

The Phenomenon of Bullying in Sports: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Sports provide good health and psychological benefits, but also create negative environments such as bullying which is often considered normal. This study aims to analyze the forms, causal factors, and impacts of bullying in sports. This research is a literature review with literature searches through SCOPUS, Web of Science, PubMed, SPORTDiscus, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar using the keyword "bullying in sports". Of 645 identified articles, 21 articles met the inclusion criteria and were analyzed using thematic analysis. The results showed that bullying in sports occurs in various forms including physical, verbal, cyber, psychological, and social, with verbal bullying being the most dominant form. This behavior is caused by individual factors (sexual orientation, physical condition), interpersonal relationships (coach-parent communication), organizational factors (authoritarian club culture, weak policies), and macrosystem factors (heteronormativity, normalization of violence). The impacts are very serious including psychological disorders (stress, anxiety, trauma), physical health disorders, decreased performance, loss of motivation, and risk of suicide. Minority groups such as LGBTQ+ athletes and athletes with disabilities face higher vulnerability. This study concludes that bullying in sports is a multidimensional problem that requires a comprehensive prevention approach through clear organizational policies, coach training, and education for all stakeholders.

Keywords: Bullying, sports; physical bullying; verbal bullying; cyberbullying

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Introduction

Participation in a sports environment is a great choice for individuals who want to live a healthy life and build character (Lestar et al., 2025). Sport not only provides physical health benefits but also significant psychological benefits through the development of discipline, teamwork, and mental resilience (Hafiar et al., 2023). However, reality shows that the sports environment does not always provide a positive environment; it often also creates negative spaces such as bullying, which is recognized as a very serious problem (Olmedo et al., 2023).

Sport should be a place to foster sportsmanship, but intolerant behaviors such as bullying emerge (Vveinhardt et al., 2019). The phenomenon of bullying in sport has unique characteristics that distinguish it from bullying in general educational settings. The sporting environment is characterized by a strong power hierarchy between coaches and athletes, high performance pressure, an aggressively competitive culture, and the normalization of aggressive behavior as part of "character building" (Krieger & Pieper, 2023; Newman et al., 2022). These factors create an ecosystem where bullying behavior is often considered normal and even part of "jokes" within the team (Rusbasan et al., 2021; Afriani & Afrinaldi, 2023).

This condition is very concerning, especially because this behavior often occurs in students with disabilities, thus hindering their participation in school sports (Gusliana et al., 2024). Based on the perspective of Bronfenbrenner's social ecology theory, bullying in sports can be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon influenced by various environmental layers, starting from individual factors (athlete characteristics), interpersonal relationships (team dynamics and coach-athlete relationships), organizational context (club culture and policies), to macrosystem factors (social norms and sports culture) (Kalina et al., 2025).

Power dynamics theory and social identity theory are also relevant to explaining how power structures in sport create vulnerabilities for minority groups, such as LGBTQ + athletes (Denison et al., 2021; Townshend & MacLean, 2025). This theoretical framework is crucial for understanding why bullying in sport takes different forms and impacts than bullying in other contexts. Bullying in sport takes diverse forms, ranging from mild teasing (Abell et al., 2024) to often undetected physical abuse or violence (Lestar et al., 2025), unhealthy relationships between athletes on teams (Alwan, 2021), poor organizational culture (Krieger & Pieper, 2023), and even intimidating behavior by coaches and parents (Sayers, 2025).

In some sports environments, bullying is even considered fun (Afriani & Afrinaldi, 2023). This situation is very worrying because many victims are affected by bullying in sports, where the athletes' well-being is compromised (Kim & Craig, 2020), ranging from psychological problems such as emotional instability (Kinoshita & Sato, 2023) to stress and even burnout (Pike Lacy et al., 2021). Worse, victims can experience long-term trauma (Kuhlin et al., 2020). The impact of bullying in sports is not only limited to psychological aspects, but also affects the decline in athlete performance (Sabate et al., 2019), poor physical health conditions (Jeckell et al., 2018), such as experiencing injuries (Ottesen et al., 2019), and more fatally, there is a risk of victims injuring themselves or even committing suicide (Bailey et al., 2025).

