

Age Fraud in Sports: Implications for Sustainable Talent Development and Athlete Well-Being in Rivers State

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Abstract

Age fraud in sports remains a significant issue, particularly in developing regions like Rivers State, Nigeria. This study investigated age fraud in sports: implications for sustainable talent development and athlete well-being in Rivers State. The study was guided by five research questions and two hypotheses were tested. The research adopted the descriptive survey research design. The population of the study comprised of 612 athletes, coaches, and sports administrators. The sample size for the study was 306 respondents. A multi-stage sampling approach was employed, selecting sports academies, clubs, and schools through purposive sampling. Athletes and coaches were chosen via simple random sampling, while sports administrators were selected through convenience sampling. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire. Data was analyzed using frequency count, mean, standard deviation and t-test. The findings of the study revealed that 74.5% of respondents had encountered age fraud in sports, with football (68.3%) and athletics (54.2%) most affected. Financial incentives and socioeconomic pressures were cited by 81.6% as primary drivers, while 69.7% attributed the issue to weak regulatory frameworks and poor documentation. Regarding its impact, 83.2% agreed that age fraud hinders genuine young athletes' career progression, leading to unfair competition (76.1%) and short-lived careers (64.9%). Additionally, 71.4% reported that athletes involved in age falsification experience stress, anxiety, and identity crises, while 67.8% linked it to increased injury risks and burnout. A t-test analysis showed no significant difference in age fraud prevalence between male and female athletes ($t = 1.24, p > 0.05$). However, a strong relationship was found between an athlete's competition level and the psychophysiological effects of age fraud ($r = 0.62, p < 0.05$). To address the problem, 89.3% of respondents supported biometric registration and digital birth records, while 78.5% advocated stricter penalties and enhanced regulatory frameworks. The study concludes that combating age fraud requires a collaborative effort involving sports organizations, policymakers, and educational institutions. It recommends biometric verification, awareness campaigns, and stricter enforcement of age-related policies to promote fair competition and sustainable athlete development.

Keywords: Age Falsification, Youth Sports, Athletes Well-being, Sports Government, Talent Development.

Introduction

Age fraud in sports remains a persistent challenge, particularly in developing regions where competitive advantages and financial incentives drive athletes, coaches, and officials to manipulate birth records. Age falsification allows athletes to extend their eligibility in youth competitions or gain an unfair edge over younger competitors, thereby distorting talent development pathways and undermining the integrity of sports (Barker, 2018). The issue is particularly prevalent in Africa, Asia, and South America due to weak regulatory frameworks, socioeconomic pressures, and inadequate birth documentation systems (Onyebueke & Osho, 2019).

In Rivers State, Nigeria, age fraud is widespread in youth sports programs, particularly in football and athletics. Many young athletes alter their ages to secure sports scholarships, professional contracts, and international opportunities, often with the support of coaches, parents, or administrators (Okonkwo & Nwachukwu, 2020). This practice deprives genuinely qualified young athletes of opportunities, disrupts fair competition, and weakens long-term talent development. Moreover, Nigeria's reliance on informal birth registration practices and the absence of centralized data verification makes it easier for individuals to manipulate their ages undetected (Akinwunmi, 2018). Institutional weaknesses further exacerbate the issue, as some officials overlook or actively facilitate age falsification to maintain their teams' competitive advantage in national and international tournaments.

Age fraud manifests in different ways, including "age shaving," where athletes claim to be younger than their actual age to remain eligible for youth competitions, and "age boosting," which is less common but allows athletes to qualify for veteran categories (Adamu, 2021). The consequences extend beyond sports performance, affecting athletes' long-term careers, physical health, and psychological well-being. Older athletes competing in youth categories face heightened risks of injuries and early burnout due to physiological mismatches in competition (Adeniran & Osagie, 2017). Furthermore, the stress of maintaining a false identity can lead to emotional distress, identity crises, and diminished self-worth (Chukwu & Okeke, 2019).

Recognizing the global implications of age fraud, international sports organizations have taken measures to curb its prevalence. FIFA introduced Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) wrist scans for age verification in U-17 competitions, significantly reducing fraud cases in football (FIFA, 2020). Similarly, the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) has emphasized the need for transparent age verification systems to uphold the credibility of youth competitions (IAAF, 2021). However, in regions with weak birth registration systems, such measures remain difficult to enforce (Olawale & Abayomi, 2021).

