



Research paper

Restoring the Mind and the Game: A Transitional Justice-Informed Sport Psychology Framework for Youth Exploitation in Sub-Saharan African Sport

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ABSTRACT

In Sub-Saharan Africa, sport is often touted as a tool to develop young people, to improve their mental health, to build social mobility and to empower communities. But these potential futures are undermined in the absence of good governance, when young athletes are vulnerable to exploitation, unsafe recruitment, too early professionalisation, abuse, structural exclusion, and poor safeguarding. The aim of this desk-based conceptual research is to explore the potential of transitional justice principles to contribute to psychological recovery and institutional reform in selected sport contexts in Sub-Saharan Africa. The paper builds upon interdisciplinary literature from sport psychology, human rights, youth development, sport governance and transitional justice to create a transitional justice informed sport psychology framework. Four inter-related issues are targeted for analysis: governance failure, psychological harm, restorative justice mechanisms and pathways to institutional and psychological restoration. Youth exploitation in sport is not considered merely an ethical or discipline issue, but also a structural injustice that has psychological implications, the study argues. The conceptual synthesis suggests that reparative strategies including acknowledgements, institutional changes, mental health services, trauma-informed coaching, youth voice and non-repetition can enhance accountability and re-establish trust in sport systems. While the use of secondary sources and the lack of literature in certain regions limits this conceptual exploration, it serves as a basis for future empirical studies and policy-making efforts focused on athlete dignity, safeguarding and justice.

1. Introduction

Sport is a significant part of the lives of young people in Sub-Saharan Africa. It has been linked to discipline, resilience, social inclusion, physical health, psychological well-being and community empowerment (Fuller et al., 2013; Almeida et al., 2025). Sport is also a potential means of access to education, economic mobility and international recognition for many young people. But the developmental potential of sport is reliant on the quality of the institutions which organise, regulate and safeguard young sport participants. In the absence of effective sport governance, young athletes could be vulnerable to exploitation instead of empowerment.

Sport can exploit young people in a number of ways such as through illegal trafficking, forced or deceptive recruitment, early professionalisation, emotional abuse, neglect of education, unsafe training environments and lack of access to welfare services. These practices can have a detrimental effect on young athletes' psychological and developmental pathways, especially when they are told that sport is the only way to

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achieve success in their lives (McGee, 2013; Caudwell, 2017; Robinson and David, 2004). These harms highlight critical issues regarding safeguarding, institutional responsibility, psychological healing and justice within youth sport systems (Rulofs, 2025; Todres and Kilkelly, 2025).

Sport's dual nature as a potential site for harm and healing has come to be increasingly acknowledged in recent scholarship. Sport psychology offers concepts to understand the emotional impacts of exploitation such as identity foreclosure, betrayal trauma, anxiety, loss of self-worth and challenges with athletic transition (Beamon, 2012; Stambulova et al., 2009; Brewer and Petitpas, 2017). Human rights and governance perspectives, however, highlight the institutional setting that enables abuse to persist, such as poor accountability, underdeveloped child protection systems and poor representation of athletes (Harris and Adams, 2016; Coalter, 2021).

This paper proposes that transitional justice provides a helpful framework to link these psychological and institutional considerations. While transitional justice is usually linked to societies that have to deal with conflict, authoritarian rule or historical violence, the principles of transitional justice can also be used in institutions that have to deal with serious harm and restore trust. Truth-telling, acknowledgement, reparations, institutional reform and guarantees of non-repetition, are particularly relevant in sport systems where young athletes have been exploited or neglected (Murithi, 2022). Incorporated appropriately into the context of youth sport, transitional justice can shift the focus from individual misconduct to a broader focus on institutional repair, athlete-centred safeguarding and psychological restoration.

This study aims to explore the potential role of transitional justice principles in promoting the psychological well-being of young athletes and supporting sport governance reform in selected Sub-Saharan African contexts. The specific objectives are to:

- identify governance structures and institutional weaknesses that enable or fail to prevent youth exploitation in sport;
- analyse the psychological consequences of exploitation using relevant sport psychology concepts;
- examine how transitional justice principles such as acknowledgement, reparations, institutional reform, and guarantees of non-repetition can support psychological and systemic recovery; and
- propose a conceptual framework for restorative, trauma-informed, and youth-centred sport governance.

The importance of this study lies in the fact that there is a lack of discussion on development, psychology, governance and justice in existing literature on youth sport. Sport-for-development literature places an emphasis on empowerment and social inclusion, and sport psychology literature on individual well-being. Governance literature focuses on institutional design and accountability and may not have paid as much attention to the psychological injuries resulting from exploitation. Youth sport, on the other hand, is hardly touched upon in transitional justice scholarship. This paper aims to unite these fields and make the case for justice and healing to be mutually reinforcing priorities in sport governance.

This study adopts a desk-based conceptual research design and does not test statistical hypotheses or claim empirical generalisability. Instead, it synthesises peer-reviewed literature, policy-oriented scholarship and relevant conceptual debates to develop a theoretical framework for restorative sport governance. The emphasis is not on Africa as a homogenous context, but on sport systems in Sub-Saharan Africa where evidence suggests that there are overlaps between youth vulnerability, poor governance and a lack of protection. This difference is significant as African sport is regionally, linguistically, legally, institutionally and socio-economically diverse.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Youth Exploitation in Sport

Youth exploitation in sport is the practice of using, exposing, or controlling a young athlete in a manner which compromises their rights, welfare, education, psychological development or long-term well-being. In African and other contexts in the Global South such exploitation can be exacerbated by poverty, lack of legal knowledge, lax institutional regulation, and the social prestige of winning. When sport is not adequately safeguarding youth, it can be linked to labour exploitation, trafficking, gendered vulnerability and commercial interests, as illustrated by McGee (2013) and Caudwell (2017).