Field observations show that despite the implementation of various prevention policies in various sports clubs, bullying continues to occur (Clerincx et al., 2025). This indicates a gap

between policy and practical implementation. Bullying in sports is a serious concern because it provides knowledge for sports environments or organizations to provide oversight and response. However, research in this area is still limited (Mishna et al., 2019), and the response is still suboptimal (Nery et al., 2020).

Parents and coaches are also deeply concerned (Grau et al., 2020), and perceive this condition as a problem that needs to be addressed but is hampered by a lack of knowledge and skills to prevent it (Grau et al., 2020). Furthermore, prevention policies have been implemented in various sports clubs, yet bullying still occurs (Clerincx et al., 2025). While awareness of the problem of bullying in sport is increasing, there remains a gap in a comprehensive understanding of how bullying manifests specifically in the sport context, particularly regarding the intersection of athletic culture, performance pressure, and social dynamics.

Previous research has focused primarily on bullying in general education settings, while studies on bullying in sports are scattered and not yet systematically integrated. Therefore, this literature review aims to analyze the phenomenon of bullying in sports by identifying common forms of bullying, analyzing its multidimensional causal factors, synthesizing its impact on athlete well-being and performance, and identifying gaps in current prevention and intervention strategies. Thus, this review is expected to contribute to the development of more effective bullying prevention policies and practices in sports settings.

Methods

This study is a Literature Review that aims to synthesize scientific evidence on the phenomenon of bullying in sports. The implementation of this review follows the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021) to ensure systematic and transparent reporting. A comprehensive literature search was conducted in six electronic databases: scopus, web of science, PubMed, SPORTDiscus, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar. A search in SCOPUS using the keyword "bullying in sports" found 400 articles. The search was expanded to other databases with the keywords: ("bullying" OR "harassment" OR "victimization") AND ("sport" OR "athlete" OR "physical education") AND ("prevalence" OR "risk factor" OR "impact"). The literature search was limited to publications from 2021-2026 (the last 5 years).

The inclusion criteria for this review were original research articles in peer-reviewed journals; available in English and open access; discussing bullying in a sporting context; presenting empirical data; and published between 2021 and 2026. Exclusion criteria included opinion articles or editorials; studies on bullying in general settings without a sporting context; and articles without full text availability. The study selection process followed the PRISMA 2020 flowchart (Page et al., 2021). In the identification stage, a scopus search yielded 400 documents. Restricting the search to the last 5 years left 206 documents. Restricting the article type (articles only) yielded 148 documents, then restricting to English language and open access yielded 88 documents.

After reviewing abstracts and themes for relevance, 21 articles met the inclusion criteria. Screening was conducted independently by two researchers, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion. Methodological quality was assessed using the JBI Checklist for quantitative studies (Munn et al., 2020) and the CASP Qualitative Checklist for qualitative

studies (Long et al., 2020). Assessments were conducted by two researchers independently, with quality ratings of high, moderate, or low. Studies of low quality were not excluded but were discussed as limitations. Data extraction used a standardized form that included: author, year, country, sport type, sample, study design, type of bullying, and main findings. Data synthesis used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with six phases: data familiarization, coding, theme discovery, theme review, theme definition, and report writing. The main themes identified included the forms of bullying, their causes, and their impacts.