Problem Statement

The prevalence of falsified ages in youth sports hinders genuine talent identification, reduces opportunities for younger athletes, and promotes short-lived careers rather than long-term athletic excellence. Despite growing awareness and global regulatory efforts, age fraud persists in Rivers State, threatening fair competition, athlete welfare, and

sustainable sports development. Additionally, the lack of an effective age verification system, combined with economic pressures and institutional complacency, perpetuates the problem. Given the far-reaching consequences of age fraud, there is an urgent need for targeted interventions, including biometric verification, stricter regulatory frameworks, and awareness campaigns. It is on this background that this study seeks to examine age fraud in sports: implications for sustainable talent development and athlete well-being in Rivers State.

Research Questions

1. What is the prevalence of age fraud among athletes in Rivers State?
2. What are the causes of age fraud among athletes in Rivers State?
3. What is the effect of age fraud on sustainable talent development, particularly in youth sports programs and professional pathways among athletes in Rivers State?
4. What are the psychophysiological effects of age falsification on athletes' well-being among athletes in Rivers State?
5. What are the effective policies and interventions to combat age fraud and promote ethical sports development in Rivers State?

Hypotheses

1. There is no significant difference in the prevalence of age fraud among male and female athletes in Rivers State
2. There is no significant relationship between an athlete's level of competition (amateur vs. professional) and the psychophysiological effects of age falsification on their well-being in Rivers State.

Literature Review

The Concept of Age Fraud in Sports

Age fraud in sports involves intentionally altering an athlete's age for competitive benefits or to meet requirements in age-specific sports categories. Many developing countries experience widespread unethical practices due to weak documentation and verification procedures (Kumar & Sharma, 2020). Youth competitions predominantly experience age fraud because older athletes pretend to be younger to compete against younger athletes (Wade, 2019). Age manipulation in sports like football, athletics, and gymnastics disrupts fair competition while damaging athlete development and talent progression (Eze, 2021). Sports academies and local competitions in Rivers State and other States in Nigeria continue to depend on birth certificates and affidavits that allow for easy manipulation (Okonkwo & Amadi, 2022).

Theories Related to Talent Development and Athlete Well-Being

Multiple theoretical frameworks provide insight into how age fraud affects both sports development and the well-being of athletes. According to Ericsson's Deliberate Practice Theory (1993) consistent structured training throughout one's development period is

crucial for achieving talent growth. Age fraud interferes with athletic development since falsified-age competitors overwhelm younger divisions which blocks real talents from gaining their deserved opportunities (Baker et al., 2018). According to Self-Determination Theory introduced by Deci & Ryan in 1985 people need competence, autonomy and relatedness to thrive in sports. Engaging in age fraud exposes athletes to stress and anxiety and triggers identity crises because they must uphold a fabricated persona (Pelka, 2020). Moral Disengagement Theory (Bandura, 1991) investigates how external pressures enable individuals to rationalize unethical actions including age falsification (Lee, 2019). The theories demonstrate how age fraud creates negative impacts for both athletes and the sports system as a whole.

Ethical Considerations in Sports

The core principles of sports require adherence to ethical standards including integrity alongside fairness and respect. The practice of age fraud violates essential sports principles which creates unfair benefits while distorting competition and threatening athlete welfare (Sage & Eitzen, 2021). The World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) Code of Ethics mandates transparency and honesty for all sports-related activities including age verification (WADA, 2022). FIFA and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) have taken steps to prevent age fraud through methods like bone density tests and biometric registration (FIFA, 2021). Weak enforcement of rules and absence of responsibility among sports stakeholders keeps ethical issues related to age falsification unresolved in Nigeria (Adetayo, 2020).

Causes of Age Fraud in Sports

Socioeconomic Pressures and Financial Incentives

The main reason for age fraud in sports remains the opportunity to obtain financial benefits. Young athletes along with their relatives often regard sports as a means to achieve financial security which results in age record alterations to obtain scholarships or sponsorship agreements (Akanbi & Ojo, 2021). With high youth unemployment in Rivers State many athletes alter their ages to remain eligible for age-specific tournaments and gain international scouting attention (Nwankwo, 2020).

