athlete emphasises that the same indicator is readable; the authenticity of laughter is actually perceptible to everyone in the environment:

'You can tell if they're really laughing or getting upset. But if someone keeps targeting the same kid obsessively, always over the same topic, at that point it's no longer a joke, it's mobbing in plain sight. During training everyone's there, you're talking, joking, normal; but if the thing has turned on one person, everyone sees this.'

— **TR-Athlete8-Taekwondo-M-17**

When these three narratives are read together, three separate functions of laughter emerge: a cover used to take back the name of harm (karate), the price of inclusion in the group (water polo), and an indicator that everyone can see but no one names (taekwondo). The last is important from the bystander's perspective: in these narratives, what stands out in the environment is not so much a lack of knowledge as a lack of the obligation to translate that knowledge into action. The 'let me also be inside the group' desire in the water polo narrative suggests that a bystander's joining in the laughter can sometimes be a form of protection rather than approval; the one who laughs may be laughing so as not to become the one who is laughed at. Adults can also notice the same indicator; however, the observation most often does not translate into action. A mother in the swimming discipline describes the mistake of an adult watching from the stands:

'From the outside, the picture looks very beautiful. The children are putting on their swimming caps, getting in line, laughing. The mothers are having tea in the stands. But I've been there for five years, I see something different. A girl glances at another and whispers something in a friend's ear, two of them laugh; when you look from the stands you say "what sweet girls". But a child is shrinking there.'

— **TR-Parent2-Swimming-Mother-Ankara**

The expression 'a child whose eyes aren't laughing' in athlete narratives and this parent's observation point to the same indicator. The difference between laughing and one's eyes laughing is a sign that can both be seen and ignored in the environment; in this respect it is evaluated as an indicator that can be operationalised for prevention work (see Section 6 (Curriculum)). The readability of the



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emotion behind laughter is also voiced in coach narratives. A coach working in combat sports recounts that even when the athlete tries to not show it, the indicators remain visible in the body:

'As the age group gets older, right up to when the punches or kicks get harder, even when athletes try not to show it in their facial expression or speech... that can be understood. It can be understood from the pulling and holding, or from the face reddening, the eyes filling with tears.'

— **TR-Coach-FocusGroup1**

The indicators the coach mentions — the reddening of the face, filling of the eyes with tears, hardening of contact — overlap with the indicators athletes convey with the expression 'a child whose eyes aren't laughing'. The conclusion that can be drawn from this is that detection capacity has not completely disappeared; but whether these indicators translate into action is a separate matter. Another coach working in the taekwondo discipline recounts how the deniable margin can assume the appearance of helpfulness in front of the adult eye, and why it is difficult to notice:

'I mean whatever they do they don't look like they're being unkind from the outside. I mean they don't look like they're bullying. Actually quite the contrary, if you look from outside, in the time of individual exercises they look as if they're going to the younger kids and teaching them something. [...] But actually in there are such small sentences that harm the young child and lower their morale a bit. Because sometimes I notice things from their facial expressions. Someone's morale drops right there. In that moment there are those who can't say it to anyone.'

— **TR-Coach-FocusGroup2**

This narrative shows that deniability does not rest only on the word 'joke'; it can also operate under the appearance of a positive activity — teaching something to younger players. In this case, the scene the adult sees is not harm but, on the contrary, a desired behaviour; the harm is hidden in the 'small sentences' within the scene and the only way to notice it is, as the athletes recount, to look at the face of the recipient. The fact that the coach states they are 'stuck' in resolving the same phenomenon suggests that this form is one of the most difficult to name even for adults. In another incident recounted by the same coach, a single sentence constructed as a compliment also reached the coaches' knowledge only years later (see 3.3.4.1). In partner-country data, the distribution of laughter is used repeatedly as the determining criterion for the boundary. A Slovenian athlete grounds the criterion directly in facial expression:

I read it off faces, if everyone including them is laughing it's fine, if they're forcing a smile it's gone too far.

— **SLO-ATHLETE-04**

The same criterion appears in Croatia as 'a joke is a joke when everyone is laughing; the line shifts the second someone goes quiet and it continues' (HR-ATHLETE-01); and in Slovenia as a not-yet-nameable intuition: 'I often don't know where the line is, I just notice when someone goes quiet after

a joke' (SLO-ATHLETE-06). In the Portuguese coach focus group the same distinction turns into a professional self-questioning; one coach, reviewing their past assessments, says 'sometimes we mistake a teasing situation, a joke, for bullying', while another grounds the criterion in repetition: 'bullying happens when it starts repeating' (PT-COACH-FG). The use of the distribution of laughter by athletes in all three countries as one of the core indicators for determining the boundary suggests that this indicator could be transformed into a teachable criterion for adults. The Portuguese coaches' discussion is also noteworthy in showing that the criterion can be ambiguous not only for athletes but also for adults, and that this ambiguity can operate in two directions — missing the harm, or counting every friction as bullying.

3.3.1.3. *Nickname: The Most Economical Form of Stigma*

Nickname is one of the prominent forms of harm in the data and constitutes one of the least costly tools of deniability: it is constructed with a single word, repeated daily at no cost, and when objected to can be taken back with 'it's only a name'. A water polo athlete, in recounting how a nickname was chosen, describes a scanning logic:

'They fixate on appearance a lot. They called me "tiny". Both because I was short and because I was a late developer. They also called me "fish" because I didn't talk much, didn't open my mouth. Both were annoying but I gradually got more used to "fish". They fixated on one person for having big ears, on another one for their weight. They always find something and name you after it. It's like they pick one feature from each person and call them by it. Nobody's perfect, they probably find something.'

— TR-Athlete5-Waterpolo-M-17

The last two sentences suggest that nicknaming is experienced not as random teasing but as a systematic selection: everyone is scanned, a 'deviation' is found in every body, and that deviation is transformed into the way the person is called. The same athlete also conveys the bodily consequence of this scanning: 'because I developed late [...] when I was ribbed about having "a child's body", and I started looking at myself in the mirror that way, you always find a flaw, a deficiency.' The naming from outside can thus turn into a self-perception from inside; the permanence of this inner voice is addressed in T3 under the heading of self-surveillance (see 3.3.3.3). A volleyball athlete defines the threshold at which a nickname passes from joke to bullying through the number of repetitions; this is the counterpart on the repetition dimension of the criterion established in 3.3.1.1:

'I think you need to look at who's laughing. If everyone's laughing it's a joke. If one person isn't laughing and the others keep mocking them, then it stops being a joke. And there are those who do it over and over. You say it once, fine. But if you start saying the same thing every day it becomes something else. Like they were calling me "Rabbit" and making fun of my teeth. The first time I laughed too. But by the thirtieth time I stopped laughing. I think that's exactly where the line is.'



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The expression 'the thirtieth time' points to the fact that it may be the accumulation rather than the nature of the harm that is decisive. Viewed individually, each repetition may seem innocent; the sum transforms into a stigma. This structure can be read as one of the factors that feeds deniability: the perpetrator can be held responsible only for the last repetition each time, while the responsibility for the accumulation appears to belong to no one. A parent's narrative conveys the trajectory and bodily consequence of a nickname once it sticks:

'In swimming the children walk around in swimsuits, their bodies are actually constantly visible. For a girl at this age that's already a hard thing. And if someone says something about your weight, your belly, your shoulders on top of that, that child can never look in the mirror comfortably again. Someone said something to our daughter for a while; I don't even want to say it. Our daughter started wearing a t-shirt over her swimsuit during that period. When I saw this my heart broke. [...] Once that nickname stuck, the child starts thinking of herself with that nickname.'

— TR-Parent2-Swimming-Mother-Ankara

The detail here — the t-shirt worn over the swimsuit — shows the moment when the nickname has turned into an observable behavioural trace. The harm is still deniable ('only a nickname'), but its consequence is now visible in the body. The sudden change in clothing and covering behaviour can therefore be evaluated as an early warning indicator for prevention work. The permanence of the nickname also appears in coach narratives as a personal testimony. A basketball coach, while recounting why they are so sensitive about peer bullying, refers to a memory from their own time as an athlete:

'I can't forget a word my friend said to me on the field when I was 10 years old. [...] My coach had said "You've become a bulldozer, you can't get off the ground". Ten years have passed and I haven't forgotten that. I haven't forgotten being belittled in front of my friends. [...] I'm 25 years old. I still remember the thing from 10 years ago, and I'm upset about it.'

— TR-Coach-FocusGroup2

This narrative is important in two respects. First, it shows that a nickname and a single sentence directed at the body can still be alive in an adult who has now become a coach, ten years later; this is an adult testimony of the athletes' finding that 'physical pain fades, words remain' (see 3.3.3.2). Second, the fact that the person who gave the nickname was not a peer but a coach suggests that the nickname culture does not only arise spontaneously among peers; it can also find a model in the adult's language. The element the coach emphasises is also noteworthy: what cannot be forgotten is not only the word but that the word was said 'in front of my friends'; the harm of the nickname is multiplied by the presence of spectators. A counter-example from a karate athlete is decisive; it suggests that nicknaming is not a fate but a practice that can be shaped by the rules of the environment:

'With us there are almost no nicknames because the sensei doesn't allow it. Everyone is addressed by their name or belt. Once someone tried to give another person a nickname related to their appearance, the sensei heard, and said "no one's appearance is discussed here, everyone is called by their name". That nickname thing just doesn't exist and it really relaxes me, unlike at school.'

— **TR-Athlete14-Karate-F-14**

This narrative indicates that a clear address rule can limit nicknaming: in the same age group, in the same country, at the same time, a rule set and adhered to by an adult appears, to the extent the athlete conveys, to have largely eliminated the nickname culture. The athlete's expression 'unlike at school' suggests that the difference should be sought in the environment, not in the child. Since this observation rests on a single narrative, it should be evaluated not as a causal claim but as a pattern worth examining at the design level. A manager-coach's narrative from the Portuguese sample shows how the same logic is constructed in a weight-class discipline. The participant working in kickboxing states that their club has children from 22 kg to 70 kg in different weight categories and recounts how they handle words related to weight:

Por isso é que eu tenho sempre muito cuidado quando às vezes as pessoas usam palavras mais, ah é gordo ou isto, e eu digo não, aqui é proibido usar essa palavra. Mais forte, mais forte, pronto. [...] Porque às vezes basta uma palavra, pá, mesmo às vezes sem querer, percebes? Mas que pode magoar e que pode ficar, pá, para sempre. [That's why whenever people use words like, ah, "fat" or whatever, I'm always very careful and I say no, using that word is forbidden here. Stronger, stronger, that's it. [...] Because sometimes one word is enough, like, even sometimes without meaning to, you understand? But it can hurt and it can stay, like, forever.]

— **PT-MANAGER-03**

This narrative shares the same structure as the address rule in the karate dojo: the adult forbids the word that could be the raw material for a nickname before the event occurs, and proposes an alternative ('stronger'). Considering that in weight-class disciplines weight is both a sporting category and potential material for mockery (see 3.3.3.3), such a language rule is thought to be evaluable as a discipline-specific measure. The participant's justification 'one word... can stay forever' overlaps with the basketball coach's ten-year testimony. The partner-country data also reflect the finding that a nickname gains additional weight when it touches an unchangeable feature. A Slovenian athlete directly uses this criterion to make a distinction between discipline-specific nicknames and nicknames directed at personal features:

Nicknames about how someone looks or talks are different from judo nicknames. The first are for fun, the second remind a person of something they can't change.

— **SLO-ATHLETE-01**

In the same sample, the function of the nickname is defined as establishing hierarchy — 'these are actually not jokes, they're a way of putting someone below yourself; you wear a judo nickname with



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pride, you only endure that kind of nickname' (SLO-ATHLETE-02) — and attention is drawn to its permanence and transmission: 'even if said lightly it follows the person and new kids copy what the seniors say' (SLO-ATHLETE-03). This last expression suggests that the nickname spreads through spectators; the naming started by the senior is institutionalised through repetition by new arrivals. In the Croatian sample, the asymmetry in perception is also voiced: 'a nickname about someone's background looks harmless to the one using it; for the target it's extremely personal' (HR-ATHLETE-04). These expressions suggest that the deniability of a nickname may arise not only from the lightness of the word but also from the fact that the perpetrator and victim experience the same word with different weights. A counter-example is not limited to Turkish data only: a Portuguese athlete states that nicknaming is not an established practice in their club, and grounds the reason in a simple principle: 'it doesn't happen regularly, because everyone has their own name'.

3.3.1.4. Sub-Theme: Shields — The Economy of Protection

One of the most intense sub-patterns of this theme clusters around a metaphor that recurs in the narratives of young athletes: the shield. The metaphor appears in at least six independent interviews with different functions. Who holds the shield, what it protects, and how it is obtained can be read as a selection mechanism that determines who will be targeted by bullying. This sub-theme completes the core claim of T1: in the narratives, deniable harm appears not to be randomly distributed — it tends to be directed more at the unprotected.

(a) Harm constructed as protection; 'protective bullying':

In this mechanism, for which there is no counterpart in the conceptual framework, the harmful behaviour is constructed in the perpetrator's mind as a preventive act. A football athlete explains their teasing of a teammate not as an attack but as a shield:

'If a friend makes a mistake, you rib them first, because if you don't rib them, someone from outside will do something worse. [...] If I just lightly go "come on, what was that" and let it pass, the incident closes, we laugh, it's over. But if I stay quiet, one of the senior brothers on the field who has authority steps in and it stops being a joke, it crushes the kid's pride. So by teasing him I'm actually taking the heavy ball off him and making it lighter.'

— TR-Athlete1-Football-M-17

This mechanism corresponds to the advantageous comparison operation in Bandura's (1991) moral disengagement model; however, here the operation does not appear merely as a retroactive justification. In the athlete's narrative, 'light' bullying is deployed in advance and strategically to prevent the heavier kind. The sentence the athlete immediately adds suggests this is a learned form of communication: 'There's a language there, you learn to speak that language. If you don't speak it, it eats you and it eats your friend.' The more explicit form of the same defensive logic is visible in a

judo athlete's narrative through toughness: 'Actually toughness is often armour in my view, there's always a fear underneath.' In these two narratives, the need for protection can itself produce perpetration; bullying here is associated with insecurity rather than an excess of power. While this reading allows understanding the perpetrator without pathologising them, it does not eliminate the reality of the harm or the perpetrator's responsibility.

(b) The talent shield and its limits:

The most frequently mentioned source of protection by athletes is performance. A volleyball athlete recounts noticing this when their own position changed:

'That's when I realised that talent works a bit like a shield. [...] When I didn't have performance, when there was actually nothing protecting me, I saw a bit how they felt.'

— TR-Athlete4-Volleyball-F-17

A noteworthy feature of this shield is that it is selective: while performance provides protection against changeable 'flaws', it cannot always stop stigmas related to identity. This finding points in the same direction as the criterion produced by victims in 3.3.1.1: harm directed at what is changeable can be met with a shield, while harm directed at what is unchangeable is difficult to meet with one. Through two different paths — the victim's boundary definition and the operating domain of the shield — a similar distinction is produced. The absence of the shield, meanwhile, increases the likelihood of being targeted. The same athlete's observation comparing two teammates explicitly describes this selection: 'If you have talent your nickname gets erased, your mistakes are forgiven, if you're late it goes unnoticed. If you don't have talent everything stays on you.' This observation suggests that the athlete without a shield can be targeted not just once but repeatedly.

(c) Putting the shield in front of someone else:

One of the striking findings of the sub-theme is that the shield is transferable. The same athlete who describes the talent shield, later in the interview, proposes a criterion for how the shield is used; in this way, they move protection from being a privilege to being a responsibility:

'The real power is being able to put that shield in front of someone else when needed.'

— TR-Athlete4-Volleyball-F-17

This formulation is one of the field counterparts of the moral courage discussed in Literature, Section 2.4.2, and examples of it put into action are found in the data. The athlete recounts, using their position as captain, noticing a pass-cutting behaviour directed at an excluded player and breaking it: 'As captain I noticed, stepped in, deliberately started sending the ball to them, and said to the others "pass to them too".' A judo athlete recounts taking on the toughness of a senior directed at someone else,



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risking themselves: 'Then we went to the mat, that senior was going to be tough on that girl again, I stepped in, said "I'll work with them".' The same participants also say that these interventions were not costless. The judo athlete explicitly recounts that their first reaction was to freeze: 'At first I froze like everyone, I stayed quiet because that senior had more seniority than me, standing up to them could harm me too.' In these narratives, moral courage appears not as a personality trait but as a risk that is calculated and taken (see 3.3.4.5). The two examples share another feature: both athletes hold a relatively high position within the team. Being able to put the shield in front of someone else first requires having a shield; this suggests that defender behaviour may be related to status, and that the call for moral courage cannot be directed at everyone equally (Gözmen Elmas et al., 2026). The opposite side of the shield is also visible in the same narratives: the volleyball athlete acknowledges that during the period of feeling comfortable behind the shield they 'noticed the girls without shields far too late', and that even when they noticed they sometimes stayed quiet. The security provided by one's position can also produce a blindness that makes it harder to see and intervene. The shield economy thus helps explain both victimisation and bystanding with the same logic.

(d) Discourse becoming a shield:

Finally, athletes make a finding that extends the metaphor to the institutional level and directly supports this research's critical stance:

'A sport like judo having a morality discourse doesn't mean it's safe. In fact it can become a shield that covers the problem.'

— TR-Athlete3-Judo-M-18

The same function becomes visible in a swimmer's narrative through the discipline's public image. The interviewer's observation that 'that innocent image was like a shield' is confirmed and justified by the athlete:

'Exactly. If it were a tough sport maybe someone would look. It's easier in the place that looks most innocent, because nobody sees or understands anything.'

— TR-Athlete10-Swimming-M-16

Here the shield protects not a person but a discipline: sports not associated with violence can, for precisely this reason, be exempted from oversight, and harm can be sustained there more easily. This finding suggests that concentration of protection policies only on disciplines considered risky may be misleading. Disciplines equipped with discourses of 'values education', 'respect', and 'discipline' cannot automatically be considered safe; moral discourse can turn into a cover that makes oversight seem unnecessary rather than providing protection. In this respect, the finding shares the same



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function as the adult naming addressed in 3.3.1.6: in both, language itself can become an instrument that renders harm invisible.

The existence of the talent shield is also voiced from the adult side in coach narratives. A basketball coach recounts how performance can exempt an athlete from criticism, and how the coach may also have a share in this exemption:

'Talented players aren't told much. They've already proven themselves. Just as the coach shouts at the others, tells them their mistakes right away, with them you can sometimes turn a blind eye.'

— **TR-Coach-FocusGroup1**

The analytic value of this narrative is that it shows the shield being distributed not only by the peer group but also by the adult. When the athletes' observation that 'talent works a bit like a shield' is combined with the coach's observation about their own practice, it points to an economy in which protection is partly distributed in exchange for performance. The same coach also conveys how the reverse of this exemption operates for a low-performing athlete: when a child makes a mistake 'everyone immediately shows them their mistake', and pass-withholding can turn into a pattern even noticed by parents. A coach who has worked in water polo for many years grounds how this economy is established in the coach's decision:

'Because if they're in a team like that, if you as a coach have put a player in a "superstar" wrapper, you've already automatically handed all the reins within the team into their hands. All of the team knows about them. That team, no one in the team will bully them. [...] If you don't warn that child when they make a mistake during training, or if you can't discipline them, the team already senses that.'

— **TR-Coach-FocusGroup2**

This expression suggests that the talent shield can also be read as an authority granted by the coach rather than an athlete characteristic: when the coach exempts the star from criticism, the team 'senses' this exemption and the reins pass to the star's hands. The coach recounts this situation in terms of the star not being bullied; however, the same exemption can also provide the star with immunity over others, as seen in the assistant coach's narrative in T4 (see 3.3.4.6). The two narratives together suggest that the institutional source of the shield economy lies to a significant extent in the coach's warning and disciplinary practices.

Partner-country data describes the same economy in different disciplines. In the Croatian coach focus group, the conversion of status into a distribution of respect is voiced — 'the best players start using their status to decide who deserves respect and who doesn't' (HR-COACH-07) — and the shield in swimming is described as being tied to a measurable threshold: 'hazing is generally a time standard;



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until you hit that standard you're tolerated but not really included in warm-ups or joking around' (HR-COACH-03). In Slovenia, a concrete indicator is provided of how the shield's holder uses it: 'the same athlete always picks the same young partner, ignores the desire to reduce intensity, then laughs about it in the locker room' (SLO-COACH-03). A coach in the same country's coach focus group also acknowledges this privilege granted to star players in their own practice: 'many coaches including me give star players far more patience than we would ever accept; we need to be honest about this pressure' (SLO-COACH-07). These expressions suggest that the shield economy is not specific to Turkish data; it can operate similarly in different disciplines and countries, and can also be recognised by coaches.

3.3.1.5. *If the Pass Doesn't Come: The Deniability of Exclusion*

Deniability can be strengthened even further when it passes from verbal forms to relational forms. Athletes emphasise that one of the most effective aspects of exclusion is precisely that it produces no evidence. A basketball athlete names this mechanism with a concept they have produced themselves:

'Ours is a bit mixed. From the outside it looks very unified, we pull together in matches. But inside there's a subtle competition. Not like fighting as in boys' teams but more something that operates through talking, who sits with whom, who ignores what in the group. I call this myself "smiling-face war". [...] If you ignore this dynamic, one day you look and you're outside, you don't even understand how it happened.'

— TR-Athlete2-Basketball-F-16

The expression 'smiling-face war' carries the core of this sub-theme: there is conflict but no visibility; there is harm but no incident. The athlete's last sentence shows that the victim cannot always even track their own process of exclusion; exclusion is described as a process that can be completed without being noticed. A judo athlete explains the same invisibility through speed of escalation; they describe why gradually progressing harm does not generate objection:

'If they did it all at once you'd shout, but because they do it slowly you can't tell when the line was crossed. And when you do notice it's too late, because they'll say you didn't speak up yesterday either. The most dangerous bullying in my view is this. The person does it while smiling, not shouting and screaming, and the others laugh too. It progresses step by step.'

— TR-Athlete3-Judo-M-18

This narrative suggests that deniability does not operate only as a defence in the perpetrator's hands; it can also operate as a threshold-shifting process spread over time. The victim's previous silence can retroactively become evidence in the perpetrator's hands ('they'll say you didn't speak up yesterday either'). The narrative that forms the backbone of this sub-theme belongs to a football athlete. While



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distinguishing between tactics and exclusion, the athlete describes how the deniable margin operates and conveys that the harm was not voiced by any witness:

'You understand, you feel it in your bones. If it's tactics the coach says it from the bench. But no one says anything and if the ball never comes to you when you're free, that's exclusion. Once in a match in the A team I was free for ten, fifteen minutes and not one pass came. The reason was that I'd said a senior's mistake to their face.'

— TR-Athlete1-Football-M-17

In the interview, the answer to the question immediately after this narrative 'did anyone notice this and intervene?' is a single sentence: 'No, there wasn't. No one said anything.' In this way, two layers of the exclusion become visible together: the act produces no evidence, and the bystander completes this lack of evidence with their silence (see 2.4.1). The other players on the field are in a position to see from whom the pass was cut; therefore bystander silence here can be read not merely as indifference but as one of the conditions for exclusion to be able to operate. The same athlete's passage detailing the experience also explains why relational harm cannot be reported; because the moment the victim complains, they can become the blameworthy party:

'The loneliest moment, coach. You're in the middle of the field, a thousand things are happening around you, everyone's running, shouting, but no one's passing to you. You become invisible. As you run you raise your hand and say "to me, I'm here", no one even looks. After a while you stop even raising your hand, because it's pointless. In that moment you're not playing football, you're being punished. And you can't tell anyone, because the coach will say "you're not running" and blame you, but you ARE running — there's just no one passing to you.'

— TR-Athlete1-Football-M-17

This passage is one of the concrete indicators of the theme's core claim. The harm occurred, lasted ten minutes, and was clearly defined by the athlete; but there is no perpetrator statement, no witness testimony, no reportable incident. Moreover, according to the athlete's prognosis, the consequence of attempting to report would be the victim themselves being blamed ('the coach will say "you're not running" and blame you'). The athlete's expression 'after a while you stop even raising your hand' describes a behavioural trace of exclusion: the player who stops asking for the ball appears, viewed from outside, as a player not participating in the game, and the exclusion can be read as a deficiency of the victim. A basketball athlete conveys the perpetrator-less form of exclusion — the situation of being left alone without anyone making an explicit act:

'I have to play well, because my scholarship depends on my game. Even if they play badly they stay at the club, because they're paying. If I play badly my scholarship goes, I get thrown out. So every training session is an exam for me. This is a huge pressure. I end up being the one who runs most on the field, who works hardest, because I'm the one with the most to lose. This is also a kind of loneliness, nobody understands this pressure.'

— TR-Athlete17-Basketball-M-17



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Here exclusion appears not as the consequence of an act but of a position; no one has made an act to exclude this athlete, but the athlete is not in the same conditions as the others either. This form is connected to the class intersection addressed in T6 and provides an explanation for why reporting mechanisms may not work: there is no discrete incident that can be reported. Coach narratives show that pass exclusion can be noticed from the bench too, but that intervention does not always produce results. A coach working in youth volleyball recounts a pattern they say they have been unable to resolve for two years:

'For example I bring a hitter into play. The fact that the hitter I brought in is technically a bit lacking causes the setter in the game not to pass to them or to play them less — and unfortunately this, however much we struggle and try, I've been working on only this for two years, unfortunately I still can't solve it. Neither in the parents' eyes nor in the children's eyes.'

— **TR-Coach-FocusGroup2**

This narrative shows that the deniable margin operates for the coach too: the setter's choice can be explained with a technical reason each time, and the coach's intervention cannot overcome this rationale. The coach partially attributing the source of the problem to parents — 'neither in the parents' eyes nor in the children's eyes' — also points to exclusion being fed also in family conversations, outside the field. A different coach working in volleyball in another focus group conveys the path they took to resolve a similar pattern: when they noticed the setter always passing to a close friend, they took the friend out of the game and the setter, so the friend 'stays in the first six', started distributing the pass equally (TR-Coach-FocusGroup1). A coach working in women's football youth also observes the same behaviour in their discipline: a player is passing to a friend they like more 'even though they're at a worse angle' (TR-Coach-FocusGroup1). A basketball coach recounts how this preference turns into explicit exclusion with age: at young ages the response stays at the level of 'you didn't pass', while with older athletes it turns into 'they probably won't be able to catch it, don't pass to them, forget it' (TR-Coach-FocusGroup2). These narratives together suggest that pass exclusion can be noticed by coaches; however, effective intervention seems to be possible not through warnings directed at individual players but through structural arrangements that change the rules of the game or the squad decision.

The problem of distinguishing whether a pass being cut is a tactical decision or a deliberate exclusion is similarly constructed in partner-country data. In the Croatian sample, an athlete grounds the criterion in repetition, overlapping with the Turkish data:

A guy left open every single time and the ball still doesn't come, that's not an accident, the bench sees it.



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In the Slovenian sample, the criterion is built around duration and explainability: 'tactics change week to week; if the same person keeps being left out you stop believing it's about training' (SLO-ATHLETE-02) and 'real tactical decisions are talked about, exclusion happens silently' (SLO-ATHLETE-03). This second criterion — whether the decision is explained — overlaps with the Turkish data's 'if it's tactics the coach says it from the bench'. In the Slovenian coach focus group, the same distinction is discussed among coaches: one coach states this is one of the hardest situations for a coach to prove, 'because even when that's not the real reason there's always a tactical excuse ready' (SLO-COACH-07), while another partially objects: 'you can tell pretty quickly by watching whether the explanation changes match to match; a real tactical reason stays consistent' (SLO-COACH-12). This discussion shows simultaneously how the deniable margin operates from the adult's perspective and how it can be narrowed. A Portuguese manager describes pass exclusion as a developmental process: at young ages the children who play well are watched admiringly, 'generally between 11 and 13-14 years old' a phase begins where the ball is not passed to weaker players, and by 15-16 the good players start telling those not up to the level 'what are you doing here?' (PT-MANAGER-01). This observation overlaps with the Turkish basketball coach's description of language hardening with age, and suggests that pass exclusion needs to be specifically monitored in certain age ranges from a prevention perspective. An ambiguity is also voiced in partner-country data: several athletes state they cannot distinguish between tactical and personal, and distance themselves from the topic saying 'I focus on my own game' (HR-ATHLETE-02, HR-ATHLETE-06). These expressions suggest that the distinction criterion has not developed equally in every athlete; therefore the deniable margin actually operates for a portion of athletes.

The finding regarding the permanence of relational exclusion is one of the points where clear overlaps are seen in partner-country data. When asked which form of harm is more lasting, a significant portion of athletes in both countries point to the relational form:

Exclusion leaves the deepest mark because it's quiet, there's no single moment you can point back to.

The same criterion is repeated in the Slovenian sample: 'the social one lasts longest; you forget a tough throw by the next round, but the feeling of the group freezing you out comes with you to every training session' (SLO-ATHLETE-01) and 'for me it's social exclusion, because it's quiet and nobody can point to a single moment' (SLO-ATHLETE-03). One athlete connects the distinction to a matter

of consent: 'I already agreed to the physical side of judo; I didn't agree to the cold treatment' (SLO-ATHLETE-04). These expressions are considered to overlap with this theme's core claim — harm occurring without producing a record — in terms of there being 'no single moment you can point back to'. In the Croatian sample it is also conveyed that intra-team closeness is determined by playing time — 'the ones who play in the starting five hang out together; it's not a decision, it naturally comes from shared court time' (HR-ATHLETE-05) — and in this way being left out is constructed as the consequence of a position, not an act, as in the Turkish basketball athlete's narrative. The less detailed description of exclusion in the partner-country data than in the Turkish data may be related to the data format allowing limited space for incident-level narratives (see D2.2, Section 2.5.3).

3.3.1.6. *The Adult Side: Renaming the Harm*

One of the explanatory layers of the theme emerges in how the same phenomenon is named by adults. In an important portion of adult narratives, it is observed not that the phenomenon is unseen but that what is seen is recorded with a different name. This renaming operates in four different forms: withdrawal with professional language, transfer to a competition framework, placing within a discipline/apprenticeship discourse, and converting into a resilience pedagogy. In all four, the withdrawal of the naming can also mean the withdrawal of the obligation to intervene.

(a) Withdrawal with professional language:

A recurring coding pattern in the analysis of coach focus groups is the renaming of bullying with the language of grouping. A coach, immediately after correctly describing the phenomenon they are recounting, withdraws its name:

'Let me not call it peer bullying, let me call it gaining superiority over each other through grouping. [...] As we said, they either isolate or they group.'

— TR-Coach-FocusGroup1

In this sentence the coach correctly describes the content of the behaviour (gaining superiority, isolation), but avoids giving it the name bullying. The deniable margin produced by the athlete with 'it was a joke' is here reproduced with a professional language and at the institutional level. The distinction has a practical consequence: while grouping is seen as a dynamic to be managed, bullying is defined as an incident that needs to be reported and intervened in. This withdrawal of naming may feed not so much from bad intent as from a desire to avoid the obligations that naming the phenomenon would bring or a negative image related to one's own team; whatever the reason, the result is similar from the athletes' perspective. Coaches' positioning is also described from the athletes'



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perspective in partner-country data. A Croatian athlete conveys that the coach notices the tension but avoids addressing individuals, and names the consequence themselves:

Reading the room well but addressing the group rather than individuals avoids conflict, though it lets specific problems go unnamed.

— HR-ATHLETE-04

The same pattern recurs in other narratives: the coach 'calls a whole team meeting when something seems off but rarely says exactly what they noticed' (HR-ATHLETE-05) and 'talks to the entire group without calling anyone out' (HR-ATHLETE-01). In the Slovenian sample, the coach's detection capacity is described as varying by form of harm: 'the coach manages open conflict well; quiet exclusion is harder for any adult to see' (SLO-ATHLETE-03) and 'good on the mat but doesn't always catch the social side' (SLO-ATHLETE-02). These expressions suggest that the coach's avoidance of naming may be not only a discourse choice but also a detection difficulty in the face of forms of harm with low visibility. In environments where naming is not done, bystander athletes can also suspend their own reactions: 'most of the time I stay quiet and wait for someone else to speak first' (HR-ATHLETE-02). By contrast, where intervention is fair, situations are said to quickly calm down (SLO-ATHLETE-01). It can be inferred from these expressions that bystander behaviour may be related not only to peer norms but also to the adult's naming practice; this relationship is detailed in T4 (see 3.3.4.5). A Portuguese athlete shows that a bystander can also construct a graduated intervention model: they first warn their friend when they see behaviour done to provoke rather than for a joke, and when the behaviour repeats they relay the situation to the coach or assistant coach. This narrative suggests that bystander behaviour can be constructed not as a binary choice (intervene / don't intervene) but as a graduated decision tied to repetition (see 2.4.1). Exclusion being visible from the stands is also conveyed in parent narratives. A Croatian parent grounds their observation in concrete indicators: 'I notice the same two girls being left to warm up alone every time, or a new player sitting at the end of the bench' (HR-PARENT-01); another describes the axis of group formation: 'two boys always sit together, one is "the funny one", the newer or less confident player waits for someone to pass to them before warm-up' (HR-PARENT-02). These observations suggest that relational exclusion is not invisible to adults; but that what is seen is most often not named.

(b) Transfer to a competition framework:

A swimming manager describes the phenomenon in detail and produces the concept they use themselves; they name the environment in their club as 'white-gloved competition' and describes a climate in which no one shouts or swears but a struggle is conducted through glances, implications,



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and exclusion. This description suggests the adult not failing to see the phenomenon but seeing it very clearly: the manager describes the triad of glance, implication, and exclusion in almost the same way the athletes recount it. The problem is not so much detection capacity as where what is seen is placed. When the same manager positions the hierarchy they see as a developmental stage, intervention begins to appear unnecessary or even harmful:

'A doctor father's child, a lawyer mother's child — each is raised like a prince, like a princess at home. Then they all enter the same pool and there a hierarchy is established. This hierarchy sometimes gets tough, I accept that. But look, these children are going to compete throughout their lives for the best schools, the best universities, the best professions. The pool is their first arena. I see what happens here as a rehearsal for that big competition. Tough? Tough. But this is the reality. If I try to soften this reality, I'd actually be lying to these children.'

— TR-Manager4-Swimming-M-Istanbul

The last sentence shows the moment when renaming is constructed as a moral obligation: not intervening is presented as a requirement of being honest with the child. In this way, the responsibility of protection is transferred in the name of realism. The same framing is reinforced in a parent's narrative with a professional analogy. A football father reads weak friendship not as a problem but as a preparation:

'I'm a man who speaks plainly, so I'll tell the truth. Friendship is weak, as weak as it needs to be. These kids are competing for eleven places in a squad of fifteen, everyone wants to be in that eleven. So your friend is also your opponent. I don't see this as a deficiency, quite the contrary I find it healthy. Because real life is like this too.'

— TR-Parent3-Football-Father-Istanbul

Here the adult's professional life experience is transferred to the child's peer relationship. The analytically noteworthy point is that the voluntary and contract-based competition of an adult professional and the obligatory and identity-constitutive peer environment of a child in a developmental stage are not of the same nature. Such a transfer can be associated with approaches where parenting is configured around the axis of preparing the child for a competitive future; in the literature, sports parenting is reported to become intertwined with achievement pressure, and this is reported to constitute an additional source of stress on the athlete (Harwood & Knight, 2015; Elliott & Drummond, 2017). The analogy may serve a translation function that renders invisible the harmful dimension of the phenomenon.

(c) Placing within a discipline/apprenticeship discourse:

Another recurring form of naming in manager narratives is the discourse that constructs the hierarchical burden as an educational process. A football manager positions the newly arrived as a 'rookie' and connects the process to an apprenticeship model with the expression 'will go through their



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dues'; a manager working in judo-wrestling names the same burden as 'this is not a service, this is discipline' (TR-Manager1-Football-M-Istanbul; TR-Manager2-Judo-Wrestling-M-Trabzon). In both expressions the act remains the same while its category changes; a questionable practice can thus turn into a pedagogy that is difficult to question. The detailed analysis of this discourse is provided in T2, where the seniority hierarchy is addressed as a debt-transfer regime; here it is mentioned only in terms of its naming function.

(d) Converting into a resilience pedagogy:

In parent narratives, renaming is constructed with the justification of the child's good. A basketball father, referencing his own past, positions the harm as a necessity:

'Life isn't easy. I learned this at age fifteen, my father put me in the shop in summer, as an apprentice. I took insults, I took scoldings, I even got slapped once. I made something of myself, here I am today, I'm the boss of my own business. Now they wrap children in cotton wool; one word and they break, they fall apart at one difficulty. I don't want my son to be like that.'

— TR-Parent1-Basketball-Father-Istanbul

In this narrative, the harm is justified because it was endured in the past and resulted in a success. The logic of intergenerational transfer becomes visible here: the adult's encoding of their own experience not as a loss but as a gain can turn passing the same experience on to the child into a moral obligation. That this attitude can also be reflected in bystander behaviour is seen in T4: the same father, when faced with social harm directed at another child, summarises the standard response he gives his son as 'don't get involved' (see 3.3.4.4).

(e) The cost of renaming; the stigmatisation of the reporting parent:

The common consequence of these four forms is the marginalisation of the person who names the phenomenon by its actual name. A swimming mother clearly conveys this cost:

'First I talk to my daughter, try to calm her down. Then most of the time I go to the coach. But let me say plainly, going to the coach is also a separate matter. You think about how you'll go, what you'll say, because getting the "over-reacting mother" label is very easy. I've already gotten that label. For a period our coach's face would change when they saw me, as if to say "not her again".'

— TR-Parent2-Swimming-Mother-Ankara

In this way the connection between T1 and T4 (the cost of reporting) is established: not only the child but also the adult who names the harm can be stigmatised. Naming, in these narratives, becomes an institutionally and socially costly act.

(f) Counter-examples; adults who take on the naming:

The data also shows that there is not only one attitude on the adult side. A manager working in volleyball and handball defines boundary-setting not as creating distance but as creating trust, naming



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it 'safe warmth'; in the same club, nicknames and demeaning address are explicitly prohibited in the written code of conduct:

'Setting a boundary is not putting up distance. Quite the contrary, where the boundary is clear people get closer more comfortably, because they know what will happen. Uncertainty frightens. Our children hug their coaches, joke around, we have a very warm environment but everyone knows where the line is.'

— **TR-Manager3-Volleyball/Handball-F-Istanbul**

On the parent side, a volleyball father directly formulates the criterion he conveys to his child — 'if you need to exclude someone else to belong to a group, that group isn't healthy' (TR-Parent5-Volleyball-Father-Izmir) — and reads the excluded child as an indicator showing the group's unhealthiness. A taekwondo mother, remembering the cost of the 'ignore it' advice in her own childhood, has developed an interventionist stance: 'Those "ignore its" left me crushed for years.' (TR-Parent4-Taekwondo-Mother-Istanbul). The common feature of these examples is that they tie harm to a pre-defined criterion — a code of conduct, a group health criterion, an accounting of a past experience. Renaming practices, by contrast, most often produce the criterion after the incident and on a case-by-case basis.

On the adult side, not only naming but also the function of the behaviour itself as modelling is voiced. A participant in the coach focus group states that their own manner of expression can be reflected in peer relations:

'If you're a bit old school in your approach, being held up as a successful coach at the same time... you're also automatically giving way to direct bullies among the players. Because your behaviours automatically become a model for them. They too become big fish eating small fish in the locker room.'

— **TR-Coach-FocusGroup2**

This expression points to a mechanism beyond renaming: the adult's language and stance may shape not only the way the phenomenon is recorded but also what will be considered legitimate among peers. The narrative from 3.3.1.3 — where a coach still remembers a nickname they heard from their own coach ten years later — also shows the trace left in the adult's memory by this modelling function. In the same focus groups it is also stated that the coach's intervention domain can be institutionally limited (see 3.3.1.1, 3.3.4.6). These expressions together suggest that the coach is positioned as both a model and an actor with limited authority.

In partner-country data, manager narratives approach the naming problem with a proposal for an institutional criterion. A Croatian manager directly defines the boundary — 'bullying starts when discipline becomes personal; when a child is mocked for a technical mistake or excluded because



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they haven't been useful yet in a match' (HR-MANAGER-01) — while another distinguishes between the acceptable and unacceptable in acceptance practices: 'asking a new player to introduce themselves is reasonable; forcing them into humiliation or servitude merely reproduces the hierarchy' (HR-MANAGER-03). In the Slovenian sample, the structural obstacle in front of naming is voiced: 'in a small club the same few adults wear every hat; this limits who a child can turn to if the concern involves one of us' (SLO-MANAGER-01). In the Portuguese coach focus group, a similar search for criteria is also seen; coaches try to define the boundary between joking and bullying through repetition (PT-COACH-FG). These expressions suggest that the opposite of the renaming pattern identified in the Turkish data is also possible: when a criterion is defined in advance and clearly, the same behaviours can be named as bullying. The implication for prevention work can be formulated as follows: pre-defining the criterion clearly and in advance appears to be one of the most direct tools for narrowing the deniable margin (see Section 6 (Curriculum)).

3.3.1.7. Case Portrait: Athlete — 'I Start Most of the Jokes'

The idiographic deepening of this theme is deliberately constructed from a perpetrator position. The swimmer (TR-Athlete10-Swimming-M-16), who recounts how deniable harm is produced not from the victim's side but from the side that produces it, is the most detailed of the interviews; in this respect it renders the mechanism of the theme visible from the inside. The athlete begins the narrative by placing themselves in the perpetrator's position: 'I can even say I start most of the jokes.' They then describe the feedback loop of the mechanism — a word, a burst of laughter, then another, and each burst raises the threshold for the next step: 'I say something, one person laughs, then another laughs, something happens inside me. [...] The further I went the more they laughed.' In the same passage they also clearly state how the target is perceived: the child across from them 'not like a person... but like material. Something I used so they'd laugh.' The analytic value of the narrative is that it shows the group's laughter functioning as an approval mechanism for the perpetrator. While on the victim's side laughter is a shield (3.3.1.2), on the perpetrator's side the same laughter becomes a reward. Thus a single behaviour — the group's laughter — can become both the sustainer of harm and the producer of the absence of evidence. The athlete also analyses the bystanders' position in this process and how silence is shared:

'Because we weren't there one by one. If I saw that child alone, if I noticed they were crying, maybe I'd stop. But when I'm inside the group I'm not me. Everyone's shouting, everyone's laughing, that child's fear gets lost there in that excitement. [...] Because stopping meant ruining the atmosphere. "When did you get so conscientious" they'd say. Nobody wants to fall into that situation. Also the guilt gets divided. If I did it alone everything would stay on me, when ten people do it nobody is fully guilty. "I only laughed" you say, you save yourself.'

This passage offers a contribution from the perpetrator's own mouth to the discussion of bystander dynamics (see 2.4.1). The elements the athlete lists — the individual's disappearance inside the group, the anticipation of the one who tries to stop being labelled 'conscientious', and the division of responsibility among ten people — are consistent with the operation of diffusion of responsibility defined in the moral disengagement literature and with findings that this operation can be shared at the group level (Bandura, 1991; Gini et al., 2020). The sentence 'I only laughed' names a ready-made justification that a bystander can use to position themselves outside the harm. The athlete also describes the role distribution within the group: they start it, 'two people immediately add something', 'three or four people just laugh', 'two kids looking at their phones' 'didn't say anything but also didn't stop it'. This description is close to a map of the roles of initiator, reinforcer, and outsider in Salmivalli's (2010) participant roles approach. The observation the athlete adds to this map is noteworthy from a prevention perspective: 'If one person said "enough" we'd definitely have stopped, because the mood would have broken.' This expression, based on the perpetrator's own estimate, proceeds in the same direction as athlete observations in T4 (see 3.3.4.5) that a single bystander's intervention can change the group dynamic.

The narrative also contains an explanation for why the perpetrator did not see the harm. The athlete says they knew 'inside' that they always targeted the same children, but that thinking about it didn't suit them: "'They're having fun too', 'they get the joke', 'it's not that much' and such. I said these to myself and to them, so I wouldn't lose that state. I didn't not know, actually — I didn't want to know.' This expression may also show a use of the taking-back function of the word 'joke' described by the karate athlete in 3.3.1.2 directed at the perpetrator's own conscience: euphemistic naming can operate not only as a defence against others but also as a self-deception tool against the perpetrator's own conscience. The same athlete's evaluation of nicknames makes this boundary more distinct. When asked whether they see a difference between a child they call 'antenna' for their ears and a child they call 'freeloader' for coming on a scholarship, their answer is clear: 'No, what difference would there be, both are nicknames.' The fact that the changeable/unchangeable distinction constructed by victims in 3.3.1.1 has never been constructed on the perpetrator's side suggests that this distinction does not arise of its own accord and needs to be taught. The athlete's encounter with the distinction also occurs not as the result of a thinking process but as a result of a testimony:

'Time passed, one of those kids I gave a nickname to, the one I called "antenna", said to me in another conversation "because of that nickname you gave me, I didn't want to go to school for a

while". Said it so calmly. [...] I froze, coach. My feet were cut out from under me. Because I had already forgotten that nickname. We laughed for a week, then it left my mind. But that child heard it every day, was afraid every morning going to school.'

— TR-Athlete10-Swimming-M-16

This moment is the counterpart within a single narrative of the theme's finding regarding temporal asymmetry: what is a week's fun for the perpetrator is a fear relived every morning for the victim. It is also noteworthy that the athlete states they would go on the defensive and say 'don't exaggerate' in the face of an angry reaction, but 'couldn't say anything' in the face of a 'calm' narrative; what triggered awareness was not an accusation but a witnessing of the victim's experience. The athlete also clearly describes the adult's position: the coach once noticed them doing it, said 'don't do it kids' and moved on; in the athlete's view, if it had been taken seriously the situation would have changed, 'because we wouldn't stop ourselves, someone needed to stop us.' This evaluation, coming from the perpetrator's own mouth, suggests that the assumption 'children sort it out among themselves' — at least for this narrative — does not hold true; where bullying is rewarding for the perpetrator, an external boundary is needed.

Another important feature of the portrait is that awareness does not progress linearly throughout the interview. The athlete at some points can retroactively name their behaviours, at others — especially when their own class-based stigma and privileged position are concerned — do not make the same analysis. At the close of the interview, they also soften the general tone of the narrative: they state that the environment was 'really' fun, that 'nobody held a grudge against anyone' in the team, and say 'if someone is always being taken shots at, they probably just can't adapt'. This turn shows that the awareness that emerged in the interview is fragile and that the justifications that transfer responsibility to the victim can easily return. As required by reflexive thematic analysis, it should be stated that the evaluations in the interview are not independent of the researcher's questions; the interview may have opened a space for the athlete to re-evaluate their behaviour for the first time. The finding value also lies here: a young person in the perpetrator position re-evaluating their behaviour for the first time in an interview setting, and this evaluation still being incomplete even at the end of the interview, suggests that the structures making such an evaluation possible and ensuring its continuity in sports environments may be limited.

3.3.1.8. Theme Summary

Some of the common forms of peer bullying in sport can be constructed with a deniable margin that leaves the perpetrator room to retreat; this margin operates in both verbal ('it was a joke') and relational ('it was a tactic') forms.



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Young athletes can define the boundary and produce a similar criterion: touching something that cannot be changed. In the narratives, the problem appears not so much as the boundary being unknown but as the authority to define it not residing with the victim. The fact that an athlete in the perpetrator position cannot construct the same distinction suggests that the criterion does not arise spontaneously and needs to be taught.

Laughter can operate for the victim as a shield, for the perpetrator as an approval, and for bystanders sometimes as a form of protection; this multiple function both sustains the harm and leaves it without evidence. The observations 'look at the face of the one who receives it' and 'the child whose eyes aren't laughing' are evaluated as operationalisable indicators for prevention.

The deniable margin can be constructed not only with the word 'joke' but also with the appearance of a positive activity: in coach narratives, seniors 'looking as if they're teaching something to younger ones' are described as one of the forms most difficult for adults to notice.

Nickname is one of the least costly forms of deniability: it is constructed with a single word, repeated daily, and can be taken back with 'it's only a name'. Harm does not emerge in individual repetitions but in the accumulation; a coach still remembering a nickname they heard from their own coach ten years later is an adult testimony to this permanence. Address and language rules (karate dojo, kickboxing club in Portugal) can limit nickname culture.