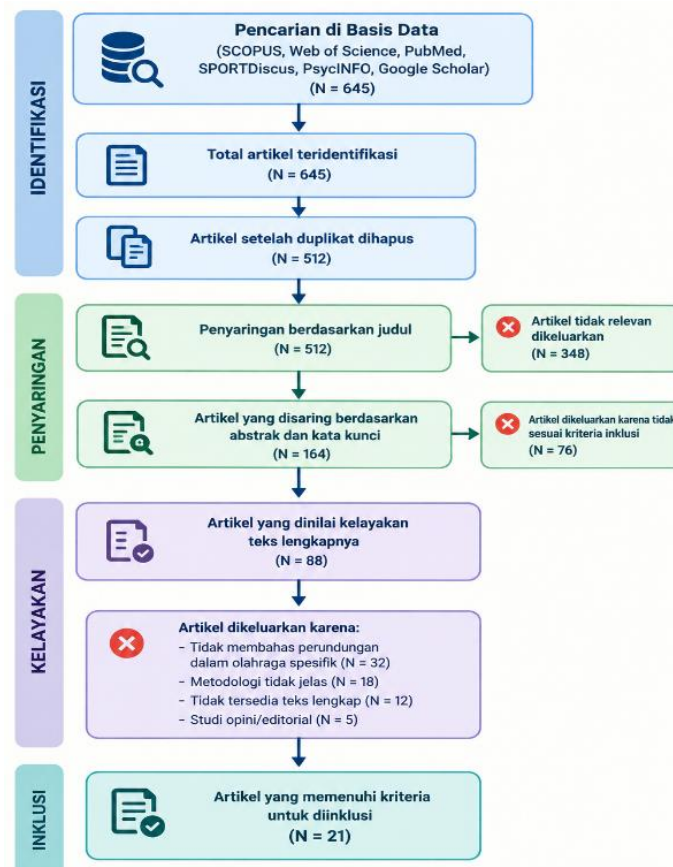


Figure 1. Study Selection Flowchart

Potential biases were identified from the language restriction (English only), open access, and use of a single primary database (SCOPUS), albeit with an expanded scope. These limitations are acknowledged and addressed in the discussion and conclusion sections.

Table 1. Characteristics of Included Studies

Author (Year)	Country	Types of Sports	Sample	Design	Bullying Focus
Vveinhardt & Fominiene (2022)	Lithuania	Various sports	1,440 athletes	Survey	Physical, verbal
Ríos et al. (2022a)	Spanish	Football	1,980 players	Survey	Verbal

Ríos et al. (2022b)	Spanish	Various sports	11 athletes	Interview	Physical, verbal, social
Trudgett-Klose & McLinton (2024)	International	Esports	145 players	Online survey	Cyber
Denison et al. (2021)	Australia	Team sports	1,173 athletes	Survey	Verbal (homophobia)
Kendrick et al. (2025)	Australia	Various sports	21 gay men	Interview	Physical, verbal, social
Velija & Silvani (2021)	English	Football	80 articles	Media analysis	Verbal (racism)
Townshend & MacLean (2025)	English	Rugby	3 gay men	Narrative	Verbal (homophobia)
Hadiana et al. (2025)	Indonesia	Physical education	180 elementary school students	Mixed methods	Verbal, social
Yabe et al. (2021)	Japan	Children's sports	6,641 parents	Cross-sectional	Physical, verbal
Kokkonen et al. (2024)	Finland	Physical education	175 teachers	Survey	Verbal, social
Watson et al. (2024)	English	Horse riding	11 professionals	Interview	Verbal
Kalina et al. (2025)	Multinational	Various sports	37 articles	Scoping review	Verbal, psychological
Marracho et al. (2021)	Portugal	School sports	642 athletes	Descriptive	Physical, verbal
Newman et al. (2022a)	English	Football	5 coaches	Interview	Verbal, psychological
Newman et al. (2022b)	English	Football	18 players	Phenomenological	Psychological
Fominiene & Vveinhardt (2022)	Lithuania	Various sports	1,440 athletes	Questionnaire scale	Physical, verbal
Kaski & Kinnunen (2023)	Finland	Elite athlete	2,045 athletes	Logistic regression	Psychological/verbal
Booth et al. (2024)	English	Youth football	8 players, 4 coaches	Qualitative	Verbal
Ballard (2026)	US	Video games	358 students	Survey	Cyber
Clerinx et al. (2025)	Multinational	Children's sports	Various studies	Systematic review	Psychological

