

**Seeing or Being the Victim of Toxic Leadership in Sports: How the Position to an Offense  
Affects Preferred Justice Responses**

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### Abstract

This study investigated responses to toxic leadership in sports, focusing on restorative (rehabilitative) versus retributive (punitive) justice preferences. It was hypothesized that (1) victims would show a stronger preference for restorative justice and a weaker preference for retributive justice and (2) this relationship would be mediated by moral outrage (linked to retributive justice) and the needs for communion and agency (linked to restorative justice). To examine these hypotheses, an experiment was set up in which participants were randomly allocated to a victim ( $N=100$ ) or bystander ( $N=96$ ) condition in which they were asked to imagine a scenario of being the victim or bystander of a case of toxic leadership in a sports association and then indicated their preferred justice response. A linear regression- and mediation analysis suggested nuanced results. Hypothesis 1 was rejected as, in contrast to predictions, there was no significant effect between position to incident and justice response. However, a tendency was observed as participants of the victim group tended to prefer a restorative justice response more than those in the bystander group. Hypothesis 2 was also rejected as none of the mediators had an indirect effect as predicted. Unexpectedly, participants of the victim group did report a stronger moral outrage level than those in the bystander group, which, in turn, predicted a stronger retributive justice response. It was concluded that victims tended to favor restorative over retributive justice. However, victim's retributive justice response was also enhanced through a stronger moral outrage level than for bystanders. These findings underline how more variables, such as time since offense and the changing sports culture, need to be taken into consideration for decision-making within sports culture and future studies. The level of moral outrage is different between victims and bystanders and might change over time. It is recommended that moral outrage for victims of toxic leadership is to be examined further in the sports domain.

*Keywords:* toxic leadership, transgressive behavior, restorative justice, retributive justice

Within the world of sports, many cases of transgressive behavior have come to light recently. One of these being the recent case of Graeme Abel, a scouting head of the women's soccer team Bay FC, who resigned his position after complains about verbal abuse from previous soccer teams (Linehan & Rueter, 2025). Behavior as such is known as toxic leadership. It can be defined as emotional transgressive behavior exhibited by a coach that causes significant distress for an athlete. Graeme himself denied these allegations. Yet, he resigned a week after being hired at Bay FC. Cases as such are quite complex with many different stakeholders at play and often have consequences not only for alleged offenders and victims, but also other association members. In the example of Graeme, statements of victims contradict his own and no concrete proof has been found, but the events still led to his resignation. Questions of toxic leadership are polarizing in sports culture as it is generally a controversial topic and often leads to detrimental impacts of mental health and performance for athletes (Lundqvist et al., 2025; Zogg et al., 2024). Offenders of toxic leadership often suffer as well from the consequences of their act, such as losing their work or team. In case of public controversy, offenders often are stigmatized after allegations and have difficulties due to exclusion from their communities as well as finding new communities or work environments. As is the case for Graeme, who even resigned from the association due to unverified allegations from athletes.

Sport associations commonly face transgressive behavior between leaders/coaches and athletes, often leading to higher drop-out rates and impacting athletes' mental health and performance with an increased desire to quit the sport (Parent et al., 2021). It is thus of interest as to why cases of leadership are so controversial and how perspectives on them can differ greatly within sports associations. To prevent drop-out rates and enhance the communication and wellbeing of association members, it is crucial to investigate the needs and desires of stakeholders involved in cases of toxic leadership. This study aims to examine the reactions of victims and bystanders to such cases.

### **Transgressive Behavior in Sports is Prevalent**

Due to frequent cases of transgressive behaviors in sports, the International Olympic Committee published the International Olympic Committee consensus statement, short IOC (Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2024). It defines unwanted, harmful behavior within the sports community as an act of Interpersonal Violence (IV). This definition includes various forms of violence within

sports, including sexual, physical and emotional violence that are harmful towards persons in the sports community. The definition of IV shares similarities with the umbrella term of transgressive behavior. Vertommen et al. (2015) define transgressive behavior as any form of unwanted behavior, non-verbal, verbal or physical that poses harm to a victim. Both interpersonal violence and transgressive behavior are considered a key problem within sport society (Forsdike & O'Sullivan, 2022; Schipper-van Veldhoven et al., 2022; Zogg et al., 2024).

Various prevalence studies underscore that transgressive behavior poses a significant problem in sports. The study by Schipper-van Veldhoven et al. (2022) estimates the prevalence of both emotional and physical transgressive behavior in sports in the Netherlands. Participants were surveyed via an online questionnaire, sharing their experience on various forms of transgressive behavior in sports during their childhood. They found that severe emotional transgression occurred in a shocking number 22% of all cases, with severe physical assault at 12.7%. Furthermore, Zogg et al. (2024) conducted a similar prevalence study with regards to current college athletes in the US. NCAA athletes were asked on a survey which forms of coaching style and Interpersonal Violence they experienced during their college sports career. One in ten athletes reported at least one form of Interpersonal Violence. Common consequences of such behavior for athletes were negative psychosocial outcomes such as an increased risk of burnout.

### **Toxic Leadership and a Lack of Research in Emotional Transgressive Behavior**

Transgressive behavior is an umbrella term for various subcategories (Kim, 2024; Vertommen et al., 2015). While estimating the prevalence of various forms of transgressive behavior, a distinction is made between physical, sexual and emotional transgressive behavior. Even though all forms of transgressive behavior can be assembled under one umbrella term, it is executed in diverse ways. Unlike physical or sexual transgressive behavior, emotional transgressions breach emotional boundaries rather than physical or sexual ones. This includes disrespecting boundaries within a coach-athlete relationship, but also verbal abuse and over-ambitiousness in demands for athletes (Akinyele & Chen, 2024).

Toxic leadership, involving these emotional transgressions, is difficult to operationalize, however. Emotional transgression does not involve the breach of physical boundaries and is more difficult to observe and objectify. Graeme Abel was, for example, alleged of verbal abuse

towards his athletes, but it led to no legal consequences or state interference (Linehan & Rueter, 2025). Graeme's case did, however, lead to controversy. Furthermore, the findings of Schipper-van Veldhoven et al. (2022) suggest that emotional transgressive behavior within sports is more prevalent than cases of physical and sexual transgressive behavior. Yet, most research has focused on sexual transgressive behavior (Van Baarle et al., 2023). It is thus of relevance to investigate emotional transgression within the context of toxic leadership.

Toxic leadership also has consequences beyond the direct harm done to athletes themselves. Powers et al. (2016) conducted a qualitative study among coaches and staff members who were interviewed on the topic of toxic leadership. The data from those interviews underlined that beyond individual harm, the structure of a team and association can also be affected by cases of toxic leadership. This is due to involved individuals having their own interests, fears and motivations in cases of emotional transgressive behavior. For example, often athletes are too afraid to voice their disturbance due to anxiety from the coach. Powers et al. (2016) thus argue that the reason for the negative perception of coaches who display toxic leadership is a lack of checks within the association and members of the association not sharing their concerns. If such problems persist, they could over time lead to a high drop-out rate which highly impacts the association structure. Dynamics as such weaken the communication- and commitment level within an association greatly. Findings by Zaabi et al. (2018) furthermore declare that badly communicated issues with toxic leadership decrease trust within organizations and weaken group productivity.

To avoid negative structural changes arising from toxic leadership, it is of interest to investigate the actual desires and wishes of all parties involved surrounding emotional transgressions in sports because of toxic leadership. To find a solution to cases of toxic leadership that encompasses the desires of parties involved, it is of relevance to examine what those desires are. More specifically, it is of interest to examine what the desires of victims are on how to treat offenders and how victims feel best supported. Offenders themselves have various needs as well, most linked to mental health support, educational training and social support (Bouffard et al., 2000; Chitsabesan et al., 2006). While it is of relevance to examine the needs of this group as well, it goes beyond the scope of this Bachelor Thesis and is recommended for future research.

As previously established by Powers et al. (2016), cases of toxic leadership can impact the organizational structure of an association beyond harm done to an individual victim. Athletes within associations, leaders and coaches do not properly communicate their concerns regarding cases of toxic leadership, increasing hostility and a lack of trust. It would thus be of interest to examine what the concerns and wishes of various stakeholders are in such situations. If, for example, bystanders would prefer that an offender gets excluded from the sports association, while the victims would rather have a conversation with him to find a solution, a conflict of interest would arise. With sports association boards knowing about a justice response-related difference between bystander and victim preferences, they would better be able to assess the preferences of both groups and initiate a conversation about what they believe to be just. Bystanders might favor a punitive response because they believe it aids the victim. A conversation with victims could take place in which victims explain how a mediated exchange to change the coach's behavior would aid them more. If there was a difference as such between victims and bystanders, it might be important to know for association boards to initiate proper conversations and exchanges that meet the desires of all stakeholders involved. When it comes to deciding on how to treat an offender and restore feelings of justice, literature defines two forms of justice response.