Exploitation in youth sport is not always obvious and may not manifest itself as physical abuse. It can also manifest itself in the form of false promises and recruitment, agents leaving trainees alone, lack of education, emotional manipulation, dangerous training practices, working without pay, or pressure to perform. Adeyemo (2022) further worries about the connection between youth vulnerability and trafficking and illicit networks in

Nigeria and Sub-Saharan Africa. In the context of the broader sport governance and child protection literature, however, this argument suggests that the institutional issue at stake is that young athletes are most at risk where there are overlapping areas of social inequality, underdeveloped sport governance and inadequate safeguarding systems. One of the main issues is that the young athlete is often seen as an economic asset and not as a right-bearing child and adolescent. When the promise of sporting success is coupled with the promise of a way out of poverty, young people and their families might tolerate negative conditions in the expectation that professional success will emerge. This power imbalance between young athletes and adults who control selection, training, travel, visibility and contracts makes it difficult for young athletes to navigate the world of sports. This imbalance can create an environment that renders practices harmful for welfare and development as normal if there are no clear safeguarding systems in place.

2.2 Governance Failures and Safeguarding Gaps

Sport governance is the processes and structures by which sport organisations make decisions, control behaviour, safeguard those involved in sport, allocate resources and hold those involved in sport accountable. Good governance in youth sport needs to be transparent, have enforceable safeguarding policies, child protection procedures, complaint mechanisms, independent oversight and meaningful athlete participation. In the absence of these systems or with weak systems, exploitation is more likely.

Some researchers have demonstrated that sport-for-development programmes and sport organisations can be described as having a social promise but there is a lack of evidence of accountability, transparency and long-term welfare outcomes (Harris and Adams, 2016; Coalter, 2021). Young athletes can be at risk for institutional neglect in these situations. Robinson and David (2004) state that children's rights in competitive sport need to be more than just opportunities to participate, they must be protected from harmful practices, and recognized as rights holders. In the same way, Rulofs (2025) emphasizes the importance of understanding child abuse in sports as a serious issue rather than an individual issue.

In many sport governance situations in Sub-Saharan Africa, governance issues can be exacerbated by other institutional issues such as under-funded sport structures, politicised federations, lack of investment in grassroots sport, inadequate welfare and legal protection enforcement. Ibitoye and Ilesanmi (2020) are helpful in demonstrating how rights violations can take place in the context of weak institutional systems, but should be seen as part of a broader discussion about rights rather than as evidence for all African sport systems. The problem is that poor governance isn't just an administrative inefficiency; it can put young athletes at risk of actual psychological, social and developmental harm.

2.3 Psychological Consequences of Exploitation

Sport psychology is critical to comprehend the impact of exploitation on young athletes beyond the physical or legal aspects. Exploitation can lead to anxiety, shame, low self-esteem, emotional withdrawal, lack of trust in adults, depressive symptoms and problems with identity development. Such consequences are particularly grave if young athletes have been told that their worth lies in their sporting achievements.

Athletic identity foreclosure is a very relevant concept. As described by Beamon (2012) and Brewer and Petitpas (2017), identity foreclosure is when athletes are very dedicated to the athletic identity but lack other personal, educational and social identities. The sole means of mobility in youth sport may be professional success, leading to psychological dependence on the outcome of sport. The consequences of exploitation, injury, rejection or abandonment can include a crisis of identity and a loss of opportunity.

Longitudinal and developmental studies also indicate that sporting involvement is closely related to more general psychological outcomes such as depressive symptoms, social adjustment, self-esteem and behaviour development (Sabiston et al., 2016; Bohr et al., 2019; Clark et al., 2015). Sport can either provide a safe space for young people to be when it is ethically organised or can create a greater vulnerability when performance is valued more than welfare. That is why it is essential that youth sport systems look at mental health – not just technical training or talent identification.

Institutional betrayal is also a key concept. The psychological impact of abuse can be just as devastating to young athletes as the abuse itself, as well as for the failure of trusted institutions to prevent, recognize and respond appropriately. When coaches, clubs, schools, federations or agents are perceived as protectors, their ineffectiveness can result in long-term distrust. This directly relates to sport psychology and governance and justice.

2.4 Transitional Justice and Restorative Possibilities in Sport

Transitional justice offers a framework for responding to serious harms through: acknowledgement, truth-telling, reparations, institutional reform, accountability, and guarantees of non-repetition. It is a concept that has been traditionally applied to post-conflict and post-authoritarian societies but can be applied anywhere institutions have allowed for harm and need to regain legitimacy (Murithi, 2022). Transitional justice can be used as a lens to look at exploitation in youth sport as an institutional injustice that needs to be fixed, as well as a welfare failure.

However, applying transitional justice to sport does not amount to a comparison between sport systems and post conflict societies. Instead, this research selectively draws on pertinent principles of restorative justice (truth-telling, acknowledgement, reparations, institutional reform, victim participation, accountability and guarantees of non-repetition) to explore ongoing institutional harms in youth sport. This is a conceptual transposition and not a direct transfer of transitional justice from post-conflict or post-authoritarian contexts.

The significance of this adaptation is that transitional justice raises questions about governance of youth sport: What harms have youth athletes suffered? What institutions did they not have to protect them? Who have been silenced or left out? What kind of recognition, assistance and repair is needed? What policies, practices and institutional arrangements need to be changed to prevent repeat? These questions are important because responses to abuse in sport can be limited to individual perpetrators and the extent to which they are considered responsible for the abuse, and fail to take into account the broader organisational cultures, governance failures and power dynamics that facilitated or contributed to the harm.