Protection operates in the data as a shield economy: harm can be produced with a justification of protection, performance can only provide protection against changeable 'flaws', and the shield can be put in front of someone else when needed. Coach narratives suggest that a portion of the shield is distributed by the adult's warning and disciplinary practices.

Relational exclusion is experienced by participants as more lasting than physical harm and is mentioned together with dropout narratives. Pass exclusion can be noticed by coaches; however, it is conveyed that individual warnings have limited effect, while structural interventions targeting the rules of the game or squad decisions can be more result-producing.

Bystander silence appears to be one of the conditions for exclusion and mockery to be able to operate. In the perpetrator's description, responsibility is divided within the group ('I only laughed'), while the one who tries to stop faces the risk of stigmatisation; according to the same athlete, a single 'enough' could have stopped the group.



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Adults can rename the phenomenon as 'grouping', 'competition rehearsal', or 'discipline'; the withdrawal of the naming can also withdraw the obligation to intervene. Counter-examples (club with code of conduct, parent who conveys a criterion) point to the pre-clear definition of the criterion being able to narrow the deniable margin.

Partner-country data overlap broadly with Turkish data in terms of this theme's criteria. Croatian, Slovenian, and Portuguese sample athletes similarly produce the criteria of distribution of laughter, repetition, and reciprocity; Slovenian coaches discuss that pass exclusion 'always has a ready tactical excuse'; in Portugal a manager conveys that pass exclusion becomes prominent in the 11–14 age range, while another manager-coach has banned weight-related words in their club. Diverging points are that several athletes describe non-responsiveness as a deliberate strategy and some athletes state they cannot distinguish between tactical and personal; it is evaluated that these differences may be related not so much to the criterion being unknown as to how much the environment permits naming.

3.3.2. T2 — '*I Went Through It, You Will Too*': *The Account That Never Closes*

In the report's conceptual framework, hazing was discussed as a group belonging ritual (2.2.3), while seniority hierarchy was addressed as the structural ground of bullying (2.3.1, 2.3.3). Field data allows these two discussions to be brought together around a concept developed from one athlete's own expression. A football athlete's definition of the seniority burden as 'a kind of debt' provided the ground for using the debt concept as an analytic concept in the analysis. The concept is not the shared word of participants; it was derived from this expression and developed to name the pattern in other narratives.

The core claim of this theme can be formulated as follows: in young athletes' narratives, seniority hierarchy can be constructed not only as a ranking but also as an obligation whose reciprocation is expected; in participants' own metaphor, pain changes hands while the account never closes. While athletes criticise the regime, the tendency to transfer the same burden when seniority is acquired is also visible in the same narratives. Adult narratives, meanwhile, most often defend the regime or express that they can intervene in it only to a limited extent; for this reason, the claim is built with reference only to athlete narratives, while coach and manager narratives are used to understand the conditions under which the regime persists and is broken.



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3.3.2.1. The Establishment of the Debt: Forms of Hazing

In the data, hazing does not appear in a single form but as a repertoire varying according to the bodily and spatial characteristics of the discipline. A water polo athlete recounts the most structured form, even giving the ritual a name:

'New arrivals in the first training session are forcibly dunked in the water, they call it something like "baptism". Also in the locker room the new kid is made to sing a song. Both were done to me. During the dunking I was very scared because water went in my eyes that day, I panicked, but they didn't let go right away. "Man up" they said. I heard that "man up" a lot in this sport. As if being scared is forbidden, as if a child who gets scared isn't really a child.'

— TR-Athlete5-Waterpolo-M-17

This narrative presents two components of hazing together: a bodily endurance test (dunking) and a public humiliation display (being made to sing). The name given to the ritual — 'baptism' — is noteworthy; borrowed from a religious rite of passage, this naming can frame the act not as harm but as an act of acceptance. In the athlete's narrative, panic became not a reason to stop the ritual but a reason to continue enduring it with the 'man up' warning; this point intersects with the emotion regime addressed in T3. A judo athlete conveys the form of the same burden in combat sports and how it can be compounded for female athletes:

'With us [...] the hierarchy is very clear of course, belt hierarchy is clear. Upper belts make the new arrival do fall practice, "endurance" they say, and throw them to the floor for hours. The new arrival carries equipment, is the first to lay the mat. I did these things when I was a beginner, it was heavy but I endured. In women's judo there's an interesting thing, you have to endure twice — both judo's toughness and "being tough despite being a girl". So you're both a rookie and a girl, that's a double burden and you carry it.'

— TR-Athlete11-Judo-F-16

The athlete's naming of 'double burden' points in their own language to the place where seniority hierarchy intersects with gender. The same athlete, while elaborating on this difference, notes that the male rookie is only tested with 'will they be able to endure?', while the female rookie additionally deals with the constant message 'this place isn't for you, girls don't do judo'. From the athlete's narrative perspective, the first test is temporary while the second is more continuous; because it puts the right to be present in the environment on the agenda every day. In team sports, the debt is constructed in narratives not so much as a physical test but as service and obedience. A basketball athlete conveys how this service can extend outside the field and into the digital domain:

'With us the first rule is you make things easier for the seniors. You collect balls, distribute water. Outside the field there are more performative things. Like liking their posts, saying "senior you were amazing today"... [...] Then there's pressure to give the ball to the star player on the field. Once I took a shot instead of the star, it was a goal, the stands clapped but that senior gave me such a look that for the rest of the match no one passed to me.'



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The last sentence of the narrative suggests that the debt regime and the deniable exclusion addressed in T1 can come together in the same scene: the violation of the seniority rule is sanctioned not with an explicit punishment but by cutting passes. Such a sanction is invisible, difficult to prove, and hard to object to. The transfer of service to social media also shows that the debt may not be limited to training hours, potentially extending into the athlete's everyday digital behaviour. A taekwondo athlete directly names the possibility that seniority can turn into an arbitrary authority: against a new arrival 'you can make them do anything'; the discursive counterpart is taking on the air of 'I'm a black belt, who are you?' (TR-Athlete8-Taekwondo-M-17). This expression indicates that seniority can move from being a technical ranking to becoming a declaration of personal superiority. The same athlete adds that what determines this transformation is not the belt system itself but the boundary set by the adult: 'The belt is the same belt after all... But what does the coach allow, what do they stop — the difference lies there in my view.' The caveat the athlete immediately adds ('At least not when the coach is around') also serves as a reminder that the rule's effect may be limited to the adult's field of vision; this observation should be kept in mind when reading the counter-examples addressed in 3.3.2.5.

An important observation regarding how hazing is recounted by athletes comes from the coach focus group. A participant who works as a coach in karate and kickboxing and has recently stopped competing, speaking from their own time as an athlete, recounts that the rough jokes in male locker rooms are rarely labelled negatively by athletes themselves:

'The incredibly rough jokes done in that male locker room, those are really, in my view, negative things. But very, very few athletes themselves can say that these were negative, that it was a negative experience for them. Many of them, even if they actually felt bad — and we don't know, I wasn't in their position before — they generally recount it as if it were something positive. I mean those wet towels [...] In my view there's something psychological there. There's a very high psychological threshold there.'

— TR-Coach-FocusGroup1

The situation the coach names 'psychological threshold' points to the distance between the weight of the experience at the time it was lived and the way it is subsequently recounted. The participant explicitly states that they don't know how this distance is bridged and grounds a portion of what they relay in what they have heard; this caveat requires reading the observation not as a definitive explanation but as a sign. Nevertheless, the observation suggests two possible mechanisms: naming the practice negatively carries the risk of exclusion from the group, and narrating an endured pain as 'positive' operates as a way of making it meaningful. The second mechanism overlaps with the 'let it

not be for nothing' logic that athletes describe in 3.3.2.2. Another experience the same coach recounts from their own time as an athlete also shows that the acceptance moment does not necessarily have to be demeaning: after their first Turkish championship, the coach asked them to bring the medal over, this turned out to be a joke applied to everyone, and the experience made the participant feel 'sweet and belonging'. The difference between the two narratives appears to lie in who, to whom, and at what cost the ritual is applied: one is a joke initiated by an adult, applied equally to everyone, and humiliating no one; the other is an application in which peers test the new arrival's threshold of endurance.

The forms of acceptance rituals in partner-country data similarly present a repertoire: a public display (singing, dancing) and service for a period of time. In the Croatian sample, athletes list these practices while also showing a tendency to retroactively minimise them:

Had to do a whole embarrassing routine in front of the team when I joined, laugh about it now, hated it then.

— HR-ATHLETE-03

The same pattern recurs in other narratives: 'seems funny now, was awful at the time' (HR-ATHLETE-07), 'rookies carried bags for a month; annoying at the time but no one was really harmed' (HR-ATHLETE-05). In the Slovenian sample, practices are similarly minimised — 'ours was pretty mild, singing in front of the team; embarrassing but not cruel' (SLO-ATHLETE-18) — but several athletes also note that a scale exists: 'it was harmless, but I've heard of teams where "welcome" goes too far' (SLO-ATHLETE-17, SLO-ATHLETE-21, SLO-ATHLETE-25). This retroactive minimisation can be read in the same direction as the Turkish coach's 'psychological threshold' observation: the experience is recounted with the weight at the time it was lived partially stripped away. A Croatian athlete directly names the function behind this minimisation:

Rookie rituals get called tradition, but really they're a way of testing who can handle a bit of humiliation.

— HR-ATHLETE-04

This expression can be read as an independent counterpart of the 'test' function identified in the Turkish data; the assessment that the 'tradition' naming conceals the testing function of the practice appears in both data sets. The Portuguese data, meanwhile, presents a range showing the extent to which the same ritual can be evaluated differently by athletes. The corridor ritual (túnel) among football-playing girls is defined as a way of immediately including the new athlete in the team ('um momento de inserir logo a atleta dentro da equipa') and defended with the justification of its



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contribution to team unity; in the same group, one athlete does not find it right for the ritual to be applied to only one person and adds that always being targeted alone could make the new arrival feel bad (PT-ATHLETE-04). A male football captain also recounts that a new arrival or a player with a birthday faces a slap on the back of the neck while passing through the corridor, that this is done 'lightly' and has continued 'for many years in many clubs': 'nós damos um cachaco, assim, de leve, mas nada, nunca abusamos' (PT-ATHLETE-02). In both narratives, the legitimacy of the practice rests on claims of moderation and tradition; the criticism the Croatian athlete directs at the 'tradition' naming targets precisely these two foundations. How the same ritual appears through the manager's eyes is addressed in 3.3.2.4.

3.3.2.2. *'The Account Never Closes, It Only Changes Hands'*

The core finding of the theme is the athletes' own explanation for why the regime persists. When asked in the interview 'your generation sees how exhausting this is but still continues; why?', a football athlete constructs the logic of the regime in their own eyes in detail:

'Because, coach, when you're carrying that equipment and going through that trouble, you want there to be a payback for it. If after you've carried it, when it's your turn, you don't make others carry it, it's as if what you went through was for nothing. Like a kind of debt. It was done to you, and you do it to someone else so the account closes. Stupid actually, because no one's account ever closes, that pain, that suffering only changes hands.'

— TR-Athlete1-Football-M-17

This passage offers a more concrete mechanism in addition to approaches explaining hazing as 'tradition' or 'belonging ritual'. The athlete describes the harm endured as operating with a kind of sunk cost logic: it needs to be transferred so that the pain suffered is not wasted. However, in their own words, the transfer does not close the account; pain does not disappear, it only changes location. The athlete's own evaluation ('stupid actually') suggests that the regime is not fully defended even by those who sustain it. The same athlete also constructs the reason why the regime cannot be broken not as a lack of courage but as a cost calculation: 'Being the first person to break the order is very difficult. Everyone looks at you "who do you think you are to break this". I mean many want to break it, but no one has the courage to throw the first stone.' This sentence suggests that the regime may rest not on a consensus of values but on a situation in which everyone assumes others are agreeable, and no one wants to bear the cost of the first objection. This functioning evokes a situation in which silence can be read as group approval and no one wants to take on the cost of the first objection; the peer bullying literature also discusses the fact that an important portion of students do not privately approve of bullying yet do not take steps to change group norms, and that this attitude-behaviour discrepancy can be a lever for intervention (Salmivalli, 2010). A intervention assumption that



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decomposition can accelerate in environments where norms are spoken about openly can be proposed; current data is not suited to testing this assumption, but the counter-examples recounted in 3.3.2.5 offer a clue in this direction (see Section 6 (Curriculum)).

The debt transfer is also visible in a similar language in the narrative of the side that applies it. A swimming athlete who states they belong to one of the club's established families and that they have gained seniority recounts what they do to new arrivals:

'The seniors become the ones with authority by the pool. You can say "do this, bring that" to the new arrival. I'm now one of the seniors, and also from the club's established family, so I have both at once. I'll admit it, I did to the newcomers what was done to me. "It was done to me too", that was the reason. Sounds ridiculous when I say it now but you don't think that way at the time. [...] It felt like it was my turn. It even felt fair. It was done to me too, I went through it, now it's my turn. Not as if I was doing something wrong, as if I was claiming my right. As if they owed me a debt and I was collecting it.'

— TR-Athlete10-Swimming-M-16

The debt metaphor that the football athlete uses critically appears here, independently and from the mouth of an athlete who applies the regime: one says 'the account never closes' while the other says 'I was collecting it'. This overlap from two different disciplines and two different positions indicates that the debt concept is not merely a frame constructed by the analysis but corresponds to a logic organising participants' experience. The expression 'it was done to me too' functions here as a justification formula: the rightfulness of the act is derived not from something the other person did but from the fact that the perpetrator was subjected to the same thing in the past. In terms of Bandura's (1991) moral disengagement theory, this can be read as a combination of reframing the act ('I was claiming my right') and transferring responsibility to the past and to the rule. The second element the athlete conveys suggests that this justification is constructed not individually but collectively: that no one said 'this is wrong', that a statement 'let the newcomer go through some trouble, they'll become a man' circulated, and that 'when everyone believes it, it seems right to you too'. The pattern that Gini, Thornberg and Pozzoli (2020) discuss as collective moral disengagement here finds a counterpart from the field: the justification lives not in individuals one by one but in a sentence the group shares. The sentence the same athlete constructs while recounting their own position in the rituals applied to new arrivals also shows the emotional investment that can accompany the debt transfer: 'I'd be at the very front. The one who has waited their turn comes to the front with even more appetite.' The fact that the person who has 'paid' their debt moves not to the position of waiting but to the most eager applier suggests that the regime can be sustained not only with compulsion but with a sense of



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entitlement. A judo athlete's narrative reveals another form of the transfer — that the gaze as well as the behaviour can be taken over:

'For years I worked with fury against those "rubbish" comments, I said "you'll see, I'll crush you too". In the end I grew strong, no one could say that to me anymore. But one day I looked and I was looking at a weak newcomer with the same eyes, without calling them "rubbish" I was looking down on them inside, and actually I had accepted the logic of that system. "Strong is valuable, weak is worthless." I actually didn't beat them, I joined them.'

— TR-Athlete3-Judo-M-18

This stands out as one of the theme's most analytically dense expressions. From the athlete's narrative perspective, the victim's resistance can reproduce the regime to the extent that it accepts the regime's value criterion (strong–valuable / weak–worthless). What the athlete gained is a position in the hierarchy; the hierarchy itself has not changed. In Bourdieusian terms, the struggle has turned into gaining position within the field without questioning the field's rules; the relation of domination is internalised by the one who resisted it. The expression 'I joined them' also shows that this internalisation was subsequently noticed by the athlete and was 'shattering' for them; the difference from the swimming athlete's narrative above lies here: one lives the transfer as an entitlement while the other can retroactively name it. Coach narratives show that the transfer can also take place not in the form of an explicit service demand but under the appearance of 'help'. A taekwondo coach recounts the intervention of older athletes with younger ones:

'But this intervention by older ones with younger ones happens to an incredible degree. [...] While talking to a small child, sometimes they think they're doing something good for a child younger than themselves. But this time because a coach hasn't said it, of course when someone else comes to you and tries to tell you things in a commanding way, the younger one also naturally takes a stance against the older one. [...] Your hand was here like this, your hand wasn't right there. [...] But we of course ban this at a certain point.'

— TR-Coach-FocusGroup2

In the narrative, the difference between the senior positioning themselves as 'the one doing good' and the younger experiencing the same act as 'a command' gains meaning when read together with the senpai example addressed in 3.3.2.5: a technical correction can be support given without expecting anything in return in one environment and a display of seniority in another. According to the coach's narrative, what is decisive is whether the correction is authorised by an adult and in what manner it is done. The same coach, recalling their own time as an athlete, also notes that there was 'an obedient expectation' from upper groups towards younger ones and that younger ones moved 'even in training, cautiously'; they add that changing this because it does not look like bullying from the outside still challenges them. The same mechanism, in the form of hurtful expressions embedded within sentences that appear to be teaching younger ones, was discussed in T1 (3.3.1.2). A brief expression from a



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coach with twenty years in water polo shows that these practices are known to adults too: in the locker room 'cutting the psychology's hair, for want of a better phrase, beating — violence, all of that happens. It's not that it doesn't happen' (TR-Coach-FocusGroup2). The same coach states that they come to know this 'every coach has a spy'; another coach, upon hearing the suggestion of having a 'spy' in the team, states that they were surprised and prefer their athletes to trust each other, for problems to come not through this means but by being spoken about openly. The difference between the two attitudes raises the question of whether the adult's knowledge of areas away from the eye is based on surveillance networks or a culture of reporting; this question is directly related to the silence and reporting discussion addressed in T4.

The construction of seniority through waiting, and its unquestioning acceptance, is also a recurring pattern in partner-country data. In the Croatian sample, athletes describe this as a time economy: 'seniority carries weight in the locker room; that's how things work, the young wait their turn' (HR-ATHLETE-05) and 'the longer you've been here the more you're listened to; the rest of us just queue up without arguing' (HR-ATHLETE-02). In the Slovenian sample, the fact that the reason for the waiting is never explained is voiced: 'I go last on the balance beam and no one explains why, it's just so' (SLO-ATHLETE-06). These expressions suggest that the regime may not need a separate justification to be sustained — the order itself can stand in for justification. The unchallengeable nature of seniority is also noted in the same narratives: 'experience directly translates to influence and challenging it doesn't go well for newcomers' (HR-ATHLETE-04). In the Croatian coach focus group, a handball coach interprets the Turkish data's 'it was done to me too' formula as a warning sign: 'Some players say "we all went through this", but that sentence is already a warning. It means tradition may be stronger than the child's well-being' (HR-COACH-11). According to the same coach, in a toxic hierarchy, acceptance depends on how much humiliation the new arrival can endure. This interpretation suggests that the invocation of shared history itself — depending on who says it and for what purpose — is a readable sign from the prevention perspective.

3.3.2.3. *The Class Form of Debt: 'Let the Scholarship Kid Carry All of It'*

In the data, hazing is not distributed with a single criterion. A basketball athlete conveys how the seniority burden is applied unequally according to economic position:

'For new arrivals there's collecting balls, carrying equipment, things like that, considered normal. But something extra was done to me, like "the scholarship kid can carry all of it". So it was implied that I was "indebted", as if because of my scholarship I was supposed to serve them. This was very heavy. The other new kids carried it once, I carried it continuously. The coach didn't see these things, they happened in the locker room.'



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In the athlete's narrative, two debts stack on top of each other: seniority debt and economic debt. While seniority debt is an obligation expected to close over time (and one that, in athletes' own words, doesn't close), economic debt is experienced by the athlete as a burden that will never close; because its foundation is not a stage to pass through but an unchanging position. For this reason, the same practice is temporary for other new athletes but continuous for this athlete. The same athlete's another finding directly states that seniority can become intertwined with capital: 'with us seniority is also a bit mixed with money. I mean not only the older one, but the wealthy one also establishes a superiority.' The same inequality takes another form when viewed from a privileged position. The swimming athlete whose narrative was included as the one 'collecting' the debt in 3.3.2.2, when recounting the source of their position in the club, says that performance is not the sole determinant:

'Also, we're a family that knows this place. My father swam in this club, friends with half the people in management. I've been here since I was born. The senior at the canteen calls me by my first name for instance. Where the equipment is, what each coach likes, who you ask for what, I know all of this. Performance-wise I'm in the middle actually, not very bright. But here it's not just about performance.'

The athlete's sentence 'Performance-wise I'm in the middle actually... But here it's not just about performance' suggests that in the participant's own experience, the seniority hierarchy can be constructed not only through sporting achievement but also through family capital. The sources the athlete lists — the father's club history, acquaintance with management, knowledge of who you ask for what — can be read in Bourdieusian terms as the field-level counterpart of social and cultural capital. This reading suggests that what determines who will be the creditor and who the debtor in the debt regime may not only be seniority — the distribution of capital may also participate in this determination. The same athlete also conveys that target selection is made according to this distribution and is known without being spoken: when asked why a child from a well-known club family was never targeted, the answer is: 'Their family is known in the club, the coach watches over them. If we said a word, they'd call us the next day. I mean we knew very well who had who behind them. We knew without ever discussing it.' In the same interview they also convey that they addressed a scholarship-supported athlete with a nickname they had started (see T1, 3.3.1.7).

The knowledge of 'who has who behind them' can be read as an immunity map operating within the group without being written into any rule text. In the narratives, harm is not randomly distributed — it tends towards those who have no institutional counterpart behind them. This completes the



basketball athlete's 'let the scholarship kid carry all of it' expression: one recounts why they carried extra burden, the other recounts who never carries any burden. When the two narratives are placed side by side, it is seen that the difference between the apparent rule of the debt regime (newness) and its actual rule (capital) becomes visible in the experience of these two participants. In partner-country data, the invisibility of this privilege is also supported by manager narratives. A Croatian manager, while listing the constituent elements of locker room hierarchy, also counts family visibility:

Locker room hierarchy is strong: starters, substitutes, physically mature boys, newcomers from smaller clubs, and players whose parents are very present.

— HR-MANAGER-03

On the adult side, a completing link to this equation appears in a parent's narrative. A football father defines toughness as a purchased service and thus directly ties the burden to payment:

'Our coach is tough. He shouts, scolds, speaks harshly when necessary. I'm very pleased with this. I want the coach to be tough. A soft coach spoils the child, my money goes to waste. [...] I tell my son "if the coach is shouting at you, be happy, it means he's taking you seriously". Once the coach said something very harsh to my son, humiliated him in front of everyone. My wife was very upset, said "let me go talk to them". I didn't let her.'

— TR-Parent3-Football-Father-Istanbul

In this narrative, toughness is presented not as a risk but as a paid-for output; therefore objecting to it could mean reducing the quality of the service received. The parent's blocking of intervention can also be read from this framework. The same payment relationship's conversion into inequality among athletes is also seen in a basketball coach's experience of a parent who pays dues objecting to a scholarship athlete remaining on the team (see T6, 3.3.6.2). In this theme, class appears not only as an axis of inequality among athletes but also as a market relationship that can determine the direction of adult intervention. The class dimension of the debt is addressed as a whole in T6; here only the aspect that intersects with the seniority regime has been conveyed.

3.3.2.4. *The Adult Side: Converting Debt into Pedagogy*

In adult narratives, the debt regime is most often not hidden but openly defended. One of the clear differences between T1 and T2 emerges here: in T1, the name of the harm is taken back ('it was a joke', 'grouping') — that is, the act is removed from the category of harm. In T2, the practice itself is acknowledged — it is stated openly that the new arrival carries equipment, is scolded, is not taken seriously for a while — but its outcome is renamed: apprenticeship, discipline, military discipline. In one, the existence of the act; in the other, the harmful nature of the act can be placed outside discussion.



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'The atmosphere here is clear: this is not a family, this is an army. I don't like the word family; everyone hugs, everyone cries, this is not such a place. There is a hierarchy here: coach at the top, captain below, experienced ones below that, newcomer at the very bottom. Everyone will know their place. If the new kid starts holding forth the moment they arrive, I'll put them in line in two days.'

— **TR-Manager1-Football-M-Istanbul**

The same manager meets the burden athletes describe as 'debt' with the concept of 'apprenticeship' and grounds it in a historical legitimacy: the new arrival is 'a rookie, and a rookie will go through their dues'; the model of the apprentice who grows up being scolded by the side of the master is transferred to the sports environment. In this way, the cycle that athletes describe with 'no one's account ever closes' is presented in adult language as a completed and purposeful educational process. A participant who manages in judo and wrestling disciplines equips the same burden with a moral content and explicitly distinguishes it from service:

'We call the new kid a "novice". The novice arrives, first wipes the mat, carries equipment, brings water to the older brothers. This is not a service, this is discipline. With us respect for elders is the beginning of everything; without acquiring that I won't teach you technique, and even if I do it won't take hold. The child goes like that for a year, no one smiles at their face, no one takes them seriously.'

— **TR-Manager2-Judo-Wrestling-M-Trabzon**

The sentence 'this is not a service, this is discipline' is a clear example of reframing: while the act remains the same its category changes, and a questionable practice turns into a pedagogy that is difficult to question. This narrative was briefly mentioned in T1 as an example of the naming mechanism; here the narrative's function of legitimising the seniority burden is addressed. The last sentence of the narrative makes the cost of this function explicit — for a year 'no one smiles at their face, no one takes them seriously'. This is the institutionally prescribed form of the relational exclusion addressed in T1: exclusion is presented not as a deviation but as a defined part of the process.

'Let's say they did nothing wrong, they're just a target all the time because they're weak. Then this is also a warning to that child: "Learn to defend yourself." Someone needs to say this to them. I'll say it if necessary. Look I'm not a ruthless man but I'm realistic. This world eats the weak, I didn't create this. I'm not going to lie to the child.'

— **TR-Parent1-Basketball-Father-Istanbul**

In this formulation, victimisation can move from being a reason for intervention to becoming an indicator of deficiency; responsibility is taken from the perpetrator and environment and transferred to the victim. The expression 'I didn't create this' allows the adult to move their own role outside the order: the order is accepted as given, and what falls to the adult is seen only as preparing the child for it. In Bandura's (1991) terms, this can be read as a combination of loading the blame onto the victim



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and transferring responsibility to 'the way of the world'. A taekwondo mother similarly constructs a similar justification through the logic of individual sport; she finds the tough competition on the mat 'natural and even beneficial', saying 'life is also individual like this' (TR-Parent4-Taekwondo-Mother-Istanbul).

Coach narratives express not so much a defence of the regime as the limit of their authority in facing it. A young female basketball coach recounts that she cannot discipline a senior and leader athlete and that this is blocked by the club:

'Especially in the older ages one becomes a leader and the club for instance doesn't find it appropriate for me to discipline that player... They discriminate against teammates and I can't discipline them. ...The club says "no coach, you have to respect them, you'll correct them". But without drawing their boundary...'

— TR-Coach-FocusGroup2

The narrative indicates that the debt regime can be protected not only among peers but also at the institutional level: the senior athlete's position can precede the coach's disciplinary authority. Another noteworthy point in the coach's narrative is that the small age difference between them and the athlete and the absence of club support combine to make the coach someone whose limits can be crossed in the team's eyes; the absence of disciplinary authority can also transform the adult into a step in the hierarchy. In the same focus group, a coach with twenty years of experience in water polo responds to this picture with an example where institutional support is reversed:

'We actually expelled the entire 94 generation, all 17 players together. 17 out of 17. Why? [...] I catch one of them smoking, I catch another applying violence to someone younger. I catch another doing I don't know what, you know many things happen in team sports especially in the locker room. [...] But everyone knows that the fate lived by the person from the 2015 birth year, that's 20 generations before, is known.'

— TR-Coach-FocusGroup2

When the two coach narratives are read side by side, it is seen that the coach's disciplinary capacity is experienced largely as depending on the space the club grants them; the second coach also emphasises that the extent of disciplinary power is largely determined by the support the club grants the coach (see T6, 3.3.6.4). However, the narrative also requires a critical reading. First, the sanction is collective, not individual: an entire age group was expelled together despite it containing athletes who displayed different behaviours. Second, in the coach's justification, behaviour and performance become intertwined; they also add that the group placing 'second in Türkiye' meant 'failure' to them. Third, the source of deterrence is not a learning process but a story transmitted from generation to generation within the club: younger age groups know not the rules but the 'fate' of the group '20



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generations before'. Such an institutional memory can limit behaviour; however, it also carries the risk of establishing a fear-based boundary rather than replacing the seniority regime with a responsibility-based norm. The coach themselves acknowledges that these are 'very serious accusations' for 16-year-old children. For this reason, the narrative is both a strong example of the necessity of authority and a question left open about how that authority is used (see 3.3.2.5).

In partner-country data, coaches describe the same dynamic from their observation positions. In Croatia, a judo coach notes that the strongest athletes 'start deciding who to work with in randori in my place' (HR-COACH-01, SLO-COACH-01); the same coach also recounts an 'informal testing period' the new arrival faces: senior athletes deliberately load harder onto the new arrival during randori, doing this 'not to harm but to see what they're made of'. The coach's expression 'I used to think there was no problem with this, now I watch more closely' shows that the testing can be re-evaluated in the adult's eye over time as well. Another coach in the same focus group takes a clearer stance: 'I don't think that testing period is not a problem; in my view this is nothing more than hazing with a training excuse' (HR-COACH-02). The difference between the two expressions suggests that how the same practice is named — between 'training' and 'hazing' — can determine the adult's threshold for intervention.

In manager narratives, the distinction is tied to an institutional criterion. A Croatian manager draws the boundary clearly in acceptance practices: 'we don't encourage acceptance rituals; carrying a bottle or ball could be a team task, but turning the new arrival into an object of entertainment is unacceptable' (HR-MANAGER-02). In the Slovenian sample, the boundary between discipline and bullying is similarly defined: 'discipline is following instructions and training safely; the moment a correction turns into mocking the child's appearance or movement it becomes bullying' (SLO-MANAGER-02). A Portuguese participant managing youth football defines compulsion as the boundary itself: 'there's no point in forcing a child who's embarrassed to climb on a chair and sing in front of everyone. There's no point in forcing a 10-12-year-old child to shower naked if they don't want to' (PT-MANAGER-05). The same manager finds the corridor ritual for birthdays 'stupid' but notes that the ritual is 'established' and that everyone does it; they describe their own role as limited to conveying their view and trying to explain that this could be dangerous. This narrative shows that a practice can continue without adult approval, that there is an intermediate zone in which non-approval does not convert into prohibition. A Portuguese coach running a kickboxing club prefers to close this intermediate zone: 'Não há praxe, é proibido' (no hazing, it's forbidden); the justification being that harm can spread over



time — a bad joke that seems 'nothing' today can 'stay with children a few years later' (PT-MANAGER-03).

Parent narratives also support this distinction. In the Croatian sample, two parents directly evaluate acceptance jokes as a risk — 'rough jokes are unnecessary' (HR-PARENT-02), 'I see acceptance jokes as a risk' (HR-PARENT-03) — while in the Slovenian sample, one parent notes their discomfort while adding that they don't know of such a tradition in their own club (SLO-PARENT-02, SLO-PARENT-03). This picture suggests that the explicit defence of acceptance rituals in adult narratives in partner countries is more limited compared to Turkish data; however, the Portuguese manager's 'stupid but established' evaluation also serves as a reminder that the scarcity of defence does not mean the practice has disappeared.

Adult narratives in Türkiye carry out a similar operation from football, judo-wrestling, basketball, and taekwondo disciplines with different words: army, apprenticeship, discipline, realism, and individualism. The common element that stands out in these narratives is the reading of the child's current harm as an investment in a future gain. This reading can make intervention appear not only unnecessary but contrary to the child's interest. It can be considered that one of the institutional foundations of the cycle athletes describe as 'the account never closes' may be sought here.

3.3.2.5. *Breaking the Chain: Environments Where Debt Is Converted into Responsibility*

The data also contains examples suggesting that the debt-transfer regime may not be inevitable. Environments where seniority produces responsibility rather than harm appear in narratives, and the common element that stands out in these environments is an adult rule that explicitly reverses the seniority–value equation. A karate athlete directly conveys this principle:

'There's an order of belts of course, black belt at the top. But ours don't use seniority to make you serve them, more to teach you. Upper belts show the new arrival movements, help them. Of course sometimes there's a bit of showing off but when the coach sees this they immediately give a warning. "If your belt is high your responsibility is also high" they say. I love that sentence a lot. At school the strong one always crushed. Here the strong protects, at least that's how it should be.'

— TR-Athlete6-Karate-M-15

The formula 'if your belt is high your responsibility is also high' constructs the opposite of the debt regime: seniority is defined not as a credit but as an obligation. The same athlete also describes the counterpart of this in their own position — despite being 'always the bottom child' because they are the youngest in age, the reason they feel safe is that power is defined as responsibility, not entitlement. The caveat at the end of the athlete's sentence ('at least that's how it should be') shows not that the



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rule always works without exception but that it tells what the environment measures itself against. What is decisive in the athlete's narrative is not so much the characters of the children as the fact that the rule has been clearly set and stood behind. The coach rule a taekwondo athlete conveys operates in the same direction: 'Belt doesn't mean putting on airs' (TR-Athlete8-Taekwondo-M-17). Two similar rules from different disciplines and clubs suggest that what may be decisive is not the belt system itself but the adult definition loaded onto it. Another karate athlete conveys how a similar environment is experienced by a new arrival and records a sentence that reverses the direction of the transfer:

'Upper belts treat us very well. When I first came a purple belt senior showed me everything, used to say "don't be scared, everyone started from the beginning". They call them senpai, meaning senior. Our senpais help, they don't belittle. Of course sometimes there are digs that aren't devastating. If I do something wrong they don't laugh, they show it again. They always tell me "don't rush, the belt comes with time". This is very reassuring.'

— TR-Athlete14-Karate-F-14

The difference between 'everyone started from the beginning' and 'it was done to me too' is such as to summarise the main tension of this theme. Both expressions refer to the same shared past; however, one produces solidarity, the other produces transfer. The same moment, the same experience can give rise to two opposing norms. The narratives suggest that what may be decisive is not so much the experience itself as the meaning loaded onto it, and that this meaning can be shaped by the adults in the environment. A basketball athlete conveys through a concrete figure that the chain can also be broken at the peer level:

'In our team there was a genuinely different senior [...]. She never played this game. When I first arrived she pulled me aside and said "don't be scared, everyone started like this, it will pass". There were matches where she had me watch her footage, she taught tactics, she asked for nothing in return.'

— TR-Athlete2-Basketball-F-16

The expression 'she asked for nothing in return' gives the criterion in the athlete's eyes for stepping outside the debt regime: gratuitousness. A female football athlete has converted this into a conscious stance from the captain position — 'I immediately take new arrivals under my wing. Because I remember the loneliness of my first day, I don't want anyone to experience it.' Here the past experience becomes not a reason for transfer but a reason for intervention. These two narratives also offer a contribution to the discussion of the role of the senior in a bystander position: the bullying literature shows that defending peers is most often treated as a matter of individual courage, yet the group's norms and the defender's status significantly influence this behaviour (Salmivalli, 2010). A study examining the moral courage of athletes in the sports context also points to intervention being



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shaped by the athlete's position within the group and the possible costs of this (Gözmen Elmas, Elmas & Aşcı, 2026). Within this framework, seniority can both sustain the debt regime as a power, and as the position bearing the lowest cost of intervention, also be the most suitable ground for breaking it.

A female manager working in volleyball and handball recounts through a reckoning with her own sporting past that the chain can also be broken at the adult level:

'During the years I played I can't remember anyone ever asking me "are you okay". There were periods when I hid my injury, because if I said it I'd be dropped from the squad. A friend had a serious problem, everyone knew, no one spoke. In the end that girl left sport. In another team we'd see the coach training through shouting and humiliation, we'd say "tough coach", it was normal. I'm a child of that period. My biggest concern here today is that none of the things we went through happen to these children.'

— **TR-Manager3-Volleyball/Handball-F-Istanbul**

Environments without acceptance rituals appear in both Turkish and partner-country data. A volleyball coach recounts that their club has no such practice and that bonding is ensured through structured activities:

'In our team? No, no such things. We do something usually: a few times a year cinema, a film... we have a conference room, we have breakfast there and such. By then a month and a half later they've already got used to things. Also the new kids coming from outside, there's a dormitory, they stay in the dormitory.'

— **TR-Coach-FocusGroup1**

The analytic value of this narrative is that it shows the acceptance process can be built not through ritual but through time and shared activity. The same coach also notes that they pair new arrivals with experienced athletes as 'working partners' and try to select the captain consciously; these arrangements position the senior alongside rather than above the new arrival. In the same focus group, a basketball coach conveys that in choosing a captain they prefer players who have played more, spent more years at the club, and know 'the club culture'. This criterion, by positioning captaincy as a reward of seniority, can both limit and reproduce the regime depending on the nature of the club culture. Another focus group's basketball coach's view that the captain should be not the most successful player but the athlete who can most motivate the team and find the middle ground with everyone shows that this tension is also discussed among coaches. A participant working as an assistant coach in women's football also serves as a reminder that the absence of ritual may not mean acceptance has taken place: they state that acceptance within the team most often remains 'nominal' ('I think it remains nominal'), that this can be shown to coaches as if acceptance has taken place, and that it can continue in the form of not passing to the non-accepted player or not talking to them in the locker room (TR-Coach-FocusGroup1). This caveat indicates that in ritual-free environments



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acceptance can also be quietly tested outside the coach's field of vision, requiring reading alongside the deniable exclusion addressed in T1.

Partner-country data point to similar practices. In the Slovenian sample, an athlete connects the absence of acceptance rituals to the climate of the environment: 'in our team we don't do acceptance rituals; maybe this is one of the reasons why the environment feels calmer' (SLO-ATHLETE-20). In the same sample another expression where seniority is defined with responsibility also appears: 'at my club it's certain but not cruel; experienced ones are expected to look out for the younger ones, but not everyone does this' (SLO-ATHLETE-03). The caveat in the last sentence is important: the existence of the expectation does not guarantee its implementation. In Croatia, a volleyball coach states that the proving process 'should be based on training habits — effort, punctuality, listening and respect — not on enduring humiliation'; they add that 'some coaches from the older generation still believe a tough acceptance builds character' and say they disagree (HR-COACH-08). In an example the same coach conveys, an athlete who came from outside and initially received little attention gained the respect of the entire team through their technical development over approximately six months. In the Portuguese coach focus group, practices where bonding is supported through direct arrangement are conveyed: coaches state that on journeys they consciously change the vehicles and at meals the seating arrangement so that established groups break up and athletes talk to different people; one coach recounts that a mutual 'hug' ritual added at the end of training in the U-14 team initially seemed 'stupid' to them, but over time the athletes turned it into a habit they wanted themselves (PT-COACH-FG). This last example is noteworthy in that it suggests it may be the content rather than the ritual itself that is the problem: belonging can also be marked with a ritual that contains mutuality rather than humiliation.

These narratives can constitute the adult-level opposite of the debt regime. The same past experience — 'it was done to me too' — in the volleyball and handball manager's narrative becomes not a justification for transfer but a justification for stopping transfer. The manager also emphasises that this should not be left to good intentions; they convey the appointment of a club safeguarding officer, beginning-of-season training for coaches, and a written code of conduct as the institutional counterpart of this stance. Compared with the football manager's stance that reads a written code of conduct as distrust of the existing moral order, it is seen that two opposing institutional approaches exist side by side in the same country and the same period. Three features that stand out in counter-examples are of a quality that can be used in prevention design: the pairing of seniority with a clear definition of responsibility, the consistent application of the rule by an adult, and the making visible



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of seniors as a model of support given without expecting anything in return. What feature each counter-example carries is shown below (Table 19). The table also makes visible that the three features do not all appear simultaneously in every example, with examples presenting different combinations.

Table 19. Examples where the debt regime is broken and the features they carry.

Example	Seniority defined as responsibility	Adult stands behind the rule	Support given without expecting anything in return
Karate: 'If your belt is high your responsibility is also high' (TR-Athlete6)	Yes	Yes	Partially
Karate: senpai support, 'everyone started from the beginning' (TR-Athlete14)	Yes	Yes	Yes
Basketball: senior's support given without expecting anything in return (TR-Athlete2)	Partially	No	Yes
Volleyball: pairing and captain selection practice (TR-Coach-FocusGroup1)	Yes	Yes	Partially
Volleyball/handball: manager's 'these children should not go through this' stance (TR-Manager3)	Yes	Yes	Yes
Slovenia: 'experienced ones are expected to look out for the younger ones' (SLO-ATHLETE-03)	Yes	Partially	Partially
Slovenia: team without acceptance ritual (SLO-ATHLETE-20)	—	Yes	—

3.3.2.6. Case Portrait: Learning to Calculate in Football

The idiographic deepening of this theme is built on the narrative of an athlete who both takes on and questions the debt regime (TR-Athlete1-Football-M-17). The athlete has been playing licensed football for seven years and conveys an experience extending from youth to A-team level; their narrative represents a position that speaks from inside the regime but can name it. The athlete's analysis of the regime (3.3.2.2) carries a striking clarity: they formulate the logic of the debt, the justification for the transfer, and why the chain cannot be broken themselves. However, the actual

value of the portrait is that this clarity is recounted together with a cost. In the same interview, the athlete recounts what sport has changed in them:

'The ten-year-old child would play, coach, would just play. They'd even forget the score sometimes. The current [I], meanwhile, is constantly calculating. Who's watching me, what does the coach think, what happens if I make this pass, what will they say if I don't. So it moved away from being a game, it became like an exam. I learned this early, maybe too early. I think I left a bit of my childhood there, on those fields. But let me also say this, if I hadn't learned to calculate like that I couldn't have stayed here either.'

— TR-Athlete1-Football-M-17

The two meanings of the word 'calculation' merge in this passage: the never-closing account of the seniority regime and the strategic calculation the athlete makes at every moment. In the athlete's narrative, being able to remain in the environment required internalising the calculating logic of the regime; the game has turned into an exam, childhood into a cost. The athlete's referring to themselves by name, in the third person singular in this sentence (given as '[I]' due to anonymity requirements) suggests that this transformation is also recounted with a certain distance in their own eyes. The acknowledgement in the last sentence ('if I hadn't learned to calculate like that I couldn't have stayed here either') shows that the regime is seen by the athlete not only as imposed but also as functional; this also provides an explanation for why abandoning it may be difficult. By contrast, the same athlete is one of the few participants who recounts actually trying to break the regime on a small scale: not asking seniors for water, getting their own water themselves. In their own words 'small things but I think important'. The finding value of the portrait lies here: in this example, the person who best analyses the regime is not the person who can reject it entirely. Change appears not as a heroic break but as everyday, low-cost deviations. This observation suggests that in prevention work, rather than expecting athletes to reject the regime wholesale, making these small deviations visible and multiplying them with adult support may be a more realistic target.

3.3.2.7. Theme Summary

Seniority hierarchy can operate in athlete narratives not only as a belonging ritual but also with a debt-transfer logic: it is thought that the pain suffered needs to be transferred 'so it's not for nothing', but in athletes' own words the transfer never closes the account. The debt metaphor was used independently by two athletes — one criticising and one applying the regime ('the account never closes' / 'I was collecting it').

Hazing can take different forms depending on the discipline: a bodily endurance test, a public humiliation display, compulsory service, acts of submission, and correction under the appearance of 'help'. While forms involving humiliation and physical testing appear more frequently in narratives



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in transitional spaces with limited adult supervision, service forms (carrying equipment, wiping the mat, fall practice) can also continue during training hours and within the coach's knowledge.

The experience can be retroactively minimised: this situation, named by a coach as a 'psychological threshold', is also seen in partner-country athletes' expressions such as 'seems funny now, was awful at the time'. Portuguese data shows that the same ritual can be defended by athletes as a means of 'inclusion in the team' while being found 'stupid' by managers yet continuing.

The burden is not equally distributed: female athletes describe a 'double burden' (being a rookie + gender), while scholarship athletes describe an economic debt that never closes (see T6, 3.3.6.2). Knowledge of 'who has who behind them' operates like an immunity map where seniority can become intertwined with capital.

One form of the transfer is the taking-over of the gaze as well as the behaviour: 'I actually didn't beat them, I joined them.' Resistance can reproduce the regime to the extent it accepts the regime's value criterion. Justification can live not in individuals one by one but in a collective sentence ('let the newcomer go through some trouble, they'll become a man'; 'when everyone believes it, it seems right to you too').

The continuity of the regime appears to rest not on a consensus of values but on a situation in which silence is read as approval and no one bears the cost of the first objection: 'many want to break it, but no one has the courage to throw the first stone.' This is a promising finding from a prevention perspective; with a Croatian coach's interpretation, the sentence 'we all went through this' can also be read as a warning sign.

Adults most often do not hide the regime but rename it: 'army', 'apprenticeship', 'discipline'. Coach narratives show that disciplinary authority depends largely on the space the club grants: the coach without club support cannot set a boundary with a senior athlete, while the coach with club support could expel an entire age group; the second example also raises the question of how authority is used as much as its necessity.

The chain can be broken. In environments where seniority is defined as 'responsibility' ('if your belt is high your responsibility is also high'; 'belt doesn't mean putting on airs'), the rule is consistently applied, and support given without expecting anything in return is made visible, seniority can be constructed together with support and protection. Rituals that contain mutuality rather than



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humiliation (the Portuguese 'hug' example) show that belonging can be marked in other ways. The absence of a ritual, meanwhile, does not by itself guarantee that acceptance has taken place.

3.3.3. T3 — The More They Say 'Man Up': Masculinity's Operating System

In the report's conceptual framework, hegemonic masculinity was addressed as the cultural ground of bullying in sport (2.3.2). Field data allows this ground to be read through a concrete mechanism: the expression 'man up', in the narratives, can operate not so much as an encouragement or identity definition but as a command that regulates behaviour in the moment. The content of the command becomes distinct in three forms of prohibition in what athletes recount: don't be scared, don't cry, don't complain. The core claim of this theme can be formulated as follows: in participants' narratives, masculinity in sport operates not only as an identity but also as an emotion regime; the cost of the regime may be not only suppressing emotion but also, over time, struggling to recognise it. The same regime is also observed to encompass female athletes; for them, control is constructed more through body and 'appropriate' visibility, while the expression 'like a girl' can be used as a punishing criterion for both genders. The athletes' own language was taken as the basis for the naming of the theme. In the data, young athletes most often voice the norm with the expressions 'be a man' and 'man up', while adults use the same norm more frequently in the form 'become a man / act like a man'. This difference may not be merely a word choice: in adult language the norm can take on a moral guise ('acting like a man' in Turkish can also be read as 'being a decent person'), while in young people's language it remains more nakedly gendered.

3.3.3.1. Three Prohibitions: Don't Be Scared, Don't Cry, Don't Complain

The most explicit form of the regime is the direct prohibition of the expression of emotion. A water polo athlete describes the everyday functioning and sanction of this prohibition:

'Yes, I think it increases it. Because especially among males there's a bit of a "be strong, don't show it" thing. If you say you're tired for example it's not received very well. If you say you're scared of something or you show that you're in pain things like "what happened, couldn't you take it?" can come. Well there are more colloquial swear words but I'm not saying them here.'

— TR-Athlete5-Waterpolo-M-17

What is prohibited in the athlete's narrative is not the emotion itself but reporting it: tiredness, fear, and pain can be experienced, but when voiced they can be received as a declaration of inadequacy. This is related to the emotional infrastructure of the reporting problem addressed in T4; an athlete who has difficulty saying they have been harmed may also find it harder to report bullying. The same athlete had also recounted that what was said to them when they panicked during a hazing ritual was this same command (see 3.3.2.1): in their narrative, fear had become not a reason to stop the ritual



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but a reason to continue enduring it. That the prohibition can operate not only among peers but also in the relationship between athlete and adult, a participant who coaches in karate and kickboxing and has recently stopped competing conveys from their own experience:

'I mean let's say a punch lands on your nose and your nose is bleeding, it doesn't matter, you must continue. [...] But in that moment the only sentence I formed was like, just tape it, wrap it up, we're going to a match and so on. [...] This is both psychological and physical. We call it this in every sense I mean, you'll always move forward. No stopping, never stopping, you'll always move forward. [...] Because you're constantly, well, that breaking point there, maybe your heart is breaking, you don't see it. The coach doesn't see it either, we're the same way.'