### **Criticisms of Retributive Justice-Oriented Responses to Wrongdoing**

Gromet and Darley (2009) laid out two main forms of justice response that humans adhere to after perceiving an act of injustice, which are likely to apply as well to emotional transgressions due to toxic leadership. First, retributive justice refers to punishment (Gromet & Darley, 2009). It is based on the philosophy that an offender caused harm to society, for example by violating a law, and needs to settle an obligation in form of an act of suffering (Wenzel et al., 2007). It relies on the notion that through experiencing suffering, the offender will not continue to inflict harm. In short, the offender is being punished within the form of retributive justice (Scholl & Townsend, 2023). Common punishments include jail time, probation supervision, community sentences or being fined. In the context of sports, an offender could be punished by having to leave the association or generally getting their training license revoked. Another option, as in the case of Graeme Abel case, would be that the offender would lose their occupation in the current sport association.

The effectiveness of retributive justice has been widely criticized, however. Agrawal (2016) criticizes retributive justice from a philosophical perspective. They argue that retributive justice is built on the idea that punishment would deter an offender from committing similar actions in the future. However, by executing punishment on the offender, they are treated as means to an end rather than an end themselves which does not consider the offender's humanity. Additionally, Agrawal also questions whether punishment deters offenders from committing similar acts. With the US prison system as an example, they argue that it is more built on profit and cheap labor than changing offenders' behavior. When an offender is punished for their actions, they are also often removed from their community and have financial deficits. This, according to Agrawal, isolates offenders and does not prevent wrongdoing. Similarly, Scholl and Townsend (2023) declare that retributive justice responses lead to antisocial instead of prosocial behaviors as well as mental health issues for offenders. They underscore how retributive justice practices accelerate feelings of exclusion from communities and important relationships. After being punished, offenders are often stigmatized within society (e.g. after prison sentences), making it more difficult for them to integrate within society and leading to recurrent offenses. Offenders in prisons experience higher levels of loneliness (Rokach, 2001). Coaches who are engaging in toxic leadership may not go to prison, but, as in the case of Graeme Abel, often are excluded from their communities. Research suggests that loneliness and isolation for individuals predict lower rates of prosocial behavior and higher rates of crime (Check et al., 1985; Yin & Lee, 2023).

The role of the victim within retributive justice practices is also criticized. Agrawal (2015) argues that retributive justice is built on the idea that, with all individuals having the same value in society, the offender justifies his act of hurting another individual through his higher value, above the victim. Thus, the offender must be punished, so that the value of individuals once again becomes equal. Agrawal criticized this approach as it assumes that victims have a lesser value until the offender is punished. The value of the victim is thus depending on the offender, with no agency for the victim. They thus argue that this is a problematic view on the victim. They also criticize whether the approach to restore "value" cannot be to support the victim through emotional or financial support for example, rather than punishing the offender.

From these criticisms, it seems questionable whether excluding coaches from associations prevents future incidents of transgressive behavior or toxic leadership. When a case

against a coach becomes public and they get excluded from their association as a punishment, it firstly seems questionable whether they are likely to find work at another association (Aine et al., 2025). And if they do, as in the case of Graeme Abel, there might already be resentment from athletes at the new association, with less trust in the coach. Based on these criticisms concerning retributive justice, I argue that this is not an ideal environment for a coach and would not prevent but rather enhance chances of a re-offense. Coaches, feeling socially excluded, would, as I argue, be more likely to execute toxic behavior in future associations. A coach would not gain insight into the consequences his behavior has on victims. The coach would only experience the act of an association to socially exclude him, feeling outraged towards the association board instead of his own behavior. I argue that under forms of punishment as such, understanding and empathy are missing for sustainable behavior change. If a coach simply gets excluded from association as a form of punishment, they will not acquire a better behavior pattern to replace with the old pattern and simply get more excluded from the sports community. Before gaining knowledge on replacing toxic leadership behavior with healthy, motivating behavior, a coach behaving in a toxic way would not be able to coach properly in the future. It puts into question whether punitive practices are beneficial for victims of toxic leadership. Victims of the offense would not get assistance to heal from the experience, as punishment mainly focusses on the offender. And possible new athletes in future associations would have less trust in the coach due to stigmatization and be vulnerable to similar behavior from the coach.

### **Arguments in Favor of Restorative Justice-Oriented Responses to Wrongdoing**

Restorative justice on the other hand is rather based on reparation. Even though retributive justice is present and dominant in the current Western climate, restorative justice is an approach which has been employed frequently in human history as well (Zehr, 2015). Within restorative and retributive justice, the view is supported that the offender caused harm to a victim. However, they fundamentally differ in which reaction towards the offender is appropriate and can fix the harm that has been done. While the offender is seen as paying his debt within retributive justice, the focus on restorative justice relies more on reparation and rehabilitation. Thus, instead of imposing suffering through punishment, an offender receives aid in attempting to learn from their experience and undo and compensate for the errors that have been made (Scholl & Townsend, 2023). Supporters of restorative justice argue that while solely focusing on punishing



an offender, the needs of victims are often overlooked and unmet. The victim and offender are given agency and control as they can choose how to react to their conflict and agree on a solution that is healing for them. This focus largely includes the victim's and offenders' relationship and focusses on establishing arrangements that favor both parties.

Restorative justice practices do, however, not go without challenges. For offenders, engaging in restorative justice properly can be extremely difficult. The process of admitting having done something harmful and apologizing to the victim alone often presents itself as a great challenge for offenders (Okimoto & Gollwitzer, 2024). Furthermore, Okimoto and Gollwitzer (2024) describe the issue of the "magnitude gap" which entails that victims often see the behavior as more severe than the offender sees the behavior. This may lead to the victim blaming the offender and no agreement process being made. This underlines the importance for restorative practices to have a well-trained mediator present that regards the situational circumstances and biases of both victim and offender (Wyrick & Costanzo, 1999). Even though offenders are often resistant in restorative practices, participation can greatly benefit both parties.

Despite these challenges, the effectiveness of restorative practice has been supported empirically. Research employing statements of victims and volunteers concludes in a tendency to favor restorative justice practices over retributive practices (Hollósvölgyi, 2025; Kitson-Boyce & Athwal-Kooner, 2024). Scholl and Townsend (2023) present the four key elements of restorative justice practice. Those firstly include agreements between individuals most closely related to the incident and repairing harm. Secondly, the element of repairing harm is of essence as it directly contrasts with the retributive approach which aims to inflict harm to the offender to prevent future damage. Furthermore, the offender must take responsibility to atone for their wrongdoing. Lastly, restorative justice focusses on the concept of being able to trust the offender and that people can feel safe around them in the future. To fulfill this point, agreements must be made about how to behave in the future to prevent harm from recurring. This process often involves victim-offender mediation (VOM) in which an offender is in a controlled and observed dialogue with the victim to exchange emotions and find mutual understanding (Jonas et al., 2022). An essential requirement for victim-offender mediation is the inclusion of a mediator for the conversation between victim and offender. As mentioned before, a challenge of restorative practices are the biases of victim and offender and the personal difficulties in engaging in restorative practices. The mediator needs to be aware of and guide victim and offender through

these challenges for VOM to succeed (Wyrick & Costanzo, 1999). In the context of sports, restorative justice would for example encompass a meeting in which a mediator, the offender and the victim exchange their emotional responses about this situation to find a common goal that fits both parties.

### **Why the Relationships to Cases of Toxic Leadership Impact Justice Responses**

Restorative and retributive justice responses can both be preferred and can happen simultaneously and at different levels (Hermann, 2017). Of interest and less researched is, however, how the preference for a restorative or retributive justice approach depends on a person's relationship to an emotional transgression in a sports case as such. It is of significance as it may impact commitment to an organization and its structure after emotional transgressions. If a case of toxic leadership is not handled properly, it could lead to victims not speaking up in fear of victim-blaming from bystanders. Another consequence of this could be that offenders experience non-regulated retributive justice responses from association members, such as large social exclusion from the community, without acquiring a healthier coaching style that could replace their toxic coaching. If no agreement is found that benefits all parties, frustrations could influence the sports culture within an association. As Powers et al. (2016) stated, in some cases an incident of transgressive behavior can impact an association's structure. Within the scope of this study, two types of relationships to a transgressive incident are considered, that being the victim of the offense and a bystander within the association. As research suggests, the preferred justice response might differ considerably between these two types of relationships.