Adeyemo (2021) can be helpful for considerations of reparative justice as a response to violations of rights, particularly in situations where there are few or no formal legal avenues for redress. In the context of youth sport, reparative justice can be psychological support, educational re-integration, public acknowledgement, scholarships, welfare compensation, safe reporting mechanisms and institutional reform. Xiao et al. (2022) also highlight the importance of safety, support, transformation and the needs of those harmed in restorative practices. These principles apply to young athletes who may need to rebuild dignity, trust, and future opportunity in addition to punishment of offenders in order to recover.

2.5 Positive Youth Development and the Need for Safe Sport Systems

Although there are risks as outlined above, sport should not be discredited as being harmful per se. Sport, when well designed and ethically managed, has been proven to positively develop resilience, leadership, emotional intelligence, social capital and a sense of community belonging in young people (Fuller et al., 2013; Catalano et al., 2019; Almeida et al., 2025). Programmes which integrate mentoring, education, psychosocial support and responsible adult supervision can help to enhance outcomes for vulnerable youth, such as those in correctional or marginalised settings (Ramohoebo, 2021).

The question is thus not whether sport is good or bad per se, but what the institutional conditions are for sport to be developmental or harmful. Positive youth development models focus on participation, agency, protection and supporting relationships. Moustakas (2024) suggests that sport can help to foster social cohesion if the governance arrangements are based on accountability and youth voice. This is significant because youth are not to be seen as just the beneficiaries of sport programmes. They ought to be acknowledged as stakeholders whose experiences, concerns and rights should influence sport governance.

A psychologically safe sport system is a system where young athletes are safeguarded from exploitation, supported in their mental health, recognised as a whole person and have a meaningful voice in decisions that impact them. It takes more than coaching changes to make such a system work. It needs to be protected and have its own oversight, open reporting, and trauma-informed practice and a willingness of the institution to recognize the harm that has occurred.

2.6 Identified Gaps in the Literature

There are three key gaps identified from the literature reviewed. First, the fields of sport psychology and transitional justice are not often combined. That means that psychological recovery is not always addressed alongside institutional accountability. Second, research on sport governance is not necessarily focused enough on the psychological and developmental damage that is generated in the process of exploitation. Third, literature on African sport contexts tends to look at opportunity, development or national performance without always considering the rights of youth athletes that might need protection, repair and participation.

This paper aims to fill these gaps by developing a sport psychology framework that is based on transitional justice. The framework connects governance failure, exploitation of the youth, psychological damage, transitional justice response and restoration. It suggests that in the chosen Sub-Saharan African settings, meaningful reform of youth sport requires an integrated approach that integrates safeguarding, mental health support, institutional accountability and reparative justice. The conceptual framework which guides the analysis is therefore developed in the next section.

3. Conceptual Framework

A sport psychology framework that is informed by transitional justice is used for this study. The framework provides an understanding of youth exploitation in sport as a process of governance failure, psychological harm and institutional and psychological restoration. It combines notions of sport governance, sport psychology, human rights and transitional justice to demonstrate that athlete protection is inextricably linked to accountability and repair.

The framework centers on five interrelated aspects of the framework: governance failure, youth exploitation, psychological harm, transitional justice response, and restoration.

Governance failure is where there are poor or no institutional structures to safeguard young athletes. These include inadequate athlete representation, political interference, inadequate complaint procedures, inadequate safeguarding policies, and unregulated recruitment and limited independent oversight. Sport institutions can be vulnerable in some areas, and this can result in them not being able to prevent abuse, trafficking, emotional manipulation, unsafe training, educational neglect, or other exploitative practices (Robinson and David, 2004; Harris and Adams, 2016; Coalter, 2021; Rulofs, 2025).

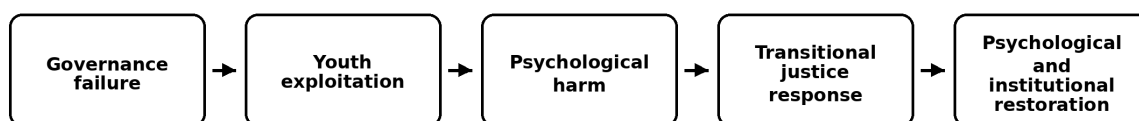
Second, youth exploitation is where children and adolescents are used primarily as a means for performative, profit-making, institutional prestige or national pride rather than as rights holders. This exploitation can manifest itself in a variety of ways, including deceptive recruitment, lack of access to education, emotional abuse, abandonment by agents, pressure to excel, and involvement in unsafe sport environments (McGee, 2013; Caudwell, 2017; Todres and Kilkelly, 2025).

Third, is psychological harm, which includes emotional and developmental effects of exploitation. According to the sport psychology literature, when sport is the only source of identity or opportunity that is recognised by young athletes, they might suffer from identity foreclosure, anxiety, shame, low self-esteem, distrust of adults, and problems with athletic transition (Beamon, 2012; Stambulova et al., 2009; Brewer and Petitpas, 2017). Such harms are exacerbated by the lack of recognition and response by trusted institutions to abuse.

Fourth, there is a framework for repair through transitional justice response. Selected restorative principles associated with transitional justice may be conceptually adapted to institutional settings in which serious harm has occurred and public or institutional trust requires restoration. Truth telling, acknowledgement, reparations, institutional reform, safe reporting mechanisms, and guarantees of non-repetition are examples of transitional justice in youth sport (Murithi, 2022; Xiao et al., 2022).