— **TR-Coach-FocusGroup1**

The coach's narrative presents a striking example of how far the 'don't complain' prohibition can be internalised by the athlete: facing the doctor's warning about a possible fracture, the sentence that came out of the athlete's own mouth was 'just tape it up'. The participant also recounts that this approach eventually resulted in a burnout that led to stopping. The analytic value of the narrative is that it shows the regime can also render invisible not only physical pain but relational fractures: 'maybe your heart is breaking, you don't see it. The coach doesn't see it either.' The coach, coming from inside this culture, acknowledges that they can sometimes reach the point where they themselves cannot 'distinguish' resilience from bullying, and attributes this to the proximity of their transition from athlete to coach. This confession indicates that the emotion regime can be transmitted from athlete to coach through generational change; but at the same time, once named, it can be questioned. A swimmer's narrative brings together in a single passage where, when, and why harm can occur without being visible:

'...Training is said to be two hours, maybe forty minutes of it in the water. The rest is waiting by the wall. Twenty seconds, thirty seconds between sets, you gather at the start of the lane. Everything happens there [recounting practices such as blocking the wall before the start, squeezing against the lane rope, and delaying departure]. At that point the coach is looking at the stopwatch, writing the next set, their head is there. Twenty seconds is little but it's enough... Nobody is looking at anyone's face anyway. If someone gets upset, if their eyes fill with tears or whatever, it doesn't show, their face is already wet. They get in the water, come out, it passes. With us there was never a discussion of "did they cry or not", you can't tell because their face is wet. The families also watch from behind the glass, the sound doesn't reach there, they only wave their hands.'

— **TR-Athlete10-Swimming-M-16**

The first half of the passage suggests that unsupervised periods can be not only spatial (locker room, transport vehicle) but also temporal. In the athlete's description, a large portion of training consists of intervals technically counted as 'training' but actually spent waiting; the adult's attention, meanwhile, is directed precisely during these intervals to the task of measurement and planning. The observation



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'twenty seconds is little but it's enough' indicates that harm may not require a long time; short and regular intervals when adult attention is directed elsewhere can be sufficient. The second half of the passage conveys how the same environment can make it harder for harm to be seen: a wet face makes crying physically unreadable, while the sound-proof glass deprives families of sound. In this way, the 'don't show it' command enforced by athletes may not always be necessary — the conditions of the environment implement it partly on their own. The athlete's describing this as the norm of an ordinary pool day suggests that no structure exists in the club where the narrative takes place that would produce awareness about such harms. A similar temporal pattern is not limited to water sports. A karate athlete, while recounting school experiences before taking up sport, describes how the presence of an adult can divide time into safe and dangerous:

'During that period I was genuinely scared. Being very thin and also wearing glasses, I don't know, it was like you immediately attracted attention. First thought when I woke up in the morning was I wish I didn't have to go to school. My stomach really ached, I'm not making it up. For example at school everyone wanted the break but I didn't. During breaks I'd try not to make eye contact with anyone, I'd walk close to the wall in the corridor so no one would notice me. There were even times in class when I said don't let the lesson end, at least there was a teacher there.'

— **TR-Athlete6-Karate-M-15**

This narrative does not directly show a finding related to sports environments; it conveys the athlete's school experience before taking up sport. Nevertheless, it provides a contextual example explaining the pattern by which adult presence can divide time into safe and dangerous: what the twenty seconds between sets is in the swimming narrative, the break is here. The child wishing the lesson not to end suggests that adult presence means not a restriction but a protection for them. The same athlete's dojo experience is recounted in 3.3.3.5; when the two narratives are read together, they point to the difference needing to be sought not in the child but in the environment. The prohibition regarding the reporting of emotion is also a recurring pattern in partner-country data; however, athletes here also produce a criterion that questions the prohibition. A Croatian athlete makes a distinction between the toughness the sport legitimately demands and its use as an excuse:

There's a real difference between toughness the sport actually demands and toughness people use as an excuse for cruelty.

— **HR-ATHLETE-04**

The same distinction is also constructed in the Slovenian sample: 'if toughness is about effort no problem, if it's being used to excuse cruelty then no' (SLO-ATHLETE-20, SLO-ATHLETE-24) and 'I accept the physical toughness, could do without the mind games' (SLO-ATHLETE-18, SLO-ATHLETE-22). By contrast, expressions where the norm is never questioned are also found: 'I've

honestly never questioned it; being tough is just this sport itself' (HR-ATHLETE-02). These two extremes suggest that the same regime is nameable by some athletes while remaining naturalised in others. A Portuguese girl football player, meanwhile, grounds the source of the prohibition in the coach's assessment and squad concerns. The athlete voices the worry that showing weakness will be read as a problem of competence in the eyes of both peers and coach:

Há atletas que pensam que se demonstrarem essa parte fraca vão ser insultados... tem medo que o treinador perceba que eles não têm o psicológico pronto para o jogo. [There are athletes who think that if they show that weak side they'll be insulted... they're afraid the coach will notice they don't have the psychological readiness for the game.]

— PT-ATHLETE-01

This expression suggests that the emotion regime can be sustained not only through peer pressure but also through the athlete's calculation regarding squad selection and playing chance; the same athlete adds that those who show weakness 'will think they're going to lose their place in the team and be sidelined'. A second athlete in the same focus group sees the resilience culture as 'something that might be useful because of the competition in football' and simply says 'faz parte' (it's part of it) (PT-ATHLETE-01). The regime being both named and normalised here shows that the two extremes in the Croatian and Slovenian data can also exist side by side within a team. The fact that the narratives come from female athletes is additionally important: the regime can operate as a criterion system not limited to 'male sport' (see 3.3.3.4).

3.3.3.2. *The Never-Ending Test: 'Are You Man Enough?'*

The second functioning of the regime is the construction of masculinity not as a position gained once but as a continuously renewed test. A volleyball athlete conveys both how the choice of discipline itself can become subject to this test and why the test never ends:

'I can actually say volleyball brought me a kind of escape. I wasn't a very large child physically. In football, before that also in basketball, I was always crushed. In volleyball there's less physical contact, there's a net in between, it's more technical and mental work. [...] For the first time I felt good at a sport. But this also came with a cost. [...] I heard the phrase "volleyball? That's a girls' sport" a lot... You put on Bengay, it's over, everyone laughs it off. But being looked at as "are you man enough?" never stops. I didn't pass that test. Honestly I didn't want to pass it either. But when you don't pass it you pay with exclusion. [...] The pain from balls hitting me, elbows hitting me on the field passed. But expressions like "you're not a man", "Cotton" stick.'

— TR-Athlete12-Volleyball-M-16

The first half of the narrative shows that the space chosen to escape bullying can turn into a new source of stigma: the discipline the athlete found safe is devalued by being gendered from outside. The second half overlaps with the criterion athletes produce in T1 on the masculinity axis: in the athlete's experience, physical pain is temporary while words directed at identity are more lasting. The



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athlete clearly stating that they refused to pass the test and that they knowingly paid the cost can be read as a taking of a position rather than a passive stance towards the regime; however, in the narrative it is seen that the environment responds to this position with exclusion. The criterion of the test is described not only as gendered behaviour but also as power. A judo athlete names how respect is distributed to whom and for what:

'Ours is actually a community of people. We work in the same hall but everyone is a potential rival because those at the same weight enter the same competition, so the ideal of the environment is brotherhood, the reality is competition. You drink tea five minutes after the person who choked you in training. There is respect, but this respect is not between equals, it's the respect felt towards the powerful. The weak one gets crushed both on the mat and in the locker room.'

— TR-Athlete3-Judo-M-18

The formulation 'this respect is not between equals, it's the respect felt towards the powerful' also makes the reward of the test visible from the athlete's perspective: those who pass it receive respect, while those who cannot are described as being crushed in both sporting and social domains. The athlete's mentioning the mat and locker room side by side suggests that the test may not be limited to the field. The name given to those who cannot pass the test becomes visible in a water polo athlete's narrative; here the criterion is silence:

'Because here making your voice heard is somewhat important it seems. Kids who talk a lot, shout, constantly joke get noticed more. [...] When you stay quiet you fall a bit into the background. When you don't say something some of them interpret this as "can't defend themselves". That's why phrases like "loser" come up. But it's not that I'm quiet because I'm scared to say something.'

— TR-Athlete5-Waterpolo-M-17

In the narrative, silence is read not as a temperament feature but as a sign of inadequacy. When read alongside the same athlete's observation in T1 (3.3.1.2) that 'the whole group is revolving around them', this narrative suggests that the test operates not only between the targeted athlete and the perpetrator but through laughing and gathering spectators: status is distributed according to whose joke the group laughs at. The peer bullying literature discusses that spectators' behaviours such as laughing or gathering around can serve a bullying-reinforcing function and that these behaviours are shaped by group norms (Salmivalli, 2010). Within this framework, the refereeing of the masculinity test is also taken on by the laughing majority as much as by individual perpetrators. Athlete interpretations regarding the source of the need to dominate proceed in a similar direction to the Turkish data in partner-country data. A Croatian athlete reads dominant behaviour as an indicator of insecurity rather than an excess of power:

Needing control over others might just be a stand-in for not feeling secure in your own place on the team.



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The same interpretation is repeated in the Slovenian sample: 'the most insecure ones push the hardest' (SLO-ATHLETE-17, SLO-ATHLETE-21) and 'probably fear of losing their own place; so they push others down to feel secure' (SLO-ATHLETE-18). These expressions can be read as an independent counterpart of the judo athlete in T1 (3.3.1.4) who describes toughness as 'armour' and sees 'always a fear underneath'. Another athlete's interpretation grounds the criterion in the adult: 'most of the time it's about proving something to the coach, not to teammates' (SLO-ATHLETE-20, SLO-ATHLETE-24). The never-ending nature of the test is also visible in the widespread nervousness that reactions after mistakes create. In the Croatian sample, athletes state that they feel nervous even when shouting is not directed at them: 'even if the shouting isn't directed at me I flinch; a bad pass next time could be mine' (HR-ATHLETE-02, HR-ATHLETE-06). This suggests that the test can regulate not only the targeted athlete but also the bystanders in the environment: for the bystander who knows they could be next, staying quiet can turn into one of the forms of protecting themselves.

The three Turkish narratives together point to three separate criteria of the test: physical size and contact capacity, power and winning, and volume of voice. In the narratives, none of these criteria are directly related to the technical requirements of sport; all three appear as criteria determining the athlete's social position in the environment. The reading of silence as 'inability to defend oneself', meanwhile, is connected to the reporting problem addressed in T4: an athlete who is already considered inadequate for not speaking up may additionally require courage to say they have been harmed.

3.3.3.3. *Control of the Body: The Measured, Tested, and Self-Surveilling Body*

The third functioning of the regime is constructed through the body. In the data, the body is controlled in three separate forms: by being measured (weight categories and weighing), by being tested (bodily indicators of masculinity), and by being self-surveilled by the athlete. These three layers show how control can shift from outside to inside.

(a) The measured body.

In weight-class disciplines, the body turns into an indicator that is continuously measured and interpreted by peers. A taekwondo athlete conveys the everyday intensity of this pressure:

'Coach, the most exhausting part of this sport for the person is clearly the weight matter. It eats your brain much more than physical fatigue. There's a weigh-in before the match, you have to meet that weight class. There's incredible pressure on you, like a feeling as if you're constantly stepping on the scales 24/7. The kids in the environment also know your weak point so they hit

from there: "You're never going to make that weight", "You'll burst mate" and such, they get inside your head.'

— TR-Athlete8-Taekwondo-M-17

In the narrative, the mockery appears directed not randomly but at the most vulnerable point regarding the athlete's career; the structural pressure of the discipline can become the instrument of peer bullying. The same athlete also conveys that the reaction they gave when being mocked was also shaped by the regime: 'The only thing I thought at that moment was "we've become a laughing stock again". Looking in the mirror and thinking "have I really sunk that much, is my health going" didn't even cross my mind. I was just deeply humiliated.' From the athlete's narrative perspective, the emotion regime can take precedence over a concern about one's own health; priority is given to reputation rather than to the body. What the athlete conveys points to the fact that weight pressure can have negative effects on eating and body perception. Although these effects have not been separately measured within the scope of the research, it is considered that peer bullying in weight-class disciplines also needs to be addressed as a safeguarding issue.

(b) The tested body: thin, hairless, 'still a child'.

The most concrete criteria of the masculinity test are indicators of bodily development, and these criteria are most intensively applied in the locker room. A volleyball athlete conveys this space and its repertoire in detail:

'One of the hardest places for me was the locker room. Because there that masculine display gets even bigger. Who talks how tough, what they say about women, who is how crude... there's always a competition. When I didn't join these "why are you like this?", "are you gay?" was said... They rib you about your body too. I was already thin, they never miss that, always "rubbish", "matchstick" they say. Then things like "you haven't got any hair yet", "you're like a child". There was no end to the conversation there. Also when the coach isn't there everyone acts more freely. I also usually get dressed quickly and leave.'

— TR-Athlete12-Volleyball-M-16

In this narrative, bodily development itself — hair, muscle mass, body volume — is turned into a masculinity criterion. The feature of the criterion is that it rests on a time-dependent process over which the athlete has no control; in this respect it overlaps with the criterion produced by athletes in T1 (touching something that cannot be changed). The expression 'you're like a child' positions the athlete not only as inadequate but as not yet having become a man. The merging of the same repertoire with a homophobic implication ('are you gay?') shows that in this narrative the bodily criterion and sexual orientation questioning can become intertwined. Another noteworthy aspect of the narrative is that the questioning begins when the athlete 'doesn't join': the 'competition' in the locker room also operates as a spectator performance, and not participating in it can be counted as a sign in itself. The

nicknames the same athlete conveys in the same interview — 'Princess', 'delicate', 'mama's boy' — are the counterpart at the naming level of this criterion; in their own words 'in male volleyball most nicknames carry the message "you're not fully a man"'. The same space can become the hardest place for another athlete with a different criterion. A basketball athlete's narrative shows how class visibility can be added to bodily visibility in the locker room:

'That's really the hardest place. On the field there's a ball, there's a game, I'm there, I'm fine. But in the locker room the game ends, the subject changes. Also while changing my old underwear and such, I was embarrassed. The coach isn't there, everyone's free. I'd always stay till last, get changed after everyone left. On the field I'm like a king, in the locker room I'm invisible.'

— **TR-Athlete17-Basketball-M-17**

Two narratives, in different disciplines with different criteria, produce a similar solution: becoming invisible. One gets dressed quickly and leaves, the other waits until everyone has gone. In spaces where bodily visibility is controlled, the coping strategy these athletes developed is withdrawal from the environment; this can also impair the quality of participation. The formulation 'on the field I'm like a king, in the locker room I'm invisible' also points to the existence of two separate measurement systems: performance on the field, and body and class in the locker room. In the athlete's narrative, no earned position is visible on the second measure. The strategy of avoiding bodily visibility is conveyed in partner-country data in similar words. In the Croatian sample, two athletes state that they deliberately shorten the time they spend in the locker room:

Not one for lingering after training, I'm out of the dressing room before most people even finish changing.

— **HR-ATHLETE-06**

In the same sample, the expression 'I change quickly and leave, I'm not one for hanging around the dressing room more than necessary' (HR-ATHLETE-02) recurs. In the Slovenian sample, the function of the space is directly named: 'the locker room is where the ranking order really shows' (SLO-ATHLETE-02) and 'in the locker room without the coach there are sharper comments — about someone's body, about how they compete' (SLO-ATHLETE-01). One athlete turns this into a demand: 'the area I'd want adults to think more about is there; not a dramatic thing but it's where someone is quietly left out' (SLO-ATHLETE-03). A Portuguese girl football player, meanwhile, upon being reminded that locker rooms and showers are spaces coaches — especially male coaches — cannot be present in, athletes emphasise that problems need to be resolved among athletes themselves regardless of whether supervision is present or not; it is stated that athletes need to have the capacity to resolve problems on their own whether coaches are there or not (PT-ATHLETE-01). This response is noteworthy in showing that the supervision gap can be framed by athletes not as a problem but as



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a self-efficacy expectation; the expectation to 'sort it out among yourselves', when read together with the reporting barriers addressed in T4, can also operate as a norm that makes seeking help more difficult.

(c) The self-surveilling body.

The deepest form of control is the external gaze turning into the athlete's own gaze. This layer is addressed in detail in the theme's case portrait (3.3.3.7); here it is only named as a mechanism. In the narratives, when the bodily criterion is continuously applied, it is seen that athletes can develop a self-regulation extending from hand movement to tone of voice, from gait to the manner of laughing. This situation can be read in Foucauldian terms as a manifestation of disciplinary power on the field: control can turn from an externally applied surveillance into a self-surveillance applied by the athlete on themselves. In this case the perpetrator may not always need to be there; the internalisation of the gaze can suffice. The avoidance of bodily visibility can also merge with the physical environment of the discipline. A water polo athlete conveys why they love the water precisely for this reason: 'How you walk, what you wore, who you're talking to... I used to think about such things a lot. When you're shy it feels like everyone's watching you. But when you get in the water that goes a bit. You put your head in the water, the sounds decrease, no one sees you fully.' Water here serves a covering function — with a logic similar to the wet face hiding tears in 3.3.3.1.

3.3.3.4. The Female Face of the Same Regime: Punishment of Visibility

The masculinity regime does not bind only male athletes. In female athletes' narratives, the same regime can operate at two separate levels: the stigma from outside and the control reproduced within the team. The finding that stands out in this sub-theme can be formulated as follows: in the narratives examined, the internal tensions in female teams appear related not to a different 'female nature' but to the visibility boundary that the same masculinity regime draws for women. The bodily form of the stigma from outside becomes visible in a judo athlete's narrative:

'My family objected. They said "a girl child doesn't do a fighting sport, you'll have muscles, you'll become like a man". I actually heard that phrase a lot, not only from the family. You do judo, your muscles develop, you really become like an iron man. Then everyone says "you've become like a man". As if a girl can't be strong. My family then supported me when I started getting medals, they were proud. But that first objection, the phrase "a girl shouldn't be like this", I'm still fighting that phrase in a way.'

— TR-Athlete11-Judo-F-16

In the athlete's description the pincer works as follows: when the strength the sport requires is gained one faces being 'like a man', when it is not gained one faces inadequacy. The same athlete notes that success doesn't resolve this pincer but complicates it: 'when you're a very strong girl a segment of



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people are uncomfortable with you, saying "too masculine". So your success both elevates you and makes some people uncomfortable because it takes you out of the "normal girl" mould.' In their own assessment 'success didn't heal that wound, it just covered it over, even made it a bit more complicated'. How the pincer can be reproduced with an instruction in training, a coach who trains girls' teams in basketball conveys from their own practice:

'Your voice has to get louder, your movements have to be a bit tougher. Because you also need to give the person across from you a fear psychologically so as to be able to create psychological pressure. Outside the field you're a princess but when you come onto the field you're an athlete I say. What happens? The inside of the field is reflected outside. [...] Because when you show it like that on the field you get performance. Outside the field too they say I'm tough on the field, my performance is good. Outside the field [...] if I behave tough what will I become? I'll be better, I'll look stronger. It settles into their mental framework. And through this they can also sometimes experience bullying. They can be told you're like a man and also experience bullying. Or when you tell the person across from you you're very strong they can also get bullied.'

— **TR-Coach-FocusGroup2**

The coach's narrative is important in showing that the pincer the judo athlete experiences from outside can also be constructed within training through a well-intentioned instruction. The 'princess outside, athlete on the field' distinction aims to limit toughness as a field-specific performance; however, according to the coach's own observation this boundary cannot be maintained, and toughness spills over outside the field because it is rewarded. The outcome is two-directional: a girl athlete who behaves tough may face the 'you're like a man' label or may direct her toughness at others. The coach naming this cycle themselves indicates that the masculinity regime can be reproduced even within the everyday pedagogy of adults who problematise it, and that this can be noticed. The fact that visibility can form a two-directional burden for female athletes becomes visible in a volleyball athlete's narrative. The athlete describes the value that being visible gives and the dependency it creates together:

'Being visible is nice but on the other hand you get used to that attention. You think "what if one day this attention fades?" The spiker position gave me that light but on the other hand made me dependent on that light. Both come together... ...When you're in the upper group you can't fully see what's happening below. For example what a newly arrived girl is going through, what the libero feels, what the one on the outside is thinking... you don't notice these. You're not even interested. Because it's not happening to you.'

— **TR-Athlete4-Volleyball-F-17**

This narrative offers a two-directional finding. First, visibility can produce a dependency as much as a gain for female athletes: value is tied to attention that needs to be continuously re-earned. Second, it points to the fact that being in a visible position can create a blindness to the rest of the group. The athlete's expression 'you're not even interested. Because it's not happening to you' suggests that the



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bystander position can be constructed not only as not intervening but also as not noticing. This adds an important layer to the moral courage discussion: a study examining the moral courage of athletes in sport points to the fact that the athlete's decision to intervene is shaped by their position within the group and possible costs (Gözmen Elmas, Elmas & Aşcı, 2026); this narrative, meanwhile, suggests that the high-status athlete, although the person who would pay the least cost for intervention, may also be the person with the lowest likelihood of seeing the problem. The violation of the visibility boundary, meanwhile, turns into a sanction in a basketball athlete's narrative:

'The moment I scored that basket I felt like a king for a second, the stands rose, I felt very good. But before that second ended I caught that senior's look and my insides went cold. Because you understand from that look, it was saying "you've overstepped". Then as the rest of the match passed without me getting a pass I understood I was being punished, and not because I did something wrong but quite the opposite, because I did something right. From that day on when I played with seniors I limited my shots, even when I was free I'd pass because coming forward, being visible, had become dangerous.'

— TR-Athlete2-Basketball-F-16

In this narrative, the sanction is applied not to failure but to success. The punishment is not given for a rule violation but for exceeding the visibility boundary; the consequence is the athlete deliberately limiting their performance. The seniority dimension of the same incident was addressed in 3.3.2.1; what stands out here is the athlete learning visibility as a risk. While visibility operates more as a capital in male athlete narratives in the data, in this example it appears as a risk. This comparison is presented not as a generalisation about all female teams but as a difference observed in the narratives at hand. A female football athlete, meanwhile, conveys the other face of visibility — the burden of representation:

'With us "playing well" also carries the burden of "representing women's football". I mean if you play badly it's not just you, "that's girl football" is the label everyone gets. That's why the pressure of success is doubly layered with us. You have to be good because you're playing as if for yourself and for "all girls". This is very tiring, no one tells a male footballer "represent all men".'

— TR-Athlete9-Football-F-17

These two narratives together indicate that female athletes can be under a double pressure: when they're not good enough they can be stigmatised representationally as a whole category, and when they come too much to the fore within the team they can be sanctioned. Visibility in these narratives appears both necessary and risky. However, the data also shows that the same external pressure can produce solidarity. The football athlete describes their team as 'very solidarity-minded' and relates the fact that the seniority burden in their own experience is not as harsh as in male teams to this shared pressure: 'Because we already struggle enough outside, we somehow don't have the energy to crush each other too much inside.' They state that they also use the captain position in this direction (see



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3.3.2.5). It is seen that the external stigma can both harm and bring closer internal relations; what may be decisive is how the group interprets this pressure.

In coach narratives, the fact that visibility can turn into a competition arena in female teams is also voiced through appearance. A volleyball coach's rule limiting appearance indicators such as earrings, make-up, and false eyelashes in the training space, together with class visibility, is addressed in T6 (see 3.3.6.5). It should be noted that the rule can be read in two directions from the perspective of this theme: on one hand it can limit comparison constructed through appearance — similar to a Portuguese manager's banning of the word 'gordo' at their club (see T1, 3.3.1.3), it moves the criterion away from body and appearance; on the other hand, the regulation of girls' athletes' appearance by an adult can also be experienced as another form of the body control addressed in this sub-theme. It can be said that what is decisive is the rule being set in a language and with an explanation that removes comparison rather than shaming the body.

Partner-country data on female athletes' experiences shows that the control constructed through body is also noticed by parents. In the Slovenian sample, a parent defines comments about body and weight as the discipline's primary concern: 'comments about bodies and weight in this sport really worry me most, more than other sports I've seen' (SLO-PARENT-02). In the Croatian sample, a parent relates the weight of the comment to repetition and number of witnesses: 'a fourteen-year-old girl can carry a single comment about her body for days; especially when it's repeated in front of stronger players' (HR-PARENT-01). The worry of female athletes about 'not appearing soft' is also seen on a different axis in the Slovenian sample. Athletes in judo discipline note that there is a social cost to refusing a senior athlete's request to work together:

If you decline, you get labelled soft or lazy quickly, so most just grit their teeth even when the partner is too rough.

— SLO-ATHLETE-01

In the same sample the expressions 'declining looks like you're scared, so you take that round even if you know it's going to be tough' (SLO-ATHLETE-02) and 'possible but there's a social cost; once I said no because I was tired and I felt it was noted' (SLO-ATHLETE-03) appear. These narratives suggest that the worry about 'not appearing soft' can operate in both male and female athletes; consequently the emotion regime can construct a similar criterion system across genders.

3.3.3.5. *Environments Where the Regime Is Reversed*

In the data, environments where the masculinity regime can be reversed also exist in the same country and among similar age groups. The common element that stands out in these environments is the



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presence of an adult authority that changes the definition of power and stands behind this definition. A karate athlete conveys the difference they experienced when transitioning from school to the dojo:

'Actually I came here somewhat out of compulsion. At school I was really picked on, in middle school. Both thin and with glasses. And a bit shy because of this. I was always being pushed and shoved, my pocket money would be taken and such. [...] Our dojo is actually different from most places. The coach establishes a very serious culture of respect. We bow when entering, we bow to each other, there is respect for higher belts but this respect doesn't stem from fear. The coach never allows belittlement. So compared to school it's like paradise.'

— TR-Athlete6-Karate-M-15

What changes in the athlete's narrative is not the bodily features but the meaning those features carry in the environment: the same body is a target at school, neutral at the dojo. This comparison offers a strong indication that the masculinity regime may be fed more by the environment than by the body. The athlete's 'respect that doesn't stem from fear' distinction overlaps with the criterion a judo athlete develops below. An incident recounted by a girl athlete from the same dojo shows how this environment can stop harm early and presents a counterpart to the reporting problem addressed in T4:

'Our locker room is small, girls are also separate. In between of course there are digs. Once a girl's hair was mocked. At first she laughed but then she was really upset. The girl next to her also said "okay, that's enough now" and told the sensei. The sensei came and talked to both of them, the matter was closed there. In my view what's important here is the girl who said this not hesitating. She didn't even think "will they call me a snitch now?". With us saying something when something happens isn't received that strangely. Also the sensei asks "what happened?" not "why did you say it?".'

— TR-Athlete14-Karate-F-14

In this short narrative, three elements work together: the fake laughter being noticed ('at first she laughed but then was really upset'), the peer intervening without fear of stigmatisation, and the adult directing the question to the incident rather than the reporting behaviour. The peer in the bystander position stepping in and saying 'okay, that's enough now' is a field example of the behaviour defined as the defender role in the bullying literature (Salmivalli, 2010); what the narrative shows is that this behaviour is possible not so much through individual courage as through the environment making it ordinary. The distinction the athlete emphasises — 'what happened?' instead of 'why did you say it?' — suggests that this form of question contributes to a safe reporting climate or makes such a climate visible. Since the two narratives come from the same club, the environment needs to be evaluated as a singular example. However, partner-country data shows that similar arrangements can also be established in different disciplines and countries. A Portuguese coach managing a kickboxing club grounds locker room supervision in a concrete arrangement structured according to gender: they note



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that up to age fourteen they are continuously present in the male locker room, and that a senior athlete is always assigned to the female locker room; they also note that on away trips male and female groups are paired with separate adults (PT-MANAGER-03). This practice suggests that unsupervised periods are not inevitable and that spatial gaps can be narrowed through job definitions. A judo athlete, meanwhile, developed a criterion from their own experience for distinguishing respect from fear:

'When I was young I thought I respected the strong seniors, I couldn't speak against them, couldn't go against their words, couldn't look them in the eye. We all thought this was respect. But then I realised that wasn't respect, it was fear. Because when they escaped from the facilities early and disappeared I felt relieved inside. You don't feel relief with someone you genuinely respect, you feel good in their presence. I was always tense in those seniors' presence. That's when it clicked — fear shrinks a person, respect opens them up.'

— TR-Athlete3-Judo-M-18

The formulation 'fear shrinks a person, respect opens them up' offers a usable criterion for distinguishing two concepts frequently used interchangeably in sports environments. The test the athlete developed is simple and observable: if you feel relieved when the person leaves, what you feel may be closer to fear than respect. This criterion can be evaluated as a concrete tool for clubs that say 'we have a culture of respect' (see 3.3.2.4) to test their own climate. The judo athlete's transformation also points to the regime being transformable from within. The athlete, whom their father signed up for sport saying 'at least learn to fight like a man', redefined the concept through the discipline's own philosophy: 'But judo actually tried to teach me the exact opposite of this. At the core of judo is not crushing the opponent but redirecting their power. So being a man isn't about beating the person across from you, it's about being able to control them.' Here the discipline's own moral system becomes a resource against the dominant masculinity definition. This finding suggests that it may be useful for prevention work to evaluate sports discipline cultures not only as a risk but also as a resource.

3.3.3.6. *The Adult Side: Those Who Transmit and Those Who Question the Norm*

In adult narratives, the masculinity regime is most often presented as a necessary equipment for the child's future. A basketball father clearly reads the change in their child as a gain and excludes the alternative by gendering it:

'I feel comfortable honestly. I was expecting this anyway. If I were uncomfortable I'd take the child and go, enrol them in ballet class. [laughs] Jokes aside, I want my son to be shaped in this environment. Look, four years ago when they came they were a shy child, couldn't say anything to anyone. Now they stare down opponents on the field, if necessary they trash-talk too. I was pleased with this. My wife sometimes gets upset, says "the child has hardened".'

— TR-Parent1-Basketball-Father-Istanbul



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The 'ballet class' reference, presented as a joke, reveals the binary logic of the regime: the opposite of hardening is positioned as a domain identified with femininity. In the narrative, a difference of opinion between parents also becomes visible — the mother's worry that 'the child has hardened' is met with the father's satisfaction. This divergence shows that the regime can also be debated within the family, but that in this example the dominant interpretation operates in favour of toughness. In manager narratives, the same norm can turn into an institutional principle. The football manager who defines their club as 'not a family but an army' (see 3.3.2.4) also constructs their stance on the moment of reporting from the same framework:

'If a child comes crying saying "they treated me badly", I look at them, I look for that spark in their eyes — will they be able to endure, or will they topple at the first wind.'

— **TR-Manager1-Football-M-Istanbul**

In this narrative, reporting is constructed not as a problem to be resolved but as a moment in which the athlete is tested. The crying child is seen not so much as a victim making a request for help as a candidate whose endurance is being measured. In this way, the emotion regime and the non-functioning of reporting (T4) merge in this manager's stance. A participant managing in judo and wrestling conveys the norm as an intergenerational way of life: 'With us there is no childhood, from the moment you're born you begin to become a man.' This expression transforms 'becoming a man' not into a developmental goal but into an obligation from birth; and removes childhood from the category of being a stage (TR-Manager2-Judo-Wrestling-M-Trabzon). How the same norm can be transmitted by parents for female athletes takes a different form. A taekwondo mother constructs the justification for directing their daughter to sport as the compensation for their own childhood passivity:

'Because I experienced the exact opposite. I was a shy child at school, people would say things to me, I'd stay quiet, I'd come home and cry. I'd tell my mother, she'd say "ignore it, don't get involved, you're a good girl". Those "ignore it" left me crushed for years. I only said to myself in my twenties, very late, "I will no longer be crushed by anyone" and my life changed after that. So I don't want my daughter to lose those years. Let her be strong from the start, stand tall from the start.'

— **TR-Parent4-Taekwondo-Mother-Istanbul**

This narrative, while born as a reaction against the regime, partly sustains its criterion: the solution is constructed as the child becoming stronger rather than the environment changing. The realisation of the harm of the 'ignore it' advice is a valuable awareness; however, the solution put in its place can again load the responsibility for protection onto the child. This structure, although with a different justification, shares a resemblance to the logic of the father who says 'let them toughen up' for boy



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children. By contrast, a female manager working in volleyball and handball, recalling that toughness was normalised under the name 'tough coach' in her own sporting period, takes a different position and today runs a written code of conduct and a safeguarding officer practice at the club (see 3.3.2.5); that is, she represents the position of an adult who recognises the norm and tries to transform it through institutional tools. Coach narratives show together how the regime can be transmitted at the adult level and at the same time questioned. A water polo coach with twenty years of experience, after noting that the word 'brutality' appears in their discipline's rules, evaluates how the coach's stance can be reflected in the locker room:

'...this increases peer bullying to such a degree I can't say. [...] Because your behaviours automatically become a model for them. They too become big fish eating small fish in the locker room. [...] Similarly when you as a coach go a bit more old school and say yes let's play tougher, let's be a tougher team or whatever, you're automatically saying in that locker room peer bullying, yes, tougher kid, bigger kid. [...] You as coach actually triggered this.'

— **TR-Coach-FocusGroup2**

The coach's evaluation suggests that the toughness discourse may not remain as a tactical instruction on the field but can be read in the locker room as an implicit permission for the physically larger and stronger to crush the smaller. This observation establishes a connection between the 'respect felt towards the powerful' in athletes' narratives and the adult's behaviour: the coach positions themselves as a model and explicitly loads the responsibility onto the adult. The karate and kickboxing coach also conveys a similar observation through pre-competition talks; noting that some coaches use a language 'as if going to war', that this motivates some athletes while increasing many others' anxiety, and that they themselves were told 'history doesn't write second places' before a final. These narratives suggest that the masculinity regime may be fed more from the adult's language and stance than arising spontaneously among athletes. Another noteworthy adult finding in the coach focus groups is that coaches can question gendered language among themselves. Upon a participant working as an assistant coach in female football saying that girls had started making 'masculine movements' on the field, the karate and kickboxing coach directed the following question:

'How can we decide that a movement is masculine or feminine anyway? [...] Because in my mind for instance I can no longer assign movements to those genders. Because I'm already a combat sports athlete. And in my view combat is not something divided between women and men anyway. [...] Actually where the problem starts is naming it this way.'

— **TR-Coach-FocusGroup1**

The discussion did not proceed one-directionally: the coach who used the first expression initially justified the situation with a biological explanation, while another coach added that they also observed girls' manner of speaking 'masculinising'. However, the discussion concluded with the same coach's



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self-criticism directed at the profession: 'coaches may also have pushed them there by using those kinds of words' and 'I'm of the opinion that we need to be careful about those words. We may also have our error there.' The fact that this questioning was not produced spontaneously but through colleagues' objections and within the conversation offers an implication for professional development design: transferring knowledge to coaches alone may not be sufficient; opening a structured space where they can talk to each other and object may also be necessary (see Section 6 (Curriculum)). A similar type of questioning is also seen in the Portuguese coach focus group. Coaches explicitly name the established 'endure' culture in sport and note that it continues while weakening between generations:

Não tens que ser, tens que aguentar; se chorar é para os fracos. ...Existe, existe, existe. [You don't have to be, you have to endure; if you cry it's for the weak. ...It exists, it exists, it exists.]

— PT-COACH-FG

In the same discussion, one coach notes that this culture was stricter in their own childhood and has diluted over time — 'before, children had to endure almost everything alone; today people are more tolerant' — while another emphasises that the expectation is primarily constructed on male athletes: 'there's a culture where we all need to be strong, resilient, "macho"; we're mainly talking about boys here'. Another coach in the same focus group recalls first hearing the phrase 'football isn't for girls' from a coach, while also emphasising that mental resilience is still necessary and that the two things need to be separated (PT-COACH-FG). These expressions suggest that the 'man up' discourse in Turkish data is not only a local pattern, but that it can become questionable among adults. A Croatian manager, meanwhile, directly relates psychological safety to performance: 'a player who feels safe takes more sporting responsibility; a scared player only tries not to be noticed' (HR-MANAGER-03). This expression is important in offering an institutional justification that can be placed against the emotion regime.

3.3.3.7. Case Portrait: 'I Didn't Pass That Test, I Didn't Want to Either'

The idiographic deepening of this theme is built on the narrative of an athlete who explicitly rejects the masculinity test and knowingly recounts paying the cost (TR-Athlete12-Volleyball-M-16). The athlete's narrative is one of those that makes most clearly visible, within the scope of this study, one of the central theses of the hegemonic masculinity literature — that masculinity is a position that needs to be continuously proved. The athlete's journey begins with an escape: a child who recounts being crushed in disciplines with intense physical contact felt adequate for the first time in a discipline with less contact. However, this safe space turned back into a source of stigma when the discipline itself was gendered ('that girls' sport'). In this way, the athlete encountered another form of bullying



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while escaping from bullying; this pattern suggests that the regime may not easily leave a space for escape.

At the centre of the portrait is the distinction the athlete makes while listing their harms: physical pains have passed, words directed at identity have remained. The 'Cotton' nickname and the expression 'you're not a man' can be read as a counterpart of the criterion produced by athletes in T1 (touching something that cannot be changed). The athlete also placing exclusion among these lasting harms shows that T1 and T3 can intersect: failing the masculinity test can become the justification for relational exclusion. The most original layer of the portrait is the external gaze turning into the athlete's own gaze. The athlete conveys this process and the reward mechanism they noticed:

'When you think you're constantly being watched you can't act naturally. How you hold your hand, how you walk, how your voice comes out, how you laugh... you think about all of them once more. After a while you start looking at your own body with attention. You constantly check yourself. [...] I even deliberately made my voice lower, tried to talk more roughly, imitated them. Just to get a bit more accepted. They would rib me less then. So the system rewards you the more you give up on yourself. This is very dangerous. Because a person after a while starts to become like them. I'm resisting not reaching that point but it's very hard genuinely.'

— **TR-Athlete12-Volleyball-M-16**

The expression 'the system rewards you the more you give up on yourself' is analytically important in noting that the regime not only punishes but can also simultaneously reward compliance. In the athlete's narrative, the decrease in bullying is experienced not as the result of the environment improving but of the athlete giving up on themselves. When this observation is read alongside the judo athlete in 3.3.2.2 who says 'I joined them', it suggests that T2 and T3 can intersect in the same mechanism: one describes the cost of taking over the gaze of the seniority hierarchy, the other of taking over the masculinity regime's gaze; one notices this retrospectively while the other is still resisting. The athlete reaching this evaluation during the interview also requires taking researcher influence into account: the semi-structured interview opened a space for the athlete to retrospectively name their behaviour and position. The possible implication from a prevention perspective is that the decrease in bullying indicators used alone may be misleading as a measure of success.

3.3.3.8. Theme Summary

'Man up' can operate in athlete narratives not so much as an identity definition but as a command; its content becomes distinct in three prohibitions: don't be scared, don't cry, don't complain. What is most often prohibited is not the emotion itself but reporting it; a coach's 'just tape it up' moment from their own time as an athlete shows how far the prohibition can be internalised by the athlete.



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The regime can also be supported by spatial and temporal conditions: twenty seconds between sets, a wet face, and the family behind glass can allow the 'don't show it' command to be partly implemented by the environment on its own.

Masculinity in the narratives appears not so much as a position gained once but as a never-ending test. Even the choice of discipline can be subject to this test; the refereeing of the test can be taken on by laughing and gathering spectators as much as by individual perpetrators.

The body, especially in weight-class disciplines, can turn into a continuously measured indicator; peer mockery can target the structural pressure of the discipline. Bodily development indicators are turned into a masculinity criterion; athletes from different disciplines produce a similar solution: becoming invisible.

The deepest form of control is self-surveillance. The observation 'the system rewards you the more you give up on yourself' suggests that a decrease in bullying may mean not the improvement of the environment but the athlete's compliance.

For female athletes, the regime can operate through a visibility boundary: gaining strength means 'becoming like a man', not gaining it means inadequacy; coming too much to the fore within the team can mean sanction. A coach's 'princess outside, athlete on the field' instruction whose toughness spills outside the field shows that the pincer can also be reproduced with well-intentioned pedagogy. External stigma can in some cases also increase internal solidarity.

The high-status athlete's position, while reducing the cost of intervention, can also make seeing the problem more difficult ('it's not happening to you'); bystanding can be constructed not only as not intervening but also as not noticing.

Adults can turn the norm into an expectation ('ballet class', 'will they topple at the first wind', 'from the moment you're born you begin to become a man') while also turning reporting into a resilience test. Coach narratives emphasise that toughness discourse ('old school', 'as if going to war') can be read in the locker room as implicit permission for the powerful to crush the smaller, and that the responsibility lies with the adult.

Coaches can question gendered language in an environment with objection and discussion; this awareness was not produced spontaneously but within conversation, and offers an implication for professional development design.



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The regime can be reversed. The same body can be a target at school, neutral at the dojo; a peer stepping in saying 'okay, that's enough now' and an adult asking 'what happened?' shows that defender behaviour can be made ordinary by the environment. The discipline's own moral system (judo's principle of 'redirecting power') can become a resource against the dominant masculinity definition.

Partner-country data overlap broadly with Turkish data in terms of this theme's criteria. Croatian and Slovenian sample athletes make a distinction between the toughness the sport legitimately demands and its use as an excuse for cruelty; they associate the need to dominate with insecurity; and they describe withdrawal from the locker room in similar words. In Portuguese data, the emotion regime is explicitly named both by girl athletes (worry about the coach's assessment, acceptance of 'it's part of it') and coaches ('if you cry it's for the weak'); coaches also note that this culture is weakening between generations. The diverging point is that the regime is more frequently questioned by adults in partner countries and that institutional arrangements (locker room assignment, word prohibitions) are more visible.

3.3.4. T4 — *The Bruise Fades, the Label Stays: The Cost of Reporting*

In the report's conceptual framework, the culture of silence (2.3.5), bystander dynamics (2.4.1–2.4.2), and the functionality of protection mechanisms (2.6.2) were discussed under separate headings. Field data suggests that these three discussions can be read together within the same pattern. An important portion of the young athletes interviewed describe staying quiet not as cowardice or ignorance but as a considered preference; in these narratives the harm itself is experienced as temporary while the cost of reporting is experienced as more lasting. The core claim of this theme can be formulated as follows: athletes decide whether to speak by taking the possible cost of reporting into account; and institutional responses, in most of the examples conveyed, appear to confirm rather than refute this calculation. In this framework, silence can be read not only as individual reticence but also as a predictable response to the conditions of the environment.

The naming of the theme comes from athletes' own vocabulary: the words 'label' and 'snitch' are repeated in reporting narratives more frequently and more prominently than expressions about physical harm. This indicates that the centre of gravity of harm in participants' experience has shifted from the physical to the relational and reputational. The qualitative finding also moves in the same direction as the quantitative phase results: in the Turkish sample, the large majority of athletes exposed to peer bullying stated they told no one, and the most frequently marked option among non-reporting reasons was the belief that the complaint would not produce results or that they would not



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be believed (see Tables 1.16 and 1.17). The sub-themes below trace how this belief is constructed in athletes' narratives and what counterparts it finds in adult narratives.

3.3.4.1. *The Calculus of Silence*

When athletes recount their decision about reporting, they most often openly weigh the possible gains and losses of speaking. A basketball athlete's calculation shows how clearly this weighing can become when what is to be lost is concrete and material:

'I told my mother a bit but not everything, so she wouldn't get upset. I couldn't tell her they were mocking me for being a "scholarship student", she'd be heartbroken. I couldn't tell the coach either, because my scholarship comes from them, I didn't want to be the "troublemaker kid", I was scared of being thrown out. So I stayed quiet, because if I spoke I would have been the one losing, that's why I chose to stay quiet.'

— **TR-Athlete17-Basketball-M-17**

The expression 'I would have been the one losing' points to one of this theme's prominent inequality findings: reporting capacity appears not to be equally distributed among athletes. For an athlete whose remaining in the club is tied to a scholarship, the perceived cost of speaking may structurally be higher than for an athlete whose family pays fees. In this case, access to protection mechanisms risks becoming most difficult for the athlete who most needs protection. This finding can be read as one of the counterparts in the reporting domain of the class intersection addressed in T6. A swimming athlete conveys how the same calculation is compounded on the axis of origin and belonging:

'At the start I always hid it. I couldn't tell my family, because they had also struggled to adjust, I didn't want them to get upset. I mean I couldn't say "they don't want us" to them. If I told the coach the team would immediately make me a snitch, I know. I mean I'd be someone who both came from outside and then complained. That's why I stayed quiet for a long time. There was always an expectation of "if you're not happy, leave".'

— **TR-Athlete7-Swimming-F-16**

The sentence 'I'd be someone who both came from outside and then complained' describes a situation where two disadvantages reinforce each other. For an athlete who is already in a fragile position in the environment, reporting is perceived as an act that will confirm the existing fragility. The athlete's evaluation in the same interview also contains their own interpretation of the long-term consequence of this calculation: 'I realised afterwards, my silence encouraged them even more.' A water polo athlete's narrative shows that the calculation can be applied not just to a single channel but to all available channels:

'I hid most of it. I couldn't tell my mother, so she wouldn't get upset. My father is the type who says "a man handles it himself", I could never tell him. If I told the coach I'd be a snitch. Then they'd do it much worse afterwards. Because I know the coach very well, he'd turn me back saying "they're your big brothers". So I stayed quiet, I stayed quiet mostly for four years.'



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In this passage, mother, father, coach, and peer group are evaluated one by one, and each is eliminated with a separate justification: the mother must be protected, the father is the representative of the emotion regime (see 3.3.3.1), the coach is anticipated to side with the seniors, and the peers are expected to retaliate. The result, in the athlete's own words, is four years of silence. In these three narratives, it is seen that options are not unknown but evaluated and eliminated one by one; this suggests that efforts to increase reporting should not remain limited only to teaching 'who to go to'. Coach narratives convey how this calculation operates in the athlete's inner world together with its externally observable consequences. A taekwondo coach recounts an incident during a camp between two athletes from different age groups working in the same hall, and how it emerged years later:

'While watching them, as if giving a compliment to the smaller one, they say something like this to them. Well, how do you lift your feet like that with this weight, I'm impressed. [...] And of course as time passes, time passes, two or three years pass in between. They've really taken this to heart. Afterwards of course we find out, they tell us and such. In that situation of course the coach... None of us know. One of us is on this side, one on that side. [...] And in that one-minute process it remains in the younger one's mind.'

— TR-Coach-FocusGroup2

This narrative makes visible the coach-side face of the reporting problem: the harm occurred during a training session with an adult physically present, in a single sentence that took the form of a compliment, and reached the coaches' knowledge only two or three years later. The same coach associates the reason for the silence with shame and also describes how knowledge can be reached: 'The child can't tell anyone. Even if they have a close friend because they're already ashamed themselves. [...] And in this way, by asking a bit more and such, how was it, how are you and such, maybe by pressing a bit, we can reach the reality of these events. So we can sometimes barely recount these with difficulty.' This expression suggests that the athlete's cost calculation can be counterweighted by the coach's persistent and personal attention; however, this rests on individual effort rather than a systematic channel.

The fact that the athlete's option to leave the environment is limited can further narrow this calculation in some conditions. A volleyball coach working with youth groups, while discussing compliance with club rules, mentions the difficulty of changing clubs during the season: 'Once you leave a place, until that season ends you can't leave and emerge at another place. I can especially say this for youth. That's why they're a bit more cautious. If you're unattached what will you do, if you're expelled from the club what will you do?' This expression was voiced not in the context of reporting but as a response to the question of why athletes comply with club rules, and is an observation valid only for this coach's

discipline and youth level; licence and transfer conditions differ by discipline and age category. Nevertheless, it is considered that in situations where the option to change environments during the season is limited, the athlete's silence may be shaped not only by psychological preference but also by institutional conditions. Partner-country data suggests that the pattern of reporting being constructed as a cost calculation is not specific to Turkish data. In the Croatian sample, athletes' narratives concentrate on the finding that the social cost of reporting can outweigh the harm itself:

Telling someone feels like it costs more socially than whatever the original problem actually cost me.

— HR-ATHLETE-10

The same finding recurs in other athletes: 'the social cost of speaking up often outweighs the actual issue' (HR-ATHLETE-16) and 'the social cost of speaking usually exceeds the issue itself; that's exactly the point' (HR-ATHLETE-20). Going to the coach is described by many athletes as 'the last resort, not the first step' (HR-ATHLETE-05, HR-ATHLETE-09, HR-ATHLETE-13, HR-ATHLETE-17). In the Slovenian sample, the content of the calculation is connected to selection and squad decisions:

Honestly, I'm a little afraid a report could affect whether I'm picked for competitions and camps. Maybe it wouldn't, but the thought stops you.