#### ***Victim***

While first thinking about a victim's reaction to injustice, one might intuitively think that punishment is an initial and appropriate reaction as the victim is directly harmed. This, in turn, might suggest that a victim would favor punishment as a just response. However, in the previously discussed paper by Scholl and Townsend (2023), it is argued that a restorative justice approach is more beneficial for victim's mental health. They argue that by its own nature, restorative justice is focused on causing rehabilitation instead of additional suffering which aids the healing process of victims.

**Need to Restore Agency.** Instead of causing more harm to the offender, restorative justice by nature provides feelings of agency for the victim (McAuliffe et al., 2024). Van Dijk

(2016) argues that in restorative justice programs, victims will often have a need to restore their feelings of agency as their boundaries have been violated. In restorative justice approaches such as victim-offender mediation, a victim is in control in how to act and respond towards the offender. For example, it can accept or reject an apology from the offender based on its own interpretation of the offender's sincerity. While constructing a rehabilitation plan with the offender, the victim has also the choice to engage with the offender as much as desired, gather the information it needs or exit a conversation overall. Shnabel and Nadler (2008) argue that in case of a transgressive incident, the victim's perceived control is threatened. They argue that a restorative approach fits victims better than a retributive approach as it considers the underlying needs of victims more. Precisely, victims have the need to restore their sense of agency and power after they have been threatened by the behavior of the offender.

**Need for Communion.** Next to individual power, victims often seek to restore a sense of social connection and communion with others after they have been harmed by an offender. Pemberton et al (2017) define communion as "the participation of the individual in and in connection with a group." They argue that a victim's sense of communion and agency are disrupted through an offense. After experiencing an offense, victims often feel isolated, misunderstood and socially rejected. Mediated communication between victims and offenders could help to restore a sense of social value for both parties. Victims not only need to restore their personal sense of agency, but they also have a desire to express themselves through social relatedness and warmth. While social support and close personal relationships around the victim itself are crucial, Shnabel and Nadler (2008) argue that it is also beneficial for some victims to find direct communion with the offender, as through victim-offender mediation. They argue that by exchanging their perspectives and emotional reactions, reconciliation and emotional healing is possible.

Direct contact and connection with an offender can deliver a victim information and closure in more direct manners than if information was filtered through a third party. Firstly, the reasoning behind an offense is often unclear for victims. Victims are often interested in the motivation behind the offense towards them (Boom et al., 2008, as cited in Van Dijk, 2016; Nascimento et al., 2022). Van Dijk (2016) argue that victim-offender mediation between victims and offenders significantly decreases feelings of anger and fear for victims. The desire to gain information on the motivations and circumstances is thus a key motivation for victims to engage

in victim-offender mediation (Wyrick & Costanzo, 1999). With gaining information on the offender's perspective, victims can better understand their role in the offense and gain a clearer understanding. However, according to Van Dijk (2016), this effect largely depends on face-to-face mediation between the victim and offender directly. Based on these findings, I argue that direct cooperation and creating feelings of communion between victim and offender explain a victim's restorative justice response in contrast to bystanders.

### ***Bystander***

As bystander, this study classifies another member of the sport association who is otherwise not closely linked to the victim or the offender. Unlike victims, bystanders are not directly affected by an offense and therefore may have different motivations than victims do. While most research on victims strongly supports the assumption that a restorative approach is supported (Scholl & Townsend, 2023), a bystander's justice response is not as evident. Research conducted by Hill et al. (2024) underlines the complexity of bystanders' responses and incorporate denounce theory in their argument. Denounce theory finds that bystanders usually feel anger toward perpetrators and empathy towards victims. These findings suggest that bystanders' needs for resolution after direct contact with the offender is not as strong. Feelings of anger might prevail regarding the offender, and they may therefore prefer a more retributive approach than victims.

**Moral outrage** Van De Vyver and Abrams (2014) conducted a study on moral outrage among bystanders. Moral outrage is defined as an emotional angry response when witnessing an act of transgressive behavior and a desire for justice. They examined that moral outrage leads to a higher longing for justice among bystanders. Rothschild and Keefer (2017) argue that bystanders often feel guilty of transgressive instances taking place in their own in-group. Cases of transgressive behavior indicate ingroup dysfunction which elicits guilt for members of the ingroup, even if they did not take part in the behavior themselves. Feelings of outrage are associated with lower levels of feelings of guilt. Rothschild and Keefer (2017) furthermore argue that bystanders often prefer restoration of justice, but that their underlying motives often focus more on guilt relief and moral status than genuine desire to aid victims. Moreover, research conducted by Bremer (2024) suggests that bystanders often react with a stronger desire for retributive justice than victims themselves. They name moral outrage as one possible factor of bystanders leading to a desire for punishment. It could thus be assumed that moral outrage serves guilt relief as bystanders have a strong desire for the offender to "get what they deserve" by

inflicting harm on them. In this study, it is thus of interest to examine whether moral outrage explains a more punitive response among bystanders.

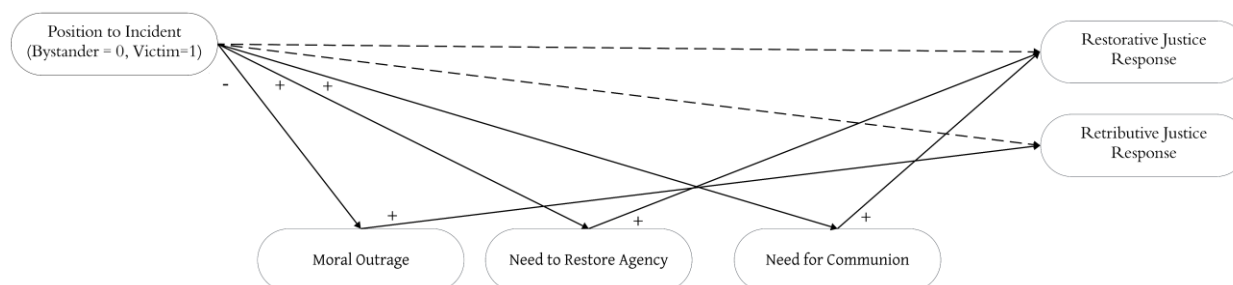
## Hypotheses

Based on these findings, it is argued that while investigating the link between position to the incident of transgressive behavior and preferred justice response, that:

- I. Victims have a significantly stronger preference for restorative justice and a weaker preference for retributive justice than bystanders to an emotionally transgressive incident in sports.
- II. This effect is expected to be mediated by victim's need to restore feelings of agency and communion: Victims are expected to experience more need to restore feelings of agency and communion which in turn predicts a stronger preference for restorative justice (RJ) and less for retributive response. Bystanders are expected to experience stronger feelings of moral outrage, which in turn should explain why they prefer a retributive response more.

**Figure 1**

*Hypothesized model predicting how the need for agency and communion, and moral outrage, mediate victims' stronger preference for restorative justice and weaker preference for retributive justice compared to bystanders*



## Method

### Participants

Participants were gathered from the University of Twente as well as in the network of the researcher. Participants of the University of Twente could earn 0.25 SONA credits when they participated in this study which aids in attaining a BSc Psychology degree. The other participants did not receive an award for participating in this study. To collect the data of members of the public, a convenience snowball sampling method was applied. The data collection period ranged

from April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2025 to April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2025. The final number of participants was 196<sup>1</sup>, consisting of 94 identifying as men (48 %), 97 as women (50%) and 5 (3%) as neither, including one genderless and four non-binary participants. The age range of participants was between 18 and 78 years of age ( $M=32.03$ ). Thirty-six participants were of Dutch nationality (18.4%), 107 of German (54.6%), and 52 from other nationalities (26.5%), representing 24 different countries, including France, the United States, the United Kingdom, Belgium, Canada, Poland, and others.

As the study was conducted in English, it was required that participants had enough knowledge of the English language to participate. This requirement was declared in the consent form of the study, that participants had to agree with to gain access. Participants were asked whether they took part seriously in the study and whether they were able to imagine their position as victim or bystander (see Appendix). Participants had to reply to this question on a Likert-Scale (ranging from [0] not at all to [6] very much). Ethical approval was obtained from the Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) Ethic Committee of the University of Twente on the March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2025.