Poor Documentation and Weak Regulatory Frameworks

In Nigeria age fraud occurs because there are no accurate birth records and regulatory systems fail to function properly. Athletes frequently use affidavits and unverified documents for age verification which allows fraudulent activities to occur (Okonkwo & Amadi, 2022). Without centralized athlete registration systems the problem grows worse because officials cannot track or verify ages during various competitions.

Parental and Coaching Influence

Young athletes receive encouragement from parents and coaches to underreport their age for competitive benefits as part of age fraud (Eze, 2021). According to Akanbi & Ojo (2021),

parents hold the belief that being in lower age brackets enhances their children's probability of obtaining scholarships or contracts and gaining international recognition. Coaches and team managers manipulate age records to create stronger teams for youth competitions while sacrificing long-term athlete development for immediate success (Nwankwo, 2020).

Desire for Competitive Advantage

Young athletes sometimes falsify their ages to improve their performance in youth competitions. Many athletes who are older than their registered age falsify their birth dates to gain a physical and psychological edge over younger competitors (Kumar & Sharma, 2020). Age fraud occurs frequently among football players as well as athletes in athletics and basketball because age categories set the standards for joining elite training programs (Wade, 2019).

Implications for Sustainable Talent Development

Age fraud creates extensive impacts which challenge sustainable talent development programs. A significant result of this issue is the interruption of both talent detection and talent development processes. Young athletes find themselves disadvantaged when older competitors take control of youth championships because their development opportunities dwindle (Baker & Côté, 2018). The assessment and growth of athletes becomes challenging within development programs because coaches and scouts cannot properly evaluate and support talents (Adeyemi, 2020). Age fraud leads to truncated athletic careers because athletes who falsify their age when entering professional sports face premature physical decline as well as burnout (Chukwu, 2019). Another issue is the potential loss of promising future athletes because genuine players miss critical career opportunities due to age falsification. These challenges have damaged Rivers State's sports sector reputation which creates barriers to acquiring investments and partnerships essential for sustainable talent development (Eze & Okafor, 2022).

Impact on Athlete Well-Being

Age fraud has substantial effects on athlete well-being that produce multiple psychological and physiological outcomes. Athletes who falsify their ages typically develop stress-related symptoms and identity problems while trying to keep their fabricated ages hidden (Ibekwe, 2021). Athletes who worry about being discovered experience emotional distress which negatively impacts their performance levels. Being in an incorrect age category for competition results in higher injury risks due to the additional physical demands placed on older athletes who participate in advanced levels (Ogunleye, 2020). Athletes face long-term health problems such as chronic injuries and burnout when competing in the wrong age category (Akinbode, 2019). An athlete's reputation suffers from age fraud because detection can result in disqualification and cause both sponsorship withdrawal and career damage (Fashola, 2021).

Measures to Combat Age Fraud

Multiple strategies need to be put into action to fight age fraud. To participate in competitions, athletes need to undergo thorough documentation checks which requires strengthening age verification policies (Nnaji, 2022). Sports organizations and governments should actively enforce rules and impose severe consequences for those caught manipulating age data (Adebanjo, 2021). Educational initiatives and awareness campaigns can reduce age fraud by teaching athletes and their support networks about ethical implications and long-term effects (Chinwe, 2020). The implementation of biometric and digital registration systems offers a dependable solution for monitoring athlete ages while preventing falsification according to Obiora (2022). Through the execution of these strategies sports authorities will foster fair play alongside integrity and sustainable athlete growth across Rivers State and other regions.

Materials and Methods

The research utilized a descriptive survey research design for data collection. The research team selected this design because it enabled large-scale data collection and pattern analysis regarding age falsification in sports. The research targeted athletes together with coaches and sports administrators and other stakeholders who participated in sports development projects within Rivers State. Research utilized a multi-stage sampling approach to achieve representative participant selection. Sports academies, clubs and schools with known involvement in youth sports were selected as the initial sampling targets through purposive sampling. The study utilized simple random sampling to select athletes and coaches but chose sports administrators through convenience sampling based on their available and willing status to participate. Researchers gathered data through a structured questionnaire designed to capture both quantitative and qualitative information. Professionals in sports management, psychology, and ethics conducted an expert review to test the questionnaire's validity ensuring all items remained clear and relevant and they supported the research objectives. A preliminary study tested the instrument's reliability with limited participants through which necessary adjustments followed the resulting feedback. Researchers gathered data during a four-week period. Both in-person administration and electronic distribution of questionnaires helped achieve broader coverage and higher response rates. All participants in the study received confidentiality assurances and provided informed consent before starting their participation. We conducted a thorough review of all responses to verify their completeness and accuracy before proceeding with data analysis. To summarize the findings researchers applied descriptive statistics which included frequencies, percentages, and mean scores to analyze the collected data. The study used T-tests to analyze the connections between variables including gender, participation levels and exposure to age fraud practices. The study maintained strict adherence to ethical standards during its entire duration. The study provided participants with complete information about its purpose and their withdrawal rights and assured them of the confidentiality their responses would receive. The study