Finally, restoration is not only about psychological healing, but also about institutional change. Psychological restoration can involve counselling, mentoring, educational reintegration, trauma-informed coaching and helping to develop an identity outside of sport performance. Institutional restoration can involve the safeguarding commissions, enforceable child protection standards, transparent recruitment procedures, youth participation and independent oversight. The framework thus makes the assumption that justice and healing must go hand in hand. Sport institutions must recognise harm, take responsibility and change the conditions that allowed exploitation to happen, and young athletes require support to help them recover mentally.

The conceptual relationship used in the study could be summarized as:



The framework links governance failure to restoration through an explicitly reparative and trauma-informed pathway.

Figure 1: Transitional Justice-Informed Sport Psychology Framework

The interconnections between these elements are illustrated in Figure 1, which depicts how governance failure can lead to conditions that can encourage youth exploitation, how youth exploitation can lead to psychological harm, and how transitional justice can help to restore both the psychological and institutional aspects.

4. Materials and Methods

4.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative, desk-based conceptual research design. It synthesised literature concerning youth exploitation, sport governance, sport psychology and transitional justice to develop a transitional justice-informed sport psychology framework. A desk-based design was considered appropriate because the study addresses ethically sensitive issues, including youth exploitation, psychological harm, institutional neglect and safeguarding failures. Direct research involving affected young athletes would require extensive ethical safeguards; consequently, the present study focuses on the conceptual synthesis of relevant academic and policy literature.

An interpretivist approach was used in guiding the study. This was appropriate as the paper is not attempting to make any statistical generalisations, but rather is exploring how meanings, institutional practices and psychological consequences are linked in youth sport settings. Desk-based research is appropriate when the goal is to develop conceptual understanding from a variety of literature, particularly when empirical fieldwork is restricted due to ethical, logistical or contextual factors (Guerin, Janta, and van Gorp, 2018; Snyder, 2019).

4.2 Sources of Data and Search Strategy

Academic databases, institutional repositories, and relevant policy sources were used to locate relevant literature. Searches were conducted on the following databases: JSTOR, Scopus, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar and sport development, child protection, human rights, and youth welfare organisation repositories such as the African Union, UNICEF, Human Rights Watch, and sport development organisations.

Publications between the years 2000-2025 were searched. This time period has been chosen as it encompasses key advancements in sport for development scholarship, youth safeguarding, sport governance, transitional justice, and athlete mental health. Combinations of the following terms were used as search terms: “sport and child labour”, “Child protection in sport”, “African sport governance”, “Sub-Saharan African sport”, “sport-for-development in Africa”, “athlete safeguarding”, “youth sports and psychology”, “athletic identity foreclosure”, “athlete trauma”, “institutional betrayal in sport”, “transitional justice”, “restorative justice”, “reparative justice”, “trauma-informed coaching”, “human rights in youth sport”

Boolean combinations were also utilized such as youth sport AND exploitation, sport governance AND safeguarding, transitional justice AND institutional reform and sport psychology AND trauma. The search was not intended to be a comprehensive systematic search, but to find conceptually relevant literature from the major fields that inform the study.

4.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Sources were included if they met one or more of the following criteria:

1. they examined youth sport, child protection, athlete safeguarding, exploitation, or abuse in sport;
2. they addressed sport governance, especially in African, Sub-Saharan African, or Global South contexts;
3. they contributed to sport psychology debates on identity, trauma, youth development, mental health, or athlete transition;
4. they discussed transitional justice, restorative justice, reparations, institutional reform, public acknowledgement, or guarantees of non-repetition;
5. they provided policy or institutional insight relevant to youth welfare, sport governance, or human rights.

Sources were excluded if they focused exclusively on adult professional athletes without youth relevance, lacked clear analytical or methodological grounding, were purely anecdotal, or had no direct connection to the research objectives. Duplicate records, unverifiable sources, and references added without clear relevance to the body of the paper were also excluded.

4.4 Screening and Selection Process

The study was a structured conceptual review and not a systematic review. Therefore, it is not claimed that the paper is exhaustive in PRISMA level. But screening principles were used to enhance the methodological transparency and minimize arbitrary source selection.

The literature search was initially conducted using database search, citation tracking and specific search of the institutional repositories. Titles and abstracts were screened for relevance to the four key themes of the study: youth exploitation in sport, sport governance, sport psychology and transitional justice. Any source that didn't cover youth or professional sport in general, didn't have a clear analytical base or didn't relate directly to the research questions was excluded.

The final body of literature consisted of 29 core sources which were used for the thematic synthesis. These comprised peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books and book chapters, one thesis, one conference proceeding and some policy and methodological sources. The final sources were chosen because they directly related to one or more of the categories of analysis used in the study: governance failure, youth exploitation, psychological harm, restorative justice, safeguarding, positive youth development, and institutional reform.

Table 1: Summary of Literature Selection Process

Screening stage	Description	Outcome
Database and repository search	Searches were conducted using JSTOR, Scopus, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, and selected institutional repositories	Broad pool of potentially relevant academic and policy sources identified
Title and abstract screening	Sources were screened for relevance to youth sport, exploitation, governance, sport psychology, human rights, and transitional justice	Irrelevant, adult-only, anecdotal, and weakly connected sources were excluded
Full-text assessment	Relevant sources were read to assess conceptual, methodological, and theoretical usefulness	Sources directly linked to the research objectives were retained
Final synthesis corpus	Sources were organised according to recurring concepts and analytical relevance	29 core sources were included in the thematic synthesis

This structured approach was deemed to be suitable as the purpose of the study was not to measure the prevalence of youth exploitation or statistically compare sport systems, but to construct a conceptual framework that would connect the concepts of governance failure, psychological harm, transitional justice and restoration. The selection process for the literature is summarised in Figure 2, and described in text in Table 1. This presentation enhances transparency, and acknowledges that the study is a structured conceptual review, not a systematic review.