— SLO-ATHLETE-01

In the same sample, one athlete relates this concern to the structure of the discipline — 'I think it could and that's exactly why people stay quiet in a sport where you're selected' (SLO-ATHLETE-03) — while a newly arrived athlete voices a justification very close to the Turkish data's 'outsider' athlete's calculation: 'as a newer person I'd probably stay quiet; I don't want to be seen as a problem this early on' (SLO-ATHLETE-04). Adults also recognise the same calculation. A Croatian coach focus group participant sees the equating of complaining with weakness as a significant cause of unreported incidents — 'I think the expectation that complaining equals weakness is directly responsible for so much going unreported' (HR-COACH-06) — while a Portuguese manager defines the form of bullying management is slowest to notice as practices in the locker room and explains the reason as follows: children 'don't complain about it afterwards; they don't want to look weak in front of the coach or teammates' (PT-MANAGER-01). These expressions suggest that the cost calculation is described in similar ways across different disciplines and countries, and that adults are also aware of the existence of this calculation.



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3.3.4.2. How the 'Snitch' Label Works

The most frequently voiced cost of reporting by athletes is stigmatisation. In the data, it is seen that this stigma can operate not only as a sanction applied after reporting but also as a norm pre-established against the possibility of reporting. A football athlete's narrative about a hazing ritual reveals that the expectation of silence can be embedded in the ritual itself:

'Mine happened at the back of the bus. They called me to the very back, asked ridiculous questions, came at me when I didn't know the answers. Light pushing and shoving, but it was frightening. The purpose is: supposedly they're testing you "welcome here, but this place isn't easy, can you take it?" Also a test. About whether you'll snitch, whether you'll cry. When I got through that night they really said "now you're one of us" and I, I'm embarrassed to say it, felt proud. Because I'd been accepted into the team.'

— TR-Athlete1-Football-M-17

In this narrative, the hazing operates not only as a tool for establishing hierarchy but also as a silence contract: one of the conditions for acceptance into the group is to show that you won't take what happened outside. This point connects T2 to T4; belonging and silence are acquired simultaneously with the same ritual in this example. The athlete's 'I'm embarrassed to say it, felt proud' expression indicates that the ritual has been normalised or accepted in exchange for belonging; the shame in the expression also suggests this acceptance is not unquestioning. The name of the label can vary according to environment, but its function remains similar. A volleyball athlete names the 'more polite' form in a female team:

'Because the label "went to the coach" appears immediately. We maybe don't say snitch but we say "one who upsets the atmosphere". I think it's a more polite word but the same thing. The "stays between us" culture is very strong with us.'

— TR-Athlete4-Volleyball-F-17

The observation 'a more polite word but the same thing' suggests that the renaming mechanism addressed in T1 (see 3.3.1.6) operates here too: the softening of the word does not mean the sanction has softened. The expression 'one who upsets the atmosphere' also displaces responsibility; in this naming, it is not the person who causes the harm but the person who voices the harm who is positioned as upsetting the atmosphere. A taekwondo athlete draws attention to who makes the 'stay quiet' request and constructs their own criterion regarding the function of the label. When asked who says 'keep it between us, don't be a snitch', which they heard frequently at their old club, the answer is clear: 'Those who bothered us, the seniors, the coach. I mean the people who did the bad things to us were also forbidding us to tell.' The same athlete conveys that the coach at their new club says 'You can tell me anything, the one who speaks is not a snitch', and draws the following conclusion from the two experiences: 'If in a place they're saying "be quiet, don't say" in my view that means something



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is being hidden there. Staying quiet always works in their favour.' This comparison suggests that the label is not only a norm that arises spontaneously among peers; it can be strengthened or weakened depending on the adult's stance. The label can also be applied to the intervening athlete. A judo athlete conveys the reaction they faced after defending a peer and names its deterrent effect:

'When I said "enough" for a while "did you become a hero, snitch" was said. That pressure silences most people. The coach must protect the one who doesn't stay quiet, otherwise no one speaks.'

— **TR-Athlete11-Judo-F-16**

This expression indicates that the label can target not only the victim but also the bystander. In this way, silence is reinforced at two levels simultaneously: the one who is harmed stays quiet, and the one who sees it also stays quiet. The athlete's proposal is directly a policy proposal — 'the coach must protect the one who doesn't stay quiet'. This finding that protection mechanisms need to be directed not only at the victim but also at the one who reports is addressed separately in curriculum recommendations (see Section 6 (Curriculum)). Coach narratives suggest that the 'snitch' logic may have a counterpart in the adult world too. In one of the coach focus groups, a participant summarised how coaches learn what happens in areas they don't see as 'every coach has a spy... you get them to sing anyway'; in another focus group a football coach stated that they can learn what happens in the locker room through designated captains, that apart from this 'there's nothing we can do'. A basketball coach meanwhile recounts how they first encountered this approach and their own stance against it:

'Everyone has one spy. Here an older, experienced coach of ours said something to me, he said it in a meeting, friends, we'll have one spy in the team. You'll have one clown. They'll make the team laugh, entertain them. And one person will come and tell everything. [...] I was very surprised. [...] I mean team, I want my team to be like a family. I want them to talk to each other, share, and know that unless there's something bad they won't come to me. I'd want them to trust each other.'

— **TR-Coach-FocusGroup2**

This narrative holds up a mirror at the adult level to the peer-level functioning of the label. A 'spy' system that collects information through secrecy and personal loyalty transforms the 'snitch' figure that athletes fear into an institutional function; it therefore positions information transfer not as an open and legitimate right but as a secret loyalty relationship. The coach's own stance carries two concerns together: maintaining trust within the team and ensuring they can be reached when 'something bad' occurs. How the boundary between these two concerns is drawn is a question that stands out as something that may also determine the extent to which athletes can be protected from the 'went to the coach' label. The stigmatisation pattern also recurs clearly in partner-country data, with particular emphasis on the permanence of the label. A Croatian sample athlete expresses this as follows:



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A reputation like that follows you around long after whatever actually happened gets forgotten by everyone else.

— HR-ATHLETE-09

In the same sample, the expressions 'in a small team news travels fast and "ran to the coach" is not a label that easily fades' (HR-ATHLETE-13) and 'the label sticks for a long time' (HR-ATHLETE-17) appear; the fact that the label rests on an unwritten rule is also stated: 'there's an unspoken rule that you handle things within the group; taking it outside breaks something people don't easily forgive' (HR-ATHLETE-08). A Slovenian sample athlete compares the weight of the label to the bullying itself: 'the snitch label is the main reason people stay quiet; sometimes it's stronger even than the fear of bullying' (SLO-ATHLETE-02). Another athlete voices a justification close to the Turkish data's 'one who upsets the atmosphere' expression — 'nobody wants to be the reason the group gets tense, so a lot goes unsaid' (SLO-ATHLETE-13) — while an experienced athlete describes the strategy they developed to avoid the label: 'I've learned to carefully bring things up in a way that doesn't look like a report' (SLO-ATHLETE-03). A Croatian coach focus group participant also names the same responsibility shift: 'Sometimes the group acts as if the problem started when the victim spoke. We need to clearly say that the problem started with the harmful behaviour, not with the reporting' (HR-COACH-11).

Partner-country data also presents two caveats regarding the limits of this pattern. First, in the Portuguese women's football focus group athletes state that the label does not affect them; one athlete says 'even if I'm known by that name... I know in my conscience that I saw that situation and knew how to escalate it to higher levels' (PT-ATHLETE-01). The fact that these expressions are voiced in a focus group setting, in front of teammates, should be kept in mind; nevertheless, they point to the label not operating with the same weight in every environment. Second, in the quantitative phase the Croatian sample, fear of being seen as a 'snitch' was marked as a reason for not reporting relatively less frequently, while not considering the incident serious enough came to the fore. The fact that the qualitative interview directly asked about fear of stigmatisation is a methodological detail that should be taken into account in interpreting the difference between these two findings.

3.3.4.3. The Institution's Response: Confirming the Calculation

The extent to which athletes' cost calculation is realistic can be partially evaluated by looking at what happens in situations where a report is made. An important portion of the recounted examples show the calculation being confirmed. A basketball athlete's narrative, encompassing the entire post-reporting process, forms the backbone of this sub-theme:

'Before I always hid it. Once I told the coach that a senior hit me, the coach said "hit back a bit, stop crying like a girl". Then that senior filled the whole team against me, for a while no one spoke. That loneliness was worse than the pain of the beating, that's why I stayed quiet for a long time.'

— TR-Athlete2-Basketball-F-16

In this short narrative, four stages follow one after the other: physical harm, reporting, the adult's non-response, and retaliation. The coach's response ('hit back a bit, stop crying like a girl') serves two functions: it refers the solution back to the victim and in doing so draws on the language of the emotion regime (see 3.3.3.1). The relational exclusion that follows concretises the theme's titular distinction through this athlete's experience — the pain of the physical harm passed, while the cost of reporting continued. The athlete's 'that's why I stayed quiet for a long time' conclusion suggests how a single experience can shape subsequent reporting behaviour. This sequence appears consistent with the 'wall of silence' that Fortier, Parent and Lessard (2020) argue plays a role in sustaining maltreatment directed at children in sport. A recent prevalence study on harassment and abuse in sport in Türkiye also reports that formal reporting rates remained quite low (Öztürk et al., 2026a).

The same prognosis is also shared by athletes in situations not yet attempted. The football athlete explains their reason for not reporting an incident at camp as 'if I told them the coach would say "sort it out among yourselves" and move on, and I'd become an even bigger target.' The 'sort it out among yourselves' formula is one of the recurring forms of institutional non-response in the data: responsibility is returned to the parties of the relationship where the power imbalance exists. It is also seen that the quality of the response can vary according to the reporting person's position. A judo athlete notes that when they conveyed an incident they witnessed in the locker room to their coach without naming names, the initial response was 'kids will be kids', but when they persisted the coach took the matter seriously and spoke with the group. This example suggests that a report receiving a response may in part depend on the reporting person's capacity to persist; it seems very difficult for the newest and most vulnerable member of the environment to show the persistence that a more senior and successful athlete can demonstrate.

Coach narratives offer the opportunity to observe the consequence of an adult's failure to intervene over a long period of time. A participant who has been both athlete and coach in karate recounts a process they witnessed at their own club:

'There was a group of five girls. They made a decision to exclude one of them. [...] Slowly, slowly she was pushed out, and then the coach, our coach at that time, their attitude was also very important [...] they also this time provided no help at all to the girl. On top of it they also started not pairing with the girl. [...] Only when I came could the girl come to me and ask sister will you



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be my partner. [...] And after I left sport the girl was completely alone in the club. [...] And without the coach intervening in any way, the girl's psychology was very badly affected and she also made the decision to leave the club. [...] We can actually observe this in a clearly understandable way. Let me say this happens very openly.'

— **TR-Coach-FocusGroup1**

The analytic value of this narrative is showing that institutional non-response can occur not only as a response given to a report but also as inaction in the face of an observable process. As the participant emphasises, the exclusion happened 'very openly'; yet the coach's not pairing with the athlete effectively functioned as an approval of the peers' exclusion. What kept the athlete going for a while was not an institutional mechanism but the individual support of a 'big sister'; when this support was removed, the process ended with the athlete leaving the club. The response the same participant received from their personal coach when they shared the problems they had with athletes at their own club during their sporting period — 'you will be very resilient, you can overcome these things' — exemplifies how the resilience discourse can convert reporting into a question of personal competence (see 3.3.3.1). A portion of manager narratives also overlaps with athletes' prognosis. A manager in judo-wrestling defines reporting itself as a character flaw:

'Let me speak openly, with us they call it "tattling", it's not well received. A man swallows their troubles. If a child goes and complains about someone else, no one trusts that child anymore; they say today you sold me, tomorrow you'll sell them. I also think this way, I won't hide it. The people of our area take it in, carry it, if necessary settle the score themselves; but don't go knocking at someone else's door. This is a matter of pride.'

— **TR-Manager2-Judo-Wrestling-M-Trabzon**

In this narrative, the label that athletes fear is voiced as a principle at the top level of the institution. The same manager also describes how they would process a complaint that reaches them: 'I call both sides, in the middle of the hall, in front of everyone's eyes.' This method exposes the victim's identity and claim to the environment, thus carrying the risk of increasing rather than decreasing the perceived cost of reporting. Furthermore, the described 'three-door' system — first a senior, then the coach, lastly the manager — places the most easily accessible authority for the athlete at the very end. A football manager states that they first 'size up' the child who reports and most often thinks the one who comes is 'a child who can't hold on'; and even when they find a report justified, the response again burdens the child with responsibility: 'son, stand tall, go handle it yourself' (TR-Manager1-Football-M-Istanbul; see 3.3.3.6). In this approach, the reporting child is positioned primarily as a party whose credibility is being tested. These manager narratives, at least in these examples, help understand why athletes' cost calculation is constructed so cautiously: among the inputs of the calculation are also the institution's own declarations.

In partner-country data, observations regarding the institutional response concentrate particularly on a threshold of taking-seriously that varies according to the type of harm. A Croatian parent describes this threshold with an expression strikingly consistent with the theme's title:

A complaint is taken seriously when it concerns safety, but emotional harm is harder. Sometimes adults want visible bruises before they accept that something is wrong.

— HR-PARENT-04

In the same sample, parents note that coaches are more open to safety and insult-related complaints but 'still prefer to handle things quietly' (HR-PARENT-02) and that some coaches' stance 'varies according to the player's importance' (HR-PARENT-03). Coaches meanwhile find the visibility of the institutional response decisive for bystander athletes: 'if the team sees an incident quietly disappear, they learn that empathy doesn't actually change outcomes and this lesson stays longer than the incident itself' (HR-COACH-02); 'if we downplay the incident they learn that status protects people' (HR-COACH-10). A Slovenian coach voices the same point in the context of a star player — 'if I look the other way once, the whole team learns the real rule, not the stated one' (SLO-COACH-12) — while another coach draws attention to management pressure: 'managers want the matter resolved quietly and quickly; this sometimes means real conversations get skipped in favour of a quick fix' (SLO-COACH-08). In the Portuguese sample, a manager states that most of the reports reaching the club 'don't carry much weight', some being minor incidents that don't amount to bullying (PT-MANAGER-01). This last expression can be read alongside the Turkish data manager stances showing that at the institutional level a report can first be met as a credibility question. Croatian athlete narratives, where coaches content themselves with speaking to the whole group when they notice tension and rarely name the source of the problem, were addressed in T1 (see 3.3.1.6).

3.3.4.4. *The Parent Battling the Gap*

The second link in the reporting chain is the parent, and the data indicates that this link too can weaken through different routes. A swimming mother describes both the label applied to them and the limit of their authority:

'In my view this is entirely an institutional responsibility. As a mother I cannot go into the locker room, I cannot get on the transport. I mean my power ends exactly there. That's why there needs to be an adult there; a duty officer, a female coach, a responsible person, whoever it may be. I always said this at the club, "put a duty officer in the locker room, provide an escort for the transport". Do you know what the response was? "No budget."'

— TR-Parent2-Swimming-Mother-Ankara

This narrative clearly names where parental intervention stops: unsupervised spaces where harm is concentrated (see 3.3.3.1, 3.3.3.3) are also spaces the parent cannot physically access. Unable to fill



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this gap themselves, the parent demands it from the institution; the demand is, according to the narrative, rejected not as a debate of principle but as a resource problem. The 'no budget' response provides a clue about where protection stands in this club's prioritisation. The same parent also reveals that their observation capacity is actually high: they identified the repetition of splashing, touching the foot while passing, and blocking behaviours in the lane; moreover, they noticed that the perpetrator checked their surroundings before the act. In their own words, 'a person making an accident doesn't look around'. Here the parent is independently producing a version similar to the intent test athletes developed (see 3.3.1.1). In this narrative the problem is not the parent not seeing, but the absence of a functioning channel to which they can convey what they see. The same parent's experience regarding the 'over-reacting mother' label was conveyed in T1 (see 3.3.1.6). The dissuasion of parental intervention can be carried out not only by the institution but also by other parents. A basketball father conveys an intervention as a story of failure:

'Mothers are more bothered. There are one or two mothers who always make everything bigger, write in the group, "the kids are being horrible to each other". Fathers generally think like me, we say "these things happen" and move on. Once a mother took what happened on the transport to the coach, the coach warned the kids, what happened then? For two weeks no one spoke to that woman's son. I mean the mother's intervention harmed the child.'

— **TR-Parent1-Basketball-Father-Istanbul**

This narrative shows that the cost of reporting is valid at the parental level too, and is transmitted intergenerationally. In the narrative, it is not the reporting itself but the retaliation that is found problematic; the lesson drawn is 'not to intervene'. Additionally, the gendering of the tendency to intervene is noteworthy: concern is attributed to the mother, equanimity to the father; in this way the demand for protection is transformed into an indicator of hypersensitivity. The 'over-reacting mother' label that the swimming mother conveys is the name of this mechanism. What the same father conveys in other parts of the interview also shows how this lesson is transmitted to the child. The father who summarises his standard response to his son when behaviours towards other children are in question as 'This is my standard answer: don't get involved', makes a clear distinction between physical and social harm: 'If a child stays on the ground, if they're in pain, of course I'd help them up... But if there's a social matter... I don't get involved.' His justification also shares the same structure as athletes' calculations: 'They'll say "so-and-so's father complained", my son will pay the price for this.' These expressions suggest that bystander silence (see 3.3.4.5) can be constructed not only among peers but also as a principle openly taught within the family, and that the adult also makes their own retaliation calculation.



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Later in the interview, the same father begins to connect his son no longer talking to him with this principle: 'Because I always said "ignore it, don't get involved, grit your teeth". Maybe that's why he doesn't tell me anymore.' This retroactive evaluation points to the fact that the rule the parent set may have narrowed not only the child's intervention in others but also the channel through which the child reaches the parent. By contrast, the data also contains a model in which the parental link can operate differently. A volleyball father, reading exclusion not as a child problem but as a group problem, changes the intervention framework from the start:

'Then in a few training sessions I also saw it. The child comes, sits alone on the sideline; the others talk and laugh among themselves. They ask something, get a quick answer and moving on. That seemed a bit wrong to me then. Because you look at this child and there's no such big matter. It's more like the group has formed its own order inside and someone has been left outside that order. When one of the children is left out the others huddle closer together.'

— **TR-Parent5-Volleyball-Father-Izmir**

This framing is qualitatively different from other parent narratives. Instead of the excluded child 'becoming stronger' or the family 'not exaggerating', the question is asked of why the group produces a need to leave someone out. The same parent also acknowledges that this stance has a cost for their own child, but makes their preference explicitly: 'Yes, being friends with an excluded child may somewhat risk my daughter's position within the group. But I don't want to raise my daughter as someone who ignores another child to protect their position in the group.' Here the parent formulates the criterion they convey to their child as a value choice; in this way it is seen that bystander behaviour (see 3.3.4.5) can be pre-shaped at the family level. The same phenomenon operates in the exact opposite direction from the 'don't get involved' principle. A reverse-functioning link in the chain also exists: the child may stay quiet to protect the parent. In the basketball, swimming, and water polo narratives recounted in 3.3.4.1, all three athletes state they hid what they experienced so as not to upset or break the hearts of their parents. In these narratives, the reporting chain weakens in two directions simultaneously: the adult cannot reach the child, and the child protects the adult.

Partner-country data on the parental link reiterates in different forms the two tendencies in Turkish data — managing quietly and concern about retaliation. A Croatian parent describes the divide among parents: some want everything discussed immediately while 'others prefer silence because they're afraid their kid will lose playing time' (HR-PARENT-02). Another parent notes that problems are most often discussed in the corridor and that 'very few make written complaints because they're scared of damaging their relationship with the coach' (HR-PARENT-06); another conveys that problems are softened with expressions like 'maybe it was nothing' so as not to disrupt the club's 'family



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atmosphere' (HR-PARENT-05). In the Slovenian sample too, a parent notes that these kinds of discussions happen quietly between parents in the car park rather than in a formal setting, and voices concern that a complaint could, 'even if this is never openly said', be perceived as affecting their child's selection to camps (SLO-PARENT-01). Coaches evaluate the parental link from their own positions. In Croatian focus groups, a coach notes that 'the athlete is often ready to say something before the parent is ready to hear, and this gap leads to actual harm' (HR-COACH-02); another says some parents believe 'if the kid is complaining they're not strong enough for the sport' and this stance makes it harder for athletes to speak up (HR-COACH-08). This last expression moves in the same direction as the Turkish data's 'don't get involved' principle and the parent stances addressed in 3.3.3.6. A Croatian manager emphasises that an open reporting pathway saves parents 'from having to guess whether they're overreacting' (HR-MANAGER-07); this expression is noteworthy in showing that the 'over-reacting mother' label in Turkish data could be eased by an institutional arrangement.

3.3.4.5. Bystander Silence and Moral Courage

The third dimension of the reporting problem is the stance of those who witness harm. The bystander is in a position that can be decisive in both the continuation and the stopping of bullying; for this reason it is also the first place where moral courage is tested (see 2.4.1–2.4.2). In the data, bystander silence appears not only as indifference but most often as a consequence of the same cost calculation; however the narratives also suggest that this silence cannot be reduced to a single cause. A taekwondo athlete, remembering the room where no one intervened while they were crying during a 'welcome' ritual applied to new arrivals at their old club, separately analyses why each group stayed quiet:

'There were seniors, there were people my age, there was a coach. The seniors were laughing. People my age stayed quiet. The coach was already ignoring it. [...] For the seniors it was normal, because it had been done to them too. People my age were scared I think, "if I get involved it'll be my turn next". The coach already thought this was a good thing, like a "test". [...] When everyone stayed quiet I was left there crying. [...] When you most need help you can be most alone. In the middle of a crowded room but alone. That harm wasn't only done by those who did it, those who watched and stayed quiet were also part of it.'

— TR-Athlete16-Taekwondo-F-15

This narrative, through the athlete's own analysis, reveals that bystander silence can be fed from different sources. In Salmivalli's (2010) participant roles approach, bystanders are distinguished by their behaviours (reinforcer, outsider, defender); in this narrative, meanwhile, the same behaviour — staying quiet or laughing — is associated with three different justifications: for seniors, tradition ('it had been done to them too'); for peers, fear ('it'll be my turn next'); for the coach, method ('test'). This distinction suggests that silences based on different justifications may require different interventions. A portion of the justifications can also be read through mechanisms defined in the moral



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disengagement literature: the seniors' justification normalises the act, while the coach's justification legitimises it by connecting it to a pedagogical aim (Bandura, 1991). Gini, Thornberg and Pozzoli (2020) argue that when such justifications are shared at the group level they can relieve an individual's moral distress and reduce the likelihood of intervention; the athlete's expression 'when everyone stayed quiet' indicates that silence has acquired a collective quality in this sense. The athlete's final sentence positions the bystander not outside but inside the harm.

Fear-based silence can in some narratives extend to joining the perpetrator. A basketball athlete, while recounting a case where a photo of a teammate that would cause embarrassment was sent to a group and the athlete subsequently left the team, does not conceal their own reaction: 'Everyone said "we were joking", and in that moment I also said "too sensitive".' Naming the victim as 'too sensitive' can be read as a justification that shifts responsibility to the one experiencing the harm. The same athlete, looking back, also voices an important observation about the functioning of silence within the group: 'It turned out everyone was uncomfortable like me but everyone was waiting for the first person to write. Once one person speaks the wall cracks. I wish I'd known this sooner, I wish I'd also supported that girl I called "too sensitive" that day.' This expression describes a situation where an important portion of group members are uncomfortable while assuming others have consented; it can be read as the bystander-level counterpart of the pattern addressed in T2 in the context of the seniority regime (see 3.3.2.2). Studies showing that defender behaviour is related to the expectation that others will also intervene (Jungert et al., 2016; Gözmen Elmas et al., 2026) are consistent with this observation.

In counterpoint to bystander silence, the data also contains detailed narratives of moments when moral courage turned into action. A judo athlete, explaining the two seconds before the decision to intervene in a moment when a senior was rough-handling a young athlete in the locker room until they were about to cry while everyone stayed quiet:

'Those two seconds actually contained a lot, coach, thinking about it now. [...] Our discipline is very strict on this. A voice inside said "don't get involved, it's not your problem, you'll get yourself into trouble". But in those two seconds something else happened: I looked at the young girl's face. She was about to cry and was alone, in the middle of a huge room with everyone looking at her and staying quiet. I remembered that helplessness when people were mocking my own body.'

— TR-Athlete11-Judo-F-16

In this passage the athlete clearly evaluates the risk ('you'll get yourself into trouble') and intervenes despite it; the same athlete's first reaction to this moment was to freeze, as recounted in T1 (see 3.3.1.4). It is emphasised that what distinguishes moral courage from prosocial behaviour is precisely this anticipated cost (Osswald et al., 2010). From the perspective of this narrative, it is seen that what



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changed the decision was the athlete's recollection of their own victimisation experience. This should be read not as the only source of moral courage but as a trigger that was effective in this case; in the volleyball narrative below it is seen that the same threshold is crossed in a different way. The finding suggests that bystander training programmes should not be limited only to providing 'what to do' knowledge; they should also include content supporting empathic remembrance and perspective-taking, together with institutional guarantees that reduce the cost. Indeed, the same athlete faced the 'did you become a hero, snitch' reaction after their intervention (see 3.3.4.2).

A volleyball athlete's narrative shows another form of crossing the courage threshold and its cost together. The athlete, who admits they stayed quiet for a long time due to their high position in the team — 'Before I used to say "I didn't do anything to anyone". Now I think that isn't enough... In my view staying quiet is also taking a side.' — recounts that when a newly arrived teammate's photo was leaked to another group with demeaning comments written underneath, they stayed quiet for two days, and on the third day reacted in the group and conveyed the situation to the coach without naming names. They describe what made them cross the threshold as: 'For a moment I put myself in their place. I thought, "What if that photo were my photo and everyone stayed quiet?"' The cost is also clear: 'For a few weeks I was the "one who upsets the atmosphere".' However the athlete describes the harmed teammate returning to training and saying 'thank you' to them as 'possibly the best thing I've received in six years of volleyball.' When these two narratives are read together, it is seen that moral courage can be triggered in different ways — one through recalling a real moment, the other through an imagined role reversal. However, the fact that both athletes are in a relatively sheltered position in the team is an important limitation: the cost in these cases may have remained at a manageable level; for a more vulnerable athlete the cost of the same step may be much heavier. For this reason it is considered that the call for moral courage cannot be directed equally at everyone and needs to be supported with institutional protections (Gözmen Elmas et al., 2026).

Silence is not limited only to victims and witnesses. A swimming athlete, speaking from the perpetrator position, completes the third link of the silence chain:

'It happens. The one who does it also stays quiet, doesn't tell anyone. By not saying anything they don't question it, forget it, move on. So the one who receives it stays quiet because of shame, the one who does it stays quiet because it suits them. When both stay quiet nothing changes.'

— TR-Athlete10-Swimming-M-16

The formulation 'the one who receives stays quiet from shame, the one who does stays quiet because it suits them' reveals that silence is not only a behaviour belonging to the victim. In the athlete's



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expression, the perpetrator's silence also prevents them from questioning their own behaviour — 'by not saying anything they don't question it'. Thus in this narrative, silence not only conceals the harm but also contributes to its continuation. The same athlete making this evaluation during the interview also points to the possibility that the interview may have opened a space for such questioning (see 3.3.1.7). A Portuguese coach focus group participant also conveys a similar observation: an important portion of athletes do not notice they are bullying during their play, but when the coach takes them aside and warns them they grasp the situation and, feeling 'a weight on their conscience', try to change their behaviour (PT-COACH-FG). These two narratives together suggest that the perpetrator also needs a space in which they can name their own behaviour, as if they too were a bystander.

Coach narratives exemplify how the bystander position can be read by adults and influenced without waiting for a report. A volleyball coach recounts how they monitor indicators of bullying within daily training routines:

'They shout each other's names. For example bravo Serra, bravo Pinar, whoever said it calls the other's name. I notice this thing: if they're being bullied those children's names are generally not said. [...] Then I step in there, I call to them and so on. [...] The captain for instance — when going out in the evening, who do they make count the balls? Or who do they get to do the jobs? That's generally the type who is unloved, unwanted, the one given the thankless jobs. I watch those too. Is it always the same person? Why do you always make the same person carry the balls? [...] I say to them, this week they did it, this week they won't do it any more, that's done. Change it. [...] Since they also see that we're observing and examining them, they also can't go down that path.'

— TR-Coach-FocusGroup1

The analytic value of this narrative is that it identifies observable traces of bystander behaviour. An athlete whose name is not called in warm-up is read as an indicator of a quiet exclusion practice among peers — a pattern where no one openly does anything but everyone participates; the distribution of chores meanwhile points to a form of the debt regime addressed in T2 (see 3.3.2.1) that can also be sustained by bystanders. The coach intervenes in these patterns without waiting for a report, thus partially freeing athletes from the reporting burden. The narrative's final sentence suggests that an adult being visibly observant can itself create a deterrent effect.

The reverse of the same dynamic is also voiced in coach narratives. A basketball coach recounts how bystanders can move closer to the perpetrator when no sanction is applied: 'The others see that when that kid does it nothing happens to them... It's treated as normal. As if everything is fine. Then it's said we can do this bullying too. Or they find a place for themselves next to the one doing the bullying. I'll also do it, becoming next to them' (TR-Coach-FocusGroup2). This observation points to the institutional non-response addressed in 3.3.4.3 also shaping bystander roles; in an environment with



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no reaction, a passive bystander can over time shift towards the reinforcer position. The bystander's position is described in partner-country data, particularly in coach focus groups, with a diversity close to the Turkish data. A Croatian coach focus group participant analyses the effect of a bullying incident on bystanders:

Some children feel guilty because they saw it and did nothing. Some become afraid that they will be next. Others try to justify it because admitting it was wrong would mean admitting their own responsibility.

— HR-COACH-11

This expression overlaps strikingly with the taekwondo athlete's distinction between fear-based and justification-based silence; its final sentence voices the function of moral disengagement at the bystander level — justifying behaviour in order not to acknowledge one's own responsibility — as a coach's observation. Another coach in the same focus group notes that the team divides into three groups: 'a group saying it was only a joke, a group that knows it was wrong but stays quiet, and maybe one or two athletes who might defend the excluded player' (HR-COACH-09). The Portuguese coach focus group also describes a similar split: alongside those who defend the victim, there are those who approach the perpetrator 'making the situation even worse' (PT-COACH-FG). Another Croatian coach draws attention to the silence of senior athletes: some players, knowing the behaviour is wrong, do not intervene because they don't want to lose their position in the group, and 'when good leaders stop intervening, toxic competition becomes part of the climate' (HR-COACH-08). Athlete narratives reflect the same tension. Several Croatian athletes formulate the question they weigh in the reporting decision in the same way: 'does staying quiet protect the team, or just the source of the problem?' (HR-ATHLETE-04, HR-ATHLETE-08, HR-ATHLETE-12, HR-ATHLETE-16, HR-ATHLETE-23). A Slovenian athlete notes they tense up when a teammate is being picked on 'because they don't want to be next' (SLO-ATHLETE-01); another openly admits they witnessed digital exclusion and said nothing and 'doesn't feel proud about that' (SLO-ATHLETE-03). A Slovenian coach focus group participant recounts experiencing the same dilemma from the adult position: when they intervened with a senior athlete refusing to soften their intensity, they appeared to undermine their authority in front of the group, but adds that 'staying quiet would mean the younger one faces that intensity alone' (SLO-COACH-01). This last expression is noteworthy in showing that the bystander dilemma can be valid not only for athletes but also for adults with the authority to intervene.

3.3.4.6. *The Adult Side: Denial and Construction of the Mechanism*

Adult narratives are the domain in the data where a clear polarisation is visible regarding reporting mechanisms. At one end are managers who explicitly reject the written mechanism; at the other,



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managers who have established a multi-channel system; moreover both models coexist in the same country during the same period. A football manager finds a written code of conduct unnecessary and constructs the right to report as a producer of character weakness: they think that when a child is given the message 'you are a victim, you can complain at any moment', the child will learn 'not to grit their teeth but to run and complain' (TR-Manager1-Football-M-Istanbul). The fact that this rejection stems not from negligence but from a deliberate pedagogical position is evaluated as a factor that can make it more difficult to change. The judo-wrestling manager's justification 'here a word is a bond, not paper' has the same structure: the written code is read as a distrust of the existing moral order. A similar polarisation is also voiced in the parent community; a taekwondo mother notes that parents divide into those who say 'I want my child to be strong, not to be crushed, if necessary to crush' and 'sensitive mothers', that the second group 'runs to the coach when an incident happens', while their group says 'let the kids handle it' (TR-Parent4-Taekwondo-Mother-Istanbul). This expression suggests that the parent who reports can be marginalised by other parents even before the institution.

Coach narratives make visible a position between the two poles — the adult left alone in the absence of a mechanism. A basketball coach recounts a process they witnessed in a team where they worked as assistant coach and their own intervention attempt:

'There was a very talented star player in the team and they were made team captain. [...] They were made team captain and there was a child in the team who played badly. Actually they don't play badly. [...] The kid who plays badly isn't making mistakes but they're getting angrier. [...] They're withdrawing psychologically. The kids are putting more pressure on them. I talked to the coach about this. [...] I went and talked to the coach. The coach hemmed and hawed. Said nothing, did nothing. It continued, permitted them to be bullied. And there was nothing I could do. [...] And the child currently doesn't play basketball at all.'

— **TR-Coach-FocusGroup2**

This narrative indicates that reporting can break not only at the athlete level but also between adults. The assistant coach saw the harm, named it, and conveyed it to the responsible person; however this report did not receive a response and the process ended with the athlete leaving the discipline. In the narrative, the head coach's attitude is also part of the chain: the anger directed towards the low-status player rather than the star when a mistake is made appears to have modelled peers' pressure. The same coach also expresses the obstacle to taking a clear stance in similar situations in a language very similar to athletes' calculations: 'Unless my club permits me, unless they support me, I can't clearly show my stance against that bullying player. I might lose my livelihood, I might not earn money, I might have to leave the team.' This expression suggests that the cost calculation described for athletes in 3.3.4.1 can also operate at the adult level; that without institutional support the coach can also face



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a bystander dilemma (see 3.3.2.4). Why intervention responsibility left only to individual goodwill may not work, and why authority definition needs to be made institutionally, can be concretely seen through this narrative.

At the opposite pole is a club that has systematically established the reporting mechanism. A female manager working in volleyball and handball, justifying why a single channel is insufficient, defines three separate paths:

'We have three channels. Because a single channel always gets blocked. First, the club has a protection officer; this person is not a coach, someone who was deliberately chosen not to be a coach, a colleague of ours at our club with a background in psychological counselling. Second, at the club entrance and in the locker room corridor there are report boxes; they can also be written anonymously. Third, an online form; it can be filled in from a phone in two minutes, goes directly to the protection officer.'

— **TR-Manager3-Volleyball/Handball-F-Istanbul**

The design of this system responds to an important portion of the obstacles athletes describe. The protection officer not being the coach addresses athletes' concern 'if I told the coach I'd be a snitch'; the report box being in the locker room corridor addresses access to the space where harm is concentrated; and the possibility of anonymous reporting targets the label risk. The same manager also names the indirect retaliation that athletes fear most: 'You tell the child "come and tell", the child tells, the next week they're not in the squad; nobody says "because you told" but the child understands.' For this reason at the club, the playing time of the reporting athlete is monitored for eight weeks after a report and a written justification is requested when there is a noticeable drop. The information-gathering format is also arranged to reduce the label risk: 'If you ask "who did it" no child will speak'; instead athletes are asked during the season whether there was a moment they felt uncomfortable in the locker room. This question format shares the same logic as the coach example recounted in T3 who asks 'what happened?' rather than 'why did you say it?' (see 3.3.3.5); it directs the question not to the reporting person's behaviour but to the incident that occurred. At the same club, four separate codes of conduct (for athletes, coaches, managers, and parents) are signed by the relevant parties at the start of the season. This example is one of the important counter-examples of this theme in suggesting that the reporting problem can be addressed not only as a cultural given but also as a domain changeable through institutional design. Taking into account studies discussing that the existence of reporting systems does not alone guarantee they will be used (Tak, Kim & Rhind, 2024), the care this club shows for details such as retaliation monitoring and question format rather than just the number of channels is noteworthy.

Partner-country data identifies the absence of an independent point of contact as a clearly prominent problem, particularly in small clubs where the roles of coach, selector, and organiser are concentrated in the same person. A Slovenian sample athlete describes this impasse as follows: if the problem involves this person 'you don't really know who to tell or whether it stays confidential; there's no independent route' (SLO-ATHLETE-01). Another athlete in the same sample draws attention to the absence of both written rules and 'someone independent you could go to' (SLO-ATHLETE-03), while a coach notes that 'a neutral person, not involved in selection decisions, that athletes can go to could significantly reduce the fear of speaking up' (SLO-COACH-06). Croatian sample managers voice the same need with different justifications: 'Trust is good, but when the issue involves the coach's favourite player a parent still needs a clear path' (HR-MANAGER-05); 'without a known route, parents wait, girls stay quiet, and by the time management hears, the social pattern is already set' (HR-MANAGER-01); in communities where families know each other, people avoid formal complaints for fear 'the child won't be left alone for years' (HR-MANAGER-04). In the same sample, coaches emphasise that when a star athlete is disciplined, the victim needs to be protected — 'if the group sees that the star player being benched was caused by the victim, retaliation could follow later in the chat group or locker room' (HR-COACH-08) — and that a written club policy won't leave the coach alone in this decision (HR-COACH-09). The Portuguese sample makes the tension between written mechanism and personal trust visible in a different form. A participant who serves both as coach and manager in a kickboxing club recounts that there is no report form at their club, relying instead on the personal trust relationship they have established with their athletes:

'Às vezes em segredo, percebes, aos mais pequeninos, se passar contas-me em segredo. O mestre não diz nada. Percebes que é para eu ter também a noção, porque eu não estou sempre presente e às vezes acontecem coisas e eu nem sei. [...] Não temos um formulário, não, isso não temos. Porque também conhecemos, toda a gente conhece toda a gente, não é? [Sometimes in secret, you understand, to the youngest ones, if something happens tell me in secret. The master won't say anything. You understand that it's so I also have an awareness, because I'm not always present and sometimes things happen and I don't even know about them. [...] We don't have a form, no, we don't have that. Because we also know each other, everyone knows everyone, don't they?]

— PT-MANAGER-03

The same participant notes that younger athletes can also communicate their problems to them by writing letters; states that the club's code of conduct, internal rules, and statutes are kept at the hall reception accessible to everyone; and conveys that at least three months' suspension is applied when bullying repeats. By contrast, they approach anonymous reporting with scepticism, citing an anonymous complaint at a tournament that turned out to be unfounded on investigation. Another Portuguese sample manager also states that digital platforms are 'useful in one way, counterproductive

in another' (PT-MANAGER-01). These narratives suggest that a trust-based channel can be functional in small clubs where close relationships dominate; however, as Turkish data manager narratives also show, personal closeness can in some situations also constitute an obstacle in front of reporting. In a system where trust is tied to a single person, when the problem concerns that person or when that person is not there, the absence of a path to turn to constitutes the justification for the independent channel demand expressed in Slovenian and Croatian data.

3.3.4.7. *The Moment the Chain Completes: A Multi-Voiced Reporting Narrative*

This theme is closed not with a single person's idiographic portrait but with the multi-voiced narrative of a chain in which reporting actually works. This preference is consistent with the theme's reading that connects reporting to the totality of a chain of relationships rather than individual courage. A karate athlete's narrative is the clearest case showing all the links of the chain together. This athlete, who was systematically silent at school before starting sport, recounts behaving differently in the face of a digital attack:

'There I had also started karate, that's why I acted differently. In the past I would have stayed quiet, I wouldn't have told anyone. But at that time with the sensei's influence I also told my father. I showed my father the phone. My father took a screenshot of the image, date, time and so on. Then he filed a complaint both at the school and on that platform, the image was removed, the account was closed. My father followed everything through, didn't let it drop. I also showed my teacher, they said "good you kept it". So this time I didn't stay quiet...'

— TR-Athlete6-Karate-M-15

The links of the chain can be traced one by one: the environment (the option of speaking coming to mind thanks to the climate the sensei established), the parent (believing, gathering evidence, and following through), the institutions (school and platform), and the coach (approving feedback of the behaviour). In this narrative it is seen that no single link is sufficient on its own; the athlete's decision to speak rests on a trust previously acquired that speaking will receive a response. The athlete believes this trust was built not through one-time information-sharing but through continuity: 'Those things are always performative in my view. They come, explain for an hour, leave. Our teacher isn't like that. He tells us every week. He steps in at every small incident, reminds us.' How the same chain can break is shown by another case the athlete conveys: a friend who plays basketball wanted to tell their coach about a senior's continuously tough behaviour, but peers dissuaded them by saying 'you'll know what happens if you tell'. According to the athlete, the result is this: 'Then the kid started not coming to training. So instead of saying something, the kid moved away from the environment.' In this example, when the reporting channel closed the remaining option became withdrawal from the environment; this can be read as one of the mechanisms related to the sport dropout phenomenon



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discussed in Literature, Section 2.6.5. The two athletes leaving the club or discipline in the coach narratives recounted in 3.3.4.3 and 3.3.4.6 also point to a pattern in the same direction.

Another condition needed for the chain to work has been drawn by the football athlete from their own experience. After conveying a serious incident to a trusted senior and getting a result, their understanding of reporting changed: 'Who, how, and when you told has turned out to matter. If you tell it in front of everyone, as if reporting the captain, you're done. But if you tell the right person, behind closed doors, sometimes the matter genuinely gets resolved. So the fear is still there, but I no longer say "nothing will ever be spoken about".' A Slovenian experienced athlete's statement that they have 'learned to carefully bring things up in a way that doesn't look like a report' (see 3.3.4.2) and a Croatian coach's noting that an athlete needs to be spoken to privately and calmly, because 'if we ask in front of the group they'll almost never speak honestly' (HR-COACH-11), point to the same condition from different positions. These expressions also explain why the judo-wrestling manager's 'in the middle of the hall, in front of everyone's eyes' confrontation method (see 3.3.4.3) may be deterrent: the confidentiality of reporting stands out in these narratives as one of the fundamental conditions for whether it works.

3.3.4.8. Theme Summary

An important portion of the athletes interviewed describe staying quiet not as ignorance or cowardice but as a decision in which possible costs are weighed: in these narratives harm is experienced as temporary while the label is more lasting. In the narratives, it is seen that options are not unknown but evaluated and eliminated one by one. In the quantitative phase too, the most frequent reason for not reporting is the belief that the complaint will not lead to results or that they will not be believed.

Reporting capacity appears not to be equally distributed. For an athlete whose remaining in the club is tied to a scholarship, who comes from outside, or who is already in a fragile position in the environment, the perceived cost of speaking is higher; this situation carries the risk of access to protection mechanisms becoming most difficult for the one who most needs protection.

The label can be pre-embedded in hazing rituals in addition to being a sanction applied after reporting; in some examples belonging and silence are acquired simultaneously. Its name can vary according to environment ('snitch', 'one who upsets the atmosphere'), and it can also target the intervening bystander. The 'spy' discourse among coaches suggests that this logic may have a counterpart at the adult level too.



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In an important portion of the recounted examples, the institutional response appears to confirm athletes' calculation: 'sort it out among yourselves', 'go handle it yourself', 'hit back a bit'. The reporting child is in some manager narratives positioned primarily as a party whose credibility is being tested; the quality of the response can vary according to the reporting person's capacity to persist. Coach narratives indicate that inaction in the face of observable exclusion can result in the athlete leaving the club.

The parental link can weaken in two directions simultaneously: the adult cannot access unsupervised spaces and their demand can be rejected on grounds of resource inadequacy; the child may stay quiet so as not to upset the adult. The intervening parent can be deterred by the 'over-reacting mother' label and the norms of other parents; the 'don't get involved' principle can teach bystander silence within the family.

Bystander silence cannot be reduced to a single cause: the same silence can be sustained with justifications of tradition, fear, or method; in some cases it can turn into joining the perpetrator together with justifications that blame the victim or normalise the incident. Moral courage, meanwhile, appears in these narratives not as a personality trait but as a risk anticipated and taken; the threshold can be crossed in different ways such as recalling one's own victimisation or putting oneself in the victim's place. The relatively sheltered position of athletes who show courage indicates that this call needs to be supported with institutional guarantees.

A distinct polarisation is visible on the adult side. Without institutional support, coaches can also face a cost calculation similar to athletes'. Arrangements such as the protection officer not being the coach, the possibility of anonymous reporting, channels placed in unsupervised spaces, monitoring of retaliation, and codes of conduct correspond to an important portion of the obstacles athletes describe; this also suggests that the reporting problem can be read as an area changeable through institutional design.

The narratives in this theme suggest that reporting can receive a response when a chain consisting of environment, parent, institution, and coach works together. When one of the links breaks, in the recounted examples the remaining option most often becomes withdrawal from the environment; this can also be read as one of the mechanisms related to sport dropout. The confidentiality of reporting stands out as one of the fundamental conditions for whether it works.



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Partner-country data broadly overlaps with the core patterns of this theme. Croatian and Slovenian sample athletes similarly voice that the social cost of speaking can exceed the actual issue, that the label is lasting, and that selection decisions can be a reason for silence; coaches convey that bystanders are split between fear, guilt, and justification. In the Portuguese data, trust-based reporting channels come to the fore and anonymous reporting is approached with scepticism. Diverging points are that 'snitch' concern is marked relatively less frequently in Croatian quantitative data and that some Portuguese athletes state the label does not affect them; it is considered that these differences may be related to how much the environment opens space for reporting and to interview conditions.

3.3.5. T5 — *Training Is Forgotten, the Recording Isn't*

In the report's conceptual framework, cyberbullying was addressed as a form that distinguishes itself from traditional bullying through anonymity, speed, permanence, and spreadability (Baştürk Akca & Sayımer, 2017; see Literature, Section 2.5). While field data shows that these features are also experienced by athletes, it also points to an important distinction. In narratives about intra-team closed messaging groups, athletes most often do not describe the digital environment as a world separate from the field: in these groups, the hierarchy on the field largely continues, while the digital environment amplifies and records it. In narratives about open platforms (Instagram, TikTok, direct messages), on the other hand, it is understood that the perpetrator circle can extend outside the team to include unacquainted individuals. For this reason, the theme proposes reading the digital environment not as a single-piece risk area but through two different modes of operation.

The point at which narratives converge is time. Athletes emphasise that harm on the field can be left behind at a certain point, while the recording never ends because it can be reopened and shared. This experience can be read as the counterpart in athlete language of the features named permanence and spreadability in the literature (Baştürk Akca & Sayımer, 2017; Rusillo-Magdaleno et al., 2024). The interpretation that stands out within the scope of this study is that the distinctive contribution of the digital may be not so much producing a new type of bullying as giving an existing harm a temporal continuity. The theme addresses in turn how a recording can turn into a tool of pressure, the positions of perpetrator and bystander in digital production, and adults' attitudes regarding this domain.

3.3.5.1. *Permanence and Leverage: How Harm Persists*

The criterion athletes most often resort to when describing digital harm is duration. A football athlete, while comparing the lifespan of the same incident on the field and in the group, also includes their own reaction in the analysis:



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'It gets shared of course. If someone makes a mistake, their video is edited, comic music is added. First I say "well deserved", immediately afterwards the fear comes "what if it's my turn". That kid sees it in the group, can't respond, if they respond they'll be given more treatment as "can't take a joke". I also laugh, because if I don't laugh I'll be next. But deep down I know, that kid is watching that video again and again at night. A tough tackle on the field is forgotten but that video stays in the group, they can open it and watch whenever they want.'

— **TR-Athlete1-Football-M-17**

The passage makes visible three interconnected layers of digital harm. The first is permanence: while the act on the field is left behind, the recording remains accessible. The second is the counterpart in the digital environment of the deniability addressed in T1: since the victim's possible objection is pre-labelled as 'can't take a joke', the option of responding is also narrowed. The third concerns the bystander's position. The athlete explains their laughter not as approval but as a measure to prevent it being their own turn. This explanation suggests that visible reactions such as a laughing emoji and a like may not in every situation reflect the group's genuine approval, and that a portion may carry a self-protection purpose; the pattern addressed in T1 as 'laughter is a shield' re-emerges here on the bystander's side. In Salmivalli's (2010) participant roles approach, the laughing bystander is positioned as reinforcing bullying; this narrative is important in showing that the same behaviour can also have a fear-based justification behind it. The athlete's expression 'that kid is watching that video again and again at night' is more their own inference about what the victim is experiencing rather than an observed phenomenon; however, this inference reflects an intuition that harm may be able to continue in the moments when the individual is alone rather than in the group's visible space. A judo athlete extends the same comparison along the time and space axes:

'The biggest difference is time, coach. On the mat you may feel awful, that moment is terrible but it ends. The next day is a new day, everyone forgets, you try to forget too. But if that moment was recorded and sent to the group, it never ends anymore. They open it and watch whenever they want, when you want to forget someone sends it again, says "remember this?". Also our videos can spread even to other clubs, those in our team who have good friends in other clubs send them, judokas you've never met are watching your worst moment, laughing...'

