






# Is young athletes' bullying behaviour different in team, combat, or individual sports?

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims at describing and comparing the prevalence of bullying behaviours and the perspective of victims, bystanders, and aggressors in team, individual, and combat sports. The survey involved 664 athletes of both genders (13–18 years old) from sports school and federated of several sports (team  $n=451$ , individual  $n=173$ , combat  $n=40$ ), who filled in the Prevention of Violence in Sport Questionnaire. The prevalence of bullying (victims, bullies, and bystanders) was 26.7% in team sports; 19.1% in individual sports, and 23.1% in combat. Through the Chi-square test, it was verified that there were no significant differences between different sports in what concerns the prevalence of bullying behaviours; neither was there a difference in the perspective of victims, bystanders, and aggressors. The percentage was bigger in victims (7.7%) and bystanders (17.4%) in combat sports, and aggressors (3.3%) in team sports. There are not aggressors in combat sports. Further studies are needed in order to achieve a deeper knowledge of the problem and plan strategies to prevent this sort of behaviour.

**KEYWORDS:** bullying; individual-sports; team-sports; combat-sports; youth.

## INTRODUCTION

School offers students the opportunity to play sports not only in Physical Education classes but also in school sports activities. Young people can also enroll in federated sport outside the school context. Sport is a key tool for development based on equality (Andrews & Andrews, 2003) providing an opportunity for self-awareness (Cunti, Bellantonio, & Priore, 2016), having a positive psychological and social impact (Eime, Young, Harvey, Charity, & Payne, 2013), and contributing to greater school success (Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003).

Competition is a complex environment for studying adverse behaviours, as members of the sports community generally adhere to sports ethics, which refers to “uncritical acceptance and commitment to” sports norms

(Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Adherence to sports ethics encourages athletes to internalize common expectations in the context of sport, including dedication toward their goals, reshaping adversity as a challenge, and the pursuit of excellence in sports performance (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Research suggests that sport is a “window” into the complexity of aggressive and violent behaviour (Spaaij & Schailée, 2019), which may occur in sport, professional, school, and private colleges (Fields, Collins, & Comstock, 2010). The literature states that the performance of athletes is associated with their well-being and self-esteem (Rosa, 2016). If the athlete is unable to perform as desired, he/she will be more vulnerable, which may lead to the appearance of bullying behaviours among teammates (Douglas & Carless, 2009).

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Bullying can be understood as a subcategory of aggressive behaviour (Smith & Monks, 2008). It is antisocial, peer-to-peer, intentional, provocative, and repetitive (Olweus, 1989). Bullying behaviours may arise at school, at work, on the internet (cyberbullying), or at the sports club (Ventura et al., 2019).

Mishna, Kerr, McInroy, and MacPherson (2019) reported that out of the 122 athletes of 24 federated sports, 48.4% said they were bullied. Corral-Pernía, Chacón-Borrego, Fernández-Gavira, and Rey (2018) concluded in a paper on a federated sport that 22.2% of the sample was involved in bullying (16.7% victim, 3.7% aggressor, and 1.9% victimized aggressor). The most frequent types of bullying were physical and verbal (Kerr, Jewett, MacPherson, & Stirling, 2016). Mishna et al. (2019) concluded that the type of bullying most used is verbal, social, and finally physical.

An investigation conducted by Escury and Dudinkl (2010) supports a previous study, reporting that 26% of young football and judo participants had been bullied. Vveinhardt and Fominiene (2020) carried out a study on 1440 federated athletes, concluding that a third of athletes from team sports identified themselves as victims; in individual sports, athletes mentioned being victims and bystanders — the percentage for bystanders is larger than the one for victims. Mishna et al. (2019) confirm these results, stating that the prevalence of bullying is larger in team sports, namely in rugby (11.5%), hockey (7.4%), and football (6.6%); concerning individual sports, cycling stands out with a percentage of 6.6%. It should be noted that team sports are the ones that draw more participants, as shown by Melim and Pereira (2013) and Nery, Neto, Rosado, and Smith (2018); however, these studies were not intended to collect data on the prevalence of bullying behaviour according to sport practiced but according to context (school or federated sport).