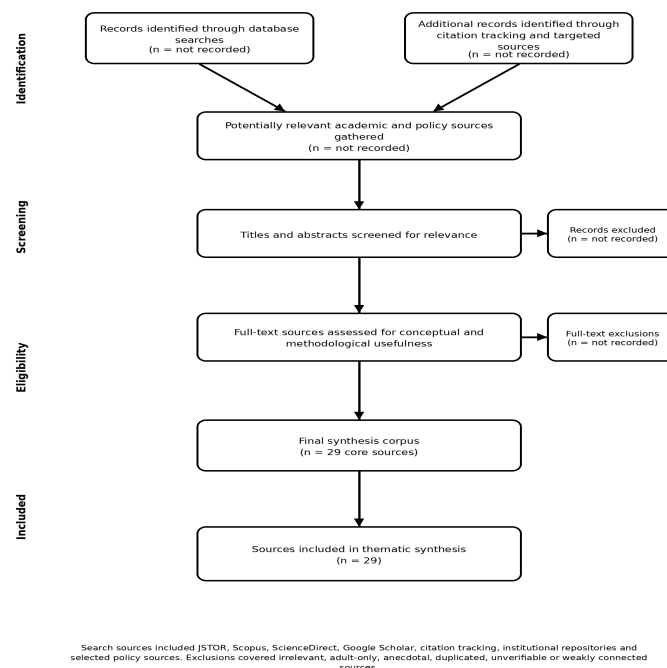


Figure 2: Conceptual Literature Selection Process

Figure 2 illustrates the literature identification, relevance screening, full-text assessment and thematic selection procedures used in the structured conceptual review. The figure is intended to clarify the progression

from broad literature identification to the final conceptual synthesis. It is not presented as a PRISMA-compliant systematic review flow diagram because complete numerical records were not retained at each database-search and screening stage. The final synthesis consisted of 29 core sources.

4.5 Analytical Procedure

Thematic synthesis was used as a method for the study, which follows the method described by Thomas and Harden (2008). The analysis was done in three phases. The chosen sources were read and common themes of institutional neglect, safeguarding failures, youth exploitation, psychological harm, identity suppression, reparations, restorative justice, and systemic change were identified. Second, these common themes were clustered into larger analytical themes. Third, the categories were synthesised to four main themes: governance failures and structural betrayal; psychological impact and athlete identity foreclosure; transitional justice as a framework for restorative governance; and pathways towards psychologically safe sport systems.

The analysis was not just a description, but was interpretive. It not only summarised the content of each source, but it also explored the possibility of linking ideas from sport psychology, governance studies, human rights and transitional justice. This helped to shift the thematic review to conceptual framework development. In this way, desk-based research was not only employed to integrate knowledge, but also to uncover conceptual tensions and develop a more integrated model for restorative sport governance (Froese and Bader, 2019).

4.6 Ethical Considerations

While the study did not directly involve human subjects, ethical considerations were still required as the topic of the study is youth exploitation, psychological harm, and institutional failure. The authors therefore made every effort to be accurate in representing the existing scholarship, not sensationalising abuse, and to continue to take a rights-based approach to young athletes. The study also does not have a deficit lens with regards to African sport systems. The study also avoids adopting a deficit-oriented perspective towards African sport systems. Rather, it recognises both the developmental potential of sport and the institutional reforms required to ensure that youth sport is safe, accountable, inclusive and psychologically supportive.

5. Results

The results of the thematic synthesis are presented in this section. Themes from the literature review were: governance failures and structural betrayal; psychological impact and athlete identity foreclosure; transitional justice as a framework for restorative governance; and pathways towards psychologically safe sport systems. These themes are a reflection of the conceptual order of the study, namely: governance failure sets the stage for youth exploitation; exploitation results in psychological injury; transitional justice provides tools for healing; and healing requires institutional change and trauma-informed assistance.

5.1 Theme 1: Governance Failures and Structural Betrayal

Thematic synthesis revealed that poor governance systems can lead to institutional circumstances where youth exploitation is more likely to occur. The governance failures can therefore not only be administrative but can also put young athletes at risk of unsafe recruitment, abuse, trafficking, neglect and exclusion from effective protection systems. Sport-for-development and sport governance studies have demonstrated that programmes have been celebrated for the potential of empowerment but fail to be transparent, accountable or have measurable welfare outcomes (Harris and Adams, 2016; Coalter, 2021).

One problem that has been highlighted in the literature is that there are no enforceable safeguarding policies and independent oversight. If sport institutions do not have effective complaints systems, welfare monitoring and sanctions for misconduct, it is possible that young athletes are not protected from coaches, agents, officials or recruiters that control their access to opportunity. According to Robinson and David (2004) youth sport needs to be viewed in the context of children's rights, rather than competition or performance. Likewise, Rulofs (2025) emphasises the need to view child abuse in sport as an institutional issue and be more accountable.

These risks can be exacerbated by poverty, low levels of legal literacy, under-resourced sport systems, and low levels of grassroots structures in selected Sub-Saharan African contexts. In the absence of institutional safeguards, rights violations can occur, as evidenced by Ibitoye and Ilesanmi (2020) but this evidence cannot be generalised to the entire continent. The main takeaway is that young athletes are more likely to be exploited where there is a lack of reliable protection, transparency in governance, and justice pathways.