— **TR-Athlete3-Judo-M-18**

This narrative adds two dimensions. The first is that forgetting can be prevented by others: 'when you want to forget someone sends it again'. According to the athlete's expression, the healing process can move out of the victim's own control. The second is that the audience can exceed club boundaries. The route of spread described is also noteworthy: what carries the recording to other clubs are teammates' personal relationships there. In situations where sports communities are small and interconnected, the recording being able to reach the athlete's future opponents and teammates can be



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interpreted as a sport-specific manifestation of the spreadability feature. A female athlete in the same discipline recounts what permanence means through a peer's experience:

'That hard throw on the mat and the fall was one second, it was painful, embarrassing but it passed. When that girl came off the mat and went home, at least that moment was left behind, she could breathe a bit. But that video is something else. That video takes her most helpless one-second moment and immortalises it. Now that fall was like thousands of one seconds. They could open it and watch whenever they wanted, they could put laughing emojis under it.'

— **TR-Athlete11-Judo-F-16**

The expression 'thousands of one seconds' summarises in the athlete's own words the interpretation that stands out in this theme: in the narrative the digital environment serves a function that multiplies a single moment rather than producing new harm. The athlete's describing home as a 'breathing' space is also important. As Baştürk Akca and Sayımer (2017) note, in cyberbullying the victim may not be able to protect themselves by physically moving away from the environment as in traditional bullying; this narrative shows that the protection space the athlete obtains by leaving the environment can be narrowed through the recording. Another consequence of permanence is that the recording is not used once and exhausted but can turn into a pressure tool that can be returned to in relationships. A basketball athlete's narrative presents this functioning together with their own naming of it:

'Yes yes. Many of us have videos. My video circulated in the team group coach, for months too. When something happened, when someone got angry at me, they'd send that video again, as if saying "remember this?". So that one-minute dance stayed for months, they pulled at it whenever they wanted [...] You're kind of like a hostage.'

— **TR-Athlete2-Basketball-F-16**

The expression 'you're kind of like a hostage' intensely names the function of the recording in this narrative: the recording operates beyond being documentation of a past incident, like a collateral affecting future relationships. The form of use the athlete describes — being shared again 'when someone got angry at me' — shows that the recording can be deployed even in everyday disagreements with no direct connection to bullying. The same athlete conveys that this dance video was taken as part of a hazing practice applied to new arrivals (see 3.3.2.1). In this respect it can be said that an image produced in hazing can turn into a tool that binds the athlete for months; the debt regime addressed in T2 and digital permanence intersect in this narrative. Gudmundson et al. (2024) also draw attention to social media having turned into a platform that both displays and documents hazing rituals. A water polo athlete conveys how a recording can narrow the connection the athlete establishes with the group:

'The team group was bad for me honestly. There too the "Tiny", "Fish" nicknames, memes would circulate. Once a video of a bad save of mine was turned into a meme, something like "goal of the



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year, our goalkeeper is asleep", laughing emojis underneath. That video circulated for a week. I became afraid to open my phone. I'd stay quiet in the group, because whatever I wrote they'd mock me.'

— **TR-Athlete5-Waterpolo-M-17**

In this narrative, the consequence of the harm appears as a behavioural change: the athlete does not leave the group but goes quiet within it. This can be read as the digital counterpart of the becoming-invisible strategy addressed in T1. The expression 'I became afraid to open my phone' suggests that the harm may not remain limited to training hours but can spread to the rest of the day. It is also noteworthy that the nicknames on the field (see 3.3.1.3) are visualised in the group as memes: the verbal stigma turns into a shareable object. A karate athlete conveys how the same objectification can be constructed through bodily appearance, this time from a school context:

'The digital side at school was bad too, coach. Sometimes in the class group they'd play with my photo wearing glasses and then post it and mock me. Once they played with a photo of mine with spots, made my eyebrows into one eyebrow, sent the meme to the group, everyone forwarded it to each other. I mean you can't imagine those laughs... [...] In karate, the messaging group with us is the complete opposite.'

— **TR-Athlete6-Karate-M-15**

In this narrative, the target is not the athlete's behaviour but their bodily appearance, and the image is reproduced by being manipulated. The manipulation of the image shows that the stigma can also be produced independently of the victim's actual appearance; the 'something you cannot change' criterion established in T1 extends here to an image attributed to the athlete. Two details of the narrative are important in terms of limiting the general reading of the theme. First, the perpetrators are school classmates; these kinds of situations where harm can circulate between school and club are also recounted by Rios et al. (2022). Second, the athlete describes the messaging group in their own club as 'the complete opposite' of this. The same child having two different experiences in two different groups suggests that the source of digital harm should be sought not so much in the tool as in the group's norms. How the timing of a recording can change is also found in coach narratives. A taekwondo coach recounts that blame after a defeat does not emerge at the moment of the match but after match videos are watched:

'Well generally for example at the very minute the defeat happened I observed nothing at all. You know, "we lost because of you, why did you do this like this, why did you do that like that" kind of thing, nothing like that. But with us the news, the first news of this [...] 2 weeks later the match has been thought about a bit more, videos like this have been watched you know. Because now everyone films all matches' videos from every angle. And after watching them, when they come to training, 5-10 minutes before training, in a warming up, preparation phase like this, well everyone chats and talks. There, well actually in the past match you did this like this. It was also a bit because of that that we lost.'

The coach's observation shows from the adult's eye that permanence can change not only the duration but also the timing of the harm. Blame that was not visible at the moment of defeat appears, after the recording has been watched repeatedly and in an interval not directly guided by the coach — in the pre-warm-up chat. Here the unsupervised time intervals identified in T3 and this theme's emphasis on permanence intersect. The same coach also adds that being paired with the accused athlete is no longer wanted afterwards; blame established through the recording can thus return to pairing preferences on the field (see T1, 3.3.1.5). This observation points to the fact that intervention at the moment of the incident, while important, may not always be able to prevent the delayed blame produced by the recording.

Partner-country data shows that the permanence experience is voiced in similar forms. A Croatian coach focus group participant makes an observation very close to the Turkish coach's: 'Digital groups are extending defeat. Back in the day, comments were made in the locker room and maybe ended there. Now screenshots, memes, short clips or voice messages can continue the punishment at home. An athlete can make a mistake on Saturday and still be getting jokes about it Monday morning' (HR-COACH-09). A Slovenian volleyball coach states they try to immediately stop post-defeat blame in the hall but knows it 'continues in group chats when everyone goes home, where I have no visibility' (SLO-COACH-09). Athlete narratives also repeat the same distinction: a clip of a mistake being shared in the group is 'worse than the mistake itself, because now everyone has it saved and keeps coming back to it' (SLO-ATHLETE-01; similar expression SLO-ATHLETE-25), the group chat has 'a memory that lasts far longer than any post-match review by any coach' (HR-ATHLETE-07), and things in digital 'never really go away, unlike a word said during a match' (HR-ATHLETE-03). Comments coming to personal accounts, meanwhile, 'follow you home', while what happens on the mat 'at least ends when training ends' (SLO-ATHLETE-01). Given that an important portion of Slovenian and Croatian athlete responses contain very similar expressions, these narratives should be evaluated not as separate pieces of evidence but as repeated expressions of a single pattern. Nevertheless, the direction of the pattern is consistent with the Turkish data's permanence emphasis.

3.3.5.2. *Two Faces of the Perpetrator: Known Perpetrator, Unrecognised Perpetrator*

The data suggests that the effect of the digital environment on perpetrator and hierarchy can differ according to platform type. In narratives about intra-team closed groups, the hierarchy on the field most often continues; on open platforms, on the other hand, the perpetrator boundary can widen to

include individuals outside the team and sometimes unrecognised. A judo athlete recounts the first situation through the continuity of the same incident in two environments:

'Absolutely. Because the senior who posted that video was the same one who drove that girl to tears with words in the locker room. This is very important, because everyone thinks "you become someone different in digital", no. That senior was powerful on the mat and powerful in the group, that's why she crushed the same girl in both. Digital didn't make her a different person, like everyone thinks, it just gave her a new weapon, that's all. On the mat with hands, in the group with video, but always with the same intent.'

— TR-Athlete11-Judo-F-16

According to the athlete's analysis, in closed groups the digital environment doesn't change the perpetrator but provides them with a new tool. This reading offers a meaningful correction for approaches that treat cyberbullying as a separate phenomenon disconnected from the field, and is consistent with Gudmundson et al.'s (2024) assessment that digital bullying in sport most often operates as an extension of power relations on the field. An implication from this study's data is that prevention work that doesn't touch the power relations on the field and focuses only on the digital tool may be limited; addressing the digital dimension not as a separate module but together with other headings of protection work is therefore recommendable (see Section 6 (Curriculum)). The same continuity is also seen in the unequal distribution of harm. A volleyball athlete explains why a recording taken during a hazing practice about themselves faded relatively quickly:

'Because of the power difference. There were people behind me. I was a spiker, I was in the upper group. They knew if they messed with me too much they'd get a response. That's why the recording circulated but the incident didn't drag on much. [...] The same recording, looks like the same joke but touches one person and passes, destroys another much more. Who you are, where you stand in the team changes a lot.'

— TR-Athlete4-Volleyball-F-17

The athlete's observation that 'the same recording... touches one person and passes, destroys another much more' suggests that digital harm cannot be evaluated by looking only at content — the target's position within the group also needs to be taken into account. This can be read as a counterpart in the digital domain of the immunity map defined in T2. Steer et al.'s (2020) finding on the relationship between humour and cyberbullying in adolescents is also in a similar direction: whether posts presented as 'a joke everyone does' constitute harm can be understood by looking at the effect on the target rather than the perpetrator's intent. The athlete's later addition about the same recording — 'thinking about it now, nobody actually asked my permission' — shows that consent can only be questioned retrospectively. A basketball athlete constructs the same continuity on the class axis, distinguishing two platform types:



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'In the closed group, acquaintances, teammates, there that class difference is very visible because everyone knows my situation. On the open platform, places like Instagram, I don't share much anyway. Their accounts are full of holiday photos, mine is like empty. So on the open platform I choose to be invisible, in the closed group I'm visibly left outside. I'm absent in both actually, one is my choice, the other is theirs.'

— TR-Athlete17-Basketball-M-17

The athlete distinguishes the two forms of digital exclusion themselves. On the open platform they withdraw because they have a life they cannot share; this can be called a chosen withdrawal. In the closed group they are left out of conversations while visible; this is a form of relational exclusion. The outcome in both situations, in the athlete's words, is 'absence', but the perpetration is different: 'one is my choice, the other is theirs'. The athlete's explanation of why they haven't left the group completes the picture: since training information is also shared there, 'I have to be there, both inside and outside'. This narrative suggests that not having been removed from the group cannot be counted as an indicator of participation; exclusion can be experienced even while membership continues (for the class dimension see T6, 3.3.6.3). When transitioning to open platforms, it is seen that the perpetrator and spectator boundary widens. A female football athlete conveys the attacks she encountered on an open platform and their spatial consequence:

'The team group is nice, we support each other there, share matches, motivate each other. The real problem is on open platforms. I for instance share my match photos, my goals on Instagram. Half the comments under them are nice, "well done" and such, but half are awful. "Are you male or female", "go home", ugly insinuations about my sexual orientation. From accounts I don't know, mostly male. The field ends, I come home, but those comments are on the phone, always there. The worst is that, there's nowhere to escape to.'

— TR-Athlete9-Football-F-17

This narrative presents two findings together. The first is that closed and open platforms can operate differently: in the athlete's experience, the team group is a supportive space while the open platform turns into an attack space. The second is that the content of the attack directly overlaps with the masculinity regime addressed in T3: 'are you male or female' and insinuations about sexual orientation can be read as the continuation of the stigma on the field by unrecognised individuals. Similar comments are also conveyed by two other female athletes: comments like "'Is this a man", "what's women's judo anyway'" written under judo videos (TR-Athlete11-Judo-F-16) and 'my leg, my kit, how I look' being discussed in match photos rather than the smash (TR-Athlete4-Volleyball-F-17). In male athletes' open platform narratives in this study, the attack appears to be constructed more on the performance and honour axis, with bodily comments not standing out. This contrast is consistent with Toffoletti et al.'s (2026) framework addressing online harm directed at female athletes as a form of gender-based violence, and with the emphasis Kavanagh and Mountjoy (2024) place on the



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intersectional nature of cyber abuse. A judo athlete, meanwhile, voices how the perpetrator's unknownness conflicts with the discipline's ethics:

'With us it happens more through direct messages. An opponent judoka sends a DM before the match, something like "I'll finish you tomorrow". Psychological warfare. I experienced it once, I couldn't sleep that night, but I didn't respond, because responding is playing into their game. [...] On the field you know who's across from you, they come and hit, who they are is clear. In digital you sometimes can't tell who hit you. This feels contrary to judo's face-to-face ethics to me. Cowardly in my view.'

— TR-Athlete3-Judo-M-18

The athlete's evaluation shows that the discipline's own moral code can provide a resource for naming the digital attack. A taekwondo athlete also resorts to a similar criterion: 'In taekwondo, the thing is to step on the mat and fight looking the other person in the eye.' In T3, judo's 'redirecting power' principle was seen to operate as a resource against the dominant masculinity definition; a similar function emerges here through the 'being face-to-face' norm. This points to sports discipline cultures being usable in prevention work not only as a risk source but also as a normative foundation. The spectator circle of the harm can also extend outside the sports environment. A football athlete conveys what the reaching of a comment to the family and neighbourhood means for them:

'[...] When I miss a goal and a heavy comment comes under it, it's not only the team seeing that comment, my neighbourhood also sees it, my relatives see it. It's as if to say "so you were going to make something of yourself". That [...] I'm trying to go out that door, that comment feels like it's pulling me back, into the neighbourhood. The shame isn't only mine, it's as if it also becomes my family's, my father's shame.'

— TR-Athlete1-Football-M-17

This passage shows one of the points where digital harm intersects with the class dimension addressed in T6. In contexts where sport is seen as a door of mobility (see T6), an online humiliation is experienced in the athlete's narrative not only as a criticism of performance but also as a public implication that that door may close. The shame spreading to the family and father suggests that the harm can move from being individual to becoming a matter of family honour, and may therefore make reporting even harder (see T4). That digital harm can reach the most private space is also seen in a coach narrative. A volleyball coach recounts an incident in the locker room and the club's response:

'We did something, we had such an incident in the locker room last year. One of them is doing a video call and the others appear in the background. [...] We have a rule. When you come to the club you sign something called an athlete contract, we had prepared this. Well you can't do a video call in the locker room, you can't take photos, you can't take video. If you do you know you'll be leaving the club we say [...] We had to send away a child of ours who violated this but it also set an example for the others.'



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This case shows that the locker room, identified as a space where bodily control is concentrated in T3, can turn into a broadcast space when combined with digital tools. In the video call example, harm can arise even without a recording being produced and a specific target being chosen: the athletes in the background become visible to third parties without their consent. Another coach's observation in the same focus group shows that the phenomenon also appears in another coach's narrative: 'I see, I've seen girls aged 13-14 filming TikToks, filming videos in the locker room.' The second half of the narrative presents one of the few examples where a sanction is enforced: the rule being written in advance, signed by contract, and applied in case of violation appears to have moved it beyond being a wish. The same coach's subsequent saying to themselves 'looking at athletes' Instagram one by one [...] is all that's left to control' suggests that in areas without written rules, the burden of oversight can fall to the coach's personal effort.

Partner-country data broadly supports this picture differentiated by platform type, but also points in an important direction. Regarding open platforms, a Croatian athlete says 'on the field you at least know exactly who's talking, online it could be anyone with an opinion' (HR-ATHLETE-07), and a Slovenian athlete notes that open posts are more permanent while group chats are faster (SLO-ATHLETE-01). By contrast, answers to the question of whether someone who is not dominant on the field can gain power online partly diverge from Turkish data. Many Croatian and Slovenian athletes express that someone who is quiet on the field can 'suddenly be very effective online' and that this 'changes who really holds power in the group' (HR-ATHLETE-04; similar expressions HR-ATHLETE-03, HR-ATHLETE-07, SLO-ATHLETE-01, SLO-ATHLETE-03). A Portuguese male football captain interprets the same situation as a lack of courage: some players turn to messages because they 'don't have the courage to speak in front of the person' and criticise them from a distance (PT-ATHLETE-02; 'não têm a coragem de falar à frente da pessoa'). The female footballer, meanwhile, states they haven't observed such a situation (PT-ATHLETE-01). In Turkish data this possibility is not completely excluded; athletes admit a limited exception by saying 'a very shy person might find a bit of courage from behind a screen' (TR-Athlete11-Judo-F-16) or 'what they can't say to your face they can write on a screen... But that's not power in my view, more like cowardice' (TR-Athlete16-Taekwondo-F-15). The same taekwondo athlete thinks the determining factor is the environment rather than the person: 'In my view this isn't about these kids, it's about the place. In the old club the environment allowed it, it existed in both. Here it doesn't allow it, it doesn't exist in either.' This difference between the two data sets may stem from question formats, disciplines, or the

short and similar structure of partner-country responses; for this reason, the reading that hierarchy continues in closed groups is presented as a pattern that stands out for the Turkish sample, while the power-shift expressions in partner-country data are presented as an alternative possibility to be taken into account.

3.3.5.3. *The Moment of Production: Perpetrator and Bystander Perspectives*

One of the theme's original contributions is testimony from the perpetrator position to the moment of production of digital harm. A swimming athlete recounts how a meme they produced from a teammate's race video — writing 'Athlete of the Year' over it — was prepared and received in the group:

'I remember of course. There was a video of the race, one of the families had filmed it. They'd got stuck at the start, came out about two seconds late, finished last. I froze that moment of the start, wrote that text on it. It didn't take five minutes. After posting it the group literally exploded, everyone added their own comment, then it went to other groups too. I kept looking at my phone that night and kept laughing. [...] I usually started it. Two people would immediately add something on top. Three or four people just laughed. Then there were two kids looking at their phones who didn't get involved. They didn't say anything but didn't stop it either.'

— TR-Athlete10-Swimming-M-16

The first half of the passage reveals the low cost of production: a labour described as 'didn't take five minutes' produced, in the athlete's words, an object used for months and reaching other clubs. This asymmetry between production and impact is also seen in the athlete's later evaluation: 'I forgot in one day, they haven't forgotten.' The fact that the source is a family filming is also noteworthy: an image taken for memento purposes can turn into the raw material of bullying. In the second half of the passage, the athlete independently makes a distinction very close to the roles in the bystander literature (Salmivalli, 2010; see 2.4.1): starter, reinforcer, laughter, and silent. The expression they use for the last group — 'didn't say anything but didn't stop it either' — shows that passive witnessing in the digital environment also holds a place in the group's functioning. How the same athlete read the targeted child's reaction gives an idea about the functioning of moral disengagement. The child had removed their profile photo, then left the group after a while; the athlete recounts that they received this at the time as 'I said "couldn't take it after all". Honestly I didn't care' and thought 'We didn't say anything either, why would they, it was a joke after all'. The renaming of the behaviour as a 'joke' and the attribution of the outcome to the victim's lack of resilience overlaps with the moral disengagement strategies (euphemistic relabelling, minimisation of consequences, attribution of blame to the victim) defined by Bandura (1991, 2016). A taekwondo athlete explains from their own observation how the screen can facilitate this distance: 'behind the screen you see no face, no reaction [...] You don't even feel how much you're hurting the person across. Also there's mob psychology,



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when you throw something in the group you think there's a whole army behind you' (TR-Athlete8-Taekwondo-M-17). The invisibility of the victim's reaction and the distribution of responsibility to the crowd can be read as two conditions explaining the ease of digital production. A volleyball athlete recounts from within this crowd the two-layered structure of the group and what being there means:

'Yes. There's an official group, where everyone is. And there's another group. The real conversations happen there. [...] In the official group the coach might also be there, everyone is there, match time and such is written. In the other group there are certain people. Gossip, plans, sometimes decisions are discussed there. If you're not taking someone in there, you're actually not taking them into the team's centre either. [...] Like a privilege. Because if you're there it means "you're one of us". But thinking about it now, being part of that group sometimes makes you complicit in certain things. Because you're there and if you stay quiet, you're not outside what's happening.'

— TR-Athlete4-Volleyball-F-17

This narrative is important in two respects. The first is structural: the distinction between the official group and the 'real group' suggests that the group visible to the adult may not be where the team's relationships actually operate; oversight monitoring the official channel cannot reach the channel where harm is produced in this narrative. The second is moral. The athlete does not see silent membership as a neutral position, defining themselves as 'complicit' in what happens. Their later addition 'I was one of those whose word carried weight. Maybe I could have stopped certain things earlier' shows that the bystander's capacity to intervene can vary according to their position in the group and that the silence of the bystander in a privileged position may carry a separate weight. Gini et al.'s (2020) finding that individual and collective moral disengagement can increase passive bystanding, and Gözmen Elmas et al.'s (2026) result that moral courage is associated with defender behaviour and moral disengagement with passivity among young athletes, provide a meaningful framework for interpreting this narrative. Data shows that there are also moments when silence is broken. A basketball athlete conveys the intervention of a senior teammate:

'Again [a senior] once saw this and said "delete those videos", no one had the courage to object to her. Even one person saying "this is wrong" was that powerful.'

— TR-Athlete2-Basketball-F-16

A similar intervention by a judo athlete is conveyed together with its cost:

'The team group is generally fine but in that young girl incident digital also came into play. A video of that girl's fall on the mat had been recorded, posted to the group, saying "look how she went down", laughing emojis underneath. That video was exactly the digital version of the locker room bullying. Same senior, same girl, just this time on screen. I wrote under that video "delete this, this is shameful". Some attacked me but some also supported. Eventually the video was deleted. But until that moment everyone had stayed quiet again.'

— TR-Athlete11-Judo-F-16



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Two narratives together suggest that the first objection in the digital environment can be decisive. When an objection comes, those who support become visible, while as silence continues, silence can be read as the group's approval. This pattern is consistent with the attitude–behaviour gap regarding bystanders who don't intervene despite not approving of bullying (Salmivalli, 2010): in the narratives it is seen that a portion of the group is waiting for the objection but no one wants to bear the cost of the first step. This cost is concrete in the narratives. The judo athlete conveys that after their objection they were faced for a while with 'did you become a hero, snitch'; the foreseeable social cost in the definition of moral courage (Sekerka et al., 2009) is directly experienced here. The same athlete also conveys the outcome of the intervention for the victim: 'That's why having that video deleted was maybe the most important thing I could do for that girl that day. She was so relieved she hugged me and cried.' These narratives point to the fact that in prevention work the athlete who makes the first objection should not be left alone and should be protected; the athlete's own proposal is also in this direction: 'Coach must protect the one who doesn't stay quiet, otherwise no one speaks.' One of the interventions in the conditions of production made by coaches is removing the tool from the environment during certain time periods. A volleyball coach recounts the isolation observed during away journeys and the outcome of the rule they established:

'We observed this. Especially when going to a match. As we said, they either isolate or group up. They take the phone. Two of them listen together. Two together. None of them talk. We again established a rule. We said when we go to a match, the moment you get on the service bus, all phones are collected. After the match at the earliest you can get your phone. When we collected the phones everyone started talking to each other. Really well that thing started to break. [...] At first incredible protest. [...] But with the older ones incredibly I'm not giving it, why should I and so on. [...] But after a while they look and see yes it really is so.'

— **TR-Coach-FocusGroup1**

The coach's observation points to the phone operating not only as a bullying tool but also as an isolation tool that divides shared time into bilateral capsules. The fact that athletes started talking to each other after the rule is a directly conveyed outcome by the coach. Whether this change transformed group norms to what extent cannot be directly understood from the data; nevertheless, the opening of a common conversation space is conceivable as a possibility that can lay the ground for bystanders being able to see each other's stance and the breaking of the silence discussed above. A football coach's consciously disrupting the seating order on the bus (see T2, 3.3.2.5) follows the same logic: in both applications, intervention is directed at the arrangement of the environment rather than individual people.

Partner-country data also voices the position of the digital bystander in various forms. In Slovenia, a judoka who admits having witnessed digital exclusion and stayed quiet (see T4, 3.3.4.5) defines the common point between platforms as the absence of an adult: 'the coach isn't there, so it runs unchecked' (SLO-ATHLETE-03). In Croatia, an athlete notes that in face-to-face settings 'there's usually someone who eventually steps in', while online 'nobody watches in the same way' (HR-ATHLETE-07), and another says that mocking a mistake in the group shows 'how comfortable we've gotten laughing at each other's expense' (HR-ATHLETE-04). A Croatian manager defines sharing directly as part of the harm (HR-MANAGER-02). A Portuguese female athlete states they find mocking posts wrong; one athlete says even a 'funny photo' should first be shown to the relevant athlete to see if they give permission (PT-ATHLETE-04: 'primeiro deve-se sempre mostrar à atleta, a ver se pode'). These expressions suggest that the Turkish data's bystander pattern — silence most often resting on cost calculation rather than approval, and the decisiveness of the first objection — is also recognisable in partner-country athlete narratives; the permission suggestion in Portugal also points to the rule applied in the Turkish karate dojo (see 3.3.5.4) being a norm that can also be adopted by athletes.

3.3.5.4. The Adult Side: From Rejecting Authority to Institutional Design

The digital domain appears in adult narratives as one of the areas where responsibility is most clearly limited. A football manager justifies both the knowledge deficit and the decision not to intervene together:

'Let me be frank, I don't understand much about those phone matters. Young people's business. There are team groups, the kids hang out there, they mock each other, it happens. They put someone's video up, laughed, reached me once or twice. What did I do? Nothing. Because if I get involved I can't get out of it. Also am I going to do phone policing? Let the kids sort it out among themselves. That thing they call "cyberbullying" lately, it strikes me as a bit of an exaggeration.'

— **TR-Manager1-Football-M-Istanbul**

In this narrative, three withdrawal moves appear in succession: handing the domain over to young people ('young people's business'), minimising the phenomenon ('it happens', 'exaggeration'), and returning responsibility to children ('sort it out among themselves'). These moves can be read as a counterpart in the digital domain of the 'sort it out among yourselves' formula defined in T4. What is noteworthy is that incidents have reached the manager ('reached me once or twice'); for this narrative the problem appears not as the absence of reporting but inaction after reporting. A similar authority limitation also appears in athletes' narratives about coaches. A volleyball athlete conveys that the coach in their team 'intervened but was a bit late. They sort of said "These are social media matters"' and adds 'In my view coaches don't see what happens in the group message as seriously as the field'



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(TR-Athlete4-Volleyball-F-17). Öztürk et al.'s (2026b) findings on the safeguarding knowledge and intervention behaviours of coaches in Türkiye, and Hayday et al.'s (2024) emphasis on institutional responsibility in protecting online sports spaces, suggest that coaches seeing the digital domain outside their authority can also be addressed as a capacity and institutional framework issue rather than a personal stance. A manager who manages in judo-wrestling disciplines addresses digital not as a safeguarding matter but as a risk management matter:

'It does make me think of course. I have to think, after all I'm at the head of the club, we don't want trouble. That's why I tell coaches "Careful, there are kids with phones, be careful, don't let things get messy". So we take precautions. But what's going through my mind is, this country got to today with this discipline, now a piece of paper is banning us from discipline.'

— **TR-Manager2-Judo-Wrestling-M-Trabzon**

In this narrative, the object of concern, at least from the manager's expression, is constructed as the club 'getting into trouble' rather than the child being harmed. The precaution conveyed is also limited to a general warning to coaches; in the same sentence the resistance to written regulation is again voiced. This distinction between a protection approach and reputation management can offer a useful criterion when evaluating institutional stances: in one the focus is the child's safety, in the other it is the institution's visibility. By contrast, manager narratives that recognise digital risk as an institutional responsibility also exist. A manager working in multiple disciplines defines cyberbullying as a new and permanent heading for the club, conveys that they adopt a two-directional approach, and notes that the phenomenon emerged 'with social media filtering down to very young age groups'. This expression suggests that the problem is seen not only as a behaviour specific to the new generation but as a structural situation arising from digital access descending by age. In coach focus groups, concrete applications were also conveyed. The volleyball coach who recounted the video call incident constructs the justification for the rule around privacy: 'Now none of them can open their phone in the locker room. Because another friend there, even if they're fully clothed, may not want to show their face.' One of the most comprehensive applications at the rule level is the dojo rule conveyed by a karate athlete:

'The sensei has a rule, very effective in my view. Taking unauthorised video or photos in the dojo is forbidden. "No one can film anyone's image without permission, no one can share it" they say. For this reason no one's bad moment is filmed and turned into a meme, because filming is forbidden anyway. [...] Also a person is more relaxed when making mistakes in training.'

— **TR-Athlete14-Karate-F-14**

This rule responds to an important portion of the theme's findings from a single intervention point: permanence, hostage-taking, and spreading are largely tied to the recording being produced or the



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image being shared. As seen in the video call example, privacy harm can also arise without a recording, so the rule doesn't cover every risk; however, it touches the first link in the chain where the recording is produced. The second finding the athlete adds is noteworthy from a learning perspective: when the risk of being recorded decreases, the athlete states they feel more relaxed making mistakes. This suggests that recording anxiety may operate not only as a bullying risk but also as a pressure that can make learning harder. The athlete also explains the support the rule provides for themselves: 'if someone takes out their phone and tries to film you, saying "don't film me" is easier, because you already know this is forbidden.' A taekwondo athlete's narrative shows that the rule alone may not be sufficient. The athlete, who evaluates the filming prohibition at their new club as 'it kills the issue from the start', adds that the rules are stated at the start-of-season meeting but 'if someone does it what will happen, who will we tell, how will it be resolved, that part wasn't discussed' (TR-Athlete16-Taekwondo-F-15). The same suggestion also comes from the judo athlete: 'In my view it should be discussed at the start of the season. No one will be humiliated in the group, no one's video will be filmed without permission and posted, who they will go to if someone is uncomfortable, all of this should be clear.' The same athlete notes that their coach 'partially' did this after a video incident and 'it worked' (TR-Athlete11-Judo-F-16). These narratives are consistent with Tak et al.'s (2024) finding that the existence of reporting systems is not sufficient on its own and that use is determined by clarity and trust. The most concrete institutional suggestion voiced in coach focus groups is the written contract. The volleyball coach who recounted the video call incident explains the application and its justification:

'In my view every club should make an athlete contract. [...] I mean we also have parents of those under 18 sign it. We also make a parent contract. [...] The athlete also signs. So if anything happens the sanction lands on the parent. [...] I mean by giving it in writing together with what you couldn't do verbally it says ha, there is a rule here. [...] I think it can be one of the outputs, you know. Well an athlete handbook like the athlete contract. Or what athletes and coaches are required to comply with. [...] Like there's a children's rights handbook you know. There should also be one for athletes I think. I mean from filming to tying shoelaces [...] Especially the item about bullying should be written item by item.'

— TR-Coach-FocusGroup1

This suggestion is at the opposite pole of the written regulation rejected by a manager in the same sub-theme ('now a piece of paper is banning us from discipline') and comes from a coach in daily contact with athletes. The coach's justification is predictability rather than punishment: giving the knowledge that 'there is a rule here' in advance. The karate athlete's description of it as the knowledge that makes saying 'don't film me' easier is exactly this. When these narratives are read together, it can be thought that a written code, in addition to being an oversight tool, can provide athletes with a basis

for objection and can make the bystander's first objection less costly. What point this code should focus on is addressed in the theme's case portrait (see 3.3.5.5).

Partner-country data shows a clear overlap with the Turkish coach suggestions, while also making the tension between oversight and guidance visible. A Croatian coach finds digital communication rules 'very important', notes that coaches 'often don't know where their authority begins and ends', and says a club-level digital code of conduct 'that athletes and parents sign at the start of the season' would be useful (HR-COACH-09); this suggestion is very close to the Turkish volleyball coach's athlete and parent contract. A Slovenian coach conveys that they determined basic rules early with their team: 'no unauthorised filming, no sharing of mistakes; and it really worked' (SLO-COACH-09). Another coach in the same focus group sees this as the right approach but emphasises 'guidance not surveillance', because if children 'feel monitored they'll always find a way' (SLO-COACH-07); another notes that their visibility of group chats is 'nearly zero' (SLO-COACH-08). Manager narratives proceed along a similar line: 'I don't want to scrutinise their private lives, but when a team chat is demeaning a teammate, it has entered club territory' (HR-MANAGER-01); 'we know how to respond to a red card, but not always to a cruel video being shared' (HR-MANAGER-03); 'the aim isn't to monitor every conversation, but to address specific harm' (SLO-MANAGER-07).

Portuguese data shows different ends of the same tension. A participant managing in football recounts closing a WhatsApp group in an adult team where jokes about a homosexual player were circulating, noting the player 'pretended not to be affected, but was'; they add that today they wouldn't do the same, preferring instead to give a clear message about the incident and inform of the consequences in advance (PT-MANAGER-04: 'Hoje não fazia'). The same participant notes that athletes have separate groups their coaches can't access and that 'a 16-year-old captain can't be expected to take this on'. A participant managing a kickboxing club states they only accept groups where only the coach makes announcements, that managers and coaches are not prepared about this, and that 'there should be more training' (PT-MANAGER-02: 'devia haver mais formações'). Athletes, meanwhile, note that the coach should not be in athletes-only groups (PT-ATHLETE-02), or that younger girl athletes might be uncomfortable with the coach in the group (PT-ATHLETE-01). This picture, while supporting the solution direction emerging in Turkish data — pre-known, written rules that give athletes a basis for objection — also points to the importance of these rules being designed not as surveillance but as a norm built together with athletes.



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3.3.5.5. Case Portrait: Where the Voice Is Recorded

The idiographic deepening of this theme is built on a narrative where digital harm intersects with the identity axis (TR-Athlete7-Swimming-F-16). The athlete, who has been licensed for five years, has moved from another region with their family; they recount having been continuously targeted over their accent and origin in the club. This is the only case among the sixteen athlete narratives in the study where origin and regional identity-based bullying is so centrally present. The analytic value of the portrait is that the athlete experiences the water as a refuge and the digital group as the violation of that refuge. The athlete clearly describes the protection sport provides: after an environment where questions of 'where are you from', 'why do you talk like that' never end, 'I got in the water and that sound stopped. When I put my head in the water no one can ask me anything, no one hears my accent. Outside I was always "the other", in the water I was just a swimmer.' In the narrative, the water emerges as an environment that temporarily suspends the audible indicator of identity — the voice; the athlete describes themselves as someone evaluated solely by their performance for the first time. The digital group, meanwhile, brings back precisely this suspended indicator and makes it permanent:

'They would most often imitate my accent. When I said a word wrong they'd laugh. Once I sent a voice message to the group, it was something ordinary. Then they imitated that voice message among themselves, made a recording mocking my voice. When I heard it I was very ashamed, for a long time I didn't send another voice message to the group. [...] I felt completely mortified, coach. It was an ordinary message, it was something about training time.'

— TR-Athlete7-Swimming-F-16

The core of the case emerges at this point: the voice that the water silenced came back through the recording; moreover it was turned into a multiplied object by being imitated. The fact that the content of the message was completely ordinary ('it was something about training time') is important for the narrative: what is targeted is not a behaviour but the athlete themselves. This can be read as a clear example in the digital environment of the criterion established in T1 — touching something that cannot be changed. The consequences of the harm are conveyed in the athlete's own words: 'For a long time I couldn't send voice messages to the group, I always wrote in text. In fact for a while I even spoke less at school, I didn't raise my hand in class. They had scared me not of one thing but of speaking itself. And that recording was sitting there within their reach.' This expression shows that the effect of a recording produced in a sports environment can extend to school; considering that the karate athlete's narrative shows harm progressing from school to sport, the two cases together suggest that bullying may not be bound by inter-institutional borders. The same withdrawal continues through image: 'when my swimming videos were shared, once my hair is black, brows dark, comments like "look at the state of you" would come. I was always tense in that group.'



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The coach's position is also clear in the portrait. The athlete conveys that their coach noticed the accent matter but passed over it by saying 'don't play around kids' and counted origin-based ribbing as a joke, evaluating this as: 'they see my swimming time but they don't see me'. The intervention they expected is not a comprehensive programme but a single clear stance: 'Once, just once, if they said "no one's origin is mocked here, this is my rule" and stood behind it, my swimming life would have changed.' When the dojo's filming rule and sensei's stance described in 3.3.3.5 and this narrative are placed side by side, how decisive an adult's clear rule and standing behind it can be for athletes becomes visible. The athlete's suggestion regarding digital matters is also in the same direction: the club should intervene not in 'the phone itself but in the team relationship continuing on the phone', and should provide the assurance 'we won't exclude you for raising something here' from the start.

The portrait's close brings together the two faces of digital in the same narrative. The athlete recounts that in a small group they connected with through a swimming app with girl athletes from other cities, they were seen for the first time by their swimming, and a peer's saying 'your accent is your strength, and your voice is beautiful too' was a turning point for them: 'I didn't change, in my view who was looking at me changed.' The athlete also repositions the source of the harm from this point: 'In those years I was even reluctant to mention my hometown, I tried to hide my accent. Afterwards I understood actually it wasn't me who should have been ashamed.' This expression shows that the self-surveillance mechanism addressed in T3 (suppression of voice, hiding of identity) can only be noticed by the athlete retrospectively. The athlete reaching this reframing through a peer group outside the club suggests they didn't encounter a structure within their own environment that would support this evaluation; it also serves as a reminder that digital environments, within the right relationships, can also serve a protective function.

3.3.5.6. Theme Summary

Permanence: Athletes describe digital harm most often through duration: 'a tough tackle on the field is forgotten but that video stays in the group'. A recording can multiply a single moment ('thousands of one seconds'), can take the healing process out of the victim's control, and can narrow the breathing space the home provides. Croatian and Slovenian coach and athlete narratives repeat the same pattern ('digital groups are extending defeat').

Recording as a pressure tool: A recording can operate like a collateral that can be returned to in relationships ('you're kind of like a hostage'). Images produced in hazing practices can take on this function in a particularly clear way; coach observations show that match videos can form a new basis for blame weeks later.



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Perpetrator differentiated by platform: In intra-team closed groups, the hierarchy on the field most often continues ('on the mat with hands, in the group with video, but always with the same intent'); on open platforms, the perpetrator circle widens to include unrecognised individuals. A portion of partner-country athletes note that someone who is quiet on the field can gain power online; this difference requires reading the finding as a pattern that stands out for the Turkish sample.

Position-dependent harm and two forms of exclusion: The same recording does not affect everyone equally — its impact can vary according to the target's position within the group. Digital exclusion appears in the forms of chosen withdrawal and relational exclusion; an athlete who has not been removed from the group can also be effectively outside it. On open platforms, attacks directed at female athletes are seen to focus on body and sexual orientation.

Production and bystander: The production cost of digital harm is low, its effect is long-lasting ('I forgot in one day, they haven't forgotten'). Athletes independently distinguish bystander roles: starter, reinforcer, laugher, and 'one who doesn't say anything but doesn't stop it either'. A portion of laughter may carry a self-protection purpose rather than approval; renamings such as 'it was a joke' and 'couldn't take it' overlap with moral disengagement. Silent membership can also be defined by athletes not as a neutral but as a 'complicit' position.

First objection and its cost: When the first objection comes, those who support can become visible; however the athlete who objects may face social costs like 'did you become a hero, snitch'. Narratives point to the fact that the athlete who makes the first objection being protected by adults is important for the sustainability of moral courage ('Coach must protect the one who doesn't stay quiet').

Adult side: In manager narratives, the digital domain is sometimes seen as outside authority ('am I going to do phone policing?') or addressed within a reputation management framework; athletes observe a similar distance in some coaches ('these are social media matters'). By contrast, coach narratives include concrete applications such as phone prohibition in the locker room, collecting phones during away trips, and athlete–parent contracts.

Rule and process: Pre-known, written, and enforced rules (the prohibition of unauthorised filming in the dojo, the athlete contract) touch the first link of the chain where the recording is produced and provide athletes with a basis for objection ('saying don't film me is easier'). Narratives show that the rule needs to be established together with a process answering the question 'who will we tell'. Partner-



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country coaches also propose digital codes of conduct signed at the start of the season, but emphasise that these need to be designed as guidance, not surveillance.

Case: In the digital dimension of origin-based bullying, the voice silenced by the water comes back through the recording and harm can extend to school. The same case also makes visible the significance a coach's single clear rule can carry for athletes and the protective potential of digital peer support.

3.3.6. T6 — 'Nobody Calls This Bullying': The Invisible Class Intersection

This theme is not present as a separate heading in the report's conceptual framework and is largely produced from data. In the literature reviewed, peer bullying in sport is addressed primarily on the axes of body, gender, sexual orientation, origin, performance, and seniority (e.g. Flores Aguilar et al., 2021; Kalina et al., 2024; Kerr et al., 2016); economic disadvantage, meanwhile, appears more often as a contextual or risk variable (e.g. Lee et al., 2025). This study's data suggests that economic position is a differentiating axis that can also operate in peer relations after joining sport. The reading the theme proposes is that the ability to stop harm depends significantly on the ability to name it; and that the differentiation operating through economic position can remain invisible because it most often does not feature in the definitions of bullying that participants describe. Class emerges in these narratives not so much as an independent axis but as a dimension that intersects with previous themes at multiple points. The naming of the theme comes from a basketball athlete's request at the end of the interview: 'People always talk about bullying through appearance, weight, strength. But money is also a reason for bullying, maybe even the quietest. [...] And nobody even counts this as bullying, they think it's "just joking around". [...] I'd like this to be discussed in the project.' In accordance with the research's participant-centred approach, this request has been addressed as a separate theme. That partner-country data contains narratives about class differentiation far more limited than in Turkish data is noted where relevant.

3.3.6.1. Harm That Cannot Be Named: Differentiation That Leaves No Evidence

The first feature of class differentiation that stands out in the narratives is that the deniability defined in T1 can often operate here without even requiring a word. A basketball athlete describes how exclusion can be constructed without words:

'You understand from small things, coach, no one ever says to them "you're at the bottom" but they know. For instance they're going to a café, no one directly says "don't come" but an expensive place is chosen, and they also pull themselves back thinking "I can't afford it". So you don't even need to say anything to exclude them, you set up the environment in such a way that they eliminate



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themselves. Or a branded shoe is being discussed, they go quiet, because they have no brand to mention.'

— **TR-Athlete2-Basketball-F-16**

The expression 'you set up the environment in such a way that they eliminate themselves' intensely summarises the functioning that stands out in this theme. In the narrative there is no act directed at a specific person — the threshold of the environment is set; exclusion is completed through a withdrawal that looks like the victim's own decision. This structure can make reporting particularly difficult: there is no visible word or act, and therefore no clear perpetrator. The same athlete also voices their own part in maintaining this environment: 'No one's guilty but everyone is building that wall.' They then explain the bystander position from their own experience: 'With us sometimes we join the chorus. [...] Because if I stay quiet or object, I'm afraid it'll be my turn next. If I mix in with those saying it, at least in that moment I'm safe. [...] We may not be bad people but we do bad things purely out of fear.' This expression shows that moral disengagement can operate not only in the form of renaming the wrong but also in the form of participating with fear while aware that it is wrong; not being able to act while one's moral judgement is intact evokes the situation in Rest's (1984) model where the motivation and implementation links are broken (see 2.4.2). Class differentiation also intersects in the narratives with other axes of belonging such as origin and settledness. A swimming athlete recounts how differentiation constructed through origin turns into a hierarchy language in the locker room:

'[...] Things like "how do you wash where you are", "do you even have a pool where you come from" would be said. I always took the fastest shower and left. [...] They were saying "where you come from is backward", coach, without saying it outright. I mean not just different but inferior — that's what they were saying. They saw themselves as city people, me as a villager. Not just "the other", but "both inferior and the other".'

— **TR-Athlete7-Swimming-F-16**

In this narrative the axis of differentiation is more origin than economic position; however, in the athlete's experience origin is expressed through a superiority hierarchy constructed between 'city people' and 'villagers'. The athlete's 'not just different but inferior' distinction suggests that the stigma directed at identity can acquire a class-based value language. The words also don't take the form of direct insults but are voiced in the form of questions ('without saying it outright'); in this respect the absence of evidence seen in the narrative above also operates here. The same athlete also notes that whatever answer they give, they will remain 'at the bottom': "'There was" and they wouldn't believe it; "there wasn't" and they'd say "see, what did I tell you".' This narrative shows that the boundary athletes voice in T1 — the targeting of something about the person they cannot change — can operate



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simultaneously on the origin and class axes (for the digital dimension of the case see T5, 3.3.5.5). Coach narratives also contain explanations regarding when and from where such differentiations are fed. A taekwondo coach thinks that class-based comparison is not spontaneously produced in children:

'Actually in my view it happens more in the middle and older ages than at a young age; judging physically and by status. Because the child isn't even aware of this yet. I mean for example the child doesn't know whether wealth, poverty or material state is good or not. They don't know whether it's something to be judged, they don't know whether it's something to be compared, unless they've seen a lot of this in that direction from their family.'

— TR-Coach-FocusGroup2

According to the coach's explanation, the child does not spontaneously produce economic difference as a hierarchy criterion; they acquire this criterion largely from the family environment. The basketball coach in the same focus group also shares a similar observation: 'Families impose this on children. Look, that one just came, that one's on a scholarship. Look, they can replace you, they're better.' (see 3.3.6.2). These explanations are individual coaches' interpretations, but they are consistent with the theoretical framework on social learning operating through observation and modelling (Bandura, 2016) and with findings on the influence of parents in shaping children's sport experiences (Elliott & Drummond, 2017; Harwood & Knight, 2015). A parent narrative conveyed within the scope of this theme (see 3.3.6.5) also shows that the strategy transmitted to the child can be conforming to the existing hierarchy. From a prevention perspective, this reading points to two possibilities: it may be useful for intervention to begin at an early age before the criterion is established; the work may need to be directed at the parent community as well as athletes (see Section 6 (Curriculum)).

Partner-country narratives about class differentiation are limited; however, the existing expressions are consistent with the absence-of-evidence pattern in Turkish data. A Croatian coach focus group participant notes that an athlete's background can create differentiation and says that 'a young player from a smaller town, a player with a different accent, a player without expensive equipment, or a shy player can face different treatment'; in their view this has nothing to do with athletic quality, 'but children notice it' and if the team is not educated these differences 'can turn into nicknames or material for exclusion' (HR-COACH-10). In the same country, a parent recounts two children in a sports hall corridor joking about another child's 'shoes and family circumstances', done in a voice low enough that the coach couldn't hear but open enough for the targeted child to pretend they were rummaging in their bag to avoid looking at them; though some parents were uncomfortable, 'nobody wanted to



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be the first person to call this bullying' (HR-PARENT-02). This expression is noteworthy in showing that the naming problem in the theme's title can also be experienced in different contexts. In Slovenian data, a narrative of differentiation constructed through economic position has not been encountered; the economic dimension of questions about nicknames was not addressed in the responses. In Portuguese data too, there is no direct narrative on this axis. This absence should be interpreted not as the phenomenon not existing in these countries but as having possibly not been visible due to question formats, sample structure, and the brevity of partner-country responses.

3.3.6.2. *The Two Faces of Scholarship: The Conversion of Achievement into Debt*

Scholarship status appears in the data as one of the most explicit forms of class stigma, and carries a contradictory structure: an achievement earned through talent can turn in the environment into an indicator of deficiency. A basketball athlete recounts this conversion and the double standard it produces in detail:

'Being on scholarship is actually something to be proud of, I earned that scholarship through my talent. But in their mouths it turns into the opposite, people in our community are very cruel. This is clear. They use that word so naturally, they don't even think it's an insult. [...] But under that label there's a whole humiliation and I feel it every time. [...] When another kid loses the ball it's "it happens", when I lose it harsh words come. So the same mistake, received differently depending on who it's with. It's as if perfection is expected of me because I play "for free" supposedly and it's made to feel as if I have no right to make mistakes.'