Results

Based on a selection process following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021), 21 articles met the inclusion criteria for analysis in this literature review. The characteristics of the included studies are presented in Table 1. Most studies originated from European countries (Lithuania, Spain, the United Kingdom, Finland, Portugal) and a few from Australia, the United States, Japan, and Indonesia. The most frequently studied sport was soccer (8 studies), followed by physical education (3 studies), and various other sports. The research designs were dominated by quantitative survey studies (12 studies), qualitative interviews (6 studies), and systematic reviews (3 studies). The total number of participants in all quantitative studies reached over 15,000 respondents.

Table 2. Distribution of articles based on the form of bullying

Forms of Bullying	Number of Articles	Author (Year)
Verbal	17	Ríos et al. (2022a); Ríos et al. (2022b); Denison et al. (2021); Kendrick et al. (2025); Velija & Silvani (2021); Townshend & MacLean (2025); Hadiana et al. (2025); Yabe et al. (2021); Kokkonen et al. (2024); Watson et al. (2024); Kalina et al. (2025); Marracho et al. (2021); Newman et al. (2022a); Fominiene & Vveinhardt (2022); Kaski & Kinnunen (2023); Booth et al. (2024)
Physique	6	Vveinhardt & Fominiene (2022); Ríos et al. (2022b); Kendrick et al. (2025); Yabe et al. (2021); Marracho et al. (2021); Fominiene & Vveinhardt (2022)
Cyber, Psychological & Social	6	Trudgett-Klose & McLinton (2024); Kokkonen et al. (2024); Ballard (2026); Kendrick et al. (2025); Newman et al. (2022b); Kaski & Kinnunen (2023)

The analysis shows that bullying in sports occurs in various forms, with verbal bullying being the most dominant form (17 articles), followed by physical bullying (6 articles), and cyberbullying, psychological bullying, and social bullying (6 articles). These findings indicate that verbal bullying is the most widespread problem in sports environments. Verbal bullying is the most common form in sports environments. Studies in Spain indicate that young soccer players are highly vulnerable to verbal bullying, which is triggered by physical factors, attitudes, and sexual orientation of the victims (Ríos et al., 2022; Booth et al., 2024).

Coaches and the youth boys' soccer community still view bullying as normal (Newman et al., 2022; Booth et al., 2024). This behavior also occurs in equestrian sports (Watson et al., 2024) and physical education, especially among students with low physical activity abilities, and is caused by low teaching efficacy of physical education teachers (Hadiana et al., 2025; Kokkonen et al., 2024). Lack of communication between parents and athletes, the influence of coaches, club culture, level of competition, social background, and aggressive behavior are all factors driving verbal bullying (Yabe et al., 2021; Kalina et al., 2025; Fominiene & Vveinhardt, 2022).

Many athletes act as mere bystanders in these cases (Marracho et al., 2021). Racism also frequently occurs due to power dynamics in sport (Velija & Silvani, 2021). Furthermore, the sexual orientation of LGB athletes, known to teammates and the heteronormative sporting environment, fuel these behaviors and lead to a loss of interest in sport in later life (Kendrick et al., 2025; Denison et al., 2021; Townshend & MacLean, 2025). This situation impacts mental health (Kaski & Kinnunen, 2023) and short- and long-term psychosocial outcomes (Ríos et al., 2022).

Physical violence in sports often occurs in team sports, where the perpetrators come from within the team itself (Vveinhardt & Fominiene, 2022). In children's teams, this behavior occurs due to a lack of communication between coaches and parents (Yabe et al., 2021). As a result, athletes experience psychosocial problems (Ríos et al., 2022) and a loss of interest in sports, similar to what gay men experience in old age (Kendrick et al., 2025). Many athletes act as observers rather than reporting (Marracho et al., 2021), resulting in a continued increase in this condition (Fominiene & Vveinhardt, 2022). Cyberbullying is experienced by female

professional esports players, who are more vulnerable to victimization (Trudgett-Klose & McLinton, 2024), and this behavior worsens athletes' mental health (Ballard, 2026).