There is little available data on the prevalence of bullying behaviour according to the sport practiced. Fisher and Dzikus (2017) consider that the lack of research, the different approaches used by researchers, and the different instruments do not form a complete bullying image. Therefore, our study is justified by the lack of research in sport context; covering the region of Trás-os-Montes and Alto Douro in Vila Real, Bragança, Chaves, and Mirandela (Northern Portugal) and is meant to contribute to further understanding of the topic of bullying, as it describes and compares the prevalence of bullying behaviours in team, individual, and combat sports. This study aims at describing and comparing the prevalence of bullying behaviours and the perspective of victims, bystanders, and aggressors in team, individual, and combat sports.

## METHOD

### Participants

A cross-sectional study was conducted in the geographical area of Trás-os-Montes and Alto Douro (Portugal), in ten schools from the main cities: Vila Real, Bragança, Chaves, and Mirandela. These cities were selected because of the greater diversity in modalities and clubs that can be found. From the 15000 students that are enrolled in the state schools, we selected: athletes that practice school sports and federated sports; they had been practicing the sport for more than two years; their ages ranged from 13 to 18 years old; they did not suffer from any handicap. The age segment was chosen because The Long Term Athlete Development (Balyi, Way, & Higgs, 2013) indicates that it is at these ages that athletes start competing.

The sample used included 664 athletes of school and federated sports (390 male, 274 female), aged 13–18 ( $16.64 \pm 1.46$ ) years. Of these, 451 athletes practiced team sports, 173 individual sports, and 40 combat sports. The average experience in sport was  $4.22 (\pm 3.00)$  years of practice.

Sports included were:

- i) individual sports — swimming ( $n= 42$ ), badminton ( $n= 37$ ), table tennis ( $n= 31$ ), acrobatic gymnastics ( $n= 18$ ), athletics ( $n= 23$ ), figure skating ( $n= 11$ ), ballet ( $n= 3$ ), field tennis ( $n= 2$ ), cycling ( $n= 2$ ), boccia ( $n= 2$ ), and chess ( $n= 2$ );
- ii) team sports — football ( $n= 167$ ), futsal ( $n= 162$ ), volleyball ( $n= 76$ ), basketball ( $n= 24$ ), hockey ( $n= 12$ ), handball ( $n= 9$ ), and rugby ( $n= 1$ );
- iii) combat sports — karate ( $n= 23$ ), kickboxing ( $n= 6$ ), kung fu ( $n= 5$ ), judo ( $n= 3$ ), goju-ryu ( $n= 2$ ), and taekwondo ( $n= 1$ ).

This study was approved by the Ministry of Education. All the athletes' parents provided a written informed consent form allowing them to participate in the study, and all ethical aspects in the Declaration of Helsinki (UNESCO, 2005) were observed.

### Instruments

For data collection, the Questionnaire on Prevention of Violence in Sport was used. It was developed by Olweus (1989), adapted and validated under the European Training and Mobility of Researchers (TMR) Program — Network Project: Nature and Prevention of Bullying by Ortega, Mora, Lera, and Mora (1999). Later it was adapted, validated, and used in the TMR project to collect data in Portugal to study the Prevalence of Bullying in Sports Training (Nery et al., 2018). The questionnaire consists of 24 questions subdivided into 4 blocks:

- i) biographical parameters — age, gender, grade, nationality, locality, sport, experience, number, and duration of training per week;
- ii) victim's perspective — frequency (occasional: 1–2 times a year; + 3–6 times a year; persistent: once a week; several times a week) and forms of mistreatment (type of bullying), duration, location, number of actors, feelings, coping, coach and family-coach communication;
- iii) bystander's perspective- forms of mistreatment (type of bullying), feelings, reactions (participating in the aggression, defending the victim or observing) and reasons for bullying;
- iv) perpetrator's perspective — frequency (occasional: 1–2 times a year;+ 3–6 times a year; persistent: 1 time per week; several times per week) and forms of mistreatment (type of bullying), number of actors, feelings and communication.