— **TR-Athlete17-Basketball-M-17**

Two mechanisms merge in this passage. The first is the adjectivisation of the stigma: according to the athlete, the word 'scholarship student' is used by peers not as an insult but as a qualification, which may mean those using it form no awareness of causing harm. The second is the conditionality of the athlete's existence: the same mistake is received differently, the right to make mistakes differs by economic position. In the athlete's own words, 'my existence is conditional, something that always needs to be proved, while theirs is guaranteed, unquestioned'. This situation can be read as a class-based form of the debt-transfer regime defined in T2: while seniority debt is recounted as a phase transferable over time, the economic 'debt' is experienced by the athlete as a position that never closes (see T2, 3.3.2.3). Adams et al.'s (2024) finding that scholarship athletes may have difficulty voicing problems because they feel indebted to the programme and their families points to the possible effect of this experience on reporting (see 3.3.6.4). How the same stigma can be constructed in adult relationships is seen in a case conveyed in the coach focus group. A basketball coach conveys a demand a parent directed at them:

'Especially if you're at a fee-paying club and I'm at such a club [...] the athletes in the team also pay and this conversation goes around among parents. Last year I personally experienced this



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directly as a coach: my child pays the team, my child will stay here. That athlete, the scholarship athlete. I don't want them on the team. And the child is very good. [...] I want to send the girl to national team selection. [...] Then I end up taking sides. Despite not taking sides [...] And then they leave the team.'

— TR-Coach-FocusGroup2

The demand the coach conveys is not an objection to the athlete's performance; the coach considers the athlete 'very good' and is thinking of sending them to national team selection. The basis of the demand, as recounted, is purchasing power: the club's income structure is laying the ground for a parent to claim a say over whether another athlete remains in the team. Another coach in the same focus group sees the source of the problem in the club's fee relationship: 'But the problem is already there, actually the sports club is taking money from everyone, you see. The whole thing cracks right there.' These narratives together suggest that economic relations among adults can lay the ground for the 'scholarship student' stigma circulating among peers, and that children can also reproduce this differentiation in their own relationships. The coach's expression 'then I end up taking sides' also shows that looking after the scholarship athlete can be read by parents as partiality, and that the coach can be left to face this pressure alone. How the stigma is produced among peers is also seen from the perpetrator position. A swimming athlete, while listing the nicknames they gave, mentions scholarship status on the same level as bodily features:

'Yes, I used to give nicknames. I'd called someone "antennae" because of their big ears. Another one something else because of their weight. Then there was a kid who came on scholarship, we used to call them "freeloader". That one was mine probably, I started it.'

— TR-Athlete10-Swimming-M-16

The analytic value of this short narrative is in the ordering itself: ears, weight, and scholarship status are mentioned in the same sentence, in the same tone. The nickname turns the athlete's economic position into a visible label available for everyone to use; this label can then be deployed in the athlete's mistakes and equipment. The athlete making their perpetration declaration ('that one was mine probably, I started it') without adding a justification suggests how much the stigma has been normalised within the group; the process in which the same athlete saw no difference between two nicknames and the stigma eventually extended to the targeted child's leaving the club is addressed in detail in T1 (see T1, 3.3.1.7). The same athlete also explains how the nickname finds its target: 'Who has no one behind them, who has lower scores, who can't respond, who cries but doesn't complain. We'd pile on them. I mean we never took any risks.' All of these criteria relate to the target's vulnerability; economic position appears in this narrative as a factor that increases vulnerability. A partner-country narrative about scholarship status has not been found. However, the pressure of the



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payment relationship on club decisions is voiced in manager narratives. A Croatian combat sports club manager notes that parents 'invest time and money in trips' and intervene strongly, but that management 'cannot make decisions according to the loudest-voiced parent after a lost match' (HR-MANAGER-07); a football manager also says parents carry information and pressure but 'they can't let every parent emotion become a management instruction' (HR-MANAGER-03). These expressions show that the pressure the Turkish coach faced alone can also be defined as a pressure that can be met with an institutional boundary (see 3.3.6.4).

3.3.6.3. Self-Exclusion: The Invisible Cost of Participation

The quietest form of class differentiation in the narratives is the athlete withdrawing themselves from joint activities. The basketball athlete recounts this process and what distinguishes it from other forms of exclusion:

'Sometimes I really don't get invited, sometimes I do get invited but can't go, because it's an expensive place. For instance they say "let's go to that mall, eat there, go to the cinema". All costs money. I say "I can't come", I don't say why, I'm embarrassed. [...] Poverty has put me in such a state that nobody needs to exclude me anymore, I exclude myself from the start.'

— TR-Athlete17-Basketball-M-17

The expression 'nobody needs to exclude me anymore, I exclude myself from the start' can be read as a class-based counterpart of the self-surveillance mechanism defined in T3. There athletes were monitoring their bodies and voices; what is monitored here is the participation decision. In both cases the externally arriving criterion is internalised and its application is left to the athlete themselves. The same functioning is recounted from three different positions in this study: the basketball athlete in 3.3.6.1 observes this from outside ('an expensive place is chosen'), this athlete experiences it from the victim position, and the swimming athlete describes it from the perpetrator's side: 'Also we'd say things like "it'll be hard for them to come, it's far for you", as if doing a favour. [...] They don't have money anyway. I always said "even if we invited them they couldn't come anyway" and moved on.' This justification presented as a favour shows that the exclusion can appear as if it happened 'of its own accord' in both the perpetrator's and victim's eyes. An important consequence of this form from a prevention perspective is that incident-based monitoring tools may miss this harm: there is no word or act to be recorded, only the athlete's 'not having come' appears in participation lists. Indicators monitoring participation patterns and team climate may be better suited to making this kind of withdrawal visible. The same inequality can also be reflected in sporting development in individual disciplines. The taekwondo coach conveys at what point athletes construct the economic comparison:



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'A person at 15, 16, 17 years old definitely starts comparing their material situation too much with the person across from them. Because they think, I can't go to those competitions, my finances don't stretch, they go to very many competitions, we're at the same club but I'm in this situation, well they become more experienced than me, so that's why I'm losing, they're passing me and such — they can have many thoughts like this.'

— TR-Coach-FocusGroup2

The comparison the coach conveys shows that athletes make a connection between competition opportunity and experience and success. This observation based on a single narrative should be read not as a causal chain but as a sign that access to competition may be related to experience and performance; findings that cost is experienced as a significant barrier to children from low-income families participating in sport are also in this direction (Holt et al., 2011). In line with this reading, it can be thought that the hierarchy constructed through 'talent' (see T3) may partly also contain an implicit reflection of economic resources. The fact that the athletes in the coach's account voice this difference as their own inadequacy ('I'm losing, they're passing me') suggests that a structural inequality can be experienced as a personal failure. Studies showing that the invisible labour and burdens undertaken by families of professional athletes are most often experienced as a matter of personal sacrifice (Roderick, 2012) suggest that structural conditions in sport being experienced in the language of individual responsibility is not limited to young athletes. The meaning that sport carries in a class context can also affect the weight of the harm. A football athlete conveys what sport means in their environment:

'It's like this, coach. In our area, if a kid works hard at school they say "well, but what will come of it?", but if they're good with the ball they say "look, this one will make something of themselves". Weird but that's how it is. Becoming a footballer looks like the shortest route out of the neighbourhood. Fathers bring their sons to matches, stand on the sidelines. They're trying to make you do what they couldn't do, a bit. I always felt this. I mean it felt like I wasn't just playing for myself.'

— TR-Athlete1-Football-M-17

In contexts where sport is seen as a door of mobility, negative experiences on the field may be experienced by the athlete not only as a sporting disruption but also as a sign that that door might close. This helps understand why the same behaviour can carry different weights for different athletes: in the athlete's narrative what can be lost is not only a position but a vision of the future, and this vision is intertwined with the family's expectations. The same athlete's digital experience is also in this direction: a comment reaching the neighbourhood and family can take the shame from being individual to becoming a family matter (see T5, 3.3.5.2).

Partner-country data, even if not linked to a class axis, also recounts exclusion from social activities within a similar invisibility. A Croatian parent notes that 'birthday invitations and post-match pizza



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create quiet rankings', and that even if parents say it's a private matter, 'children read those lists like a scoreboard' (HR-PARENT-02); another says social invitations in football are 'political', that a barbecue or birthday can 'show more clearly who's in the group than a training drill' (HR-PARENT-03). Another parent conveys that invitations are most often only noticed when photos are shared online (HR-PARENT-01). A Croatian coach in the same country emphasises that coaches need to observe 'small signs', that questions like whether the newly arrived athlete is invited when the team goes out after training 'may seem small' but can determine whether sport feels safe or hostile for the athlete (HR-COACH-11). A Slovenian coach notes that groupings take shape around who goes on away trips together (SLO-COACH-08); however in these narratives what is decisive is choice rather than cost. A Portuguese football captain conveys that in their team everyone is tried to be invited, 'there were those who couldn't come, but they were invited' (PT-ATHLETE-02: 'Havia aquelas pessoas que não podiam ir, sim. Mas eram convidados.'). This last expression, while indirectly pointing to the self-exclusion pattern in Turkish data, also suggests that maintaining the invitation can preserve the non-attending athlete's connection with the group. Overall, partner-country data confirms that social activities are a domain that makes intra-team positions visible; it does not voice the relationship of this domain with economic cost as explicitly as Turkish data.

3.3.6.4. How Does the System Silence the Most Marginalised?

This sub-theme shows how the reporting problem addressed in T4 can become even more difficult with economic dependency. The basketball athlete turns their own position into a structural analysis:

'Think about it this way: in this club, the one who experiences the most injustice, who is most crushed, is me. I mean I'm the person who most needs to speak, to complain, to seek their rights. But at the same time, speaking is also the most impossible for me. Because I have a scholarship and that scholarship is in the hands of the coach, the club. If I complain, they'll say "ungrateful" and my scholarship will be at risk, I might be expelled. So the system is set up in such a way that the most crushed one speaks least, because they're the one with the most to lose. [...] Maybe the coach isn't even a bad person but the system has put them in such a position that they're also part of that system, they also have to protect themselves.'

— TR-Athlete17-Basketball-M-17

The athlete's analysis points to an important problem from the perspective of the design of protection mechanisms: in this narrative the athlete with the highest need for protection is in the position of paying the heaviest cost for reporting. For this reason, when the reporting addressee has decision authority over the athlete's continuation in the club or sporting future, the mechanism's independence and therefore its functionality can weaken. Krieger and Parks Pieper's (2023) finding that an athlete making a complaint to institutions they are dependent on to sustain their career can face the risk of being pushed out of the system, and Tak et al.'s (2024) analysis of reasons why reporting systems go

unused, are in this direction. The athlete's evaluation of the coach is also noteworthy: they ground the responsibility not in the coach's personal intent but in their position within the club's income relationship. The same athlete also conveys that the coach once heard the word 'scholarship student' but 'passed over it saying "don't joke around"', and interprets this as 'Maybe they don't want to fall out with the kids and parents, because they pay fees.' The swimming athlete's coach saying 'don't do that kids' and moving on (see T1, 3.3.1.7) is also a similar example of a half-intervention. These narratives help understand why the three-channel reporting system conveyed in T4 (see 3.3.4.6) deliberately chose the protection officer from outside the coach. The coach's limited position is also voiced by coaches themselves in focus groups. A coach states that their intervention capacity is largely determined by the support the club gives:

'That's why the path the club gives the coach actually completely changes the work. It also changes the discipline within the team because the coach's way of speaking can change then. [...] Actually the whole thing is the confidence inside the coach. The club gives you that confidence. The more support you see from your club the more you can go after the player.'

— **TR-Coach-FocusGroup2**

This expression can be read as a counterpart on the adult side of the athlete's observation that 'they also have to protect themselves'. In the coach's narrative, intervention is not only a moral preference but also related to the authority the club grants; when this authority is not explicitly defined, it is understood that the coach can feel themselves unauthorised in the face of harm they witness. In this respect the coach too can face a bystander dilemma: they see the harm but cannot be sure of the institutional foundation of intervention (see T4, 3.3.4.6). For this reason it may be advisable for coach training to be addressed together with a clear definition of authority and responsibility at the club level. How economic support can be reflected in decision processes is also voiced in a manager narrative. A participant managing in judo-wrestling disciplines, while recounting the advantage of the local funding model, also acknowledges its cost:

'It works through fellow townspeople's support. Here tradespeople give, businesspeople give, nobody hesitates to put their hand in their pocket. [...] But of course this also has a cost. The man who gives money sometimes also wants to give opinions, says "put that kid on". I stand firm then, say "the money is yours, the decision is mine".'

— **TR-Manager2-Judo-Wrestling-M-Trabzon**

The demand the manager conveys they resisted ('put that kid on') and the parent demand the coach in 3.3.6.2 faced ('I don't want that scholarship athlete on the team') share a similar structure: purchasing power can turn into a claim to a say over sporting decisions. The difference between the two narratives is in who the demand is met by: in one the manager states they draw the boundary with their own



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authority, in the other the coach is left largely to face the pressure alone. This comparison suggests that it may be useful for resistance to economic pressure to be tied to an institutionally defined decision boundary rather than being left to individual stance.

A direct athlete narrative on the effect of economic dependency on reporting has not been found in partner-country data; Slovenian data on the concentration of selection and decision authority in the same person potentially making reporting more difficult was addressed in T4 (see 3.3.4.6). By contrast, the boundary between the payment relationship and club rule is clearly drawn in Portuguese data. A participant managing a kickboxing club conveys that when they reminded a bullying athlete of the suspension to be applied, the athlete said 'but my father pays', and they responded 'yes, but your father decides about his own money; in this club it's us who decide' (PT-MANAGER-03: 'o teu pai manda no dinheiro dele. E nesse clube mandamos nós'). The same manager notes that rules, the code of conduct, and internal regulations are given to families and athletes upon entry to the club. This response almost exactly repeats in a different country and discipline the Turkish manager's 'the money is yours, the decision is mine' line; suggesting that pre-written rules can make it easier to draw this boundary without leaving it to individual courage.

3.3.6.5. The Adult Side and Counter-Design: Making the Difference Invisible or Eliminating It?

Adult stances on the class axis cluster at two ends in the narratives: at one end, seeing the difference as a natural outcome; at the other, the effort to limit through institutional arrangements the conditions that make the difference visible. The first stance is voiced in a parent narrative as a worldview. A football father attributes exclusion to an individual skill deficiency:

'When I watch these I think, the child who's left outside has ended up there through their own weakness. Getting into the group is also a skill, something that requires social intelligence. The child who can't manage this stays on the sidelines, this is also a result. I also taught my son social intelligence, who to speak how with, how to stand by the powerful...'

— **TR-Parent3-Football-Father-Istanbul**

In this framework, inequality is constructed not as a structure but as a skills difference; this can make intervention appear unnecessary. The parent's expression 'how to stand by the powerful' suggests that the strategy transmitted to the child may be conforming to the existing hierarchy; this can be read alongside the finding in T4 that who the bystander stands by is shaped in the family in advance (see T4, 3.3.4.4), and provides a supporting example for the coaches' explanation in 3.3.6.1 that the class criterion is acquired from the family. Thought together with the 'I want the coach I pay for to be tough' approach conveyed in T2, it is seen that economic power is positioned in some parent narratives as both an advantage and a pedagogical principle. At the opposite end are institutional practices aimed

at reducing the visibility of the difference. A volleyball coach conveys the rule they established to limit comparison constructed through appearance:

'Well you can't come to training wearing earrings. [...] You can't wear make-up. I mean let's leave aside the health aspect and such, one is putting on false eyelashes to show off to the others. Someone puts glittery stuff on the tips. It has no end. You can't do this in training. Everyone will be equal. What I say when you come here. When you come here the only thing you do. Everyone is equal in terms of appearance. If you want to shine on the field you'll play well.'

— **TR-Coach-FocusGroup1**

This rule limits some of the visible indicators of comparison constructed through brand, accessory, and appearance in the training space; while not completely eliminating the differentiation, it aims to tie visibility to performance on the field. The karate coach in the same focus group also agrees on the necessity of pre-established rules, recounting from their own sporting period how make-up brands were discussed in the girls' locker room before training and this could extend to being late for training. However, the rule can be read in two directions. On one hand it can limit comparison and exclusion constructed through appearance; on the other hand, an adult establishing a rule about girls' athletes' appearance can also be experienced as an application intersecting with the body control discussed in T3 (see T3, 3.3.3.4). The coach's conveying that resisting athletes eventually adopted the rule suggests that explaining the justification clearly through health and equality could soften this tension. Other practices the same coach conveys — providing dormitories and school scholarships for athletes coming from outside, shared breakfasts and activities — mean the club taking on a portion of the economic preconditions of participation. The basketball athlete's expectation of the club also points to this:

'In my view they definitely should get involved but just saying "don't mock" isn't enough. The club should see that not everyone is equal. For instance if the team activity is free or something the club covers, I can come too. Also those phone, brand conversations... if the coach said "what anyone has here isn't discussed", a lot would change. But most importantly, the one who speaks shouldn't be afraid. I could never say anything because my scholarship might go, as long as that fear exists no one can say anything.'

— **TR-Athlete17-Basketball-M-17**

The athlete's proposal has three layers and all three are at the institutional level: eliminate the cost, establish a clear rule for conversations, and guarantee the one who reports. None of the proposals rests on the athlete's resilience or peers' goodwill. The expression 'The club should see that not everyone is equal' also draws attention to the difference between treating equally and equalising: when starting points are different, treating everyone the same can sustain inequality. The single-sentence rule the athlete expects from the coach has the same structure as the open stance the swimming athlete expected from their coach against origin-based exclusion (see T5, 3.3.5.5): in both



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narratives athletes request a rule the coach states clearly and stands behind, before a comprehensive programme.

Partner-country data also contains expressions aimed at establishing equalising norms within the club; however these are voiced as a general inclusivity principle rather than economic position. The participant managing a kickboxing club in Portugal notes that they don't interfere in friendship choices outside the club, but that 'inside the mat everyone is friends' and 'everyone speaks with everyone' is established as a rule (PT-MANAGER-03: 'Aqui dentro do tatame, é toda a gente amiga [...] Toda a gente fala com toda a gente.'). A Croatian manager includes 'no exclusive groups for team matters' among the digital ethics principles they want to put into writing (HR-MANAGER-01), and a parent notes that a club 'digital and travel code' would be useful (HR-PARENT-07). These expressions share a similar logic to the Turkish coach's rule — limiting through club rules the areas where differentiation is visible. A concrete application of the club taking on the economic preconditions of participation has not been conveyed in partner-country data.

3.3.6.6. Case Portrait: 'King on the Field, Invisible in the Locker Room'

The idiographic deepening of this theme is built on an athlete who carries the layers of class intersection in a single narrative (TR-Athlete17-Basketball-M-17). The athlete was noticed in a neighbourhood park by a coach, was brought into the club on a scholarship due to their talent because their family couldn't cover the club fee, and has become one of the standout players of the team they have been playing for licensed for four years. The analytic value of the portrait is that it shows sporting success may not compensate for class disadvantage. The athlete's experience is divided between two separate evaluation systems: 'When I'm on the field I'm like a king, the ball is with me, everyone's looking at me, I'm the one scoring, I'm collecting the rebound, I'm the centre of the game. In that moment I feel strong, valuable, important, because there the measure is talent and I am talented. But the moment I enter the locker room the measure changes there. It's no longer talent, it's always money conversations.' This division overlaps with the two measurement systems identified from the same athlete's narrative in T3 (see T3, 3.3.3.3); here the second criterion rests on a source the athlete has no control over — their family's income. The athlete describes the first form of the harm not as a word but as a look:

'That look, coach, is even more effective than an outright insult, because you can't do anything against it. If someone openly says to you "you're poor", at least you can respond, fight, complain, there's a word on record. But that look is different; on my first day there, they gave a look at my shoes, my bag, my old phone, looked me up and down, then looked at each other. They didn't say a single word. So they both give you that message and can deny they gave it.'



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The expression 'they both give you that message and can deny they gave it' can be read as a clear definition made by an athlete of the deniable harm discussed in T1. A similar structure is also seen in other narratives: the female basketball athlete reading the 'you've overstepped' message from a senior's look (see T3, 3.3.3.4) and the swimming athlete facing remarks disguised as questions, produce a similar outcome across different axes (talent hierarchy, origin, class): harm is experienced but leaves no demonstrable evidence. The boundary criterion the athlete conveys in T1 — the distinction between a correctable mistake and an unchangeable position (see T1, 3.3.1.1) — is also fed by this experience. The incident they convey in the same interview — someone looking at their shoes and saying 'are those still going?' and everyone laughing — shows that the criterion was derived from a lived moment. The athlete completes that moment: 'Everyone laughed. I couldn't laugh, because I had no money to buy new ones.' In T1 it was seen that victims used laughing as a shield in response; in this narrative the athlete states they could not even use that shield.

The athlete also recounts that the same measure operates in the digital environment: after a moment in the team group where they were mocked for their phone, they say 'On the field I'm the best player but in the group I became "the kid whose phone doesn't work"', and redefines the power relationship in their own words: 'The real issue isn't weak–powerful, it's which power counts in which domain. On the field talent counts, in digital money counts.' This expression proposes a class-based answer to the question of 'who holds power in digital' discussed in T5 (see T5, 3.3.5.2). In the portrait's close, the athlete notes they are voicing this experience this openly for the first time in the interview, and then adds: 'but even saying it scares me. I said it with difficulty, those who come after me will also say it with difficulty, most will never be able to say it at all.' This expression shows that the research interview opened a space for the athlete to name their experience; it also suggests they haven't encountered a structure in their everyday environment that would facilitate this naming. The athlete's own prognosis is that those who come after may also face a similar silence. The observation in the theme's title — 'nobody calls this bullying' — appears in this narrative both as a finding and as a warning.

3.3.6.7. Theme Summary

An axis that operates even after participation: Economic position emerges as a differentiating axis that can operate in peer relations even after joining sport, beyond access to sport. It can remain invisible because it most often does not feature in the definitions of bullying that participants describe: 'nobody even counts this as bullying, they think it's "just joking around"'.



Differentiation that leaves no evidence: Class differentiation can most often operate without even requiring a word, through the threshold of the environment: 'you set up the environment in such a way that they eliminate themselves'. When it intersects with origin, the differentiation can take on a superiority language such as 'city–village'. Bystander athletes most often explain their participation with fear rather than approval ('we may not be bad people but we do bad things purely out of fear').

A learned criterion: Two coaches think children acquire economic difference as a hierarchy criterion largely from their family ('families impose this on children'). This explanation is consistent with the literature on social learning and parental influence, and points to prevention work needing to encompass the parent community as well.

The two faces of scholarship: A scholarship earned through talent can turn in peer relations into an indicator of deficiency. When the stigma becomes adjectivised, those using it may form no awareness of causing harm, while the athlete feels the right to make mistakes is restricted. The payment relationship among adults ('my child pays the team') can lay the ground for this stigma; the coach most often faces this pressure alone.

Self-exclusion: The quietest form in the narratives is the athlete withdrawing themselves in advance from costly activities. The same functioning is recounted from observer, victim, and perpetrator positions ('even if we invited them they couldn't come anyway'). Incident-based tools may miss this harm; participation and climate indicators may be better suited to making it visible. The connection between competition opportunity and experience may lead a structural inequality to be experienced as personal failure.

Reporting and dependency: The athlete with the highest need for protection may be in the position of paying the heaviest cost for reporting ('the most crushed one speaks least'). When the reporting addressee has decision authority over the athlete's future, the mechanism's independence can weaken; for this reason a channel outside the club or independent from the coach gains importance.

The coach's position: Coaches associate their intervention capacity with the authority the club grants ('the club gives you that confidence'); athletes also explain the coach's half-interventions ('don't joke around') through the fee relationship. It may be advisable for training to be addressed together with a clear definition of authority at the club level. Examples where the boundary between purchasing power and sporting decision is institutionally drawn exist in Türkiye ('the money is yours, the decision is mine') and Portugal ('in this club it's us who decide').



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Counter-design: Appearance equality rules, dormitories and school scholarships, activities where the club covers the cost, can limit the visible indicators of the differentiation; it is important that these rules be explained clearly to avoid turning into body control. The athlete's proposal has three layers — eliminate the cost, establish a conversation rule, guarantee the one who reports: 'The club should see that not everyone is equal.'

Partner-country data: In Croatia, differentiation constructed through equipment and family circumstances and the 'quiet rankings' of social activities are voiced; in Portugal, the boundary between payment and club rule is clearly drawn. The absence of direct narratives about class differentiation in Slovenian and Portuguese data should be interpreted not as the phenomenon's absence but as a limitation of its visibility.



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4. DISCUSSION

This section addresses the six themes produced from the qualitative phase as divergent yet interrelated patterns and discusses what these patterns might point to together. Themes intersect throughout the text: the same narrative sometimes contains simultaneously a deniable harm, a seniority relationship, and a reporting calculation. For this reason, the discussion proposes not reducing themes to a single mechanism but re-reading them through four analytic axes: whether harm produces a record, who has the authority to name harm, how compliance is rewarded, and how costly reporting is for whom. The fourth axis is addressed together with the bystander's position and moral courage; because in the data the decision to report is made not only by the victim but also by the peers, coaches, and parents who witness the incident.

The flow of the section is as follows: first the general pattern that the themes together suggest and its relationship to the prevalence survey are summarised (4.1), then the four axes are discussed separately (4.2–4.5), an analytic model that brings these axes together is proposed (4.6), points of overlap and divergence with the literature and inter-country comparison are addressed (4.7), and finally the conceptual contributions the study proposes are discussed (4.8). The thematic framework is built on Turkish data; narratives from Croatia, Slovenia, and Portugal are used as a comparative layer showing at what points the framework is also recognisable in different contexts and at what points it diverges. The interpretations proposed in the discussion are, in accordance with the nature of reflexive thematic analysis, the product of the researchers' interpretive relationship with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021) and are limited to a non-probabilistic sample consisting predominantly of athletes who have experienced harm. For this reason the propositions below should be read not as generalisable laws but as analytic inferences open to testing in different contexts (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

4.1. What the Six Themes Together Suggest

When the six themes are read together, the general pattern that stands out is that peer bullying in sport in this study's data emerges not only as a behaviour problem but also as a visibility problem. In the narratives, harm most often occurs and can be identified by participants; however it does not always turn into an incident the institution can record and act on. The themes can be read as patterns showing the different ways this non-conversion occurs.

T1 points to the fact that an important portion of harm can be constructed in a way that can be subsequently retrieved: 'it was a joke', 'it was tactical' can be withdrawn. T2 suggests that a similar operation can also be done at the institutional scale through recategorisation; when the chores loaded



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onto a new arrival are named 'discipline' or 'apprenticeship', a questionable practice can be turned into a pedagogy that is difficult to question. T3 shows that control can be partially transferred to the athlete themselves; through a self-surveillance extending from hand movement to tone of voice, the victim can cover the traces of harm with their own behaviour. T4 reveals that even in situations where harm is known, it is most often not reported, and that this decision is described in the narratives not so much as cowardice but as a preference in which possible costs are weighed. T6, meanwhile, presents a relatively extreme form of the differentiation: in some narratives there is not even a specific act, the threshold of the environment is set, and the victim withdraws themselves.

T5 occupies a different place within this sequence. In the digital environment, harm most often produces a record; moreover this record is permanent, multiplied, and shareable in nature. Narratives in Turkish data suggest that in closed team groups this record can most often remain in the hands of the perpetrator or group rather than the victim; a basketball athlete summarises this as 'You're kind of like a hostage.' (TR-Athlete2-Basketball-F-16). In this way the recording can become appended to the bullying mechanism rather than the protection mechanism; in the report this situation is named the changing hands of evidence. On open platforms, meanwhile, the picture differs: the identity of the perpetrator can become uncertain and the harm domain can extend outside the team.

Table 1. The common mechanism of the six themes: different techniques for harm to occur without producing a record.

Theme	Technique by which harm remains invisible	Evidence status
T1 Deniable harm	Subsequent withdrawal of the act's name ('it was a joke', 'it was tactical')	Act exists, no evidence
T2 The never-closing account	Changing the category of the act ('discipline', 'apprenticeship', 'army')	Act exists, but not counted as harm
T3 Masculinity's operating system	Victim erasing traces by adapting (self-surveillance)	Victim erases the evidence
T4 The bruise fades, the label stays	Reporting cost exceeding harm cost	Evidence exists, not reported
T5 Training forgotten, recording isn't	Recording turning into pressure tool	Evidence exists, but in perpetrator's hands
T6 Invisible class intersection	Setting the threshold of the environment; victim eliminating themselves	No act even exists

This reading receives a degree of support when evaluated together with the descriptive picture of the prevalence survey. The three behaviours most frequently reported in the combined sample — hurtful nicknames and demeaning mockery (37.5%), humiliation in front of others after mistakes (32.3%), and intentional exclusion from peer groups (30.3%) — overlap with the forms of harm with the widest deniability margin as defined in T1. Of participants reporting a personal experience and answering the help-seeking question, 53.9% stated they told no one or tried to handle it alone; the most frequently marked option among reasons for not reporting was not considering the situation serious enough (40.3%). This last rate is consistent with the qualitative reading that a portion of harm may not be recognised by the athlete themselves as 'an incident to be reported'. However, the survey data is descriptive, samples are not probabilistic, and the two data streams come from different participant groups; for this reason the relationship between them should be addressed not as causal but as an interpretive overlap at the level of 'mutually explaining' data in mixed-method integration (Fetters et al., 2013).

Partner-country data contributes to this picture in two directions. On one hand, the construction of boundary criteria through repetition and distribution of laughter, performance serving as a temporary shield function, the 'snitch' label deterring reporting, the permanence of digital content, and the need for an independent point of contact are also recognisably present in Croatian, Slovenian, and Portuguese narratives. On the other hand, there are clear divergences at some points: responses regarding whether an athlete not dominant on the field can gain power in the digital environment, the density of narratives about class differentiation, and the distribution of non-reporting reasons differ between countries. For example, while the belief that no result will be achieved or that they will not be believed is the most frequently marked reason in Türkiye (49.3%), not considering the situation serious enough stands out in Croatia (62.7%). Given the relatively short and similar nature of qualitative responses in Croatia and Slovenia and the small size of the Portuguese athlete sample, these comparisons are presented not with a validation claim but as a reading aimed at monitoring how patterns appear in different contexts. A cumulative breakdown of the comparison is in 4.7.3.

4.2. First Axis: Harm That Leaves No Record and the Changing Hands of Evidence

The literature has long explained the non-reporting of interpersonal violence in sport through concepts of culture of silence, power asymmetry, and institutional resistance (Fortier, Parent & Lessard, 2020; Manley, Roderick & Parker, 2016; Vveinhardt, Fominiene & Andriukaitiene, 2019). This research's

data is broadly consistent with these explanations; however it also points in some cases to a difficulty that precedes reporting: some harms, before even reaching the reporting stage, cannot be recognised as an 'incident' either by the victim or those around them. One of the recurring situations in the narratives is structures where harm occurs but does not convert into a record at any stage: not being passed to throughout a training session, an expensive venue being chosen for a social activity, being looked up and down on the first day. It is difficult to write these kinds of experiences as a single, datable incident on a complaint form.

One dimension of unrecognisability is related to naming. A taekwondo athlete explains that they couldn't see what they experienced at their old club as bullying at the time with the words 'They called fear respect and I thought it was right' and also formulates the consequence themselves: 'If you don't know that something is bad, you can't even think to escape from it.' (TR-Athlete16-Taekwondo-F-15). The same difficulty also appears in a narrative from the perpetrator position; a swimming athlete, while recounting their behaviours towards peers, says 'I heard the sentence "this is bullying" years later.' (TR-Athlete10-Swimming-M-16). The two narratives together suggest that the absence of the possibility of naming can delay both the victim's search for help and the perpetrator's questioning of their own behaviour.

This finding is also related to the measurement tradition of the field of interpersonal violence in sport. Parent and Fortier (2018) proposed addressing violence directed at athletes in a framework encompassing psychological, physical, sexual, and neglect dimensions together. The large-scale prevalence studies of the field — the CASES research covering six European countries (Hartill et al., 2021, 2023), Australian community sport data (Pankowiak et al., 2022), and the study with high-performance athletes in Brazil (Maranhão et al., 2025) — are largely built on these definitions and collect experience reports through behaviour checklists (also see Parent et al., 2019). These tools, by their nature, depend on participants being able to recognise and mark a behaviour.

This research's data points to a measurement difficulty at precisely this point. Some of the harms athletes describe as most lasting — not being passed to, an expensive venue being selected, being looked up and down — can certainly also be read as acts; however in the narratives these acts are most often experienced not as a single, easily recordable incident but as a relational or environmental process spread over weeks. In a water polo athlete's words 'You can tell what you experienced but you can't quite show it.' (TR-Athlete5-Waterpolo-M-17); another athlete in swimming recounts the weight of such experiences with the words 'These kinds of things are sometimes worse than open



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bullying because you can't show the wound to anyone.' (TR-Athlete7-Swimming-F-16). The detail the same athlete adds while recounting questions directed at their origin — 'If you say "it was", they wouldn't believe it; if you say "it wasn't", they'd say "see, we told you so".' — overlaps with the structure the microaggression literature describes: interactions that look unimportant when viewed individually but cumulatively carry an exclusionary message and put the objector in the position of the 'too sensitive' (Sue et al., 2007). Clerinx, Schaillée and Spaaij (2025), in their systematic review on psychological violence and psychological bullying in children's sport, draw attention to the difficulty of recognising and documenting such harms. Hawker and Boulton's (2000) meta-analysis revealed the relationship between peer victimisation and psychosocial maladjustment; in the data, a football athlete's expression 'I forgot the nights I was beaten but I didn't forget that lobby.' (TR-Athlete1-Football-M-17) is one of the narratives pointing to relational harm being experienced as more lasting than physical harm by the athlete. The psychometric value of tools such as the measurement tool whose validity was tested in the Flemish context by Vertommen and colleagues (2022) is not disputed; however, like every behaviour checklist, these tools are more inclined to capture experiences the participant can name. Bright and colleagues' (2026) review aimed at classifying the severity of interpersonal violence in sport reveals the need to standardise severity criteria in the field; the question this research adds comes one step before severity: if a harm cannot be recorded as an incident, how can its severity be evaluated with what indicators?

The second dimension of unrecognisability is related to observability. In some disciplines, harm can occur in spaces where the adult is physically present but cannot see. The water polo athlete describes below-surface behaviour as 'Actually in front of everyone's eyes but in a place no one sees, pulling your swimsuit right in the middle from underneath and hurting you...' (TR-Athlete5-Waterpolo-M-17), while another swimming athlete, recounting the short intervals during which the coach is occupied with stopwatch and programme recording between sets, says 'Twenty seconds is little but it's enough.' (TR-Athlete10-Swimming-M-16). In coach focus groups the same situation is also voiced by adults. A taekwondo coach, recounting that a 'compliment-like' weight implication directed at a young athlete by a senior was heard by none of the coaches ('None of us know. One of us is on this side, one on that side.') and that the incident left a mark on the child despite being very brief, emphasises: 'And in that one-minute process it remains in the younger one's mind.' (TR-Coach-FocusGroup2). Vertommen and colleagues (2025) examined the relationship between sport type and gender and experiences of interpersonal violence; this research's data suggests that in explaining

differences between disciplines, the observability of the act by an adult could also be addressed as a separate variable alongside contact intensity.

However, harm that leaves no record does not mean harm that leaves no trace for an attentive adult. Some coach focus group participants recount being able to notice exclusion by looking not at single incidents but at behaviour patterns. A volleyball coach, observing a warm-up practice where athletes voice each other's names at the start of training, notes 'if they're being bullied the names of those kids are generally not said' and uses positioning during warm-up and cool-down as an indicator: 'If they're alone in a corner there's a problem with that child.' (TR-Coach-FocusGroup1). The football coach in the same focus group says 'With their gestures and facial expressions we can also understand if they're bullying.' These narratives suggest that harm leaving no record can be read at the pattern level and that this reading can be addressed as a teachable skill in coach training (see Section 6 (Curriculum)).

Partner-country data contains expressions that broadly overlap with this axis. In Slovenia, an athlete defines the most lasting form of harm as 'for me social exclusion, because it's silent and nobody can point to a single moment' and adds that the adult's capacity to see also varies by form of harm: 'the coach manages open conflict well; quiet exclusion is harder for any adult to see' (SLO-ATHLETE-03). Another athlete notes that a hard throw is forgotten at the next training, but 'the feeling of the group freezing you out comes with you to every training' (SLO-ATHLETE-01). A detail in the quantitative data can also be read alongside this interpretation: not considering the situation serious enough was marked as a non-reporting reason at a rate of 62.7% in Croatia, 46.5% in Portugal, and 41.6% in Slovenia. These rates can indicate that the incident is genuinely perceived as mild, or can also be interpreted as a portion of harm not reaching the threshold of a reportable 'incident'; survey data does not allow distinguishing between the two possibilities.

The same difficulty also appears in the conceptualisation of the boundary between a joke and bullying. Booth, Cope and Rhind (2024) examined how the boundary between bullying and 'banter' in male adolescent community football is constructed and legitimised; Booth (2025) argued that this boundary largely depends on the position of the perceiver. Studies conducted in professional football also show that the boundary is perceived as 'very thin' and that joking can cover abuse (Hickey & Roderick, 2024; Newman, Warburton & Russell, 2022). This research's T1 finding supports these identifications while proposing an addition: athletes do not leave the boundary solely to the perceiver's discretion but voice similar and transferable criteria (see 4.3). In the narratives the problem



most often appears to be not the absence of criteria but the fact that the authority to apply the criterion does not lie with the athlete.

This finding points to a limitation concerning the established toolkit of the protection field. International protection standards and their impact evaluations are largely built on incident reporting, record-keeping, and case management processes (Rhind & Owusu-Sekyere, 2020). This research's data does not deny the necessity of these processes; however it suggests that an important portion of the harm participants described may fall outside the field of vision of these processes. Owusu-Sekyere, Rhind and Hills' (2022) call for transition from protection policies to a protection culture overlaps with the direction this data points: recognising harm that doesn't make it onto record appears to depend not on procedure alone but on adult attention that monitors everyday climate together with it.

T5 adds a separate layer to this picture. One of the promising features of the digital environment from a protection perspective is making harm documentable; indeed the data contains a counter-example where evidence is used in this direction. A karate athlete saved a screenshot of content targeting them, showed it to their father and coach, and had the content removed: 'So this time I both didn't stay quiet and saved the evidence, showed it to the right people.' (TR-Athlete6-Karate-M-15). By contrast, the pattern recurring in Turkish data is the recording remaining under the control of the perpetrator or group rather than the victim. A water polo athlete recounts that they requested the removal of a video belonging to them and received the response 'I asked them to delete it, they said "it's a joke buddy, don't exaggerate". It wasn't deleted.' (TR-Athlete5-Waterpolo-M-17); a judo athlete describes the permanence of the recording as 'On the mat you fall, get up, continue, but if that video stays, you can never get up, you stay in that fall forever.' (TR-Athlete11-Judo-F-16). Kavanagh and Mountjoy (2024) define the digital environment not as a reflection of physical abuse but as a violence ecosystem with its own specificity; this research proposes seeking one of the sources of that specificity in who controls the recording. Producing a document alone does not appear protective; what is decisive is who the document is in the hands of and whether a chain exists through which the victim can use it as evidence.

Partner-country data describes the permanence experience in similar ways. A Croatian coach notes that digital groups 'extend defeat' and that an athlete 'can make a mistake on Saturday and still be getting jokes about it Monday morning' (HR-COACH-09); a Slovenian athlete finds a clip of a mistake being shared 'worse than the mistake itself, because now everyone has it saved and keeps



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coming back to it' (SLO-ATHLETE-01). On open platforms, meanwhile, the identity of the perpetrator can become uncertain. A volleyball athlete says for anonymous messages 'You don't know who wrote it.' (TR-Athlete12-Volleyball-M-16), a Croatian athlete expresses the same difference as 'on the field you at least know exactly who's talking, online it could be anyone with an opinion' (HR-ATHLETE-07). While in closed groups evidence remains in the hands of a known perpetrator, on open platforms evidence may be publicly accessible but the perpetrator uncertain; both situations make it difficult for the victim to convert the evidence into a report in different ways (Baştürk Akca & Sayımer, 2017).

The practical conclusion of this axis can be summarised as follows: approaches that address the digital environment only as a risk domain and reduce prevention to prohibition may remain incomplete. The promising practices in the data operate in two directions: rules that limit the production of recording from the outset, and a support chain that enables the athlete to use the recording as evidence. A karate athlete conveys their club rule as 'Taking unauthorised video or photos in the dojo is forbidden.' (TR-Athlete14-Karate-F-14), while a taekwondo athlete who changed clubs evaluates a similar rule at their new club as 'The filming prohibition here is the best example, it kills the issue from the very start.' (TR-Athlete16-Taekwondo-F-15). A volleyball coach also recounts that they added filming in the locker room to the athlete contract and framed the justification around privacy: 'Because another friend there, even if they're fully clothed, may not want to show their face.' (TR-Coach-FocusGroup1). A Slovenian coach conveys that they established 'no unauthorised filming, no sharing of mistakes' rules early with their team and that this 'really worked' (SLO-COACH-09), while another coach in the same focus group emphasises that the rule needs to be established as 'guidance not surveillance', because if children 'feel monitored they'll always find a way' (SLO-COACH-07). These two emphases together suggest that digital rules designed as norms built together with athletes and with their justifications explained may be more functional than purely prohibitive regulations.

4.3. Second Axis: Naming Authority — Athletes' Criteria and Adult Re-labelling

One of the noteworthy aspects of the data is that an important portion of young athletes appear more equipped to define bullying than might be supposed. In independent interviews, athletes voiced criteria that broadly overlap with those in the literature and are sometimes quite functional from a daily use perspective. Some of these criteria emerged in responses to interview questions, some appeared spontaneously while the athlete recounted their own experience; therefore the pattern



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presented below should be read as an indicator of athletes' capacity to produce criteria, not interpreted as all athletes sharing these criteria.

Athletes from different disciplines similarly tied the boundary to touching something the person cannot change. A basketball athlete says 'In my view the boundary is the moment something you cannot change is mocked.' (TR-Athlete17-Basketball-M-17), a football athlete puts the same distinction as 'The boundary is there: you can laugh at a moment, you can't laugh at someone's identity.' (TR-Athlete9-Football-F-17), a swimming athlete as 'The boundary is in whether something you cannot change about yourself is touched.' (TR-Athlete7-Swimming-F-16), and a volleyball athlete as 'In my view the boundary is when what's said touches a moment of mine or who I am.' (TR-Athlete12-Volleyball-M-16). This criterion can be read as the field-level counterpart of the phenomenon discussed in the literature as identity or prejudice-based bullying: body and weight-based bullying (Flores Aguilar et al., 2021), homophobic language related to sexual orientation (Denison, Bevan & Jeanes, 2020), or bullying constructed through origin, by turning something the target cannot change into a stigma, overlap with this criterion (also see Hymel & Swearer, 2015). Other criteria address different dimensions. A volleyball athlete builds the repetition criterion from their own experience: 'But by the thirtieth time it was said I stopped laughing. In my view the boundary is exactly there.' (TR-Athlete4-Volleyball-F-17). A judo athlete looks at the distribution of laughter ('The moment you don't laugh, that's the boundary.'; TR-Athlete11-Judo-F-16), a water polo athlete proposes a frequency test for intent ('It was called "accident" but it happened every training session. An accident doesn't happen every day...' ; TR-Athlete5-Waterpolo-M-17). Intent is in some narratives read from observable signs: 'If they checked their surroundings, it's intentional.' (TR-Athlete1-Football-M-17); 'If they're smirking while apologising, know that they did it on purpose.' (TR-Athlete8-Taekwondo-M-17). A karate athlete, meanwhile, determines from whose perspective the evaluation is to be made: 'That's why to understand whether a behaviour is a joke or bullying, you need to look at the one receiving it, not the one delivering it.' (TR-Athlete6-Karate-M-15).

The relationship of these criteria to classical definitions is more complex than a one-directional overlap. The three components of Olweus's (1999) bullying definition — repetition, intent, and power imbalance — appear with different weights in athletes' criteria: repetition ('by the thirtieth time') and intent ('if they checked their surroundings') find clear counterparts, while power imbalance is more often voiced through the selectivity of the target ('Because if it were really a joke it should be doable to everyone.'; TR-Athlete4-Volleyball-F-17). A Slovenian athlete's expression 'joke is fine if done between equals; not if done to someone who can't respond back' (SLO-ATHLETE-03) similarly ties



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power imbalance to the capacity to respond. Volk, Dane and Marini (2014) redefined bullying as goal-directed aggression containing a power imbalance; athletes' intent tests can be read as attempts to infer this goal-directedness from the perpetrator's observable behaviours. Salmivalli (2010) showed that bullying is sustained through the role distribution within the group; athletes' looking at the distribution of laughter overlaps with this group dimension but diverges from it at one point: group approval, in Salmivalli's framework, is a mechanism sustaining bullying; in athletes' criterion it becomes a sign showing the presence of harm. The most clear divergence is in the 'something you cannot change' criterion. While classical definitions largely define bullying through the form and structure of behaviour, athletes' criterion is content-based: even a single word, when it touches the person's identity, can be counted as having crossed the boundary. In this respect, athletes' criteria can be evaluated not as an alternative to classical definitions but as complementary indicators that can facilitate their application in the field.

The fact that athletes can produce these criteria suggests that the problem in the narratives is most often not a lack of information but the question of who has the authority to apply the criterion. The sentence of a karate athlete about content shared without permission — 'Whether it's funny or not can't be decided only by the person who shared it.' (TR-Athlete14-Karate-F-14) — explicitly formulates this authority question. Data shows that adults can sometimes record the same phenomenon under other names. In one of the coach focus groups a participant renames the situation they describe as 'Let me not say peer bullying but say groups establishing superiority over each other' (TR-Coach-FocusGroup1), a manager frames the phenomenon as 'a test run of high-level competition', and a manager working in judo-wrestling moves what is loaded on a new arrival to another category saying 'this is not a service, this is discipline' (TR-Manager2-Judo-Wrestling-M-Trabzon). These naming changes can also operate as a responsibility change: grouping is managed, competition is supported, discipline is given; bullying is defined as a situation that needs to be reported and intervened in. A taekwondo athlete's observation shows how this operation is experienced from the victim's side: 'They were calling shouting "discipline". Intimidation "respect".' and 'When you give something a nice name no one can object.' (TR-Athlete16-Taekwondo-F-15). These narratives suggest that Bandura's (1991) mechanism of euphemistic labelling among moral disengagement mechanisms can operate not only as an individual defence but also as an institutional vocabulary; the silence structure Vveinhardt and colleagues (2019) describe as 'omertà' in organised sport and the legitimisation processes running through banter that Booth and colleagues (2024) discuss also point in a similar direction.

This finding is also related to sport's own moral vocabulary. Hughes and Coakley (1991) showed that athletes can redefine harmful behaviours as positive deviance through excessive compliance with sport ethics. This research's data suggests that the same operation can be sustained not only among athletes but also through adult discourse. Sport's own moral discourse can also be part of this vocabulary. A judo athlete, after describing the sport's official respect culture, says 'On the other side, when the door closes, something completely different is going on under that respect.' (TR-Athlete3-Judo-M-18), while another athlete from the same discipline adds 'Calling something a "respect sport" shouldn't hide the bullying inside it.' (TR-Athlete11-Judo-F-16). A similar observation also comes from sports considered 'polite' or 'calm': a volleyball athlete says 'That's why that "polite sport" image seems a bit like a shop window to me.' (TR-Athlete4-Volleyball-F-17), a swimming athlete 'The water looks calm but the side is never calm.' (TR-Athlete7-Swimming-F-16), and another 'In the place that looks most innocent this business is easier, because no one either sees or understands.' (TR-Athlete10-Swimming-M-16). Gomez and Schoch (2026) name the adoption of the protection language in international sport federations while implementation remains limited as 'performative compliance'; these narratives suggest that a similar gap can form at the level of discipline philosophy. Read together with Vertommen and colleagues' (2025) study comparing violence experiences by sport type, this data indicates that concentrating protection policies only on disciplines considered risky may be misleading.