## **Design**

This study had an experimental design with position to the incident (victim versus bystander) as a between-subjects factor. The dependent measures comprised restorative justice response and retributive justice response. Mediator variables were named moral outrage, need to restore agency and need for communion.

## **Independent, dependent and mediator variables**

### ***Independent Variable***

The independent variable, position to the incident, was experimentally manipulated in the survey and consisted of two experimental conditions: an athlete in a sports association experiencing toxic leadership directly (victim) and a volunteer of the same association who knows about the same incident (bystander). Of the 196 participants, 96 participants were assigned to the bystander and 100 to the victim condition. Both situations were framed in a similar fashion, however once from a bystander and once from a victim's perspective.

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<sup>1</sup> 12 participants answered the statements measuring justice responses, but they quit the study afterward and did not reply to mediator questions and further. This led to more participants ( $N=208$ ) being included in the validity and reliability analysis for the measures of the dependent variables only. As they gave no data for further analysis, they were excluded from it, leading to the final number of participants ( $N=196$ ).

The toxic leadership case comprised an athlete who firsthand experiences toxic leadership from a coach in their sports association while being dismissed when voicing their worries and complaints (see Appendix). In the victim condition, the scenario was described from the athlete's perspective (using pronouns such as "you" and "yourself") while the victim was described as "the athlete" in the bystander condition. Moreover, the introductory sentences differed in terms of perspective ("As a dedicated athlete in your sports association, your coach M. was first admired for achieving results" for the victim condition and "As a volunteer in a sports association, you know that coach M. was first admired for achieving results" for the bystander condition). An attempt was made to frame the scenario with enough emotional weight needed for participants to understand the burden that the victim is experiencing. Therefore, the fear, stress and exhaustion the victim was feeling were highlighted in the scenario in both conditions.

No direct manipulation-check was employed in the study. However, before finishing the survey, participants were asked with two items to what extent they were able to imagine being the victim or bystander in the situation ("How well could you imagine being a bystander/victim in such a situation?" (see Appendix).<sup>2</sup> The level of imagination of both groups centered around the middle, and victims could imagine the scenario slightly better ( $M=3.5$ ) than bystanders ( $M=3.26$ ). In addition, the means of both groups did not differ significantly, as a simple t-test suggested;  $t(183.77) = -1.12, p = 0.26$ . From this, it was concluded that both groups had a similar level of immersion within the scenario. This implies that the data was not severely altered due to different immersion levels.

### ***Dependent Variable***

For the measurement of restorative justice, participants were asked to fill out five items to agree/disagree on a Likert Scale from 1-5 (ranging from [1] strongly disagree to [5] strongly agree) (e.g. "Coach M. should have the opportunity to listen to the athlete and acknowledge their suffering.") (see Appendix). The measurement of retributive justice was conducted with the same Likert-Scale values (ranging from [1] strongly disagree to [5] strongly agree) and seven items,

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<sup>2</sup> An alternative dataset was also analyzed, once with all participants and once with participants who did have a value of 3 or higher for *Control.1* or *Control.2* (see Appendix). As it did not result in any significant differences in terms of hypothesis testing, all participants remained included for further analysis.

only the content of the items differs (e.g. “Justice is only restored when Coach M. suffers consequences for their actions.”) (see Appendix).

All items concerning restorative and retributive justice were analyzed via factor analysis for validity estimation. The total number of justice response items for factor analysis was fifteen. Factor analysis measures factor loadings for each item based on several factors. Factor analysis recommended two factors with most restorative items aligned with Factor 2 and most retributive items aligned with Factor 1 (see Appendix). Items with low factor loadings were excluded from further analysis, with loadings  $<0.4$  being considered low loadings. For restorative justice items, two items were excluded based on low factor loadings on Factor 2. Thus, restorative justice was measured with five remaining items with meaningful factor loadings. For retributive justice, only one item did not have a meaningful loading on Factor 1 and was excluded from analysis, leaving seven items for further analysis.

Reliability was estimated with remaining items by Cronbach’s Alpha ( $\alpha$ ).<sup>3</sup> The restorative justice items had a moderate reliability score ( $\alpha=0.61$ ). Retributive justice items had a higher score which is interpreted as good ( $\alpha=0.86$ ).

### ***Mediator Variables***

Mediator Variables were also measured with items on a Likert Scale (ranging from [1] strongly disagree to [5] strongly agree) Moral outrage was measured via four items (e.g. “I feel deeply upset and angry about the behavior of this coach.”) (see Appendix). Need to Restore Feeling of Agency was measured with four number of items, such as: “The victim of this behavior should have a say in deciding the consequences for the coach.” Need for communion was measured with four number of items such as: “A conflict resolution should help to rebuild trust between a coach and the athlete”.

Mediator variables were, too, analyzed via factor analysis. Each mediator variable at first was measured via five items. Factor analysis recommended three factors, which aligns with the number of mediator variables. Most moral outrage variables aligned with Factor 1, need to restore agency items with Factor 3, and need for communion items with Factor 2. As with items measuring dependent variables, items with a factor loading  $<0.4$  were excluded from further

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<sup>3</sup> Lambda2 was also conducted as an alternative measure to Cronbach’s Alpha. Reliability was, however, extremely similar using both methods.



analysis. For both moral outrage and need for communion, one item was excluded based on low factor loadings or meaningful factor loadings on multiple variables. Concerning the need to restore agency, factor analysis results were more complex. Two items had significant loadings on Factor 3, both concerning empowerment. One item was excluded based on low factor loadings. However, two items had a loading below the cut-off value, 0.38. A decision had to be made whether these items should be excluded. It was decided to not exclude these items based on their content (“The athlete must be given the opportunity to reclaim control over their training environment.”; “The resolution should focus on ensuring that athlete feels heard and respected.”). These items entailed an essential feature of agency, namely control and feeling heard and respected. Only including the items with meaningful factor loadings here would mean that only one aspect of agency would be included, namely empowerment. This would not suffice to concretely measure agency. Thus, despite the two items being slightly below the cut-off value of 0.4, they were still included in further analysis.

As with dependent variable measures, mediator variables’ reliability was measured via Cronbach’s Alpha ( $\alpha$ ). Moral outrage items had good reliability ( $\alpha = 0.83$ ). Need to restore agency items had a moderate score ( $\alpha = 0.65$ ). Need for communion items had an acceptable score ( $\alpha = 0.77$ ).

## Procedure

Participants were recruited through the University of Twente SONA system or by distribution of a link to the survey. Before participating in the study, participants had to consent to the study and possible risks. The risks of a study include possible emotional distress as transgressive behavior often is a sensitive topic. Then, participants answered some demographic questions on age, nationality and gender. Moreover, participants were asked whether they have experienced transgressive coaching behavior themselves in sports context or witnessed it happening to another person (see Appendix).<sup>4</sup> Further, participants were randomly assigned to two groups: Victim and bystander. A short description was given on each of the roles to clarify their

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<sup>4</sup> These items were included to see if one of the two groups had more direct experiences with these forms of behavior which could have altered the data. However, after later comparing the amounts, the number of participants and bystanders experiencing such behavior did not differ.

viewpoint (see Appendix). Then a case was described in which a victim suffers from a case of toxic leadership.

After reading the scenario, participants completed a matrix measuring their justice response on the DVs restorative justice response and retributive justice response (see Appendix). After, participants were asked to declare how well they imagined the situation as the bystander or victim on a matrix with 15 items that they rated on a Likert Scale (ranging from [1] strongly disagree to [5] strongly agree). After, a similar matrix was given with 15 items; this time with items concerning the three mediators (moral outrage, need to restore agency and need for communion). Furthermore, participants had to indicate how well they could imagine being the bystander or victim and how seriously they took part in the study (ranging from [0] not at all to [6] very much). After finishing the survey, participants were thanked and contact information on the researcher and supervisors was given so they had the opportunity to ask additional questions or form complaints if needed. Moreover, they were debriefed on the study's purpose and manipulation of the IVs.

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

Correlations were estimated by applying Pearson's  $r$  (Table 3). Pearson's  $r$  estimated the correlation between two items, positive or negative. Participants scored higher on restorative justice responses ( $M=4.08$ ,  $SD=.55$ ) in contrast to retributive justice responses ( $M=2.91$ ,  $SD=.78$ ). This means that on average, participants had a higher preference for a restorative response than a retributive response for the offender. Participants also had a moderate average level of agreement with moral outrage items ( $M=3.59$ ,  $SD=.84$ ) and need for communion items ( $M=3.37$ ,  $SD=.76$ ). Regarding mediators, higher scores were achieved on the need to restore agency variable ( $M=4.00$ ,  $SD=.67$ ). This means that participants on average had a slightly higher tendency to agree with items measuring need to restore agency than with items measuring moral outrage and need for communion.