Homonegative experiences and social violence experienced by gay men result in a loss of interest in exercise in later life (Kendrick et al., 2025). This behavior also occurs in physical education due to low teacher efficacy (Kokkonen et al., 2024). Psychological violence is intentionally perpetrated against elite Finnish athletes (Kaski & Kinnunen, 2023) and professional soccer players, yet they are afraid to report the abuse (Newman et al., 2022).

Table 3. Factors causing bullying based on the level of analysis

Level of Analysis	Causative factor	Author (Year)
Individual	Sexual orientation, attitude, physical appearance of the victim	Booth et al. (2024); Denison et al. (2021)
Interpersonal Relationships	Lack of coach-parent communication, aggressive athlete behavior	Yabe et al. (2021); Fominiene & Vveinhardt (2022)
Organization	Authoritarian club culture, low level of competition, weak policies	Newman et al. (2022b); Kalina et al. (2025); Krieger & Pieper (2023)
Macrosystem	Heteronormativity, normalization of violence, structural racism	Townshend & MacLean (2025); Velija & Silvani (2021)

Bullying in sports occurs due to various interrelated factors. Individual factors include sexual orientation (Denison et al., 2021; Booth et al., 2024), the victim's attitude and physical condition (Booth et al., 2024; Hadiana et al., 2025), and aggressive athlete behavior (Fominiene & Vveinhardt, 2022). Interpersonal factors include a lack of communication between coaches and parents (Yabe et al., 2021) and unhealthy relationships within teams (Alwan, 2021). At the organizational level, authoritarian and hierarchical club cultures (Newman et al., 2022), high levels of competition (Kalina et al., 2025), and weak prevention policies (Clerincx et al., 2025) are driving factors. Macrosystem factors include a heteronormative sporting environment (Townshend & MacLean, 2025), the normalization of violence as part of sporting culture (Vveinhardt & Fominiene, 2022), and structural racism (Velija & Silvani, 2021).

Table 4. Impact of bullying on athletes

Impact	Author (Year)
Psychological disorders (stress, anxiety, burnout)	Kinoshita & Sato (2023); Kaski & Kinnunen (2023)
Prolonged trauma	Kuhlin et al. (2020); Ríos et al. (2022b)
Loss of motivation and interest in exercising	Kendrick et al. (2025); Prasetyowati & Qariah (2022)
Decrease in athlete performance	Sabate et al. (2019); Lu et al. (2024)
Physical health problems	Jeckell et al. (2018); Ekowati et al. (2023)
Risk of injury	Ottesen et al. (2019)
Suicidal ideation	Bailey et al. (2025); Rodelli et al. (2018)

The impacts of bullying on athletes are diverse and serious. Psychologically, victims experience stress, anxiety, and burnout (Kinoshita & Sato, 2023; Kaski & Kinnunen, 2023), as well as prolonged trauma (Kuhlin et al., 2020; Ríos, Ventura, & Mateu, 2022). Victims also lose motivation and interest in sports (Kendrick et al., 2025; Prasetyowati & Qariah, 2022). In the physical aspect, bullying causes decreased performance (Sabate et al., 2019; Lu et al., 2024), health problems (Jeckell et al., 2018; Ekowati et al., 2023), risk of injury (Ottesen et al.,

2019), and most fatally, the risk of suicidal ideation (Bailey et al., 2019). 2025; Rodelli, De Bourdeaudhuij, Dumon, Portzky, & DeSmet, 2018).