### Procedures

First, the school directors were contacted in order to obtain their permission to apply a questionnaire on bullying in sports contexts (school and federated sports). Next, the parents were sent an informed consent form (including information on the aims and methods used in the study). Once consent was granted, the questionnaire was applied.

The questionnaire was applied by the researcher in six schools, while in the other four schools, it was applied by the Physical Education teachers. The researcher met the students of the six schools to explain the purpose of this study and gathered data on the same day. In the four schools in which there was no direct participation of the researcher, a meeting was held with the Physical Education teachers to explain the aims of the study and the procedures for applying the questionnaires to their students.

The data was collected between October 2018 and February 2019.

### Statistical analysis

For statistical analysis, frequency distributions and Chi-Square tests were performed. In sections two, three, and four of the questionnaire, which correspond to the victim's, bystander's, and bully's perspectives, participants were divided into victims, bullies, bystanders. Respondents who did not report experiencing or seeing any bullying episodes were not used in the comparative tests. According to sports, we did not carry out any comparative test in what concerns the aggressors' perspective because the percentage of aggressors is very low in individual sports and non-existent in combat sports. Statistical significance was set at  $p < 0.05$  level. The Monte Carlo method was used when the necessary conditions for applying the Chi-square test were not satisfied.

### RESULTS

In what concerns the prevalence of bullying behaviour, 76.4% of the athletes from school sports claimed not to be involved in bullying, and only 23.6% admitted being involved. In federated sports, 74,4% of the athletes stated that they were not involved in bullying episodes, while 25,6% admitted their involvement.

In what concerns differences between modalities, 26.7% of the athletes reported being involved in bullying behaviours in the team sports, 19.1% in individual and 23.1% in the combat. There were no significant differences when comparing bullying roles by sports: victim ( $\chi^2(2) = 2.249, p = 0.325$ ), bystander ( $\chi^2(2) = 1.033, p = 0.596$ ) and aggressor ( $\chi^2(2) = 2.087, p = 0.352$ ) (Figure 1).

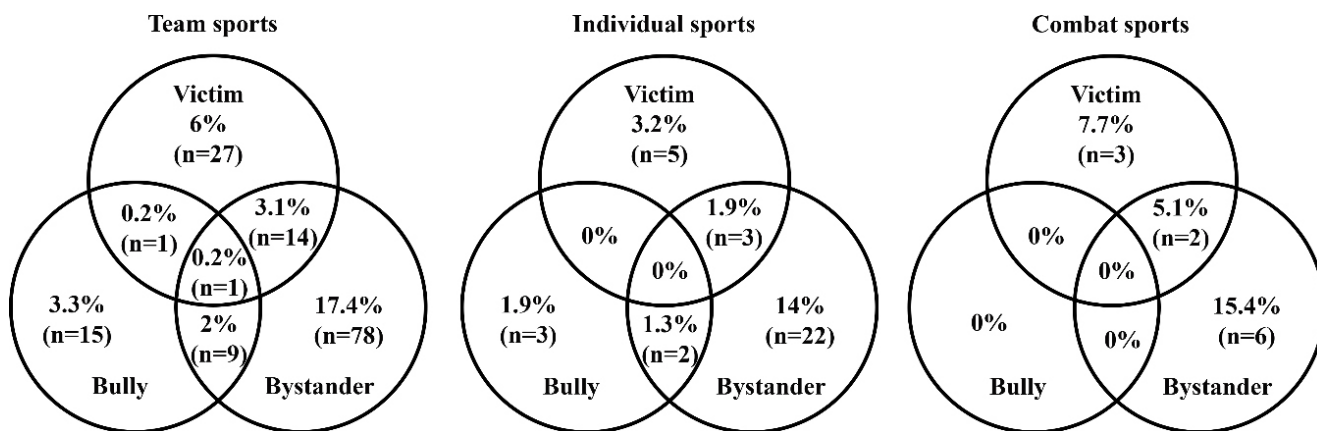


Figure 1. Prevalence of Bullying Behaviours by sports.