Moreover, restorative justice response and retributive justice response were weakly and negatively correlated ( $r = -.17$ ,  $p < .05$ ). This indicates that participants who preferred a restorative response more, preferred a retributive response less and vice-versa.

Restorative justice responses were also significantly correlated with all mediator variables: moral outrage ( $r = .18, p < .05$ ), need to restore agency ( $r = .47, p < .01$ ), and need for communion ( $r = .52, p < .01$ ). This indicates that to the extent that participants favored a restorative justice response more to the transgressive incident, they also reported greater moral outrage, and a strong need to restore agency and communion. Retributive justice response was significantly correlated with all mediator variables as well, namely moral outrage ( $r = .53, p < .05$ ), need to restore agency ( $r = .22, p < .01$ ) and negatively with need for communion ( $r = -.50, p < .01$ ). This indicates that to the extent that participants favored a retributive justice response more to the transgressive incident, they also reported greater moral outrage, and a stronger need to restore agency. However, they also agreed less with items measuring need for communion.

Lastly, the manipulation-check variable was significantly correlated with moral outrage ( $r = .15, p < .05$ ). This indicates that participants who declared that they could imagine the victim or bystander better also had a slight tendency to agree with items measuring moral outrage.

**Table 3**

*Stats and correlations between dependent and mediator variables; restorative justice response (DV), retributive justice response (DV), moral outrage (med), need to restore agency (med) and need for communion (med). Also includes imagine (manipulation variable)*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Restorative Justice Response	4.08 <sup>5</sup>	.55	1.62	5.00	-					
2. Retributive Justice Response	2.91 <sup>6</sup>	.78	1.00	5.00	-.17*	-				
3. Moral Outrage	3.59	.84	1.00	5.00	.18*	.53**	-			
4. Need to Restore Agency	4.00	.67	2.25	5.00	.47**	.22**	.37**	-		
5. Need for Communion	3.73	.76	1.00	5.00	.52**	-.50**	-.20**	0.7	-	
6. Imagine (Manipulation Variable)	3.38	1.49	0.00	6.00	.02	.05	.15*	.04	-.06	-

<sup>5</sup> The mean of the bystander group was  $M=4.01$ . The mean of the mean of the victim group was  $M=4.15$ .

<sup>6</sup> The mean of the bystander group was  $M=2.90$ . The mean of the victim group was  $M=2.91$ .

Note: N = 196; M = mean; SD = standard deviation; Min = minimum; Max = maximum;  
 \* $p < 0.05$  (two-tailed); \*\* $p < 0.01$  (two-tailed), \*\*\* $p < 0.001$  (two-tailed)

## **Hypothesis Testing**

### ***Hypothesis 1***

Hypothesis 1 declared that victims had a significantly stronger preference for restorative justice and a weaker preference for retributive justice than bystanders to an emotionally transgressive incident in sports. Table 3 illustrates that victims had on average a higher tendency to agree with restorative justice items ( $M=4.15$ ) than bystanders ( $M=4.01$ ). Concretely, this means that being a victim positively predicts a restorative justice response. It also means that being a victim negatively predicts being a retributive justice response. To test Hypothesis 1, the (total) effects of the independent variable (position/relationship to the incident) on the dependent variables (restorative and retributive justice) were assessed using a linear regression model in R. The effect of the position to incident (bystander = 0, victim = 1) on restorative justice showed a trend but was not statistically significant,  $b = 0.14$ ,  $t(194) = 1.761$ ,  $p = .08$ . This means that being a victim did not significantly predict a restorative justice response, however there was a tendency. Hypothesis 1 however states that victims do have a significantly stronger preference towards restorative justice than bystanders. Insofar, this statement could not fully be supported by the findings. The effect of the position to incident (bystander = 0, victim = 1) on retributive justice was not statistically significant;  $b = 0.01$ ,  $t(194) = 0.065$ ,  $p = .95$ . These findings indicate that being a victim does not significantly predict a retributive justice response. This contrasts Hypothesis 1 insofar that it stated that victims had a significantly weaker preference for retributive justice; These findings suggest no preference. From these findings, it can be drawn that despite a slight tendency towards a restorative justice response, victims did not significantly prefer a restorative justice response and did not have a weaker preference for retributive justice than bystanders. Hypothesis 1 is therefore not supported.

### ***Hypothesis 2***

Hypothesis 2 declared that the effect between position to the incident of toxic leadership in sports and justice response was expected to be mediated by a victim's need to restore feelings of agency and communion; Victims were expected to experience more need to restore feelings of

agency and communion which in turn should have predicted a stronger preference for a restorative instead of a retributive justice response. Bystanders were expected to experience stronger feelings of moral outrage, which in turn should explain why they preferred a retributive response.

To test hypothesis 2, mediation analyze was performed via the application of the PROCESS package by Andrew F. Hayes for R version 4.3.1. The mediation analysis was run with 5000 bootstrap samples. It estimated the indirect and direct effects of the proposed independent, dependent and mediator variables. The direct effect from position to incident on both restorative and retributive justice was estimated as well as all indirect effects through the three mediators (moral outrage, need to restore agency and need for communion). All direct and indirect effects are displayed in Figure 3 and Figure 4. It was thus tested whether the effect of independent and dependent variables was significantly mediated by victim's feelings of agency and communion.

The linear regression analysis for Hypothesis 1, a trend has been found between being a victim and preferring a restorative justice response. I expected this trend to be mediated by a need to restore agency and need for communion.

**Mediation Analysis with Restorative Justice as Dependent Variable.** Figure 3 illustrates all the effects from position to incident (bystander  $r=0$ , victim=1) on the mediators and the effects from all the mediators on the dependent variables. Next to the total effect discussed in Hypothesis 1, it illustrates and the direct effect from position to incident on justice response. This is the effect from independent to dependent variable, controlling for mediators. Regarding the total effect, there was no significant effect between being a victim and restorative justice response, but a tendency,  $b = 0.14$ ,  $t(194) = 1.761$ ,  $p = .08$ .

To check whether mediators significantly mediated the effect between independent and dependent variable, it was analyzed whether mediators had an indirect effect. If an indirect effect is significant, it means the mediator variable significantly mediates the relationship. To check the indirect effects of each variable on restorative justice, it was estimated whether the bootstrap confidence interval included zero, meaning they would not significantly mediate the effect between position to the incident (bystander =0, victim =1) and a restorative justice response. Neither the need to restore agency (indirect effect=-0.0084, 95% CI [-0.0619, 0.00563]), or the need for communion (indirect effect=0.0003, 95% CI [-0.0835, 0.0817]), significantly mediated

the relationship between bystander=0, victim=1) and a restorative justice response. Moral outrage (indirect effect=0.03, 95% CI [-0.0031, 0.0784]) approached significance. The total indirect effect of all mediators was not significant either (indirect effect=0.0210, 95% CI [-0.0899, 0.1380]). Thus, no mediator had an indirect effect with restorative justice as a dependent variable.

I observed that none of the mediators were affected/predicted by position to incident, however some separate effects from position to incident and mediators or mediators to a restorative justice response were observed. Regarding the predictors of the mediators, the position to the incident (bystander =0, victim =1) did not significantly predict the mediators need for agency ( $b = -0.03, p = .71$ ) or need for communion ( $b < 0.01, p = .99$ ). However, the mediator variable moral outrage was unexpectedly positive and significantly predicted by position to the incident. ( $b = 0.42, p < .01$ ). This means that being a victim predicted a stronger level of moral outrage.

As expected, both need to restore agency ( $b = 0.33, p < .01$ ) and need for communion ( $b = 0.37, p < .01$ ) significantly predicted restorative justice. Surprisingly, moral outrage tended towards predicting a restorative justice response, however not significantly ( $b = 0.06, p = .08$ ). This means that stronger agreement with need to restore agency and need for communion both predicted a restorative justice response in comparison to bystanders (as described in Hypothesis 2), however that this was also in no relation to whether the participants were victims or bystanders (which goes against Hypothesis 2).

When controlling for mediators, the direct effect from position to the incident (bystander =0, victim =1) to restorative justice approached significance ( $c' = 0.12, p = .05$ ). The direct effect approaches significance therefore to a higher extent than the total effect. This indicates that while controlling for mediators, the effect from position to incident on restorative justice approaches significance more than while not controlling for them. Yet, this effect is not stronger regarding absolute magnitude.