Table 2: Governance Failures and Consequences for Youth Sport

Indicator of governance failure	Consequences for young athletes	Literature reference
Absence of enforceable child safeguarding policies	Increased vulnerability to abuse, trafficking, and neglect	Robinson and David (2004); McGee (2013); Rulofs (2025)
Weak enforcement of codes of conduct	Impunity for exploitative coaches, agents, and officials	Harris and Adams (2016); Coalter (2021)
Limited reporting and complaint mechanisms	Silence, fear of retaliation, and lack of redress	Rulofs (2025); Todres and Kilkelly (2025)
Political interference and favouritism	Unequal access to sport opportunities and weakened accountability	Harris and Adams (2016); Coalter (2021)

5.2 Theme 2: Psychological Impact and Athlete Identity Foreclosure

The second theme relates to psychological effects of exploitation. The literature reviewed indicates that exploitation in sport can result in anxiety, shame, low self-esteem, emotional withdrawal, depressive symptoms, a lack of trust in adults and problems with identity development. These are particularly severe if young athletes have been taught to identify their self worth with their sports success.

A concept that came to the fore was athletic identity foreclosure. Athletic identity foreclosure is a developmental issue that involves athletes prematurely adopting the athletic identity without cultivating other personal, educational and social identities, as described by Brewer and Petitpas (2017). Beamon (2012) further demonstrates that athletes with a high level of socialisation into sport can have difficulty when their sports careers come to an end or when opportunities fail to come to fruition. The psychological narrowing can increase vulnerability in youth sport settings where sport is seen as the sole means of escape from poverty.

The literature also indicates that betrayal trauma may be a result of exploitation. Youth sports can have a detrimental impact on young athletes, as well as through the lack of support and protection of trusted institutions. Coaches, clubs, schools, federations or agents can be considered as 'gatekeepers of opportunity'. These kinds of actors can allow or turn a blind eye to harm, which can lead to loss of trust, helplessness and long-term psychological insecurity for young athletes. Research relating youth sport to mental health outcomes indicates that sport can be beneficial for mental health when well structured, but can be detrimental when ethical and psychological protective measures are not in place (Clark et al., 2015; Sabiston et al., 2016; Bohr et al., 2019).

Table 3: Psychological Outcomes of Youth Exploitation in Sport

Psychological indicator	Typical outcome	Literature reference
Athletic identity foreclosure	Narrow self-concept and difficulty imagining a future beyond sport	Beamon (2012); Brewer and Petitpas (2017)
Chronic stress and anxiety	Withdrawal, aggression, depressive symptoms, and reduced self-worth	Clark et al. (2015); Sabiston et al. (2016); Bohr et al. (2019)
Betrayal trauma	Distrust of adults, institutions, and formal reporting systems	Stambulova et al. (2009); Xiao et al. (2022)
Loss of educational and social development	Reduced resilience and limited transition capacity	Fuller et al. (2013); Catalano et al. (2019)

5.3 Theme 3: Transitional Justice as a Framework for Restorative Governance

The third theme illustrates how transitional justice can be a helpful paradigm to respond to exploitation in youth sport. Transitional justice is generally linked with post-conflict and post-authoritarian societies, but the principles of transitional justice can be applied in institutional contexts where harm has taken place and trust needs to be restored. They are the principles of truth telling, acknowledgement, reparations, institutional reform, accountability and guarantees of non-repetition (Murithi, 2022).

From the literature reviewed, there is a strong indication that the majority of sport systems have a limited response to abuse that is targeted at individual misbehaviour. Individual accountability remains important, but it is insufficient where exploitation is facilitated, normalised or sustained by wider institutional cultures and governance failures. Transitional justice focuses away from isolated misdeeds towards structural repair. It asks the question, "What happened? Who was hurt? What went wrong? What form of repair are required? How can it be prevented from happening again?"

Reparative justice in a youth sport setting can involve counselling, education, scholarships, welfare payments, public recognition, complaints procedures and recruitment or safeguarding policy changes. The relevance of this is to the work of Adeyemo (2021) which sees reparations as both symbolic and material responses to rights violations. But when viewed in the context of the broader literature on transitional justice and restorative justice, this argument is reinforced. Xiao et al. (2022) highlight that the needs of those affected and safety, support and transformation are key elements of restorative responses. Rulofs (2025) also highlights the need for institutional inquiry, recognition and reconciliation in child abuse incidents in sport.

Table 4: Transitional Justice Mechanisms Applied to Youth Sport

Transitional justice mechanism	Application in youth sport context	Literature reference
Truth-telling and acknowledgement	Public recognition of past abuse, neglect, or institutional failure	Rulofs (2025); Todres and Kilkelly (2025)
Reparations	Counselling, scholarships, educational reintegration, and welfare support for harmed athletes	Adeyemo (2021); Xiao et al. (2022)
Institutional reform	Safeguarding policies, independent oversight, and enforceable reporting mechanisms	Murithi (2022); Harris and Adams (2016)
Guarantees of non-repetition	Coach education, child protection systems, and transparent recruitment procedures	Robinson and David (2004); Rulofs (2025)

5.4 Theme 4: Toward Psychologically Safe Sport Systems

The fourth theme is on the conditions for restoration. The literature does not imply that sport is to be abjured as a bad thing. Instead, it demonstrates that sport is developmental when it is safe, structured, inclusive and governed by ethical principles. Sport is recognised as having the potential to contribute to positive youth development through confidence, resilience, emotional intelligence, leadership and social connection (Fuller et al., 2013; Catalano et al., 2019; Almeida et al., 2025).