Based on an analysis of 21 studies, several research gaps were identified. First, most studies focused on popular sports such as soccer, while other sports and athletes with disabilities remain under-researched (Kalina et al., 2025). Second, longitudinal studies to understand the development of bullying over time are still very limited. Third, research on the effectiveness of bullying prevention interventions in sports is still rare (Clerinx et al., 2025). Fourth, most studies originate from Western countries, so generalizing findings to other cultural contexts requires caution.

Discussion

The findings of this study can be comprehensively understood through Bronfenbrenner's social ecological theory framework, which identifies four interconnected environmental layers in the phenomenon of sports bullying (Swearer & Hymel, 2015). At the microsystem level, individual athlete characteristics such as sexual orientation, physical condition, and attitudes are key vulnerability factors (Booth et al., 2024; Denison et al., 2021). These findings align with research by Espelage and (Swearer, 2016), which shows that individual differences often trigger bullying across various social contexts. At the mesosystem level, the dynamics of interpersonal relationships within the team are significant factors. Lack of communication between coaches and parents (Yabe et al., 2021) and aggressive behavior among athletes (Fominiene & Vveinhardt, 2022) create a permissive environment for bullying.

Recent studies have shown that the quality of the coach-athlete relationship is a strong predictor of bullying experiences (Marracho et al., 2023; Stirling & Kerr, 2021). Coaches with an authoritarian leadership style tend to create a climate that normalizes abusive behavior (Strand, 2021; Güler et al., 2024). At the exosystem level, hierarchical and authoritarian club cultures (Newman et al., 2022), weak organizational policies (Clerinx et al., 2025), and high competitive pressure (Kalina et al., 2025) are systemic factors that facilitate bullying.

Longitudinal studies have shown that sport organizations with comprehensive athlete protection policies have a lower prevalence of bullying (Molnar, 2023; Vertommen et al., 2021). At the macrosystem level, heteronormative social norms (Townshend & MacLean, 2025), the normalization of violence in sport culture (Vveinhardt & Fominiene, 2022), and structural racism (Velija & Silvani, 2021) reflect how broader societal values shape bullying practices in sport. Social identity theory explains why minority groups such as LGBTQ+ athletes and athletes with disabilities are more vulnerable to victimization (Hartmann-Tews et al., 2022; Ball et al., 2022).

The finding that verbal bullying was the most prevalent form (17 of 21 articles) confirms previous research that teasing, name-calling, and racist comments are entrenched practices in sport culture (Newman et al., 2022; Ríos et al., 2022). This normalization phenomenon occurs because the line between "banter" and bullying is often blurred in sport environments (Booth et al., 2024; Abell et al., 2024). Recent research has shown that coaches often view verbal abuse as part of "character building" and "motivating" athletes, despite its detrimental impact on psychological well-being (Brad Strand, 2021; Grau et al., 2020).

Power dynamics theory explains why verbal bullying often goes unreported. Athletes, especially youth and professional athletes, are in a powerless position because they depend on coaches for playing opportunities and career development (Newman et al., 2022; Krieger & Pieper, 2023). The culture of "omerta," or silence, in professional sports makes athletes afraid to report perpetrators due to the threat of retaliation and stigmatization (Vveinhardt et al., 2019; Clerincx et al., 2025). This phenomenon is exacerbated by an asymmetrical power structure in which coaches have absolute authority over athletes (Stirling & Kerr, 2021; Molnar, 2023).

Findings about the vulnerability of LGBTQ+ athletes and athletes with disabilities reinforce evidence that bullying in sport is systemic and discriminatory (Denison et al., 2021; Kendrick et al., 2025; Townshend & MacLean, 2025). LGBTQ+ athletes experience homophobic abuse that forces them to leave sport, as documented in studies of gay athletes in Australia and Germany (Kendrick et al., 2025; Hartmann-Tews et al., 2022). Recent research suggests that transgender athletes face dual barriers: structural discrimination and interpersonal bullying (Bailey et al., 2025; Jones et al., 2023).