**Mediation Analysis with Retributive Justice as Dependent Variable.** As depicted in Figure 4, the total effect from dependent on independent variable was not significant  $b = 0.01, t(194) = 0.065, p = .95$ . This illustrates a very weak relationship between position to incident and retributive justice.

The indirect effect of moral outrage did, however, significantly predict a retributive response (indirect effect=0.03, 95% CI [0.0701, 0.3403]). The total indirect effect of all mediators on retributive justice was also significant (indirect effect=0.03, 95% CI [0.0165, 0.3473]). Yet, the need for agency (indirect effect=-0.0024, 95% CI [-0.0239, 0.0223]) and need for communion (indirect effect=-0.0003, 95% CI [-0.0011, 0.0950]) did not significantly mediate the relationship between position to incident (bystander= 0, victim= 1) and a retributive justice response. Based on these findings, the only significant but unexpected indirect effect was moral outrage between position to incident (bystander =0, victim =1) and retributive justice.

Regarding separate effects, retributive response was significantly predicted by both moral outrage ( $b = 0.41, p < .01$ ) and need for communion ( $b = -0.43, p < .01$ ). It is important to note here that the need for communion negatively predicted retributive justice; meaning a higher level of need for communion predicted a lower level of retributive justice and that need for communion was not predicted by position to incident. Need to restore agency did not significantly predict a retributive justice response ( $b = -0.10, p = .16$ ).

While the total effect was insignificant, the direct effect from position to the incident (bystander =0, victim =1) to retributive justice similarly approached significance ( $c' = -0.16, p = .05$ ). This means that, while controlling for variables, victims were predicted to favor retributive justice less than bystanders. This could be impacted by victim's favor of moral outrage, which predicted a retributive justice response. When this mediator was controlled for, bystanders tended to prefer a retributive justice response in comparison to victims.

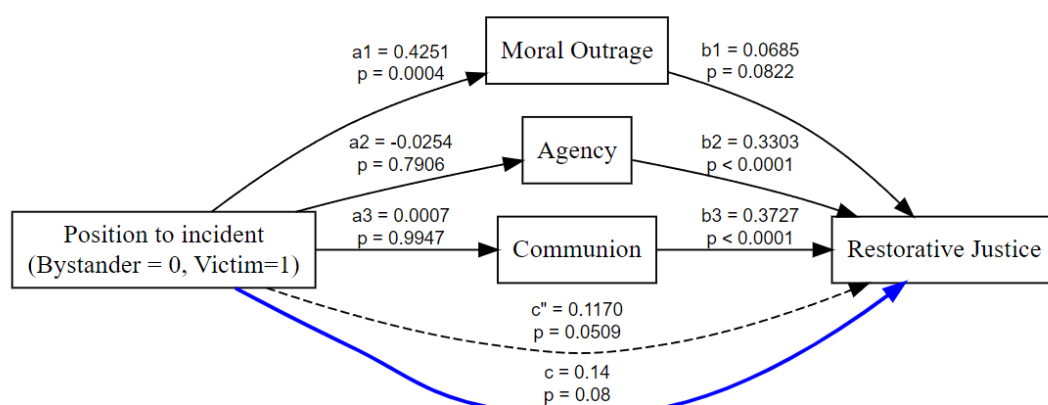
These findings illustrate that while controlling for mediators, being a victim tended to negatively predict a retributive justice response, yet this relationship was not significant. Moral outrage was predicted by the position to the incident and did further significantly predict retributive justice, making it the only significant indirect effect of independent to dependent variable. Surprisingly, being a victim did significantly predict the stronger moral outrage level in comparison to bystanders. This stands in contrast to Hypothesis 2, as bystanders were assumed to predict a higher moral outrage level, not victims.

**Conclusion Hypothesis 2.** Based on these findings, the second hypothesis was not supported; none of the mediators significantly mediated the relationship between position to incident (bystander =0, victim =1) and a restorative justice response. For retributive justice,

moral outrage mediated the relationship between position to the incident and retributive justice, but in an unexpected manner.

**Figure 3**

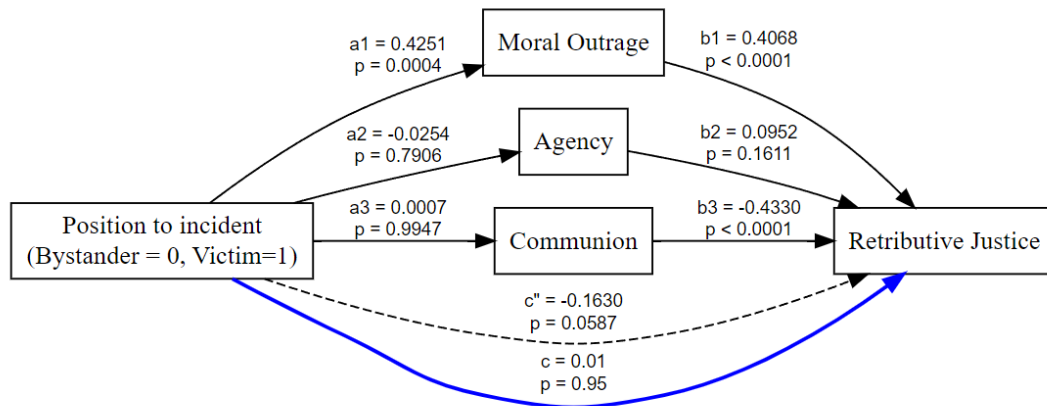
*Mediation model with IV (position to incident, bystander=0; victim = 1) three mediators (moral outrage, need to restore agency and need for communion), and DV restorative justice. Standardized regression coefficients (a, b c', c) are shown along each path together with the p-value, indicating significance. Total effect (c) marked in blue. P-values below <0.05 indicate significance. Arrows represent tested paths.*



**Figure 4**

*Mediation model with IV (position to incident, bystander=0; victim = 1) three mediators (moral outrage, need to restore agency and need for communion), and DV retributive justice. Standardized regression coefficients (a, b c', c) are shown along each path together with the p-value, indicating significance. Total effect (c) marked in blue. P-values below <0.05 indicate significance. Arrows represent tested paths.*





## Discussion

In this study the focus was on how people respond to a toxic leadership situation in sports (i.e. an over demanding coach). It was investigated whether people prefer a restorative or retributive justice response. Depending on whether they would themselves be a victim or a spectator (bystander) of such a situation, a restorative justice response was estimated to differ significantly. Victims were expected to have a stronger preference for restorative justice preference than bystanders. They were also expected to have a weaker retributive justice preference than bystanders. The differences in restorative justice preference for victims and retributive justice preference for bystanders was estimated to be explained by three mediator variables: Moral outrage, a need to restore agency and a need for communion. Based on research, victims were expected to have a significantly higher desire for a need for agency and communion than bystanders which was predicted to explain their restorative justice response (Pemberton et al., 2017). Bystanders, on the other hand, were expected to experience a higher level of moral outrage, explaining their preference for a retributive justice response.

These hypotheses were tested using an experimental design, in which participants were asked to imagine a scenario of toxic leadership inhibited from a coach within a sports association. In quantitative experimental survey study, participants were randomly asked to

imagine either a victim or bystander position, each reading a scenario about a coach exhibiting toxic behavior before responding to measures on justice responses and mediators.

The outcomes of this study did not provide support for these two predictions. The assumption that victims had a significantly higher restorative justice preference, and a significantly lower retributive justice preference compared to bystanders was not supported. Participants who imagined being victims tended to slightly prefer restorative justice overall compared to those who imagined being bystanders, but the difference was not very strong. The level of retributive justice response was completely independent from the position to the incident, so whether participants were victims or bystanders. The second assumption, that victims had a higher level of a need to restore agency and a need for communion, was not supported either. Mediation analysis indicated that a need to restore agency and a need for communion were both indicators for restorative justice as such, but that imagining being a victim or bystander was completely independent of agency or communion levels. Moral outrage did significantly predict a retributive justice response. However, victims exhibited larger retributive justice levels than bystanders, not the other way around. This directly goes against the assumption that bystanders would exhibit greater retributive justice levels.