Through the analysis of Table 1, it was found that most victims reported occasional (91.4%) and verbal (83.3%) bullying. These behaviours were generally reported as being individual (83.3%), occurring in the club (57.6%), and lasting

for a short period (75%). Bullying mainly caused negative feelings in the victims (81%); 73% reported using emotion-focused coping; 39% declared that they did not reveal their feelings to anyone. Most victims did not seek support

**Table 1.** Comparison of victims' perspective according to sport practiced.

	Total	Team sports	Individual sports	Combat sports	p-value
	Freq. (%)	Freq. (%)	Freq. (%)	Freq. (%)	
Frequency					
Occasional	32 (91.4)	25 (92.6)	5 (100)	2 (66.7)	0.28
Persistent	3 (8.6)	2 (7.4)	-	1 (33.3)	
Forms of mistreatment					
Verbal	23 (83.3)	19 (86.4)	4 (80)	2 (66.7)	0.36
Social	4 (10)	2 (9.1)	-	1 (33.3)	
Cyberbullying	3 (6.7)	1 (4.5)	1 (20)	-	
Duration					
Occasional	21(75)	15 (71.4)	4 (100)	2 (66.7)	0.60
Repeated	7 (25)	6 (28.6)	-	1 (33.3)	
Place					
Competition	9 (27.3)	8 (32)	1 (20)	-	0.57
Club	19 (57.6)	13 (52)	3 (60)	3 (100)	
Training and competition	3 (9.1)	3 (12)	-	-	
Cyberbullying	2 (6)	1 (4)	1 (20)	-	
Speakers					
Individual	20 (83.3)	17 (89.5)	2 (50)	1 (100)	0.27
Group	4 (16.7)	2 (10.5)	2 (50)	-	
Feelings					
Negative	25 (81)	18 (78.3)	4 (80)	3 (100)	0.82
Indifference	6 (19)	5 (21.7)	1 (20)	-	
Reactions					
Focused on emotion	22 (73.3)	17 (77.3)	2 (40)	3 (100)	0.31
Focused on problem	7 (23.3)	4 (18.2)	3 (60)	-	
Multiple	1 (3.3)	1 (4.5)	-	-	
Communication					
No one	12 (39)	11 (47.8)	-	1(33.3)	0.15
Peers	8 (26)	7 (30.4)	1 (20)	-	
Family	8 (26)	4 (17.4)	3 (60)	1 (33.3)	
Adults	3 (9)	1 (4.3)	1 (20)	1 (33.3)	
Coach support					
Did not talk	18 (60)	15 (68.2)	1 (20)	2 (66.7)	0.31
Talked (negative)	2 (7)	1 (4.5)	1 (20)	-	
Talked (positive)	10 (33)	6 (27.3)	3 (60)	1 (33.3)	
Communication (family-coach)					
Did not talk	24 (80)	20 (87)	1 (25)	3 (100)	0.08
Talked (negative)	2 (7)	1 (4.3)	1 (25)	-	
Talked (positive)	4 (13)	2 (8.7)	2 (50)	-	

from the coach (60%), and 80% reported no communication between family and coach. When comparing the victims' perspectives according to sports, no statistically significant differences were found.

From the analysis of Table 2, it was found that bystanders reported that the most frequent form of mistreatment was verbal (56.6%), leading mainly to negative feelings (95%) towards aggressive behaviour. Bystander's reactions usually focus on the victim's defence (73.3%); 70% of respondents blamed the aggressor. No statistically significant differences were found when comparing the perspectives of the bystanders according to sports.