Athletes with disabilities also face a higher risk of bullying in integrated physical education and sports settings (Gusliana et al., 2024; Ball et al., 2022). Studies of para-athletes in Turkey indicate that they are just as vulnerable to bullying as athletes without disabilities (Büyüklüoğlu et al., 2025). This phenomenon reflects how non-inclusive social structures reinforce inequality and marginalization in sport (Shephard, 2018; Nam et al., 2022). The impact of bullying on athletes is broad, encompassing psychological, physical, and social dimensions. Findings on psychological impacts such as anxiety, depression, and trauma (Kinoshita & Sato, 2023; Kaski & Kinnunen, 2023; Kuhlin et al., 2020) are consistent with the general bullying literature showing that bullying is a strong predictor of mental health disorders (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Modecki et al., 2014).

Alarmingly, the risk of suicidal ideation (Bailey et al., 2025; Rodelli et al., 2018) indicates that bullying in sport is not simply a juvenile delinquency issue, but a serious public health concern. Physical impacts such as injuries and health problems (Jeckell et al., 2018; Ottesen et al., 2019) indicate that bullying not only damages psychological well-being but also athletes' performance and careers. Decreased athlete performance (Sabate et al., 2019; Lu et al., 2024) results in lost opportunities for competition and career development, which in turn impacts continued participation in sport (Rutland et al., 2021; Sayers, 2025).

Long-term impacts such as loss of interest in sports in later life (Kendrick et al., 2025) demonstrate the lifelong consequences of youthful bullying experiences. The finding that many athletes act as observers rather than reporters (Marracho et al., 2021) highlights the critical role of bystanders in bullying dynamics. Bystander intervention theory (Latané & Darley, 1970) explains why bystanders often fail to act due to diffusion of responsibility, fear of retaliation, and normalization of behavior (Kokkonen et al., 2024; Booth et al., 2024). Recent research suggests that bystander training can improve reporting and intervention in youth sports (Clerincx et al., 2025; Nery et al., 2020).

Barriers to reporting include fear of retaliation (Newman et al., 2022), lack of trust in reporting systems (Krieger & Pieper, 2023), and a culture of silence within sport organizations (Vveinhardt et al., 2019). Research shows that athletes who have positive relationships with coaches and teammates are more likely to report bullying (Stirling & Kerr, 2021; Vertommen

et al., 2021). Therefore, creating a safe psychological climate is a prerequisite for effective reporting (Kinoshita & Sato, 2023). Bullying in sport has unique characteristics that distinguish it from bullying in schools or workplaces.

The normalization of physical and verbal violence as part of sport culture (Vveinhardt & Fominiene, 2022; Strand, 2021) creates a situation where behaviors considered unacceptable in other contexts become accepted in the sporting environment. The absolute authority of coaches (Newman et al., 2022; Güler et al., 2024) creates a power hierarchy that is more extreme than teacher-student or manager-employee relationships. High performance pressure and athletes' dependence on coaches for career opportunities (Sabate et al., 2019; Molnar, 2023) make athletes more vulnerable and less able to resist bullying. However, some similarities with general bullying have also been identified.

Unequal power dynamics, repetitive behavior, and harmful intent are core elements in both contexts (Olweus, 1993; Swearer & Hymel, 2015). Psychological impacts such as anxiety, depression, and trauma are also consistent across contexts (Modecki et al., 2014). A key difference lies in the cultural normalization and more extreme power structures in sport, which require context-specific prevention approaches (Vertommen et al., 2021; Clerinx et al., 2025). While most studies focus on risk factors, some research identifies protective factors that may reduce bullying. Positive relationships between coaches and athletes (Stirling & Kerr, 2021; Kinoshita & Sato, 2023), inclusive team cultures (Denison et al., 2021; Kalina et al., 2025), and strong organizational policies (Clerinx et al., 2025; Vertommen et al., 2021) have been shown to reduce bullying incidents.