The institutional dimension of the naming problem is also related to the absence of a common counterpart for the concept of safe sport among stakeholders. Gurgis, Kerr and Battaglia (2023) showed that safe sport is interpreted in clearly different ways by stakeholders, and Gurgis and Kerr (2021) showed that sport managers advance the safe sport agenda through their own definitions. This research's data suggests that this definitional plurality may be related not only to a conceptual scatter but also to an actual authority distribution: when the same incident is defined as 'bullying' by the athlete, 'grouping' by the coach, and 'a test run of competition' by the manager, in the narratives the definition that counts is most often the one from higher up in the hierarchy. Partner-country data also shows the opposite direction of this authority question. A Croatian manager defines the boundary in advance and explicitly — 'bullying begins when discipline gets personal' (HR-MANAGER-01) — while a Slovenian coach notes that the 'tactical' justification can be tested, because 'a real tactical reason will remain consistent' (SLO-COACH-12). These expressions suggest that in environments where the criterion is defined in advance and in writing, the margin for renaming may narrow.

Brackenridge (1998), in pioneering work on safeguarding in sport, drew attention to the fact that parents' role is structurally limited and problematised how protection responsibility is divided between family and institution. This research's T4 finding suggests that a similar limitation can operate at the naming level too: the parent who names harm by its name can, in one mother's expression, face the risk of 'the "over-reacting mother" label' (TR-Parent2-Swimming-Mother-Ankara), thus naming authority can be taken back not only from the child but also from the family. A Croatian manager's evaluation that an open reporting pathway saves parents 'from having to guess whether they're overreacting' (HR-MANAGER-07) points to the possibility of this burden being lightened through an institutional arrangement.

However, the data also shows that renaming is not inevitable. In one of the coach focus groups, a moment was recorded where participants questioned gendered language among themselves. When the football coach spoke of girls' athletes making 'masculine' movements, the karate coach objected to this naming ('Actually where the problem starts is naming it this way.'), and the football coach reassessed their own language at the end of the discussion: 'I don't know, by using words of that type coaches may have also pushed them there.' and 'I'm of the opinion that we need to be careful about those words. We may also have our error there.' (TR-Coach-FocusGroup1). The share of the research context in interpreting this moment should not be overlooked: the self-evaluation emerged in a structured focus group environment where the topic was brought up by the interviewer and colleagues were listening to each other; the participants' tendency to display a socially acceptable stance also cannot be excluded. For this reason, the finding is presented not as an indicator of a lasting attitude change but as an example pointing to the potential of structured peer discussion to produce awareness. McMahon and colleagues' (2023) design proposals for athlete- and coach-led abuse training also draw attention to learning environments where experience is discussed together rather than knowledge being transferred. The implication for coach training is that in addition to knowledge transfer, opening structured spaces where colleagues can question their own language together may also be valuable. A similar self-questioning is also seen in the Portuguese coach focus group; a coach acknowledges that the criterion can be uncertain even for adults by saying 'sometimes we mistake a mocking situation, a joke, for bullying' (PT-COACH-FG).

4.4. Third Axis: The Rewarding of Compliance and the Problem of Apparent Improvement

The third axis is of particular importance because it directly concerns the success criteria of prevention work. A volleyball athlete, observing that as they adapted to masculinity norms the mockery directed at them decreased, recounts this experience:

'I even deliberately made my voice lower, tried to talk more roughly, imitated them. [...] They would rib me less then. So the system rewards you the more you give up on yourself.'

— TR-Athlete12-Volleyball-M-16

A similar observation also comes from a different discipline and an independent interview. A judo athlete describes the same functioning as 'This system doesn't openly say "submit", it just rewards the submitting one and quietly pushes aside the non-submitting one.' (TR-Athlete3-Judo-M-18). In both narratives athletes attribute the decrease in bullying not to improvement in the environment but to their adapting their own behaviour to the environment's expectations.

This observation can be read alongside discussions in the hazing literature regarding reward and cost relations. Hazing rituals demand that the new arrival meets expectations such as showing consent, obedience, enduring pain, acceptance, commitment, and internalisation (Van Raalte et al., 2007; Waldron & Kowalski, 2009). Those who adapt to these expectations may stay within the process thinking they will reach promised gains such as group identity, status, comfort, and loyalty (Allan & DeAngelis, 2004; Waldron et al., 2011; Wintrup, 2003). In this way, new arrivals become less threatening to seniors; 'rookies' who join in team solidarity move out of their prospective position and earn their place in the team (Elmas, 2022; Elmas et al., 2025). Rituals that are part of subculture and identity formation also function as one of the ways athletes demonstrate commitment to a masculinity identity defined with characteristics such as taking physical risks, being resilient and tough (Bryshun, 1997; Donnelly, 1985; Perlow, 2018). In this process, behaviours and values associated with femininity are most often othered or dismissed (Bryshun, 1997). Liminality as a temporary and precarious intermediate state represents the transition between the symbolic 'death' of individual identity and the 'birth' of group identity (Carlson et al., 2020; Stuart, 2013; Thomassen, 2014; Turner, 1969). This research's data suggests that the mentioned reward structure may not be limited to specific hazing moments but can spread to everyday interactions — tone of voice, hand movements, manner of laughing.

One point the data adds to this discussion is that liminality may not always be completed. The volleyball athlete describes their experience as 'It's like an exam but an exam you can't pass, that you keep retaking.' (TR-Athlete12-Volleyball-M-16), while a swimming athlete recounts the same

situation by comparing with peers: 'The others were tested once and accepted; I was continuously tested and never accepted.' (TR-Athlete7-Swimming-F-16). Johnson (2011), while analysing hazing through the concepts of rite of passage and liminality, drew attention to the formation of a *communitas* feeling at the end of the ritual. These two narratives suggest that for athletes who 'cannot pass' due to identity, origin, or masculinity performance, the threshold may not close and may turn into a continuously renewed test. In the report, this situation is named 'permanent liminality' as an interpretation based on a limited number of narratives and needing to be tested in different samples.

The theoretical counterpart of the observation can also be sought in the masculinities literature. Connell (1995, 2005) defines hegemonic masculinity not as a fixed identity but as a hierarchical practice that is continuously reconstructed and subordinates other forms of masculinity; they distinguish non-hegemonic forms as subordinated and marginalised masculinities. Messner (1990), meanwhile, discussed sport as a socialisation domain that turns the body into an instrument. This research's data points to the possibility that the regime may have not only a punitive but also a rewarding dimension: an order that grants relative immunity from mockery to the athlete who adapts to it can maintain its continuity with less need for an external controller. The volleyball athlete also thinks the regime can be related to how the discipline looks from outside: 'So to escape the "girls' sport" label coming from outside, inside there's a very tough masculinity display forming quite the opposite.' (TR-Athlete12-Volleyball-M-16). Kimmel (2008) described a peer culture where adolescent and young men continuously monitor each other's masculinity; this expression points to the worry of being labelled as 'not masculine' potentially feeding a compensatory display of toughness. Coach narratives suggest that this display can also be related to adult models. An experienced water polo coach recounts how a coach trying to instil toughness into a team can unintentionally feed peer hierarchy: 'Because your behaviours automatically become a model for them. They too become big fish eating small fish in the locker room.' (TR-Coach-FocusGroup2).

The regime does not appear limited only to male athletes. A girl basketball athlete describes the test in her team as 'So there's a kind of test here; if you show your teeth it passes, if you can't they pile on.' (TR-Athlete2-Basketball-F-16), while a basketball coach notices that the 'on the field you're an athlete, outside you're a princess' instruction she gave girl athletes, together with the toughness spilling onto the field, can turn into another label: 'They can be told you're like a man and experience bullying too.' (TR-Coach-FocusGroup2). Similar patterns are also seen in partner-country data. In the Portuguese focus group of girl football players, the resilience culture is on one hand criticised while on the other being normalised as 'faz parte' (it's part of it) (PT-ATHLETE-01). In Slovenia two



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athletes note that 'the most insecure ones push the hardest' (SLO-ATHLETE-17, SLO-ATHLETE-21), and a Croatian handball coach interprets the sentence 'We all went through this' as a warning sign in itself (HR-COACH-11).

The same mechanism can also operate on the class axis. A basketball athlete recounts that exclusion most often occurs without even a word as 'I mean sometimes they don't even exclude me, I withdraw myself, because my money doesn't stretch to that world.' and also describes the internal trace of this experience: 'It doesn't just crush you from outside, it also diminishes you in your own eyes.' (TR-Athlete17-Basketball-M-17). A taekwondo athlete expresses how an externally arriving word can over time turn into an internal voice as 'Even if no one says anything, what they said continues in my head.' (TR-Athlete16-Taekwondo-F-15). In these narratives the externally arriving criterion is internalised and its application is partially transferred to the victim. T3 and T6 intersect at this point; self-surveillance, at least in these narratives, can operate in similar ways on both the gender and class axes.

One of the targets of the finding in the protection field is approaches based on positive reinforcement. Komaki and Tuakli-Wosornu (2021) advocated building a protection culture in sport through positive reinforcement rather than punitive control and argued that reward mechanisms may be more effective for behaviour change. This research's data does not contradict this proposition, but adds a thought-provoking observation to it: in some sports environments the reward mechanism may already be operating; it may just be reinforcing an undesired behaviour, namely the athlete giving up on themselves. One of the first steps of a protection design based on positive reinforcement may therefore be, before adding new rewards, to make visible what the current reward structure reinforces.

The consequence of the finding from an evaluation perspective can also be derived from here: when a decrease in bullying indicators is used alone as a success criterion it can be misleading. An athlete's no longer being targeted may show not that the environment has improved but that the athlete has adapted to the environment. The volleyball athlete defines this adaptation as a danger for themselves and questions its long-term sustainability: 'At some point fatigue can break the resistance.' (TR-Athlete12-Volleyball-M-16). This reading gains further importance when thought together with the sample's structure. The athletes interviewed are athletes who continue in sport; some of those who could not or didn't want to adapt to the environment's expectations may have left sport without entering the sample. A judo athlete's observation explicitly voices this selectivity: 'Because enduring gives pride but we lose the ones who can't endure and those we lose are always the most vulnerable,



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the ones most in need of support.' (TR-Athlete11-Judo-F-16). Lafferty, Wakefield and Brown (2017) questioned the widespread justification that hazing practices contribute to team cohesion; Vella and colleagues (2022), meanwhile, conceptualise psychological safety as an environment in which the athlete can take interpersonal risks. Thought together with these frameworks, it may be useful for protection evaluations to monitor not only incident counts but also the athlete's capacity to remain themselves, perceived psychological safety, and the reasons for leaving stated by those who leave the club (Owusu-Sekyere et al., 2022).

4.5. Fourth Axis: Cost Asymmetry, the Bystander's Position, and Moral Courage

4.5.1. Unequal Reporting Capacity

The fourth axis concerns the design of reporting mechanisms and contains some of the most directly policy-relevant results of the research. Data suggests that reporting capacity is not equally distributed among athletes and that in the narratives as the need for protection increases so may the cost of reporting. A basketball athlete playing on a scholarship constructs this relationship from their own position: 'So the system is set up in such a way that the most crushed one speaks least, because they're the one with the most to lose.' (TR-Athlete17-Basketball-M-17). A swimming athlete recounts the same asymmetry through belonging: 'They make me feel like a guest, a guest in my own sport. Guests can't complain either...' (TR-Athlete7-Swimming-F-16). In both narratives what prevents reporting is not so much not knowing how to report but the vulnerability of the reporting person's position.

This finding invites questioning of an established assumption in the protection field. The accessibility of reporting mechanisms is most often evaluated through physical and cognitive access: is there a channel, does the athlete know the channel, have they learned to use it? This research's data points to the fact that relational and economic dependency can also be decisive in addition to these questions. In a portion of the narratives examined, athletes' not making a report appears related not so much to not knowing the options as to having evaluated and eliminated the options one by one. A water polo athlete predicts the consequence of going to the coach as 'If I told the coach I'd be a snitch' and summarises the total outcome of this evaluation as 'So I stayed quiet, I stayed quiet mostly for four years.' (TR-Athlete5-Waterpolo-M-17). A volleyball athlete describes this situation as a double trap: 'So they both crush you and prevent you from telling.' (TR-Athlete12-Volleyball-M-16). The prevalence survey also indicates that this calculation may be prominent in the Turkish sample: in Türkiye, 70.5% of those reporting a personal experience stated they told no one or tried to handle it alone; the belief that the complaint would not produce results or that they would not be believed



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(49.3%), fear of the situation worsening or retaliation (26.9%), and fear of being labelled a 'snitch' or excluded (23.2%) stood out among non-reporting reasons.

In the narratives it is also seen that the cost calculation can be reinforced by institutional responses. Responses conveyed in situations where reporting was considered or made — 'sort it out among yourselves', 'hit back a bit' — return responsibility to the relationship where the power imbalance exists. A football athlete explains their reason for not reporting as 'Because if I told them the coach would say "sort it out among yourselves" and move on, and I'd become even more of a target.' (TR-Athlete1-Football-M-17), while a basketball athlete conveys the response they received to a report they made to the coach: 'Once I told the coach that a senior hit me, the coach said "hit back a bit, stop crying like a girl".' (TR-Athlete2-Basketball-F-16). A response a volleyball athlete conveys combines two naturalisations — developmental and gender-based: 'But instead of intervening they said "Sort it out among yourselves, you're boys".' (TR-Athlete12-Volleyball-M-16). Fortier, Parent and Lessard (2020), while discussing the 'wall of silence' surrounding child abuse in sport, drew attention to a similar chain — reporting, the adult's rejection, and subsequent silence. Stirling and Kerr (2009) identified a dependency pattern in how athletes who experienced abuse perceived the coach-athlete relationship; this research's data suggests that a similar pattern can operate in the context of peer bullying and in some cases together with economic dependency. Tak, Kim and Rhind (2024), while discussing forms of non-use of safe sport reporting systems, draw attention to these kinds of contextual conditions.

The limitedness of exit options can also carry this dependency to a structural dimension. A volleyball coach recounts the difficulty of playing at another club during the season for an athlete expelled from the club for violating club rules: 'If you're unattached what will you do, if you're expelled from the club what will you do? Will you sleep on the street?'; a karate coach conveys that the same rule can operate differently for successful athletes: 'If I'm successful nothing can be done to me they say.' (TR-Coach-FocusGroup1). The two expressions together suggest that the same institutional arrangement may be silencing for a low-status athlete while remaining relatively ineffective for a high-status athlete. Partner-country data shows that the cost calculation is described in similar ways in different contexts. Several Croatian athletes note that 'the social cost of speaking up' can exceed the issue itself (HR-ATHLETE-16, HR-ATHLETE-20), a Slovenian athlete relates this to the discipline's selection structure (SLO-ATHLETE-03), another says the 'snitch' label is 'sometimes stronger even than the fear of bullying' (SLO-ATHLETE-02). A Croatian coach also thinks that equating complaining with weakness is related to many incidents going unreported (HR-COACH-06). By contrast, the noticeably



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lower rate of not telling anyone in the Slovenian sample (28.3%) and the higher rate of reporting to a coach or club official (18.5%) indicate that the reporting climate can vary by country and club context; however the reasons for this difference cannot be derived from descriptive data.

4.5.2. The Bystander's Position: Different Sources of Silence

Cost asymmetry shapes not only the victim's but also the decision of those who witness the incident. In the prevalence survey, more than half of participants (52.7%) reported witnessing at least one of the behaviours examined; witnessing appears as a sports experience as widespread as the experience itself. The bullying literature addresses the bystander as one of the central subjects of the phenomenon: Salmivalli (2010) showed that bullying is sustained through the role distribution within the group — initiator, assistant, reinforcer, outsider, and defender; Gini, Thornberg and Pozzoli (2020) and Sjögren and colleagues (2021) revealed the relationship between individual and collective moral disengagement and bystander behaviour. Rest's (1984) model of moral behaviour also serves as a reminder that there can be a breakpoint in each of the links between morally perceiving a situation, judging what is right, prioritising it, and taking action. This research's data suggests that bystander silence cannot be reduced to a single cause and that different sources may require different interventions.

A taekwondo athlete's recounting of a first-day ritual at their old club shows this diversity in a single scene: 'The seniors were laughing. People my age stayed quiet. The coach was already ignoring it.' The sources of silence also diverge in the athlete's narrative: for seniors this practice is a tradition, for peers it is a fear ('if I get involved it'll be my turn next'), and for the coach it is a method ('The coach already thought this was a good thing, like a "test"'). The athlete evaluates this retrospectively: 'That harm wasn't only done by those who did it, those who watched and stayed quiet were also part of it.' (TR-Athlete16-Taekwondo-F-15). Salmivalli's (2010) role model classifies bystanders by their behaviours; this narrative, meanwhile, shows that the same behaviour (staying quiet) can be fed from different motivations. From a prevention perspective this distinction is important: silence fed from tradition, silence fed from fear, and silence adopted as a method may not be changeable with the same message.

The silence of peer bystanders is in the narratives most often explained with fear rather than indifference. A basketball athlete voices both the justification for joining in the mockery and the discomfort it left in them together:



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'If I mix in with those saying it, at least in that moment I'm safe. I use it as a kind of shield. This is what I'm most upset about — we may not be bad people but we do bad things purely out of fear.'

— **TR-Athlete2-Basketball-F-16**

Reading this expression through Rest's (1984) model, it evokes a situation where moral awareness and judgement are intact but a breakpoint occurs in the link of taking action. The athlete is not renaming or legitimising their behaviour; on the contrary they acknowledge participating through fear in a behaviour they know is wrong. In this respect the narrative suggests that the reinforcer role may arise not always from hostility but also from self-protection (Gini et al., 2020). The same athlete also notices that silence can also operate as a form of pluralistic ignorance: 'It turned out everyone was uncomfortable like me but everyone was waiting for the first person to write. Once one person speaks the wall cracks.' (TR-Athlete2-Basketball-F-16). A football athlete also makes a similar observation: 'I mean many want to break it, but no one has the courage to throw the first stone.' (TR-Athlete1-Football-M-17). These narratives are consistent with findings showing that defender behaviour may be related to the expectation that others will also provide support (Jungert, Piroddi & Thornberg, 2016). Another source of bystander silence may be the position itself. A volleyball athlete at the centre of the team, looking back, says 'When you're in the upper group you can't fully see what's happening below.' and relates their own silence to responsibility: 'Because you're there and if you stay quiet, you're not outside what's happening.' (TR-Athlete4-Volleyball-F-17).

The bystander role is also visible in a narrative from the perpetrator position. A swimming athlete, while recounting having been the person who started mockeries directed at peers, also distinguishes the positions of different members of the group and describes the outsiders as: 'Then there were two kids looking at their phones who didn't get involved. They didn't say anything but didn't stop it either.' The protection provided by the group is also part of the narrative: 'If I did it alone it'd all be on me, when ten people do it no one is fully guilty. You say "I only laughed", you save yourself.' The same athlete also shares their own estimate of the possible effect of a single objection: 'If one person said "enough" we'd definitely have stopped, because it would have taken the wind out of the sails.' (TR-Athlete10-Swimming-M-16). These expressions evoke Bandura's (1991) mechanism of diffusion of responsibility and Sjögren and colleagues' (2021) findings on collective moral disengagement. However, the last expression should be read not as evidence of effectiveness but as an estimate made from the perpetrator's own perspective; nevertheless it is noteworthy in suggesting that the justification for bystander intervention can be grounded not only in a moral call but also in a group dynamic recognised by the perpetrator themselves. It is also seen in the same narrative that consent is read from the absence of reaction: 'If they objected we'd have maybe let it go. But they weren't



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objecting.' This expression shows how the forced laughter victims describe in T1 can be read by the perpetrator as approval.

The bystander position is not specific only to peers; narratives show that coaches can also be bystanders and in some cases can effectively participate in exclusion. A karate coach recounts a process they witnessed during their sporting period: a group of five girls decided to exclude a friend, and the head coach 'did not help the girl at all. On top of that they also stopped pairing with the girl.' The only person who paired with the excluded athlete is the narrator themselves; when they left the club, the process ended with the athlete's departure too: 'And without the coach intervening in any way, the girl's psychology was very badly affected and she also made the decision to leave the club.' (TR-Coach-FocusGroup1). In this narrative the coach appears not so much as Salmivalli's (2010) outsider bystander but as an actor who reinforces exclusion through pairing decisions. The presence of a single peer defender provided meaningful protection for the athlete, but without structural support this protection could not be sustained. The same coach also voices the limits of the assistant coach position: 'when the head coach is permitting certain things you don't have much authority anyway' (TR-Coach-FocusGroup1).

A similar authority limit also appears in the second focus group. A basketball coach, while working as assistant coach in a team, observed that the head coach's double standard in responding to mistakes fed peers' pressure, spoke with the head coach, but received no response: 'The coach hemmed and hawed. Said nothing, did nothing. It continued, allowed them to be bullied. And there was nothing I could do.' The athlete eventually left the discipline (TR-Coach-FocusGroup2; for details see T4). The same coach also describes how behaviour the adult leaves without consequence can multiply among peers: 'The others see that when that kid does it nothing happens to them, it gets a punishment. It's treated as normal.' and 'Or they find a place for themselves next to the one doing the bullying. I'll also do it, becoming next to them.' (TR-Coach-FocusGroup2). This observation suggests that Salmivalli's (2010) assistant and reinforcer roles may be related to adult non-response. The opposite direction of a norm signal is also possible: a volleyball coach thinks that when they show athletes that the team is being watched by them, exclusionary behaviours decrease: 'Since they also see that we're observing and examining them, they also can't go down that path.' (TR-Coach-FocusGroup1). Verhelle, Vertommen and Peters (2022) examined the determinants of coaches' positive bystander intervention and drew attention to the fact that intervention is related to perceived competence and surrounding norms as well as attitudes; this research's coach narratives also point to intervention capacity being possibly limited by position within the hierarchy.



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Parent narratives suggest that the bystander position can also be taught within the family. A basketball father summarises the answer he gives his son in the face of social harm towards another child as 'This is my standard answer: don't get involved' and grounds the justification for silence in the possible cost of reporting: "'So-and-so's father complained" they'll say, my son will pay the price for this.' (TR-Parent1-Basketball-Father-Istanbul). By contrast, a volleyball father recounts that rather than blaming his daughter for staying silent in the face of mockery towards a teammate, he asked her what she would like to do now and that his daughter sent her friend a support message the next day (TR-Parent5-Volleyball-Father-Izmir). The two narratives together suggest that bystander-based interventions may remain limited if designed without taking into account the 'don't get involved' teaching from the family, and that the parent component can be addressed as a complement to the child component. Evaluated together, these findings can be read as a multilayered structure where bystander silence is sustained at the peer, coach, assistant coach, and parent levels through similar calculations (see 4.8).

Partner-country data shows that bystander silence is described in similar ways in different contexts too. A Croatian coach notes that the team can be split into three groups: 'a group saying it was only a joke, a group that knows it was wrong but stays quiet, and maybe one or two athletes who might defend the excluded player' (HR-COACH-09). A portion of Croatian athletes weigh the reporting decision around the question of whether staying quiet protects the team or only the source of the problem (HR-ATHLETE-04, HR-ATHLETE-08, HR-ATHLETE-12). In Slovenia, an athlete notes they tense up when a teammate is being picked on 'because they don't want to be next' (SLO-ATHLETE-01), another admits they witnessed digital exclusion and said nothing and 'doesn't feel proud about that' (SLO-ATHLETE-03). A Slovenian coach recounts experiencing the same dilemma from the adult position and emphasises that staying quiet 'would mean the younger one faces that intensity alone' (SLO-COACH-01). The Portuguese coach focus group also notes that alongside those who defend the victim there are those who approach the perpetrator 'making the situation even worse' (PT-COACH-FG).

4.5.3. Moral Courage: Crossing the Threshold and Its Cost

The data also contains narratives where bystander silence is broken, and these narratives offer valuable clues about how moral courage can emerge in sport. Moral courage is defined in the literature as taking action for a moral principle despite possible social or personal costs; the key element distinguishing it from other prosocial behaviours is also the presence of this cost (Osswald et al., 2010; Sekerka, Bagozzi & Charnigo, 2009). A recent study examining the relationship between moral

courage and bystander behaviour in youth sport also draws attention to the relationship between moral courage and defender behaviour (Gözmen Elmas, Elmas & Aşcı, 2026).

A judo athlete recounts in detail the brief hesitation before stepping in during a moment when a teammate's body was being mocked. Their first reaction is to withdraw: 'A voice inside said "don't get involved, it's not your problem, you'll get yourself into trouble".' What crosses the threshold is recalling their own past experience: 'I remembered that helplessness when people were mocking my body.' The athlete describes the moment as 'It was as if fear and courage clashed and courage won.' and formulates the conclusion drawn from the experience: 'Staying quiet is also taking a side, I learned that on that day.' (TR-Athlete11-Judo-F-16). In a volleyball athlete's narrative the mechanism that crosses the threshold is different. The athlete, in a situation where a teammate's photo was being mocked in a group, first questioned their own position ('"I'm someone whose word carries weight here, why am I staying quiet?" I thought.') and then put themselves in the target's place: '"What if that photo were my photo and everyone stayed quiet?"' They describe their experience after the intervention as 'Because for the first time I'd used my power not for myself but for someone else.' and reaches a similar conclusion: 'Staying quiet is also taking a side in my view.' (TR-Athlete4-Volleyball-F-17).

Two narratives suggest that moral courage may be more related to processes operating in a specific moment than to a personality trait; Baumert and colleagues' (2024) findings on personality processes in everyday moral courage can also be read in this direction. In the first narrative, what crosses the threshold is the person's own exclusion memory, in the second it is putting oneself in the target's place. This distinction may be useful from a prevention perspective: beyond the 'be brave' call, narrative-based materials that remind athletes of their own experiences and help concretise another's position may contribute to lowering the threshold before moral courage. However, it should not be overlooked that both narratives come from athletes in relatively sheltered positions. The volleyball athlete is in a central and high-status position in the team; as they themselves note 'But when you're in the upper group you sometimes also have the power to change the atmosphere.' (TR-Athlete4-Volleyball-F-17). A basketball athlete also conveys that when a senior in their team whose word carried weight said 'delete those videos', no one could object (TR-Athlete2-Basketball-F-16). These narratives suggest that preparing high-status athletes for the defender role may be an effective intervention point from a prevention perspective, while also serving as a reminder that the call for moral courage cannot be directed equally at everyone.



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The presence of the cost is clearly visible in the narratives. The judo athlete conveys that after their intervention they were faced with 'did you become a hero' and 'snitch' reactions and also develops their own proposed solution: 'The coach must protect the one who doesn't stay quiet, otherwise no one speaks.' (TR-Athlete11-Judo-F-16). Jungert and colleagues (2016) showed that defensive motivations are related to the quality of the teacher-student relationship; this research's data suggests that in the sport context the cost for the defender may also be related to squad, playing time, and scholarship security. Moral courage in this context can be read not only as a personality trait but also as a risk calculated and taken. A taekwondo athlete, meanwhile, distinguishes the boundary of individual courage and where responsibility lies: 'But I can only choose not to do it myself; the coach can end all of them at once if they want. That's why I think the main responsibility lies with them. They can break the chain.' (TR-Athlete16-Taekwondo-F-15). This expression suggests that expecting moral courage from children should not replace the adult's responsibility to establish rules and protect.

A rarely seen form of moral courage in the data is a person acknowledging their own perpetration. A judo athlete recounts that after becoming senior they repeated what was done to them with a rookie and then decided to apologise; they also voice the unwritten rule in front of this decision: 'Because a senior doesn't apologise to a rookie, it would break the order.' (TR-Athlete3-Judo-M-18). Kerschner and Allan's (2025) video-based training work aimed at preventing hazing shows that while an increase in intervention intention can be achieved, the transformation of behaviour change and group norm requires additional support; this narrative suggests that the opportunity to break the cycle may be concentrated particularly in the position of senior athletes. A Portuguese sample athlete's description of bystander intervention as a graduated decision — first warning a friend, then escalating to the coach or assistant coach if the behaviour recurs — also shows that moral courage can be constructed not always as a single and heroic moment but as a stepped process.

4.5.4. Independence and Counter-Examples

This axis is also related to international policy texts. The International Olympic Committee's consensus statement on interpersonal violence and safeguarding (Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2024) identifies independent and accessible reporting mechanisms as one of the fundamental components. This research's data helps concretise what the 'independence' criterion can mean in practice. From the perspective of the narratives, independence means beyond being a separate box in the institutional diagram, the reporting addressee not having decision authority over the athlete's sporting and material future. For an athlete whose scholarship or chances of playing are dependent on the coach's decision, a channel tied to the coach may not be perceived as effectively independent. Tuakli-Wosornu and

Kirby (2022) propose reconfiguring protection to centre athlete rights and positioning the athlete not only as protected but as a rights-holding subject. This research's data points to one of the concrete obstacles in front of this positioning: in an important portion of the narratives examined, the athlete correctly identifies the violation but finds the cost of exercising their right heavier than the violation itself. The operationalisation of the rights-based approach may therefore require not only declaring rights but also reducing the cost of exercising them.

Counter-examples in the data point to the fact that this asymmetry can be eased through design. In the three-channel system conveyed by a manager working in volleyball and handball, the deliberate choice of the protection officer from outside the coach directly responds to the dependency problem athletes describe: 'this person is not a coach, someone who is deliberately not a coach was chosen' (TR-Manager3-Volleyball/Handball-F-Istanbul). The possibility of anonymous reporting targets the label risk, while the box placed in the locker room corridor and the online form target the access problem. The positive results the manager conveys are based on participant declaration and therefore evaluated not as evidence of impact but as an important counter-example showing that the reporting problem may be addressable through design rather than being a cultural fate. Partner-country data voices the same need from different positions. In Slovenia, an athlete notes that when the problem concerns the coach 'there's no independent route' (SLO-ATHLETE-01), a coach thinks 'a neutral person, not involved in selection decisions, that athletes can go to could significantly reduce the fear of speaking up' (SLO-COACH-06), and a manager notes that in small clubs 'the same few adults wear every hat' (SLO-MANAGER-01). A Croatian manager emphasises that trust is important but 'when the issue involves the coach's favourite player a parent still needs a clear path' (HR-MANAGER-05).

4.6. Integrative Model: The Production Chain of Invisibility

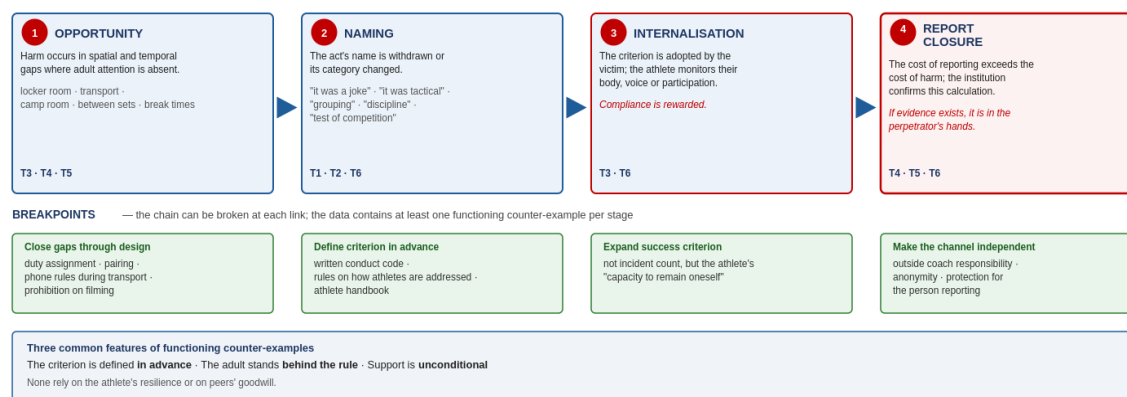
When the four axes above are brought together, a four-stage analytic chain can be proposed from the data. The model is aimed not so much at explaining how harm occurs as at understanding how it can remain institutionally invisible after it occurs. The chain is presented not as a sequence necessarily followed in every case but as an interpretive framework derived from narratives in which stages can facilitate each other. In some cases stages can be skipped or intertwined: digital content can turn directly into a pressure instrument without passing through the naming stage, while in class exclusion the internalisation stage can be decisive while the opportunity stage is almost invisible.



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The Production Chain of Invisibility

A four-stage model explaining how harm is institutionally dismissed after it occurs



At no stage of the chain is the athlete uninformed: they know where they are, can voice the criterion, notice their own compliance, and weigh the cost of reporting.

What the athlete lacks is not information but authority and guarantee.

Figure 1. The production chain of invisibility: a four-stage model explaining the institutional dismissal of harm, the breakpoints of each stage, and the common features of functioning counter-examples.

The model's stages, foundations, and possible intervention points are detailed below.

Table 2. The production chain of invisibility: four stages, their foundations, and intervention points.

Stage	Functioning	Key foundation	Breakpoint
1. Opportunity	Harm occurs in spatial and temporal gaps where adult attention is absent: locker room, transport, camp room, between sets, break times.	T3, T4, T5	Closing gaps through design (duty assignment, pairing, phone rules during transport, prohibition on filming)
2. Naming	The act's name is withdrawn or its category changed: 'it was a joke', 'it was tactical', 'grouping', 'discipline', 'test of competition'.	T1, T2, T6	Defining the criterion before the incident and in writing
3. Internalisation	The criterion is adopted by the victim; the athlete monitors their body, voice or participation themselves. Compliance is rewarded.	T3, T6	Expanding the success criterion from incident count to 'capacity to remain oneself'

Stage	Functioning	Key foundation	Breakpoint
4. Report Closure	The cost of reporting exceeds the cost of harm; the institution confirms this calculation. If evidence exists, it is in the perpetrator's hands.	T4, T5, T6	Independent channel, anonymity, guarantee for the reporter, transfer of evidence to victim

Two features of the model can be emphasised. First, the chain appears breakable at different links; the data presents at least one functioning counter-example for each stage. The filming prohibition targets the first stage, the address rule ('no one's appearance is discussed here, everyone is called by name') the second, rules about appearance equality the third, and the protection officer chosen from outside the coach the fourth. Second, there are three features these counter-examples share: the criterion is defined in advance, the adult stands behind the rule, and support is given without expectation of return. These three features are evaluated as one of the concrete contributions the research can offer to prevention work and are reflected in the curriculum proposal framework (see Section 6 (Curriculum)).

The model also opens for questioning a common assumption regarding athletes' position. In many of the narratives examined, athletes are aware of the situation at different stages of the chain: they know where harm occurs, can voice the criterion, notice their own compliance, and weigh the cost of reporting. In these narratives the problem appears not so much as an information deficit as a deficit of authority and guarantee. This observation does not apply to every athlete; some athletes state they could only name the harm years later (see 4.2). Nevertheless the data points to the importance of knowledge-based prevention work being designed together with arrangements that provide athletes with a domain of authority and guarantee in which they can use the knowledge; this direction also overlaps with rights-based and athlete-centred safeguarding approaches (Owusu-Sekyere, Rhind & Hills, 2022; Tuakli-Wosornu & Kirby, 2022).

Counter-examples acquire separate meaning when read together with athletes' own interpretations of the relationship between environment and child. The taekwondo athlete who changed clubs says, while comparing the two environments, 'The children are the same, you see. The rule is different.' (TR-Athlete16-Taekwondo-F-15), while a karate athlete reaches a similar conclusion: 'So actually even a good kid can become a bully in a bad environment and conversely even a kid who might be a bully stays well-behaved in a good environment.' (TR-Athlete6-Karate-M-15). Another athlete from the same discipline emphasises that this contrast requires effort: 'So actually bad traditions carry on



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by themselves, good traditions are sustained by someone's effort.' (TR-Athlete14-Karate-F-14). These expressions are consistent with ecological approaches according to which bullying can be shaped not only by individual characteristics but also by the environment's rules and adults' stances (Roberts, Sojo & Grant, 2020; Rhind et al., 2017).

The coach's place in this environment is described in similar ways in athlete and coach narratives. A volleyball athlete defines the coach's effect: 'Because the coach doesn't just teach the game, they also determine what is acceptable in the team. When they don't speak out against it, they've actually given permission for those behaviours.' (TR-Athlete12-Volleyball-M-16). A taekwondo athlete observed that a senior athlete at their old club passed on the harsh treatment they received from the coach to those younger: 'So they'd get it from above and do it below.' and 'I think this thing starts from the very top — however the coach is, the club becomes that too.' (TR-Athlete16-Taekwondo-F-15). Coaches too acknowledge the same relationship from their own positions. While the volleyball coach says 'Because actually, without realising it we're giving them a role model.', the karate coach draws attention to the weight of a single word: 'I mean a single sentence that comes out of the coach's mouth I think is very important here.' (TR-Coach-FocusGroup1). Bandura's (2016) framework on observational learning through social modelling provides a useful foundation for explaining how coach behaviour can be reflected in peer relations. A swimming athlete's expectation suggests that this effect can also operate in a protective direction: 'If just once, only once, they'd said "nobody's mocked for their origin here, that's my rule" and stood behind it, my swimming life would have changed.' (TR-Athlete7-Swimming-F-16).

A limitation of the counter-examples should also be emphasised: an important portion of them appear dependent on a single adult's personal stance. The karate athlete, while attributing their club's good climate to their coach's effort, also notices this dependency: 'I mean without sensei maybe our dojo would also be like those places I've heard of.' (TR-Athlete14-Karate-F-14). Another taekwondo athlete summarises their experience as 'My luck was falling into a good club, a decent person's hands.' (TR-Athlete8-Taekwondo-M-17), while the athlete who changed clubs conveys that even in a good environment procedure can remain incomplete: '"Don't do these things" was said. But if someone does, what will happen, who will we tell, how will it be resolved, that part wasn't discussed.' (TR-Athlete16-Taekwondo-F-15). These narratives point to the importance of good practices being taken out of person-dependency and transformed into written rules, defined responsibilities, and institutional support structures (Rhind & Owusu-Sekyere, 2020). Similar institutional arrangements are also conveyed in partner-country data: in Slovenia a coach notes that digital rules established at



the start of the season worked (SLO-COACH-09), in Portugal a participant managing a kickboxing club conveys they explicitly prohibited hazing ('Não há praxe, é proibido') and gave the code of conduct to families upon entering the club (PT-MANAGER-03), and in Croatia a manager emphasises that an open application pathway needs to complement relationships based on personal trust (HR-MANAGER-05).

4.7. Dialogue with the Literature: Overlaps, Divergences, and Inter-Country Reading

This section addresses the research's relationship with the literature at three levels. First the points where findings overlap with established literature, then the points where they diverge from or propose to extend the literature, and finally the counterparts in partner-country data of patterns built from Turkish data are discussed. The joint presentation of overlaps and divergences aims to make visible to what extent the findings are consistent with established knowledge and at what points they generate new questions.

4.7.1. Findings Overlapping with the Literature

The rite-of-passage nature of hazing: The concepts of rite of passage and liminality developed by Van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1969) find clear counterparts in the data. The immersion ritual called 'baptism' recounted by the water polo athlete, the test at the back of the bus recounted by the football athlete, and the 'rookie' period described by the judo-wrestling manager can be read as bodily and symbolic forms of the threshold position. Kirby and Wintrup (2002) and Fogel and Quinlan (2021) showed that these rituals can open up to bodily and sexual violation; in the data one of the clearest examples in this direction is the repeatedly occurring swimsuit-pulling 'joke' underwater recounted by the water polo athlete. Elmas, Aşçı and Hacısoftaoğlu (2025) revealed that hazing in homosocial team sports operates on the axes of masculinities and liminality; this research's T2 and T3 findings suggest that a similar structure can also be seen in different disciplines and a mixed sample. A clue regarding the continuity of the cycle comes from a narrative in the perpetrator position: 'The one who waited their turn actually comes to the front even more eagerly.' (TR-Athlete10-Swimming-M-16). Partner-country data also conveys similar rituals: while Portuguese athletes playing football defend the corridor ritual (túnel) and the birthday slap on the back of the neck (cachaço) with justifications of moderation and tradition (PT-ATHLETE-01, PT-ATHLETE-02), a Croatian judo coach recounts 'an unofficial testing period' where senior athletes deliberately pressure new arrivals harder in randori, and that they now monitor this practice more closely (HR-COACH-01). Another coach in the same country names this practice as 'hazing with a training pretext added' (HR-COACH-02). Johnson and

Chin (2016) showed that adventure-based orientation activities can be used as an alternative to traditional hazing, but that this transformation can ease rather than completely eliminate the ritual. The mutual embrace ritual conveyed in the Portuguese coach focus group — initially found 'silly' but eventually wanted to be sustained by athletes themselves (PT-COACH-FG) — also suggests that the problem may be more in the content of the ritual than its existence. A similar contrast is also found in Turkish data: the taekwondo athlete who changed clubs compares their first day at the old club, spent crying, with the first day at the new club, and attributes the difference to the coach's stance: 'The coach introduced me, said "look after this sibling of ours". Everyone said welcome. I wasn't afraid at all. Same thing, the first day, you know, but completely different.' (TR-Athlete16-Taekwondo-F-15).

The belonging need's ability to turn into a justification for tolerating bullying: Baumeister and Leary (1995) revealed that belonging is a fundamental human motivation. Some athletes' retrospective valorisation of the acceptance ritual in the data suggests that this motivation can make harm tolerable. A football athlete explicitly voices this contradiction: 'After getting through that night they really said "you're one of us now" and I, embarrassingly, felt proud in that moment.' The same athlete also questions the conditions of consent: 'But at that age you can't question this, you just want to get in.' (TR-Athlete1-Football-M-17). A basketball athlete also expresses a similar prioritisation as '...because at that age belonging is more important than being right.' (TR-Athlete2-Basketball-F-16). These narratives can be read alongside the promised gains discussed in 4.4: the new arrival may accept the conditions of the test in order to reach promised gains such as group identity and status (Waldron & Kowalski, 2009; Kirby & Wintrup, 2002). Cimino (2011) explained hazing as a mechanism testing new arrivals' commitment to the group; while the data overlaps with this function, it suggests that the test content can also include a silence pledge: 'Also a test. One to prove you won't snitch, won't cry.' (TR-Athlete1-Football-M-17). Van Raalte and colleagues (2007) and Lafferty and colleagues (2017) questioned the widespread justification that hazing increases team cohesion. A counter-experience related to belonging being constructable without humiliation is also in the data: the taekwondo athlete who changed clubs recounts the moment they experienced at a picnic organised by their new club where the coach 'checked the invitations so no one would be left out', saying 'Then for a moment I paused and thought, "oh, so this is what belonging is".' (TR-Athlete16-Taekwondo-F-15).

Bystander roles and moral disengagement: Salmivalli (2010) showed that bullying is sustained through the role distribution within the group. The behaviours the swimming athlete in the perpetrator



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position distinguishes while recounting a group mockery — starting the mockery, adding something to it, laughing, and remaining in the position of 'not saying anything but not stopping it either' — have been analytically classified in this study according to Salmivalli's role model; the four-role classification belongs to the researchers not the athlete. This classification shows that the diversity of behaviours the athlete recounts broadly overlaps with the role model. Bandura's (1991) advantageous comparison from the moral disengagement mechanisms is prominent in the narrative named 'protective bullying' in T1: a football athlete justifies ribbing a friend as 'So by ribbing them I'm actually taking the heavy ball off myself and lightening it.' (TR-Athlete1-Football-M-17). Gini, Thornberg and Pozzoli (2020) showed the relationship between collective moral disengagement and bystander behaviour; the data overlaps with this finding and suggests that the group's laughter behaviour can produce both a sign of approval for the perpetrator and an appearance that the harm 'isn't serious' from the victim's perspective (Hymel & Bonanno, 2014).

Overconformity to sport ethic: The positive deviance framework defined by Hughes and Coakley (1991) is visible in the data in the form of pain being presented as a pedagogical value: enduring, not complaining, and absorbing pain can be coded as a virtue. This coding is conveyed in the narratives through adult discourse as much as among athletes. A taekwondo athlete conveys a sentence their old coach frequently used — 'The coach always used to say "those who cry are weak"' — and looking back, questions the cost of enduring: 'But now I think, the more I endured the more they continued. So my enduring served them.' and 'Sometimes enduring is actually doing yourself harm.' (TR-Athlete16-Taekwondo-F-15). A water polo athlete also recounts how the same norm makes fear inexpressible: '"Be a man" they said. I heard that "be a man" sentence a lot in this sport.' and 'As if being afraid is forbidden, as if a child who's afraid isn't a child.' (TR-Athlete5-Waterpolo-M-17). Coach narratives show that this language can also be noticed by coaches. The karate coach recalls the 'No stopping, never stop, you'll always advance.' message of their own sporting period and acknowledges that such conversations can make it difficult for athletes to distinguish resilience from bullying: 'sometimes the conversations we have get to the point where resilience and bullying as you say can't be distinguished.' (TR-Coach-FocusGroup1). Stirling and Kerr (2013) and Kavanagh, Brown and Jones (2017) showed that elite athletes most often interpret emotional abuse as a normal part of sport and try to cope; Manley, Roderick and Parker (2016) discussed how silence is produced through disciplinary mechanisms at an academy. This research's data suggests that the same normalisation can also operate in peer relations and that peer bullying can remain invisible within the 'toughness of sport'. The water polo athlete's distinction is guiding at this point: 'Toughness is normal

during play but pulling someone's swimsuit or pushing them under and scaring them isn't the toughness of the game. The two are deliberately mixed up.' (TR-Athlete5-Waterpolo-M-17). Partner-country data contains expressions where the norm is both questioned and normalised: while Slovenian athletes state that toughness is acceptable 'as long as it's about effort' (SLO-ATHLETE-20, SLO-ATHLETE-24), a Croatian athlete says 'being tough is just this sport' (HR-ATHLETE-02), and a coach conveys that some parents believe 'if a child is complaining they're not strong enough for the sport' (HR-COACH-08).

Bullying's relationship to dropping out of sport: Rios, Ventura and Mateu (2022) documented the dropout experiences of bullying victims in youth sport through retrospective narratives. Vveinhardt and Fominiene (2020) drew attention to the possibility of organised sport becoming uninviting and discouraging because of bullying; Salim and Winter (2022) revealed the long-term psychological effects of maltreatment experiences in gymnastics. Studies on the relationship between the coach's interpersonal style and meeting athletes' basic psychological needs also indicate that continued participation in sport may be related to the relational climate athletes perceive (Pulido et al., 2020; Rocchi & Pelletier, 2018). This research's data overlaps with the mentioned literature while providing details about how dropout can remain invisible. A football athlete describes teammates who left the team as 'They weren't beaten, they just weren't seen.' (TR-Athlete1-Football-M-17); a volleyball athlete describes how an excluded teammate gradually disappeared through the process and how this process was named: 'Slowly erased.' and 'Then it's said "they left on their own".' (TR-Athlete4-Volleyball-F-17). The swimming athlete in the perpetrator position also says for a child who left 'They weren't even talked about for a week or so, no one asked where they were.' (TR-Athlete10-Swimming-M-16). Coach narratives also convey dropout from different positions: the excluded athlete the karate coach recounted left the club, the athlete the basketball coach recounted left the discipline completely ('And the child currently doesn't play basketball at all.'; TR-Coach-FocusGroup2). A volleyball coach thinks even a single moment can produce this outcome: 'Otherwise that momentary cracking may cause the child to maybe not be able to be kept in that team again.' (TR-Coach-FocusGroup1).

Narratives also suggest that dropout may be related more to the relational environment than to sport itself. The water polo athlete who came back from the brink of dropout says 'The thing I wanted to leave wasn't actually water polo. It was the people who wore me out.' (TR-Athlete5-Waterpolo-M-17), while another volleyball athlete constructs the same distinction as 'What wore me down wasn't volleyball, it was the masculinity pressure that got into volleyball.' (TR-Athlete12-Volleyball-M-16).



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The taekwondo athlete's experience also serves as a reminder that there can be a third option between leaving and enduring — changing the environment — but that this option is not open to everyone: 'But I was lucky, my brother took me away. Not everyone has someone to take them.' (TR-Athlete16-Taekwondo-F-15). This finding also has a methodological consequence: since the research's sample consists of athletes who continue in sport, the experiences of those who left because of bullying appear only indirectly, in narratives of their peers and coaches. A football athlete's words 'I persisted but not everyone can persist.' (TR-Athlete9-Football-F-17) serves as a reminder of this selectivity. Exit interviews with athletes leaving clubs and the systematic recording of reasons for leaving could contribute to monitoring this invisible dropout.