Table 3 presents the frequency of aggressors' perspective only in team and individual sports because none of the combat athletes reported being an aggressor. The results showed that bullying behaviours were mostly occasional (94%); only one athlete from individual sports reported being a persistent aggressor. The frequency of aggressors was 15 in the team sports, while only one athlete in individual sports has reported being an aggressor. Bullying behaviour assumed a verbal form in 69.2% of the cases, although two athletes who practice team sports mentioned social and other physical bullying. The bullying behaviour usually occurred in a group (88.2%); only two team sports athletes reported individual

**Table 3.** Comparison of the aggressors' perspective according to sports.

	Total	Team sports	Individual sports
	Frequency (%)	Frequency	Frequency
Frequency			
Occasional	17 (94.4)	14	3
Persistent	1 (5.6)	1	-
Forms of mistreatment			
Verbal	9 (69.2)	8	1
Social	2 (15.4)	2	-
Physical	2 (15.5)	2	-
Speakers			
Individual	2 (11.8)	2	-
Group	15 (88.2)	13	2
Feelings			
Negative	7 (53.8)	6	1
Indifference	1 (7.7)	1	-
Positive	5 (38.5)	5	-
Communication			
No one	5 (41.7)	5	-
Peers	1 (8.3)	1	-
Family	3 (25)	2	1
Adults	3 (25)	3	-

**Table 2.** Comparison of bystanders' perspective according to sport practiced.

	Total	Team sports	Individual ports	Combat sports	p-value
	Freq. (%)	Freq. (%)	Freq. (%)	Freq. (%)	
Forms of mistreatment					
Physical	21 (19.8)	15 (19.2)	4 (18.2)	2 (33.3)	0.85
Verbal	60 (56.6)	43 (55.1)	13 (59.1)	4 (66.7)	
Social	22 (20.7)	18 (23.1)	4 (18.2)	-	
Cyberbullying	3 (2.8)	2 (2.6)	1 (4.5)	-	
Feelings					
Negative	94 (95)	66 (93)	22 (100)	6 (100)	0.75
Indifference	1 (1)	1 (1.4)	-	-	
Neutral	4 (4)	4 (5.6)	-	-	
Reactions					
Agression participation	2 (2.2)	1 (1.5)	1 (5.6)	-	0.53
Victimization	5 (5.6)	3 (4.5)	2 (11.1)	-	
Observation	17 (18.9)	13 (19.4)	2 (11.1)	2 (40)	
Victim defense	66 (73.3)	50 (74.6)	13 (72.2)	3 (60)	
Motives					
Don't know	18 (19.3)	15 (21.1)	3 (16.7)	-	0.71
Agressor responsabilization	65 (70)	48 (67.6)	14 (77.8)	3 (75)	
Victim responsabilization	10 (10.7)	8 (11.3)	1 (5.6)	1 (25)	

aggression. The larger percentage of athletes reported negative feelings (53.8%), while five athletes from team sports reported positive feelings and one indifference. Most athletes did not speak about aggression behaviours to anyone (41.7%), but three team sports athletes reported communication with adults. In individual sports, only one athlete admitted being an aggressor and talking to the family members.

## DISCUSSION

The current study aimed to compare the prevalence of bullying behaviour in team, individual, and combat sports. It was verified that only a minority of athletes reported having been involved in bullying episodes. Team sports were the ones that showed a higher prevalence of bullying (26.7%) compared to combat sports (23.1%) and individual sports (19.1%), although the differences are not statistically significant. Concerning the results of this study, the prevalence of victimization in collective modalities was 9.5% (6% victim, 3.1% victim and bystander, 0.2% victim and aggressor and 0.2% victim, aggressor and bystander), in the individual modalities was 5.1% (3.2% victim and 1.9% victim and bystander) and in the combat sports was 12.8% (7.7% victim and 5.1% victim and bystander). According to Parker (1996), victimization is more likely to happen in individual modalities, namely in track and field. However, the results obtained in this study do not confirm this trend since the combat modality obtained a higher prevalence of bullying than verified in collective and individual modalities. This difference in results can be justified by the fact that combat sports athletes consider aggression an inherent component of competition (Bredemeier & Shields, 1986). The prevalence of victimization in combat modalities may stem from the fact that judo athletes between the ages of ten and fourteen use the gym facilities to get dressed for practice, while footballers usually arrive equipped from home (Escury & Dudinkl, 2010). The absence of adult surveillance in the changing rooms and the entire structure of the club can be a factor in the higher prevalence of victimization.