Furthermore, parent education on the signs of bullying and effective communication with coaches (Grau et al., 2020; Yabe et al., 2021) also play a crucial role. Effective interventions must be multi-level and involve all stakeholders (Swearer & Hymel, 2015). Coach training on recognizing and addressing bullying (Clerinx et al., 2025; Nery et al., 2020), anonymous reporting systems (Newman et al., 2022), and character education and sportsmanship programs (Hafiar et al., 2023) are essential components of a comprehensive prevention strategy. Systematic evaluation of intervention programs is still rare and represents an important future research agenda (Molnar, 2023; Vertommen et al., 2021).

This review has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The restriction to English-language and open-access articles may have overlooked relevant studies from non-English-speaking countries and those with limited access. The use of scopus as the primary database, even if extended to other databases, may introduce publication bias. Variations in methodological quality across included studies also impact the strength of the evidence and the generalizability of the findings. For future research, several priority directions are identified. First, longitudinal studies are needed to understand the development and long-term consequences of bullying in sport (Kaski & Kinnunen, 2023; Clerinx et al., 2025).

Second, cross-cultural studies to compare bullying patterns across countries and sporting cultures (Hartmann-Tews et al., 2022; Kendrick et al., 2025). Third, research on underrepresented populations such as athletes with disabilities (Gusliana et al., 2024; Ball et al., 2022), transgender athletes (Bailey et al., 2025), and athletes in non-popular sports (Watson et al., 2024). Fourth, intervention studies with experimental designs to test the effectiveness of prevention programs (Molnar, 2023; Vertommen et al., 2021). Fifth, research on the growing

role of social media and cyberbullying among athletes (Trudgett-Klose & McLinton, 2024; Ballard, 2026; Lu et al., 2024).

Conclusion

This literature review concludes that bullying in sport is a multidimensional phenomenon involving various forms, namely physical, verbal, cyber, psychological, and social bullying, with verbal bullying being the most dominant form. This bullying does not occur spontaneously, but is caused by interrelated factors at various levels: individual factors (sexual orientation, physical condition, attitude), interpersonal factors (lack of coach-parent communication, aggressive athlete behavior), organizational factors (authoritarian club culture, weak policies), and macrosystem factors (heteronormativity, normalization of violence, structural racism). Minority groups such as LGBTQ+ athletes and people with disabilities face higher vulnerabilities, while the culture of "omerta" and the normalization of abusive behavior in sport are major barriers to reporting and addressing bullying.

The impact of bullying on athletes is widespread and serious, including psychological disorders (stress, anxiety, trauma, burnout), physical health problems, decreased performance, loss of motivation and interest in sports, and even the risk of suicidal ideation. These findings confirm that bullying in sports is not simply an interpersonal issue, but a public health problem that requires serious attention from various stakeholders. The unique characteristics of the sporting environment such as extreme power hierarchies, the normalization of violence, and high performance pressure distinguish bullying in sports from bullying in general contexts and require context-specific prevention approaches.

This study has limitations due to restrictions on English-language and open-access articles, as well as the predominance of studies from Western countries. For future research, longitudinal studies to understand the long-term development of bullying, cross-cultural studies in different countries, research on underrepresented populations (athletes with disabilities, transgender athletes, and non-popular sports), and intervention studies with experimental designs to test the effectiveness of prevention programs are recommended. Sports organizations are advised to implement clear anti-bullying policies with anonymous reporting mechanisms, mandatory training for coaches on recognizing and responding to bullying, and education for athletes and parents on athletes' rights and the importance of an inclusive and psychologically safe sporting environment.

Author Statement

Author Contributions: Wulandari served as the lead author and was responsible for the conceptualization of the study, literature search and selection, data extraction, thematic analysis, and manuscript writing. Rubiyatno contributed to the validation of the methodology, supervision of the review process, and critical revision of the manuscript. Putra Sastaman B contributed to data interpretation, drafting the discussion section, and approval of the final version of the manuscript.

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