But, if young athletes continue to be vulnerable to exploitation or if exploitation is not addressed, this potential may not be realized. Trauma-informed sport systems must have trauma-informed coaching, youth participation, rights-based education, accessible complaint processes and institutional accountability. It is crucial to recognize that trauma-informed coaching is essential, as when children have been exploited as athletes, they may need more than just coaching in performance; they may need to feel safe, build trust and receive emotional support. Youth participatory governance is also key as young athletes should not merely be the recipients of sport programmes, but stakeholders in whose experiences and concerns institutional policy is based.

Moustakas (2024) suggests that sport can help foster social cohesion in communities with responsive governance mechanisms that listen to and involve the community in decision-making. This is important in youth sport as social cohesion is not developed in silence, fear and exploitation. It is therefore essential that a restorative sport system is about athlete development, protection, dignity and justice.

Table 5: Pathways to Psychological and Institutional Restoration

Restorative intervention	Expected outcome	Literature reference
Trauma-informed coaching	Improved trust, emotional safety, and athlete well-being	Mellalieu and Hanton (2015); Ramohoebo (2021)
Youth participatory governance	Inclusion, empowerment, and more responsive safeguarding systems	Wagstaff and Parker (2020); Moustakas (2024)
Rights-based sport education	Awareness of legal protections, dignity, and self-worth	Todres and Kilkelly (2025); McGee (2013)
Independent safeguarding oversight	Stronger accountability and reduced institutional silence	Robinson and David (2004); Rulofs (2025)

6. Discussion

The core of this study is that the issue of exploitation of young people in sport is not just a welfare one, but one of justice with psychological implications. A significant amount of the literature on sport-for-development

focuses on sport as a means of empowerment, inclusion, resilience and social mobility (Fuller et al., 2013; Catalano et al., 2019; Almeida et al., 2025). This still holds true but the current analysis reveals that this is incomplete where governance conditions are not taken into account. Sport does not necessarily lead to positive youth development. Its developmental value will be based on their ability to safeguard young athletes, to respond to harm and to prevent the abuse of power.

This argument questions the overly optimistic view of sport as a natural means of youth transformation. Sport can be a place of hope and a place of vulnerability for young people in contexts where poverty, weak regulation and limited educational opportunities influence young people's choices. The emergence of exploitative practices in sport can be seen where youth bodies and talents are used as an economic or institutional resource (McGee 2013; Caudwell 2017). This implies that the very sport facilities that offer mobility can also put young athletes at risk of trafficking, unsafe recruitment, emotional manipulation or abandonment. The message is that it is time for youth sport policy to transcend participation and talent identification and address issues of power, protection and accountability.

The paper also contributes to the field of sport psychology by placing psychological injury in the institutional context. At the individual athlete level, there are discussions of concepts like athletic identity foreclosure, transition difficulty, anxiety and loss of self-worth (Beamon, 2012; Brewer and Petitpas, 2017; Stambulova et al., 2009). But, this study indicates that these psychological outcomes are not independent of the systems in which young athletes are trained, selected, disciplined and evaluated. Where sport is the only way for young athletes to aspire to dignity or to survive, exploitation is more psychologically harmful as failure or betrayal not only impacts on their career but their identity. Counselling is thus not enough to achieve psychological recovery institutional reform is needed.

This is where the theoretical work of transitional justice can be of help. Typical sport governance reactions are discipline, compliance or policy correction. While these are needed, they may not be enough in the face of the silence, distrust and institutional betrayal that have been created by harm. Transitional justice brings the wider discourse of acknowledgement, truth-telling, reparations, institutional reform and guarantees of non-repetition (Murithi, 2022). This framework translates to youth sport from a focus on individual misconduct to a focus on structural repair. Not only does it seek to ask "who" but also "how" and "what systems allowed the abuse to happen", "who was ignored", "what kind of repairs are due" and "what needs to change". Accordingly, the framework should be understood as a selective conceptual adaptation of restorative transitional justice principles rather than an equation between institutional failures in sport and the mass violations associated with post-conflict or post-authoritarian societies.

This also helps to enhance the moral foundation of safeguarding. Safeguarding should not be viewed as a technical policy obligation and/or donor expectation. It must be interpreted as a part of justice due to young athletes as rights-bearers. This rights-based perspective is supported by Robinson and David (2004) and Todres and Kilkelly (2025) who both advocate for children in sport to be protected, given a voice, respect and education on their rights. A transitional justice informed approach to safeguarding, therefore, builds upon protection and adds the elements of acknowledgement, participation and repair.

The proposed framework also illustrates that there is a relationship between psychological restoration and institutional restoration. Young athletes can rebuild trust and self-worth with trauma-informed coaching/mentoring and mental health care. But, in the absence of changing institutional cultures, which allowed harm to occur, these interventions will be limited. Similarly, policy change can seem to be progressive, but the athletes impacted by it may not be provided any emotional, educational or material support. Reparative justice needs to be, therefore, symbolic and practical. It should feature public recognition of harm, safe reporting mechanisms, counselling, educational reintegration, welfare support, and effective institutional changes (Adeyemo, 2021; Xiao et al., 2022; Rulofs, 2025).