It was verified that the frequency of victimization according to sports (team, individual, and combat) is occasional in 91.4% of the cases and verbal in 84.2%, similar to the results of Volk and Lagzdins (2009), a study that involved 69 adolescents aged between 12 and 15 years. Regarding emotions, it was possible to verify that victimization transmits negative feelings to athletes (81%) and also observed by Kentel and McHugh (2015).

Our study verified that in team and combat sports, victimization is individual, a finding that contradicts Connell

(2001), who stated that there is higher bullying flow when the aggressors are in a group. In individual sports, it was verified that victimization is 50% individual and 50% group. These behaviours can be related to the lack of confidence and anxiety of the aggressor (Olweus, 1989). According to Dias (2005), individuals who practice individual sports are more likely to show higher anxiety levels. The aggressor's anxiety can be understood through the success or failure at the sporting level (Lundqvist, Kenttä, & Raglin, 2011), as failure leads to negative thoughts, higher stress, and agitation. Thus, the emotional state of the athlete can be related to the prevalence of individual and group victimization in individual modalities.

Athletes in individual sports have, concerning victimization, a reaction focused on the problem (60%). In 60% of the cases, victims talk to the family and their coach. This may be explained by the fact that parents influence and motivate young athletes to practice sports; that is, they exert a positive influence, offering motivational guidance and increasing self-esteem (Gomes, 2010). With parental involvement, athletes who are victims of bullying have more support to report these unfortunate experiences. The individual athletes see their coach as their leader because of their experience; as the athlete becomes more competitive, athlete and coach become closer, spending more hours together (Stirling, 2009), which makes it easier to approach the victimization the athlete is going through. In relation to team and combat sports, the values are different; that is, we verified that victimization in team sports has a reaction focused on emotion (77.3%), the victims do not communicate with anyone (47.8%), not even with their coach (68.2%). In combat sports victimization, it presents a reaction focused on emotion, and the victims do not communicate with their coach (66.7%). The fact that parents have a regular presence in training and competition increases pressure and anxiety (Teques & Serpa, 2013); parents' involvement, when excessive, can increase anxiety (Vasconcelos & Gomes, 2015). This process can lead the athlete to be less open with the parents, precisely because they are deeply involved in their children's sports careers. According to Stirling and Kerr (2014), the coach should build a relationship of respect and trust with the athlete; our study suggests that the athletes may not have enough trust in their coaches to report bullying episodes.

Sports participation has a psychological and social impact on the individual (Eime et al., 2013). In this sense, bullying in sport, especially victimization, can have a negative impact on athletes, leading to problems that range from depression to anxiety episodes and may even lead to suicide attempts (Geel, Vedder, & Tanilon, 2014).

Regarding bystanders, literature reports that bullying behaviours in sports context are mainly described by bystanders (Salmivalli, 2010), who report that these behaviours were more frequent in games and training (Mishna et al., 2019). This can be explained by the presence of more bystanders in team sports when compared to the individual and combat sports of our study.

Our results indicate that bystanders tend to defend victims of mistreatment (73.3%), blaming aggressors for inadequate behaviour (70%) and excusing the victims (10.7%). Another investigation has found the reverse, that 77% of bystanders are encouraged by aggressors or other bystanders to intimidate the victim (Fields et al., 2010). Our study found that the reactions and feelings experienced by the bystanders are mostly negative and that they mostly report verbal bullying. These results were confirmed and reported in another study carried out in Portugal by Nery et al. (2018).