Even though results suggested a tendency for participants who imagined being a victim to prefer a restorative justice response more than participants who imagined being a bystander, the effect was not significant. A possible explanation for these findings could be the level of immersion for participants. Even though some participants were in the victim group, they were still reading about a case of a victim, which also makes them bystanders of the situation, as they did not experience it directly. Unlike real victims, participants of the victim group might not have felt the real impact of the situation. Possible reasons for this issue lie in the setup of the current study. The experimental design of the study, with participants being exposed to a short paragraph of text alone, might have affected levels of immersion. Even though participants stated that they could imagine the scenario moderately, they may not have been able to feel and experience the real impact of the situation, at least not the way victims in real life might experience it. The paragraph describes how the victim felt exhausted and stressed from the offense, but it might be different to feel the weight of these emotions when an offense really happens to someone.

For future studies, two recommendations can be made regarding the topic of immersion of the victim. As research in the topic of toxic leadership is still rare, it might thus be a beneficial idea to first conduct interviews with those who have experienced it directly in the form of a qualitative study design. This design would firstly exclude the option that participants possibly lack immersion within the topic, as they have directly experienced it. To enhance levels of immersion, findings from Sundar et al. (2017) might be of value as well. They suggest that scenarios displayed via text result in lower immersion levels for participants than applications of other media (such as pictures, videos or VR). In line with this, Van Gelder et al. (2018) suggests that participants receiving visual cues, in comparison to written text, reported a higher perceived presence and perceived risk within the scenarios described. For future quantitative studies, it is therefore suggested to use different forms of media to enhance imagination levels for participants. This could result in participants feeling more present and immersed within the situation. It could lead to higher restorative responses as participants are more immersed in the role of a victim.

The second assumption was that victims would have a higher level of need to restore feelings of agency and communion. This, in turn, would lead to a higher restorative justice response. Bystanders, on the other hand, were expected to exhibit higher levels of moral outrage, which in turn should predict a higher retributive justice response. However, both assumptions were not met as mediation analysis suggests more of a nuanced image. The need to restore agency and need for communion both did not mediate the relationship between position to incident and justice response. However, they did predict a restorative justice response independent from position to incident. Moral outrage did mediate the relationship, yet in the opposite direction as previously expected. Namely, being a victim predicted a higher level of Moral Outrage which in turn significantly predicted a higher retributive response. This indicates that participants who imagined being a victim reported stronger levels of moral outrage than those who imagined being a bystander, which in turn predicted a stronger preference for retributive justice among victims than bystanders. However, none of the analyses suggested that participants had a stronger preference for retributive justice in contrast to bystanders.

Most research discussed in the introduction estimated that victims preferred restorative justice over retributive justice because of the victim's needs (communion and agency) being aligned with a more restorative response. In this study, however, being a victim predicted neither

of these mediator variables, but the mediator variable moral outrage. This contrast in findings to other studies could imply that another important variable was not taken into consideration here, which might have obscured the data.

A possible explanation for this could be the role of time. In this study, participants of the victim group were exposed to the paragraph describing the incident and then, participants immediately had to respond to items measuring justice response and moral outrage. This approach could have altered results as no time, in the scenario and real-life, had passed as participants engaged with the items. Zebel et al. (2017) suggest that the time elapsed since an offense is of high importance regarding justice response. Shortly after an offense with a high level of harmfulness for the victim, victims often experience high levels of anger which normalize over time. This leads to delayed desires for restorative practices that often take place longer after the offense. Wyrick & Costanzo (1999) demonstrated similar findings, as time elapsed since offense was one of the key predictors of victims participating in VOM. This effect does, however, take place in offenses with a high level of harmfulness. This begs the question whether the scenario given to participants (see Appendix) can be considered highly harmful. The scenario description was intended to be regarded as an offense with a low degree of harmfulness. However, as the scenario is formulated vaguely, some participants might regard the case as very harmful while others see it as an offense with a low degree of harmfulness. This effect might result in a higher moral outrage level for some participants than others.

As there was no question in the survey asking about the perceived harmfulness or severity of the offense, this is a question I cannot directly answer. However, it might be another variable of importance that might have obscured the data. The perceived level of harmfulness of the offense might influence moral outrage and a retributive justice response. The paragraph in which the situation was described was quite short and did leave some room for interpretation. Statements as: “You experienced how he repeatedly pushed you beyond your physical and mental limits” (see Appendix) leave open how exactly the trainer pushed participants beyond their mental and physical limits and how severe the crossing of these limits was. Control questions such as “How severe did you perceive the offense to be?” for future studies might control for this effect.

Participants of the bystander group might have also had various interpretations of the text, for example with their relationship with Coach M. Some might have taken into consideration that

they are in the same sports association and fear that Coach M. could execute similar behavior towards them, as he did for the victims. Some might not have regarded this possibility. With these different interpretations, the answers on the items might depend on variables that were not included in the model. Thus, either more variables need to be added to the model, or the scenario must be described in a more concrete way that excludes as many interpretations as possible (i.e., by describing the relationship between bystander and the coach, and the coach's influence on the bystander more concretely).

If participants perceive an offense as very harmful, it is furthermore of importance to consider the impact of time. It is therefore recommended that either while exposing the scenario, or in real-life, time needs to pass before victims engage with items measuring justice response. In text-form, it could for example be mentioned that the offense happened some time ago. A scenario could be given how much time had passed since the offense and how the victim coped at first after the offense. It must be underlined that the victim would not be in the same position and arousal as right after the offense to measure if feelings of anger have normalized. This could aid participants in their level of immersion of being the victim, after some time has passed after the offense.

Another element to be considered is how sports culture has evolved over recent years and the importance of the environment within a sports association. Within sports, it is often difficult for victims to report a case of transgressive behavior. Toxic leadership was more normalized, with a stronger code of silence preventing serious action towards toxic coaches (Moriconi & De Cima, 2019). A code of silence within sports associations often entails that due to unwritten rules, such as social pressure or due to a fear of threatening their career, athletes often refrain from reporting cases of transgressive behavior. The sports environment changed to some extent with the emergence of the Me-Too Movement, and cases of toxic leadership, with mostly sexual transgression, became public more frequently (Ehrlén, 2024). This led to a greater and wider morally outraged reaction, with more people gaining knowledge of the emotional burden athletes often face under toxic leadership and power abuse. More projects aiding athletes are now available, such as the EU-funded Voices for Truth and Dignity, gathering data to athletes who experienced sexual assault within their sports association (*Voices for Truth and Dignity – Combating Sexual Violence in Sport*, 2015). Within the description of the act of toxic leadership of this study, no statement was given on the sports association's environment or how the reaction

has been so far regarding the incident. Some associations might have a stronger code of silence and general atmosphere than others. Participants with different personal experiences or backgrounds within sports associations might therefore have their own expectations on how the environment in the sports association might be. Moreover, in the current climate of Mee-Too and more public awareness on transgressive behavior, participants might have reported an overall higher level of moral outrage.

In summary, a higher need to restore feelings of agency and communion have both predicted higher levels of restorative justice, yet they were not linked to being the victim. Yet, being a victim significantly predicted moral outrage. I believe both effects are of interest as they might propose other variables that should be taken into consideration for the relationship of position to an incident of toxic leadership and justice response. I argued that these variables could be the perceived harmfulness or severity of an offense, and the time elapsed since the offense, in case the offense was perceived as harmful.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

Strengths of this study foremost include the large sample size of 196 participants. This could indicate a high power to observe the effects, even if they are small. Factor analysis suggested solid validity for most items, meaning that they measured what they were intended to measure. Reliability measures for all variables were acceptable; For retributive justice, moral outrage and need for communion even good levels. Results of this study indicated that victims tended to prefer restorative justice, yet this effect was not significant. This suggests that more variables (such as time and perceived severity of the offense) should be taken into consideration for future research. Lastly, not much research has been done specifically in sports and toxic leadership. Most research on transgressive behavior focusses on sexual transgression, with emotional transgressive behavior in sports having the highest prevalence rate (Van Baarle et al., 2023). More qualitative studies into emotional transgressive behavior within sports hopefully inspires further research into this area.

Regarding limitations, it is firstly important to note that, despite the large sample size, most participants were German and most-likely from similar social circles (as is often a risk with snowball-sampling). Similar social circles have a high tendency to being socialized similarly and live in similar cultures. Those similarities often affect values and opinions of participants, which might differ less than if they were taken from more social circles via a non-probability sampling

method, such as simple random sampling. An example of these values would be the perception of justice responses. Moreover, as mentioned before, the medium used to expose participants to the scenario might be problematic. As it was a text-based description, participants might have had less of a level of immersion and grasp of consequences of the victim's experience.