Field counterparts of the theoretical framework: The theoretical reading of the findings rests on three main lenses and all three find counterparts at different levels in the data. Foucauldian disciplinary power becomes prominent in the self-surveillance pattern revealed in T3: the athlete's constant monitoring of their hand movements, tone of voice, and manner of laughing on themselves suggests that surveillance can be detached from an external gaze and become embedded in the body. The volleyball athlete's expressions 'You constantly control yourself.' and 'I mean you lose your own naturalness, coach.' (TR-Athlete12-Volleyball-M-16) are among the narratives supporting this reading. This reading gains further meaning together with the recording phenomenon in T5: the possibility of filming, even when no recording is actually taken, can regulate behaviour. The karate athlete's sentence about the filming prohibition in the dojo and a climate not based on fear: 'When fear left, learning came.' (TR-Athlete14-Karate-F-14) suggests that reducing the pressure of surveillance may have a positive effect on learning.

The Bourdieusian concept of symbolic violence finds a counterpart in T6 and in the class-based form of T2. The distinguishing feature of symbolic violence is that the relation of domination can be accepted as natural by the dominated party. One of its indicators in the data is the athlete in a disadvantaged position internalising inequality as a personal debt or inadequacy; the scholarship basketball athlete recounts this situation as 'Even when I was the best player, I felt like a debtor, someone paying gratitude.' (TR-Athlete17-Basketball-M-17). An observation from an athlete in a privileged position serves as a reminder that the valid capital of the field does not consist solely of athletic success: 'But here it's not just about results.' (TR-Athlete10-Swimming-M-16). A judo athlete's observation regarding their own transformation — 'Actually I didn't defeat them, I joined them.' (TR-Athlete3-Judo-M-18) — can be read as one of the clear expressions of symbolic violence: an achievement that does not question the field's value criterion can reproduce the field.



Connell's (1995, 2005) hegemonic masculinity framework operates in the data as a criterion system not limited only to male athletes. The double bind female athletes face between 'being like a man' and 'not being strong enough' suggests that hegemonic masculinity can construct not only a hierarchy among men but a value criterion valid for all athletes. A girl football athlete explains the source of the reaction she faces as 'So they're punishing me not because I play football, but actually because I break the mould in their heads.' (TR-Athlete9-Football-F-17). Among male athletes, meanwhile, homophobic language operates in the narratives as a tool that controls masculinity independently of the target's sexual orientation. The volleyball athlete's expression 'Playing football you become a "man", playing volleyball it's as if you become "half".' (TR-Athlete12-Volleyball-M-16) suggests that even discipline choice can turn into a domain where masculinity is tested. This pattern can be read alongside Connell's (2005) concepts of subordinated and marginalised masculinities; Denison and colleagues (2020, 2023) also discussed the prevalence of homophobic language among young male athletes and the possibilities of educational interventions directed at this language. Klim (2015) showed how hegemonic masculinity can sustain sexual orientation-based exclusion in the sport domain; the point to be emphasised in this research is that the stigma can operate not based on information about the person's identity but through the monitoring of masculinity performance. Messner (1990) argued that sport can turn the body into an instrument; this research's data points to one of the possible costs of this transformation as emotions becoming inexpressible.

These three lenses can also be associated with the model's four stages. The opportunity stage appears more closely related to spatial and temporal unsupervision, the naming stage to symbolic violence, the internalisation stage to disciplinary power, and the report closure stage to structural dependency. This matching is not proposing a definitive correspondence but rather pointing to the possibility that the four mechanisms can be thought of not separately but as a chain that feeds each other.

4.7.2. Points of Divergence and Extension

The assumption that the digital environment can reverse power relations: One of the common theses in the cyberbullying literature is that the digital environment, due to possibilities of anonymity and distance, may also give attacking opportunities to those who are powerless in face-to-face environments and thus partially reverse established hierarchies (Baştürk Akca & Sayımer, 2017; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). This research's data meets the thesis in a form that varies by platform type. In Turkish narratives relating to closed team groups, the hierarchy appears largely sustained. A judo athlete, while recounting that the person targeting them on the mat is the same person in the group, says 'The digital doesn't make a different person of anyone, it didn't of them either, it just gave them



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a new weapon, that's all.' (TR-Athlete11-Judo-F-16), while a taekwondo athlete sees a similar continuity: 'So whoever they're crushing on the mat they're also crushing on WhatsApp, the same oppression continues there too.' (TR-Athlete8-Taekwondo-M-17). The scholarship basketball athlete thinks the type of power that is decisive changes in digital: 'On the field talent counts, in digital money counts.' (TR-Athlete17-Basketball-M-17). In these narratives digital appears as a medium that adds a new tool to the existing hierarchy. On open platforms, meanwhile, the picture differs: messages from anonymous accounts make the perpetrator's identity uncertain and can extend the harm domain outside the team. A volleyball athlete says regarding anonymous messages 'Writing without a name what you can't say to someone's face isn't hard.' (TR-Athlete12-Volleyball-M-16). Partner-country data, meanwhile, contains expressions somewhat closer to the thesis: several Croatian and Slovenian athletes note that someone quiet on the field can 'suddenly become very effective online' and that this can change who holds power in the group (HR-ATHLETE-04; similar expressions HR-ATHLETE-03, HR-ATHLETE-07, SLO-ATHLETE-01, SLO-ATHLETE-03). A Portuguese captain, meanwhile, interprets the same situation as a courage deficit: some players resort to messages 'because they don't have the courage to speak in front of the person' (PT-ATHLETE-02). The difference between the two data sets may be related to the form of interview questions, discipline distribution, or the relatively short and formulaic nature of partner-country responses. The most defensible reading from a discussion perspective is one sensitive to platform type: that the existing hierarchy can continue in closed team groups, while power relations can be redistributed on open platforms and in some contexts. Kniffin and Palacio (2018) drew attention to the continuity between competitive trash talk and trolling; this research's Turkish data suggests that this continuity can also be visible in closed groups in the form of continuity of perpetrator identity.

Economic position being addressed only as an access problem: The literature addresses class predominantly within the framework of inequalities in access to sport participation; in bullying discussions, meanwhile, the body, gender, sexual orientation, and ethnic origin axes come to the fore. Economic disadvantage most often appears as a contextual or risk variable (e.g. Lee et al., 2025). Alexander and Meter (2025) systematically compiled the literature on bullying and hazing among teammates and presented research agenda suggestions. This research's T6 finding suggests that economic position can be added to the mentioned agenda as a dimension that intersects other bullying axes. As defined in T6, class in these narratives emerges not so much as an independent axis as an intersection that crosses the deniability in T1, the seniority relationship in T2, the reporting cost in T4, and digital power in T5: scholarship status can become a stigma, economic difference can



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sometimes become an area of immunity, and participation cost can turn into self-withdrawal. Coach narratives show that this intersection can also carry over to relations among adults; a basketball coach conveys that a fee-paying parent said for a scholarship athlete 'My child will stay here. That athlete, the scholarship athlete. I don't want them on the team.' (TR-Coach-FocusGroup2). Partner-country narratives about class differentiation are limited. A Croatian coach notes that a player without expensive equipment or coming from a small town may face different treatment and that if the team is not educated these differences can turn into 'nicknames or material for exclusion' (HR-COACH-10), and a parent conveys that other parents 'didn't want to be the first person to call this bullying' in the face of jokes about a child's shoes and family circumstances (HR-PARENT-02). No narrative was encountered on this axis in Slovenian and Portuguese data; this absence should be interpreted not as the phenomenon not existing in these contexts but as possibly not being visible due to question formats and the brevity of responses.

The accessibility criterion of reporting mechanisms: Protection standards and their evaluations count the existence and awareness of reporting channels among basic criteria (Rhind & Owusu-Sekyere, 2020; Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2024). Recent studies draw attention to the fact that the existence of a channel does not guarantee use. Tak, Kim and Rhind (2024) discuss forms of non-use and misuse of safe sport reporting systems alongside forms of proper use, together with contextual conditions; Krieger and Parks Pieper (2023) address how athletes perceive governance problems related to abuse and how trust in institutions can affect reporting. Sølvsberg and colleagues (2023) drew attention to the fact that the level of disclosure and awareness of reporting possibilities among young athletes regarding sexual harassment and abuse experiences may remain limited, and a recent prevalence study conducted in Türkiye indicated that harassment and abuse experiences in sport need to be addressed together with perpetrators and gender differences (Öztürk et al., 2026a). Studies examining protection policies at international federation level (Fletcher, 2025) and the performative compliance discussion (Gomez & Schoch, 2026) also bring up the question of whether the existence of policy texts can alone guarantee accessibility in practice. Gurgis and Kerr (2021) drew attention to the obstacles sports managers encounter while advancing safe sport.

This research's data proposes adding a dimension to the mentioned discussion: the existence and awareness of the channel appear necessary but not sufficient; what may be decisive for athletes is the dependency relationship between the channel's addressee and the athlete. In the Turkish sample, the high rate of telling no one (70.5%) and the standout of the belief that no result will be achieved (49.3%) among non-reporting reasons can be read together with trust and dependency problems in

qualitative narratives. The same problem may also be valid not only for athletes but also for adults. A basketball coach states that without club support they cannot take a clear stance against a bullying star player and calculates the cost on their own work ('I could lose my livelihood'; TR-Coach-FocusGroup2), while the experienced water polo coach in the same focus group recounts that institutional knowledge most often flows not through an official channel but through personal ties, with the words 'Every coach has their spy.' (TR-Coach-FocusGroup2). A secret and personal-tie-based flow of information can feed the 'snitch' figure athletes fear by removing reporting from being an open and legitimate right. Partner-country data shows that the problem can become particularly prominent in smaller clubs where roles are concentrated in the same person: in Slovenia a manager notes that in small clubs the same few adults 'wear every hat' and this limits who the child can approach (SLO-MANAGER-01), while a Croatian manager notes that formal complaints in communities where families know each other can be postponed out of fear that 'it will follow the child for years' (HR-MANAGER-04). For this reason, in evaluating reporting mechanisms at least three questions can be added alongside 'Is there a channel?' and 'Is it known?': Does the channel's addressee have authority over the athlete's squad, playing time, or scholarship decisions? Is monitoring conducted against retaliation for the reporting athlete and family? Is the channel also accessible for an assistant coach, parent, or witness peer who wants to intervene?

The incident-based framing of protection work: Case management and incident-record-based approaches can structurally miss forms of harm that produce no incident. Clerinx and colleagues (2025) emphasise that the psychological violence and psychological bullying literature in children's sport have developed in a disconnected way from each other, and that this makes it difficult to address verbal and relational harms comprehensively. Vella and colleagues (2022), meanwhile, conceptualise psychological safety as an environmental quality in which the athlete can take interpersonal risks; this conceptualisation provides a framework aimed at monitoring environmental quality beyond incident counts. A portion of the harms described as most lasting in this research's data — relational exclusion, self-withdrawal, self-surveillance — do not produce a record. Manager narratives also suggest that written regulation may not alone be sufficient: a manager working in judo-wrestling voices their attitude towards written rules as 'now a piece of paper is prohibiting discipline to us' (TR-Manager2-Judo-Wrestling-M-Trabzon). Gomez and Schoch's (2026) concept of performative compliance is useful for naming this gap between the existence of a policy text and the transformation of practice. Narratives also show that adults paying attention to pattern indicators rather than incident records can catch some warning signs. A water polo athlete recounts the period they waited in the

toilet rather than going into the locker room and the coach's not noticing this: "'Where were you?" when asked, I didn't say "I was in the toilet" either, they don't even notice being there.' (TR-Athlete5-Waterpolo-M-17); the swimming athlete in the perpetrator position also acknowledges that warning signs were most often visible: 'I mean, you didn't have to try that hard to see it.' (TR-Athlete10-Swimming-M-16). This finding indicates that adding climate indicators alongside protection policies may be useful: the athlete's capacity to remain themselves, equity of participation (for instance the distribution of playing time and pairings), the perceived cost of reporting, avoidance of unsupervised spaces such as locker rooms, and reasons for leaving can be counted among these indicators.

Addressing coach intervention only as individual competence: Coach training most often focuses on knowledge and awareness transfer. A recent study examining coaches' safeguarding knowledge and intervention behaviours in Türkiye pointed to significant gaps in coaches' evaluation of their own knowledge levels and intervention behaviours (Öztürk et al., 2026b). While Rhind and Blair (2018) defined the coach's safeguarding responsibility as part of the professional role, Bolter and Weiss (2013) showed the relationship between coach behaviours and athletes' sportsmanship behaviours. A study with semi-professional team sport athletes in North Cyprus also examined predictors of bullying perpetration and victimisation in the team sport context (Maydon, Celik & Bayraktar, 2023). This research's data suggests that the coach's intervention capacity may be related not only to individual competence but also to the authority and support the club grants. The experienced water polo coach summarises this as 'Actually the whole thing is the confidence inside the coach. The club gives you that [confidence].', while the basketball coach expresses their expectation from management as 'Management needs to be able to set a boundary for parents and athletes and to be able to say I'm always behind my coach.' (TR-Coach-FocusGroup2). A Croatian coach also emphasises that a written club policy would not leave the coach alone in difficult decisions (HR-COACH-09); a Slovenian coach notes that managers can sometimes want matters resolved 'quietly and quickly', which can lead to real conversations being skipped (SLO-COACH-08).

The coach's effect is not limited only to moments of intervention; narratives suggest that the coach's everyday behaviour can constitute a model for peer relations. The 'downward reflection' the taekwondo athlete describes (see 4.6), the double standard in responding to mistakes being able to lead to peers reading who can be targeted (see 4.5.2), and assistant coaches' limited authority within the hierarchy indicate that it may be useful for coach training to address behaviour modelling, the role of assistant coaches, and authority definition within the club together. Verhelle and colleagues' (2022) findings on coaches' positive bystander intervention and the contextual factors emphasis

Solomons and colleagues (2026) make that goes beyond dimensions of closeness, commitment, complementarity and co-orientation in the coach-athlete relationship can also be read in this direction. Kerschner and Allan (2025) showed that a video-based hazing prevention training can achieve change in participants' attitudes and intervention intentions; the addition this research can suggest is that it may be necessary to think of the effect of training together with conditions of institutional authority and support. Coaches themselves also voice demands in this direction: in focus groups, athlete and parent contracts, club documents defining bullying item by item, and guidance on how to speak with both perpetrators and victims were cited as priority needs (TR-Coach-FocusGroup1).

4.7.3. Inter-Country Reading: Converging and Diverging Patterns

The inclusion of partner-country data in the discussion allows monitoring to what extent patterns built from Turkish data are also recognisable in different contexts. The limits of this comparison should be stated upfront. First, in all four countries samples are not probabilistic and the composition of participant groups differs; approximately two-thirds of Slovenia's prevalence sample consists of judo athletes, and the majority of Portugal's sample of football and futsal athletes. Second, qualitative responses in Croatia and Slovenia are relatively short and sometimes contain very similar expressions; for this reason these responses are evaluated not as separate pieces of evidence but as repeated expressions of a single pattern. Third, the Portuguese athlete sample is small and some in-vivo expressions' meaning layers may have been lost in the translation process. Bearing these limitations in mind, Table 14 summarises the counterparts of key patterns in partner-country data and how these counterparts can be read.

Table 3. Inter-country reading: counterparts in partner-country data of patterns built from Turkish data.

Pattern	Form in Turkish data	Counterpart in partner-country data	Reading
Boundary criteria	Touching something that can't be changed, repetition, distribution of laughter, intent tests	Repetition and inability to respond criteria (HR-ATHLETE-01, HR-ATHLETE-04; SLO-ATHLETE-02, SLO-ATHLETE-03); professional discussion through repetition (PT-COACH-FG)	Convergence; identity-based criterion more prominent in Turkish data

Pattern	Form in Turkish data	Counterpart in partner-country data	Reading
Talent shield	Performance providing temporary and selective protection	Status turning into respect distribution (HR-COACH-03, HR-COACH-07); patience with stars (SLO-COACH-03, SLO-COACH-07)	Convergence; coaches also recognise it
Acceptance ritual	Baptism, back of bus, rookie period; retrospective valorisation	Retrospective softening (HR-ATHLETE-05, HR-ATHLETE-07; SLO-ATHLETE-17, SLO-ATHLETE-18); túnel and cachaço (PT-ATHLETE-01, PT-ATHLETE-02); prohibition and boundary (PT-MANAGER-03, PT-MANAGER-05)	Convergence; open adult defence more limited in partner countries
Reporting cost and stigma	Not telling anyone 70.5%; belief no result would come 49.3%	Social cost and label (HR-ATHLETE-13, HR-ATHLETE-16, HR-ATHLETE-20; SLO-ATHLETE-02, SLO-ATHLETE-13); ineffectiveness of label (PT-ATHLETE-01)	Qualitative-level convergence; quantitative reason distribution diverges
Bystander silence	Tradition-, fear- and method-sourced silence; adult bystander	Three groups (HR-COACH-09); 'being next' (SLO-ATHLETE-01); coach dilemma (SLO-COACH-01); reinforcers (PT-COACH-FG)	Convergence; adult bystander dilemma also seen
Digital permanence	Recording remaining in perpetrator's or group's hands	Extending defeat (HR-COACH-09); clip being worse than mistake (SLO-ATHLETE-01, SLO-ATHLETE-25; HR-ATHLETE-03, HR-ATHLETE-07)	Convergence
Power in digital	Hierarchy continuing in closed groups; uncertain perpetrator on open platform	Quiet person on field being able to gain power online (HR-ATHLETE-03, HR-ATHLETE-04, HR-ATHLETE-07; SLO-ATHLETE-01, SLO-ATHLETE-03); courage deficit interpretation (PT-ATHLETE-02)	Partial divergence; sensitive to platform and question form
Class intersection	Scholarship, equipment, social activity cost, self-withdrawal	Equipment and background difference (HR-COACH-10); joke about family circumstances (HR-PARENT-02); no narrative in Slovenian and Portuguese data	Limited data; absence should not be read as absence of phenomenon



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Pattern	Form in Turkish data	Counterpart in partner-country data	Reading
Independent application pathway	Protection officer outside coach; three-channel system	Absence of independent pathway (SLO-ATHLETE-01, SLO-ATHLETE-03); neutral person (SLO-COACH-06); role concentration (SLO-MANAGER-01); need for open pathway (HR-MANAGER-01, HR-MANAGER-04, HR-MANAGER-05)	Convergence; becomes more prominent in small clubs
Written rule and institutional boundary	Filming prohibition, address rule, 'the money is yours, the decision is mine'	Digital rules (SLO-COACH-09; HR-COACH-09; HR-MANAGER-01); 'in this club it's us who decide' (PT-MANAGER-03)	Convergence

The table shows that an important portion of patterns built from Turkish data are also recognisable in partner-country narratives, but that there are divergences at some points. The areas where convergences are most prominent are boundary criteria, the talent shield, digital permanence, bystander silence, and the need for an independent application pathway. In these areas it can be thought that patterns in Turkish data are not specific to a single national sports culture and can be expressed in similar forms in different disciplines and countries. Large-scale prevalence studies at the European level (Hartill et al., 2021, 2023) and studies nationally describing bullying in youth sport in Portugal (Nery et al., 2019) also indicate that the phenomenon continues to exist in different country contexts.

Divergences are at least as instructive as convergences. In the prevalence survey, the rate of at least one personal experience was observed as 86.5% in Croatia, 75.7% in Slovenia, 57.3% in Türkiye, and 20.4% in Portugal; in the witnessing rate, meanwhile, Slovenia (86.8%) stands out. These differences can reflect real prevalence differences between countries but may also be related to sample composition, data collection channel, and possible differences in the threshold for naming behaviours as harm. Differences in reporting-related indicators should also be read with similar caution: the rate of not telling anyone is 70.5% in Türkiye but 28.3% in Slovenia; reporting to a coach or club official is 18.5% in Slovenia, 10.4% in Türkiye, and 3.3% in Croatia. While this picture suggests that the reporting climate can vary by context, the institutional or cultural factors with which the difference is related cannot be determined from this study's descriptive data. The most prominent divergences at the qualitative level relate to how power relations operate in the digital environment

and the visibility of class differentiation. These divergences require the conceptual framework built from Turkish data to be addressed not as directly transferable to partner countries but as propositions that need to be separately tested in each context.

4.8. Proposed Conceptual Contributions

The contributions presented in this section rest on a limited comparison with the thematic literature review conducted by the project team (violence and bullying in sport; sociological and cultural infrastructure of sport; cyberbullying; partner-country reports). This review does not claim to be a systematic compilation; for this reason the following concepts are presented not as 'original' findings but as proposals with the potential to contribute to a gap that appears not to have been distinctly named in the reviewed literature. Each concept has been built primarily from Turkish data, with its counterpart in partner-country data noted to the extent it exists. A portion of the concepts rests on a limited number of narratives; they should therefore be read not as generalisable results but as propositions that need to be tested in different samples, with different methods, and especially with data sets more strongly representing perpetrator and bystander perspectives. In this framework the study is evaluated as having developed six conceptual proposals.

1. Protective bullying: In the literature, the justification of bullying is explained predominantly through Bandura's (1991) moral disengagement mechanisms; this framework has also been tested in the bystander behaviour context (Gini, Thornberg & Pozzoli, 2020; Hymel & Bonanno, 2014). These mechanisms largely define the subsequent legitimisation of harm that has already occurred. In the data, meanwhile, a different pattern is seen in some narratives: the athlete can proactively and strategically deploy a lighter harm in order to prevent a heavier harm. A concept where this forward-looking function is separately named has not been encountered in the reviewed literature; Alexander and Meter's (2025) systematic review compiling literature on bullying and hazing among teammates also does not include such a category. The contribution potential of the concept lies in making visible that perpetration and protective intent can be combined in the same behaviour. The question it poses from a prevention perspective is also here: abandoning the behaviour may require meeting the protection function it undertook in another way. Simply saying 'stop ribbing' may deprive the child of one of the limited defensive tools they have.



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2. The shield economy: Target selection in bullying is addressed in the literature predominantly through risk factors: body, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and performance level (Evans et al., 2016; Pankowiak et al., 2022; Parent & Fortier, 2018). While this approach explains who is targeted, it less explains who is protected. In the data, protection can be distributed in three forms: harm being constructed as protection, performance providing a temporary shield, and the shield being placed in front of someone else when needed. A conceptualisation where this triple structure is addressed as a whole has not been encountered in the reviewed literature. The analytic value of the concept is concentrated in the selectivity of the shield: in the narratives performance more often provides protection against changeable 'flaws', while it may fall short in stopping stigmas relating to identity. This observation overlaps with the boundary criterion athletes voice (touching something that cannot be changed); the similar distinction that two different analytic threads point to supports the internal consistency of the interpretation. The talent shield being recognised by coaches in partner-country data (HR-COACH-03, HR-COACH-07; SLO-COACH-07) suggests the concept may not be limited to the Turkish context.

3. Changing Hands of Evidence: The cyberbullying literature has long discussed the permanence and spreadability qualities of the digital environment; Kavanagh and Mountjoy (2024) position the digital environment as a violence ecosystem with its own specificity. Permanence has most often been addressed as a quality that aggravates harm from the victim's perspective, while from a protection perspective documentability has been seen as an advantage. In the data, particularly in narratives relating to closed team groups, a pattern combining these two readings is seen: a record is produced, but the produced record most often remains under the control of the perpetrator or group and can turn into a pressure tool that can be reused over time. A conceptualisation made through the ownership of the recording has not been encountered in the reviewed literature. One of the possible policy consequences of the concept is that documentation alone may not be protective; what may be decisive from a protection perspective is who controls the document and whether a support chain exists that enables the victim to use it as evidence. On open platforms, meanwhile, since the problem can shift more to the uncertainty of the perpetrator rather than ownership, the scope of the concept should be separately tested by platform type.

4. Invisible class intersection: Economic position is studied in established ways in the sociology of sport in the context of inequalities in access to sport participation; in the bullying literature, meanwhile, stigma axes are constructed predominantly through body, gender, sexual orientation, and ethnic origin. Alexander and Meter (2025) compiled the literature on bullying and hazing among

teammates and presented research agenda proposals, while Constandt and colleagues (2024) mapped how interpersonal violence is addressed in the sport integrity literature; in neither compilation does economic position stand out as a separate bullying dimension. This research's data suggests that class can operate in peer relations even after entering sport and can emerge as a dimension that crosses other themes. The noteworthy aspect of the concept concentrates in one athlete's own formulation: 'But money is also a reason for bullying, maybe even the quietest.' (TR-Athlete17-Basketball-M-17). Economic differentiation may become difficult both to see and report because it most often does not feature in participants' definitions of bullying; the definition gap can thus turn into a detection and reporting gap. The limitedness of narratives in partner-country data shows that the concept needs to be separately researched in different contexts.

5. Rewarding of compliance: In the safeguarding field it is argued that positive reinforcement may be more effective than punitive control (Komaki & Tuakli-Wosornu, 2021). This research's finding does not contradict this proposition, but adds a caveat concerning the implementation ground: in some sports environments the reward mechanism may already be operating and may reinforce the athlete giving up on themselves. An explicit warning that a decrease in bullying may be an indicator of compliance has not been encountered in the reviewed literature; the measurement tradition generally interprets a fall in the frequency of exposure as a positive outcome (Hartill et al., 2023). The possible consequence of the concept from an evaluation perspective is that using a decrease in bullying indicators alone as a success criterion may be misleading. It may be useful for safeguarding evaluations to also monitor the athlete's capacity to remain themselves and perceived psychological safety alongside incident counts (Vella et al., 2022). This expansion of criteria can be evaluated in the same direction as Owusu-Sekyere, Rhind and Hills' (2022) safeguarding culture approach and Tuakli-Wosornu and Kirby's (2022) proposal to centre athlete rights.

6. Multi-layered bystander position: The bystander literature focuses predominantly on peer bystanders (Salmivalli, 2010; Sjögren et al., 2021); studies on coaches' bystander behaviour are relatively recent (Verhelle et al., 2022). This research's data suggests that the bystander position can be sustained at the peer, coach, assistant coach, parent, and manager levels through similar calculations: a peer can stay quiet for fear of 'being next', an assistant coach because 'there's no authority left' where the head coach permits, a parent out of worry that their child will 'pay the price', and a coach without club support out of concern they could 'lose their livelihood'. In this structure each level's silence can facilitate the next: the adult's non-response can embolden peer reinforcers, the family's 'don't get involved' teaching can limit the child's defender behaviour. The contribution

potential of the concept is its invitation to think about bystander intervention not only as a call for courage directed at peers but as a multilevel process that needs to be supported by institutional arrangements that reduce the cost at every level. Expressions in partner-country data indicating that coaches experience the same dilemma (SLO-COACH-01; HR-COACH-08) suggest that this structure may not be limited to the Turkish context.

The common ground of these six concepts is closely related to the research's methodological choices. Working simultaneously with four subject groups — athletes, coaches, parents, and managers — made visible how the same phenomenon can be named differently according to position; preserving athletes' own conceptualisations with in-vivo codes enabled an important portion of the theoretical proposals to be produced from participant language (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Saldaña, 2021). Reading the prevalence survey together with the qualitative phase helped monitor where patterns in the narratives overlap and diverge with descriptive indicators in a larger sample; partner-country data, meanwhile, allowed questioning to what extent patterns are bound to a single context. In this respect the study endeavours not only to advocate the athlete-centred safeguarding approach as a principle but also to put it into practice as an analytic strategy (Owusu-Sekyere et al., 2022; Tuakli-Wosornu & Kirby, 2022).

One of the most concrete conclusions that can be drawn from the discussion as a whole is the need to reframe the question of prevention work. The question frequently asked in safeguarding discussions — 'Why doesn't the athlete report?' — appears more productive when addressed together with the question 'For whom and why does the environment make reporting so costly?', in light of this research's data. This question shifts responsibility from the athlete's courage in the direction of the institution's design; and proposes a direction consistent with calls regarding human rights-based sport education (Masdeu Yélamos et al., 2025) and approaches emphasising that protection systems need to be configured as multi-component structures centring the child's rights (Mountjoy et al., 2016; Rhind et al., 2017). The practical counterparts of this direction are also found in the data: pre-defined and written criteria, adults who stand behind the rule, independent application pathways, protection of the reporter, and bystander intervention supported at every level. The expectation a karate athlete voiced at the end of the interview plainly summarises what this direction means from an athlete's perspective: 'I think a child should not have to constantly be on guard in the place where they do sport.' (TR-Athlete14-Karate-F-14). The counterparts of these inferences at the club, federation, and policy level are addressed in the Conclusion and Recommendations section (Section 5 (Conclusions



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& Recommendations)), and their reflections in educational design in the curriculum framework (Section 6 (Curriculum)).



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5. CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

This section converts the research findings and discussion into brief conclusion propositions and derives from these propositions recommendations at the club, coach, athlete, parent, and policy levels. The conclusions are conclusions of a study based on non-probability samples and primarily the narratives of athletes who have experienced harm; for this reason they should be read not as generalisable judgements but as inferences that can guide prevention work in similar contexts and that are open to testing. The detailed training counterparts of the recommendations are presented in the curriculum framework in Section 6 (Curriculum).

5.1. Key Conclusions

1. Bullying most often operates as a visibility problem. An important portion of the harm participants described occurs and can be identified, but does not turn into a single incident recordable by the institution. The behaviours most frequently reported in the prevalence survey — hurtful nicknames and mockery (37.5%), humiliation after mistakes (32.3%), and exclusion from peer groups (30.3%) — are the forms with the widest deniability margin; 53.9% of those reporting experiences stated they told no one. This picture indicates that protection tools based on incident reporting alone may not be sufficient.

2. Athletes can define bullying; the problem lies more in the authority to name it. Athletes from different disciplines voiced functional criteria such as touching something that cannot be changed, repetition, the distribution of laughter, and intent signs. By contrast, the same behaviours can sometimes be renamed in adult narratives as 'grouping', 'discipline', or 'a test of competitiveness'. The core need from a prevention perspective is not giving athletes new information but defining the criterion in advance, in writing, and in a form binding for all.

3. Compliance can be rewarded; a decrease in bullying may not always mean improvement. Some athletes recount that as they adapt to masculinity or belonging norms, being targeted decreases. For this reason, a fall in the number of incidents may reflect the athlete giving up on themselves as much as improvement in the environment. Evaluations also need to monitor climate indicators such as psychological safety and the athlete's capacity to remain themselves.

4. Reporting capacity is not equally distributed. In the narratives, as the need for protection increases so may the cost of reporting: for scholarship, newly arrived, migration-background, or low-status athletes, the reporting addressee is most often the person who makes squad, playing time, or



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scholarship decisions. In the Turkish sample, the most frequent justification for not reporting is the belief that no result will be achieved or that they will not be believed (49.3%). Independence must therefore be defined as the reporting addressee not having decision authority over the athlete's sporting and material future.

5. Bystander silence is multilayered and cannot be overcome with a single call. Peers may stay quiet for fear of 'being next', seniors through the justification of tradition, assistant coaches due to lack of authority, coaches without club support, and parents out of worry that their child will pay the price. The data also contains examples of moral courage; however these most often come from athletes in relatively sheltered positions. A call for moral courage can create an unequal burden if not supported by institutional arrangements that reduce the cost of intervention at every level.

6. The coach is the primary adult who determines the climate of peer relations. In the narratives, the coach's double standard in responding to mistakes, pairing decisions, silences, and language used can feed peer hierarchy; while a coach who establishes a single rule and stands behind it can break the chain. Coaches' intervention capacity, meanwhile, is largely limited by the authority and support the club grants.

7. The digital environment is a domain where existing hierarchies are carried and where evidence can change hands. In closed team groups, the recording most often remains in the hands of the perpetrator or group, while on open platforms the perpetrator becomes uncertain. An important portion of coaches see the digital domain as outside their area of authority. Written digital rules established at the start of the season together with athletes are among the most promising practices in the data.

8. Functioning counter-examples share three common features. In the positive practices in the data, the criterion was defined in advance, the adult stood behind the rule, and support was given without expectation of return. An important portion of these practices remained dependent on a single adult's personal stance; transferring good practice from person to institution therefore appears as the primary policy need.

9. An important portion of patterns are also recognisable in partner countries. Boundary criteria, the talent shield, the 'snitch' label, bystander silence, digital permanence, and the need for an independent point of contact also appear in Croatian, Slovenian, and Portuguese narratives. Power relations in digital, the visibility of class differentiation, and reporting indicators, meanwhile, differ



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between countries. For this reason it seems appropriate for recommendations to share a common core while being further adapted in each context.

5.2. Recommendations

5.2.1. For Clubs

Written criterion and code of conduct: A short and comprehensible code of conduct that defines the boundary between a joke and bullying, drawing on athletes' own criteria, should be prepared; the code should be given and signed at the start of the season by athletes, coaches, and parents.

Independent and multi-channel reporting: Among reporting pathways, at least one should reach a protection officer outside the coach and not involved in squad decisions. Face-to-face, anonymous, and online options should be offered together; for smaller clubs an extra-club point of contact at the provincial or federation level should be defined.

Protection of the reporter: Written guarantees against retaliation should be given for the reporting athlete and family; playing time, squad, and pairing decisions should be monitored in the weeks following a report. A clear club stance should be declared against 'snitch' and 'one who upsets the atmosphere' labels.

Transparency in squad and playing time: Squad and playing time criteria should be put in writing, 'tactical' justifications should be recorded, and a pattern scan should be conducted at regular intervals.

Unsupervised spaces: Assignment and supervision arrangements should be made for areas such as locker rooms, transport, camp rooms, and intervals between sets; for girls' teams, arrangements should be built with context-sensitivity, also bearing in mind the refuge function of the locker room.

Acceptance rituals: Acceptance practices involving humiliation, compulsion, bodily contact, or image recording should be explicitly prohibited; belonging needs should be met not by elimination but through welcoming activities involving the coach and based on mutuality.

Digital contract: Unauthorised image recording and sharing in club spaces should be prohibited; it should be pre-determined that content removal requests will be accepted without question, that the official information group will be separated from social groups, and who holds the institutional response in cases of online attacks.



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Economic equality: Club activity costs should be arranged so as not to exclude participation; scholarships and supports should be administered so as not to turn into a visible stigma; and the principle that 'what anyone has is not discussed here' should be adopted as a club rule.

Climate indicators and exit interviews: In addition to incident records, an anonymous climate measurement should be conducted at least once a year; exit interviews should be conducted with athletes leaving the sport or club, and reasons for leaving recorded.

5.2.2. For Coaches and Coach Education

Coach training should not remain limited to knowledge transfer; it should address the effect on peer hierarchy of everyday behaviours such as equal treatment in responding to mistakes, pairing being made by the coach, and monitoring pass and task distribution.

Pattern indicators of harm that leaves no record (athlete left alone during warm-up, athlete whose name is not mentioned, avoiding the locker room, absenteeism patterns) should be taught to coaches.

A blame-free and restorative interview language centring 'What happened?' rather than 'Why did you say it?' in the face of reporting should be developed. The 'sort it out among yourselves' response should be addressed as the transfer of authority to the powerful in a relationship with a power imbalance.

Assistant coaches should be included in training; a channel where they can report even despite the head coach should be defined.

Well-intentioned but irregular intervention (such as 'reconciling' without conveying the report) should be separately addressed in training content.

The digital domain should be defined as part of the coach's area of authority and responsibility; coaches should only be in groups for announcement purposes, and club rules should apply in individual messaging.

Coach training should include structured discussion spaces where colleagues can question their own language together.

5.2.3. For Athletes, Captains, and Seniors

A short 'Joke or bullying?' tool produced from athletes' own criteria should be disseminated.

Bystander intervention should be taught not through a 'be brave' call but through norm feedback ('you're not the only one who's uncomfortable'), low-cost micro-behaviours (not laughing, not joining



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in a nickname, sitting next to the excluded person, a private support message), and graduated intervention steps.

Captains and high-status athletes should be specifically prepared for the defender role; seniors being able to acknowledge mistakes and apologise should be made an ordinary part of team culture.

Narrative-based materials should be used in a way that facilitates athletes concretising their own exclusion experiences and the position of others.

5.2.4. For Parents

Parent training should discuss the effect of the 'don't get involved' advice given to children on bystander behaviour, and suggest a supportive language such as 'You stayed quiet; what do you want to do now?'.

A clear club pathway should be defined through which parents can convey their observations without the risk of being labelled an 'over-reacting parent'.

Expectations that count toughness as a sign of care and feed the 'tough coach' demand should be opened for discussion through the relationship between psychological safety and performance.

A parent code of conduct should be given at club registration in a way that specifically prevents the pressure of purchasing power being reflected in squad decisions.

5.2.5. For Federations and Policy Makers

In protection standards, the 'independent reporting' criterion should be concretised as the reporting addressee not having decision authority over the athlete's sporting and material future.

Not only the existence of a protection policy but also its implementation should be audited; formal compliance based only on document production should be prevented.

Protection, bystander intervention, and digital domain content should be added as mandatory components to coach licencing and visa processes.

An arrangement should be made for in-season transfer and exit options to be separately assessable for athletes experiencing bullying.

Protection approaches should be translated into local language and club culture; while a common core is maintained in partner countries, context-specific adaptations should be supported.

5.3. Limitations of the Research

The research results should be evaluated bearing in mind the following limitations. The prevalence survey is based on self-report and samples are not probabilistic; rates cannot be interpreted as national population estimates. The qualitative sample consists predominantly of athletes who have been exposed to harm and who continue in sport; the perpetrator perspective and the experiences of those who have left sport are represented limitedly and indirectly. Turkish data is limited to five large cities. The thematic framework is built on Turkish data; the short and similar structure of qualitative responses in Croatia and Slovenia, and the small size of the Portuguese athlete sample, require the inter-country comparison to remain at the level of comparative reading rather than validation. Coaches were reached only through focus groups. The translation process and online interviews may have led to some meaning layers being lost. Finally, the conceptual contributions proposed in Discussion, Section 4.8 have been compared against a non-systematic literature review.

5.4. Recommendations for Future Research

Tools that complement incident-based behaviour checklists and measure climate dimensions such as relational exclusion, self-surveillance, and the perceived cost of reporting should be developed.

Studies with athletes who have left sport should be conducted to examine the scale and processes of dropout attributable to bullying.

Qualitative and mixed-methods studies directly targeting perpetrator and bystander perspectives should be conducted.

The propositions of protective bullying, the shield economy, evidence changing hands, class intersection, the rewarding of compliance, and the multi-layered bystander position should be tested in different countries, disciplines, and age groups.

The effect of the curriculum presented in Section 6 (Curriculum) should be evaluated not only with incident counts but also with climate indicators and follow-up studies.

In conclusion, this research proposes that the fundamental question of preventing peer bullying in sport needs to be expanded from 'Why doesn't the athlete report?' to 'For whom and why does the environment make reporting so costly?' Pre-defined criteria, adults who stand behind the rule, independent reporting pathways, and bystander intervention supported at every level emerge as the institutional responses to this question.



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6. CURRICULUM

Prevention Curriculum Framework

This section presents the framework of the prevention curriculum derived from the research's findings and discussion. The curriculum addresses bullying not as an individual behaviour problem but as a climate problem sustained through naming, compliance, reporting, and bystander processes. For this reason it is directed not only at athletes but also at coaches, assistant coaches, captains, parents, and club managers. The backbone of the curriculum rests on three dimensions of human rights-based sport education: knowledge about rights (about), a learning environment that respects rights (through), and the capacity to exercise rights (for) (Masdeu Yélamos et al., 2025).

6.1. Design Principles

System first, then the call: An independent point of contact and guarantees against retaliation must be established before athletes and parents are asked to report (see Discussion, Section 4.5).

Criterion and authority, not knowledge: Athletes can most often recognise bullying; the curriculum aims not so much to teach new definitions as to convert athletes' own criteria into a common and binding language (see Discussion, Section 4.3).

Modelling: Content is not established as transmitted knowledge but as a norm modelled in the everyday behaviour of coaches and senior athletes.

The discipline's own language: Content is derived from the discipline's own values (e.g. mutual benefit in judo, control in karate, pass justice in team sports); it is not presented as a moral lesson brought from outside.

Not prohibition but meeting the function: Acceptance rituals or 'protective' ribbing are not merely prohibited; the belonging and protection needs they meet are met in other ways.

Equitable courage: The call for moral courage is not directed equally at everyone; the cost of intervention is institutionally reduced at every level and high-status athletes are prepared as priority defenders.

Narrative-based learning: Activities are built from anonymised athlete, coach, and parent narratives; they allow participants to recall their own experiences and concretise the position of others.



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Context sensitivity: While a common core is maintained, adaptation is made according to country, discipline, gender, and age group.

6.2. Structure and Target Groups

The curriculum consists of seven modules. Modules are designed to be spread across the season calendar; each module consists of a main session of 60–90 minutes plus short revision activities during the season. The modules' target groups, aims, and data foundations are summarised in Table 15.

Table 1. Prevention curriculum modules, target groups, aims, and data foundations.

Module	Target Group	Aim	Data Foundation
M1. Recognising and Naming	All groups	Define the boundary between joke and bullying using shared criteria	T1, T6; 10.2, 10.3
M2. From Bystander to Defender	Athletes, captains, seniors	Recognise the sources of silence and acquire low-cost intervention skills	T4, T5; 10.5
M3. Coach: Climate and Intervention	Coaches, assistant coaches	See the effect of everyday coach behaviour on peer relations and apply intervention protocol	T1–T6; 10.5, 10.6, 10.7.2
M4. Crossing Together	Captains, seniors, coaches	Replace hazing with alternative welcoming practices that produce belonging	T2, T3; 10.4, 10.7.1
M5. The Digital Domain	Athletes, coaches, parents	Limit the production of recordings and transfer evidence to the victim's side	T5; 10.2, 10.7.2
M6. Parents: From 'Don't Get Involved' to Support	Parents	Recognise the bystander stance transmitted to children and take on a supportive role in cooperation with the club	T4, T6; 10.5.2
M7. Club and Accountability	Managers, protection officers	Establish independent reporting, retaliation monitoring, and climate indicators	T4, T6; 10.5.4, 10.6

6.3. Modules

6.3.1. M1. Recognising and Naming

Aim: Participants recognise forms of deniable harm (nickname, mockery, exclusion, not passing, 'tactical' justification, economic differentiation) and can name the boundary using shared criteria.

Outcomes: Being able to use the five criteria of touching something that cannot be changed, repetition, the distribution of laughter, target selectivity, and intent signs; being able to notice renaming in adult language ('grouping', 'discipline', 'punishment').

Activities: A single-page 'Joke or bullying?' card prepared from athlete expressions; dilemma cards where the same behaviour changes meaning in different contexts; 'Who's not laughing?' observation exercise.

Assessment: Short case classification task (pre and post test).

6.3.2. M2. From Bystander to Defender: Moral Courage

Aim: Athletes recognise the different sources of silence (fear, tradition, method, pluralistic ignorance) and acquire low-cost intervention skills appropriate to their own position.

Outcomes: Awareness through norm feedback that 'I'm not the only one who's uncomfortable'; micro-behaviours (not laughing, not joining a nickname, sitting next to the excluded person, a private support message); graduated intervention (warning a friend, escalating to the coach if it recurs).

Activities: 'Crossing the threshold' discussion with anonymised narratives (remembering one's own exclusion moment and putting oneself in the target's place); special defender session for captains and high-status athletes; session for seniors on 'apologising doesn't break the order'; preparation for possible reactions ('did you become a hero', 'snitch').

Assessment: Intervention intention and self-efficacy items (pre-post test and 3–6 month follow-up).

6.3.3. M3. Coach: Climate, Modelling, and Intervention

Aim: Coaches notice the effect of everyday behaviours on peer hierarchy and can recognise and intervene in harm that leaves no record.

Outcomes: Equality in responding to mistakes; monitoring pairing, pass and task distribution; reading pattern indicators (athlete left alone in warm-up, name not mentioned, athlete avoiding locker room); teaching the distinction between toughness and bullying.

Activities: 'Who's invisible?' training scan; 'What happened?' interview rehearsal instead of 'Why did you say it?'; well-intentioned but irregular intervention cases (reconciling, not forwarding the report); structured discussion on gendered language and 'sort it out among yourselves' response with colleagues; coach-athlete relationship self-evaluation (Solomons et al., 2026).

Special component: Authority boundary and reporting pathway session for assistant coaches.



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Assessment: Coach self-evaluation checklist and athletes' perceived climate measurement.

6.3.4. M4. Crossing Together: Welcoming Instead of Hazing

Aim: To meet new arrivals' belonging need through practices that do not produce humiliation, compulsion, or seniority debt.

Outcomes: Recognising hazing through its criteria; distinguishing the presence of a ritual from its content; defining seniority as responsibility rather than servitude.

Activities: Welcoming activities involving the coach, based on outside the athletes' own sport and non-competitive shared challenges (Johnson & Chin, 2016); working partner pairing for new arrivals; equitable task schedule; bank of alternative traditions produced by athletes themselves; end-of-season self-monitoring.

Assessment: Belonging perception at start and end of season; short feedback interview with new arrivals.

6.3.5. M5. The Digital Domain

Aim: To prevent recordings from turning into harm instruments and to ensure evidence can be used by the victim.

Outcomes: Recognising that unauthorised filming and sharing is harm; applying the steps block, save, report, tell; complying with content removal requests.

Activities: Start-of-season digital contract prepared together with athletes (first item: unauthorised image recording and sharing in club spaces is prohibited); separation of official information group from social group; session on the limits of the coach's authority and responsibility in the digital domain; institutional response scenario for online attacks.

Assessment: Monitoring of contract signing and implementation; digital safety perception items.

6.3.6. M6. Parents: From 'Stay Out of It' to Support

Aim: For parents to notice the bystander stance they transmit to their children and to take on a supportive role in cooperation with the club.



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Outcomes: Discussing the effect of the 'don't get involved' advice on defender behaviour; responding to the child's silence without blame ('You stayed quiet; what do you want to do now?'); conveying observations using impact language rather than accusation.

Activities: Discussion with anonymous parent narratives; 'tough coach' expectation and psychological safety session; introduction to parent code of conduct and club application pathway.

Assessment: Attendance and short attitude survey.

6.3.7. M7. Club and Accountability

Aim: Transferring prevention work from being person-dependent to the institutional structure.

Outcomes: Independent and multi-channel reporting system; protection officer chosen from outside the coach; post-reporting retaliation monitoring (playing time, squad, pairing); written squad criteria; climate indicators and exit interviews.

Activities: Club self-monitoring checklist (Is there a channel? Is it known? Does the addressee make squad decisions? Is retaliation monitored? Is it also open for adult witnesses?); 'power use × protection measures' self-evaluation; adaptation of policy to local language and club culture.

Assessment: Annual club self-monitoring report.

6.4. Implementation Timeline

Start of season: M7 setup; code of conduct and digital contract signed together with athletes, coaches, and parents; M1 and M3 main sessions; M4 welcoming activity; M6 parent meeting.

During season: M2 sessions; 10-minute short revision activities before training; coaches' monthly 'Who's invisible?' scan; interim meetings with captains and seniors.

End of season: Climate measurement, exit interviews, M4 self-monitoring, and club self-monitoring report; adaptation for the next season.

6.5. Evaluation and Monitoring

The effect of the curriculum should not be evaluated solely by the number of incidents reported; as discussed in Discussion, Section 4.4, a fall in the number of incidents may reflect the athlete's compliance as much as improvement in the environment. Evaluation should monitor four indicator groups together: (1) knowledge and criterion use (case classification), (2) intervention intention and self-efficacy (pre-post test and follow-up), (3) climate indicators (psychological safety, equity of



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participation, perceived cost of reporting, avoidance of unsupervised spaces), and (4) institutional indicators (use of reporting channels, retaliation monitoring, reasons for departure). Given that the effect of short-term training may diminish over time, revision activities should be planned during the season (Kerschner & Allan, 2025).

6.6. Adaptation to Partner Countries and Disciplines

The core of the curriculum — shared criteria, bystander intervention, the coach's modelling role, digital contract, and independent reporting — rests on patterns that also find counterparts in partner-country data. In adaptation, club size and role concentration (especially extra-club point of contact in smaller clubs), local acceptance traditions, the discipline's own value language, and age groups should be taken into account in each country. For individual disciplines where the audience may be limited, adult supervision and direct reporting channel; for team sports, peer norm and defender behaviour should be emphasised. It is recommended that adapted materials be piloted together with the relevant country's athletes and coaches.



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