There is a deep “code of silence” regarding mistreatment in the sport, which can be justified by a feeling of fear or other factors (Stirling, Bridges, Cruz, & Mountjoy, 2011). The prevalence of bullying revealed by the participants in this study may lead to the wrong conclusion that bullying is not frequent in sports because the victims see aggressive behaviour as inherent to sports (Stirling et al., 2011; Vveinhardt & Fominiene, 2020).

Literature reports that 50% of young people have intimidated someone (Wild, Flisher, Bhana, & Lombard, 2004); usually, the victims are females, people with disabilities, obesity, or motor difficulties (Gonçalves, Deiques, Peres, & Júnior, 2019).

Relatively to the prevalence of abuse by the aggressor, the result of our study indicates that in team sports, it is 5.7% (3.3% aggressor, 2% aggressor and bystander, 0.2% aggressor and victim and 0.2% aggressor, victim and bystander); in individual sports, it is 3.2% (1.9% aggressor and 1.3% aggressor and bystander), and in combat sports do not exist. Vveinhardt and Fominiene (2020) obtained similar results, finding a larger prevalence of aggressors in team sports as compared to individual sports. Combat sports, specifically karate, helps athletes channel aggression and negative feelings through martial art, so it avoids the emergence and vicious cycle of bullying (Galindo, 2001). The fact that there are no aggressors in the combat modality can be justified by the sport’s philosophy and considering aggression as a component of the competition. However, few studies exist on bullying behaviours in Martial Arts and Combat sports in school-age athletes (Simões, Santos, Pereira, & Figueiredo, 2021).

Nixon (1997) states that the practicing of team sports, due to the physical contact, particularly in basketball, may

be related to violence outside the sports context; that is, the aggressors may resort to bullying out of the sight of the coach or other club members. Shannon (2013) states that bullying behaviours may start in the school environment or neighbourhoods and continue in sports clubs.

In our study, the most common form of abuse was verbal bullying (69.2%). It is mostly occasional (94.4%); generates negative feelings (53.8%), which are not communicated to anyone (41.7%), coinciding with the results obtained by the victims. In contrast to the victims’ perspective, the aggressors claim that mistreatment is carried out in groups (88.2%). As suggested by Shannon (2013), these results can be justified by the lack of supervision, which increases the probability of bullying behaviours.

## Strengths and limitations

This work is innovative in the area of “bullying in sport”, because there are no previous studies for this geographical area. The fact that it included male and female athletes in different contexts is also innovative. It is important to emphasize the need for further quantitative and qualitative studies and studies using mixed methods to deepen knowledge on this issue.

Further analysis should include other factors involved in bullying behaviours, their interactions, and their impact on different types of bullying. The consequences of bullying, both in the short and long term, should also be studied. Cyberbullying is also an important problem that needs to be studied as its frequency and impact increase.

A limitation of our study may be the structure of the questionnaire. The victims took more time to complete the questionnaire, which may lead to a lack of sincerity on the part of the interviews. A long questionnaire may exhaust the respondents and thus affect their responses. Although the questionnaires are anonymous, the respondents may not be completely honest, and the information collected may not allow a deeper understanding of the problem.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this investigation, it was verified that the prevalence of bullying and the perspective of victims, bystanders, and aggressors in relation to this behaviour, were not different depending on the type of sport practiced. However, it was verified that victimization is superior in combat sports and that bystander and aggressor roles are more frequent in team sports. Although the prevalence of bullying in the sport context is low, we believe that it is necessary to implement programs directed to the school community (parents, teachers,

and students) to prevent and act against these behaviours. In what concerns sports context, managers, coaches, staff, parents, and athletes should attend lectures on bullying behaviour, to inform and draw attention to this issue in order to reduce violent behaviour in sports, according to sports ethics.

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