Another implication is related to youth participation. Many sport systems talk about young athletes, but don't often provide effective mechanisms to listen to them. Another significant implication is youth participation. Many sport systems have policies and programmes for young athletes, but they don't necessarily have effective ways of giving young people a voice in decisions that impact their safety, welfare and development. Lack of meaningful youth participation thus is a governance gap as well as a psychological empowerment deficit. Positive youth development literature emphasizes the importance of agency, supportive relationships and structured participation (Fuller et al., 2013; Catalano et al., 2019). Youth participation is not only considered a developmental

good, but also as a restorative justice principle within this study. Youth sports participants must be part of the development of their protective systems.

The study also has implications for the discussion of the contexts of sport in Africa. The first and most obvious temptation in scholarship is to be general and say ‘African sport’, but this can obscure significant regional variations in legal, economic, colonial, and sport institutional backgrounds, as well as in language. The evidence base in this paper is better and has a strong focus on Nigeria for some contexts in Sub-Saharan Africa. While this is not a knock-out for the argument, it does need to be presented carefully. The paper thus does not make the assumption that Nigeria or West Africa is representative of the whole of Africa. Further studies should incorporate additional evidence from other African countries and systems, particularly in Eastern, Southern and Central Africa and Francophone countries, to either validate, develop or challenge the proposed framework.

Overall, it is clear from the discussion that a change from a performance centred governance to a dignity centred governance is needed to restore youth sport. Without the psychological safety of young athletes, a sport system cannot be considered developmental if it generates medals, mobility or public pride. The proposed sport psychology framework informed by transitional justice is thus a novel addition to the literature as it brings together four domains which have been discussed separately: governance failure, youth exploitation, psychological harm and institutional repair. Its primary argument is that the restoration of “the mind and the game” must go hand in hand. While psychological support is necessary for young athletes, institutions are also required to recognise the harm, accept responsibility and to change the conditions that enabled exploitation to occur.

7. Conclusion

This paper explored the links between youth exploitation, governance failures, psychological harm and transitional justice in selected sport contexts in Sub-Saharan Africa. The paper drew on literature from sport psychology, human rights, sport governance, youth development and transitional justice, to suggest that the concept of exploitation in youth sport should not be only viewed as an ethical or disciplinary problem. It should also be recognised as a structural injustice which can have long-term psychological effects on young athletes. Weak safeguarding systems, poor accountability mechanisms, unsafe recruitment practices and institutional silence can have a negative impact on the welfare of athletes, trust, identity, dignity and future development (Robinson and David, 2004; McGee, 2013; Rulofs, 2025).

The main contribution of the study was the creation of a sport psychology framework that is grounded in transitional justice theory. This is a framework that connects Governance failure, Youth exploitation, psychological harm, transitional justice response and restoration. It demonstrates that recovery and reform of the athletes and institutions go hand in hand. Youth who are victims of exploitation may need counselling, mentoring, educational reintegration, trauma informed coaching and support with rebuilding their identity beyond their sport performance. Sport institutions, meanwhile, need to respond to the conditions that enabled harm to happen by acknowledging, independently investigating, taking reparative action, reforming the sport system and ensuring it does not happen again (Murithi, 2022; Xiao et al., 2022).

The paper also reaffirms the importance of moving from a performance-centred sport governance to dignity-centred sport governance. Ethically designed and well-managed sport can help to foster positive youth development, resilience, social inclusion and community empowerment (Fuller et al., 2013; Catalano et al., 2019; Almeida et al., 2025). But these advantages are undermined if young athletes are primarily viewed as means to winning, making money, national pride or institutional glory. A youth-centred sport system needs to then see young athletes as rights-holders, where their protection, voice, mental health and long-term development are at the heart of the legitimacy of sport governance.

The study suggests that, from a policy perspective, there is a need for enhanced systems of safeguarding in youth sport. National and regional sport organisations should have independent abuse investigation and child protection bodies and monitor recruiting practices and offer safe reporting avenues. Rights-based sport education, youth participation, trauma-informed coaching and athlete mental health support should also be part of sport organisations' policy and practice. International sport partners, donors and development organisations must consider conditions of safeguarding, accountability and restorative justice as part of funding and partnerships for participation.

There are some significant limitations to the study. Firstly, it is secondary and does not contain primary data from young athletes, coaches, parents, safeguarding officers or sport administrators. This reduces the possibilities of capturing lived experiences first-hand. Second, while the paper centres on selected Sub-Saharan

African contexts, there is not an even distribution of literature across the contexts, with some countries having more literature than others. The conclusions should not, therefore, be interpreted to be representative of all sport systems in Africa. Third, the study was largely based on literature in English, and may have missed relevant literature and policy debates in Francophone, Lusophone and Arabic-speaking African contexts. Fourth, as a conceptual study, the study only suggests a framework and does not test the implementation of the framework in practice.

The limitations of this research should be tackled in future research with participative, qualitative and comparative studies. Interviews, focus groups, ethnographic research and case studies might be useful in capturing the experiences of exploited young athletes and assessing the potential effectiveness of restorative justice in the real world of sport institutions. Other sport settings (Eastern, Southern, Central, Francophone, Lusophone and North African) should also be explored to determine if the proposed framework needs to be adapted to the region. Further, future research needs to examine the potential for future applications of trauma-informed and restorative practices by safeguarding bodies, sport federations, schools, clubs and community sport organisations to be culturally responsive, legally viable and operationally feasible.

In conclusion, the paper suggests that youth sport needs to be restored and so does the mind and the game. The mind is the psychological well-being, identity, dignity and hope for a future for young athletes. The game is the term used for the institutions, policies, values and governance structures that impact their sporting experience. In a sport system that aims for development without justice, there is a risk of re-creating the very ills that it tries to overcome. Youth sport must be based on protection, accountability, repair, participation and respect for athlete dignity in order to truly be transformative.

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