Furthermore, there was an issue of direct manipulation-checks within the study. Participants were not asked within the study in which condition they were in to see if they remembered their condition correctly. They were also not asked about the content of the situation directly to check if they remembered important aspects of their perspective on the incident (e.g. the transgressive behavior that the coach exhibited). For future studies, it is therefore recommended to implement a concrete manipulation check.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study did observe a tendency for victims to prefer a restorative justice response; However they also exhibited a higher level of moral outrage, predicting a retributive justice response. The findings of this study are therefore quite nuanced and indicate more variables that have not been taken into consideration within this study. It is also notable that, despite no indirect effect, feelings of communion and agency did have a positive effect on restorative justice response. The variables of time and perceived harmfulness of the offense should be taken into consideration for future studies as victims that regard an immediate offense as severe react with a higher level of outrage that normalizes over time. These other variables might influence the level of moral outrage and justice responses.

Moreover, the methods of future research could be more robust, by including clear manipulation-check items to see if participants are aware of the perspective they are taking within the study. Moreover, the method of presentation of the scenario could be altered to include a visual presentation to enhance immersion levels for participants. A clear description of the sports association's environment was furthermore missing within the design of this study. It is therefore recommended that in future studies, researchers could attempt to manipulate how much the sports association is tolerating an athlete speaking out on toxic leadership or whether an association has a strong a code of silence. As guilt was a strong predictor for moral outrage as well, measuring guilt within bystanders could aid explaining their moral outrage level (Rothschild and Keefer, 2017). Such variables need to be taken more into consideration while measuring moral outrage within toxic leadership context.

In summary, while having limitations, this study underlined the gap in research and the importance of justice response investigation. Sports associations often face issues with toxic leadership, and it is of importance to examine what stakeholders in such situations find to be just or what they determine as “normal” within the sport context. When more research is conducted within this area, recommendations should be made to associations on how to react to such cases, regarding every perspective on the offense and supporting the victim’s and offender’s needs.

For future studies, it is recommended to take the passage of time and the medium by which the offense is displayed into consideration. Moreover, as the topic of justice response is not researched deeply within the frame of sports associations, it is recommended to apply qualitative research. Qualitative research is best applicable for topics which few studies investigated (Andrade, 2020). It would thus be a suggestion to investigate the experiences of victims of transgressive behavior, for example by qualitative studies such as interviewing. Such practices could build a foundation by which reliable and valid justice response measures could be developed. These investigations could form important insights that would better the organization of sports associations and enhance the experiences of both coaches and athletes.

## **Conclusion**

This study suggests that, in the sports domain, participants who imagine being the victims of toxic leadership tend to prefer a restorative justice response more than those that imagined being bystanders. However, victims react with moral outrage immediately after an offense, which enhances their level of moral outrage in comparison to bystanders. In addition, moral outrage predicted a retributive justice response. When controlling moral outrage, however, bystanders tended to prefer a retributive justice response. This contradicts previous assumptions that moral outrage would explain a higher retributive justice response for bystanders and suggests that other variables influence their retributive justice response. Most research suggests that victims favor restorative justice practices, and yet this study underlined the importance of the moral outrage level that victims experience right after an emotionally transgressive case of toxic leadership. Moreover, the sports environment and culture were not controlled for within this study framework, which could further have influenced moral outrage levels. In the sports domain, it is therefore of importance to account for the sports culture of an association. Moreover, taking moral outrage that victims feel into consideration when deciding on how to treat a coach who



exhibited such behavior is of relevance, and if an initial desire for punishment might change over time for victims.

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## Appendix

### Demographic Items

- Demographic.1*    What is your age?
- Demographic.2*    What is your country of origin?
- Demographic.3*    What is your highest level of education completed?
- Demographic.4*    What is your gender?
- Demographic.5*    Have you ever experienced inappropriate coaching Behavior in a sports setting towards yourself?
- Demographic.6*    Have you ever experienced or witnessed inappropriate coaching behavior in a sports setting towards another person?

### Example Case Victim

Try to imagine being that you are a member of a sports association that you like and are committed to very much. Try to imagine how you would feel about the following situation as vividly as you can and how you would experience the consequences of a situation as such.

“As a dedicated athlete in your sports association, your coach M. was first admired for achieving results. However, over the past year, you experienced firsthand how his training methods took a toll on you. You experienced how he repeatedly pushed you beyond your physical and mental limits, ignoring your concerns about exhaustion and injury. When you asked for a break or expressed worry about your body’s ability to keep up, he dismissed you as weak or uncommitted, questioning your dedication. The fear of being labeled a failure kept you silent for a long time, but the stress, exhaustion, and self-doubt continued to build. Eventually, you gathered the courage to lodge a complaint, hoping for understanding and change.”

### Example Case Bystander

Try to imagine being that you are a member of a sports association that you like and are committed to very much. Try to imagine how you would feel about the following situation as vividly as you can and how you would experience the consequences of a situation as such.

“As a volunteer in a sports association, you know that coach M. was first admired for achieving results. However, over the past year, you have heard about how his training methods took a toll on another athlete. You have heard about how he repeatedly pushed them beyond their physical and mental limits, ignoring their concerns about exhaustion and injury. You were also told that when the athlete asked for a break or expressed worry about their body’s ability to keep up, he dismissed them as weak or uncommitted, questioning their dedication. The athlete declared that the fear of being labeled a failure kept them silent for a long time, but the stress, exhaustion, and self-doubt continued to build according to them. Eventually, the athlete said that they gathered the courage to lodge a complaint, hoping for understanding and change.”

### **Items for Dependent Measures**

#### ***Retributive Justice Items***

*Retributive.1* “Coach M. should be removed from his coaching position to ensure justice is served.”

*Retributive.2* “The primary way to restore justice is through severe punishment, such as banning the coach from professional sports.”

*Retributive.3* “Even if Coach M. apologizes, he still deserves a strict penalty.”

*Retributive.4* “Justice is only restored when Coach M. suffers consequences for their actions.”

*Retributive.5* “Punishing Coach M. will deter him from behaving the same way in the future.”

*Retributive.6* “Punishing Coach M. will deter others from behaving the same way in the future.”

*Retributive.7* “A strong disciplinary action is necessary, regardless of whether the coach takes responsibility.”

*Restorative.1* “Coach M. should be let go from the sports association altogether.”

#### ***Restorative Justice Items***

*Restorative.1* “Coach M. should have the opportunity to listen to the athlete and acknowledge their suffering.”

*Restorative.2* “A fair resolution for this situation would be a dialogue between Coach M. and the athlete.”

*Restorative.3* “Justice is best achieved when the coach takes active responsibility for repairing the harm that he caused.”



*Restorative.4* “Finding a solution that allows both the coach and athletes to move forward is more important than punishment.”

*Restorative.5* “Justice should involve a mediation process with the help of a professional and neutral mediator.”

*Restorative.6* “Coach M. should receive support and guidance to change his coaching methods rather than being strictly punished.”

*Restorative.7* “Restoring justice requires a conversation about the impact of the coach’s behavior.”

### **Mediator Variables**

#### ***Need for communion***

*Communion.1* “The athlete should have a platform to share their experiences with Coach M. directly.”

*Communion.2* “Open discussion between the coach and the affected athletes is crucial for resolving the situation.”

*Communion.3* “A conflict resolution should help to rebuild trust between the coach and the athlete.”

*Communion.4* “It is important for the coach and athlete to have a normal relationship again.”

*Communion.5* “A conflict resolution should take place to restore a sense of mutual care and understanding between the coach and the athlete.”

#### ***Moral outrage***

*Outrage.1* “I feel deeply upset and angry about the behavior of this coach.”

*Outrage.2* “I feel a strong urge to take action against this type of behavior in sports settings.”

*Outrage.3* “I feel outraged about the actions of the coach towards the athlete.”

*Outrage.4* “I feel furious about what happened to the athlete.”

*Outrage.5* “What happened to the athlete is deeply wrong, and something must be done to make it right.”

#### ***Need to restore agency***

*Agency.1* “The athlete should have a say in deciding the consequences for the coach.”

*Agency.2* “Coach M. should be held accountable in a way that empowers the athlete.”

*Agency.3* “The athlete must be given the opportunity to reclaim control over their training environment.”

*Agency.4*      “The resolution should focus on ensuring that athlete feels heard and respected.”

*Agency.5*      “Justice should empower the athlete, not just punish the coach.”

**Control Items**

*Control.1*      How well could you imagine being a bystander in such a situation? (Bystanders only)

*Control.2*      How well could you imagine being a bystander in such a situation? (Victims only)

*Control.3*      To what extent did you participate seriously in this study?