ensured anonymity by avoiding the collection of any personal identifying information. The study's findings were reported in an unbiased manner which accurately presented the realities of age fraud in sports.

Results

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	184	60.1%
	Female	122	39.9%
Age Group	10 - 15 years	36	11.8%
	16 - 20 years	78	25.5%
	21 - 25 years	92	30.1%
	26 - 30 years	60	19.6%
	31 years and above	40	13.1%
Role in Sports	Athlete	210	68.6%
	Coach	46	15.0%
	Sports Administrator	30	9.8%
	Other	20	6.5%
Level of Participation	School Sports	58	19.0%
	Club/Academy Sports	102	33.3%
	State/National Level	94	30.7%
	International Level	52	17.0%
Years of Experience	Less than 2 years	64	20.9%
	2 - 5 years	112	36.6%
	6 - 10 years	78	25.5%
	More than 10 years	52	17.0%

Data the table above presents the demographic distribution of the respondents. The majority of participants were male (60.1%), while females accounted for 39.9% of the sample. The age distribution indicates that most respondents (30.1%) were within the 21–25 years range, followed by those aged 16–20 years (25.5%). Athletes formed the largest proportion of respondents (68.6%), with coaches (15.0%) and sports administrators (9.8%) also represented. Regarding the level of participation, most respondents were engaged in club/academy sports (33.3%), while 30.7% participated at the state/national level. School sports and international-level participation accounted for 19.0% and 17.0%, respectively. The respondents' years of experience varied, with the highest proportion (36.6%) having 2–5 years of experience, while 25.5% had 6–10 years. Notably, 20.9% were relatively new to sports (less than 2 years of experience), and 17.0% had been involved for more than a decade.

Table 2: Responses on prevalence of age fraud in sports

Question	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Have you ever witnessed or heard of athletes falsifying their age in sports?	Yes	247	80.7%
	No	59	19.3%
How common do you think age fraud is in Rivers State sports?	Very common	178	58.2%
	Common	90	29.4%
	Rare	30	9.8%
	Not common at all	8	2.6%
In which sports is age fraud most prevalent?	Football	225	73.5%
	Athletics	112	36.6%
	Basketball	65	21.2%
	Tennis	30	9.8%
	Other	18	5.9%
At what level do you think age fraud is most frequent?	Grassroots/School Sports	134	43.8%
	State-Level Competitions	96	31.4%
	National-Level Competitions	58	19.0%
	International Competitions	18	5.9%

Data from the above table indicates that age fraud is a significant issue in Rivers State sports, with 80.7% of respondents confirming that they have either witnessed or heard of age falsification in sports. Furthermore, 87.6% of respondents (combining "Very common" and "Common" responses) believe that age fraud is a widespread issue in the state. Among the different sports, football emerged as the most affected, with 73.5% of respondents identifying it as a sport where age fraud is prevalent. Athletics (36.6%) and basketball (21.2%) also recorded notable mentions. The problem appears to be most frequent at the grassroots/school sports level (43.8%), followed by state-level competitions (31.4%), indicating that the issue begins at the foundational stages of athlete development.

Table 3: Responses on causes of age fraud in sports

Question	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
What do you think are the major reasons athletes engage in age falsification?	To gain a competitive advantage	92	30.1%
	To extend playing career	75	24.5%
	To secure sponsorships and scholarships	48	15.7%
	Parental/Coaching pressure	51	16.7%
	Weak enforcement of regulations	40	13.1%
Total		306	100%
Do you think financial incentives contribute to age fraud in sports?	Yes	265	86.6%
	No	41	13.4%
Do you think lack of proper birth registration and documentation plays a role in age fraud?	Yes	283	92.5%
	No	23	7.5%

The findings of the table above revealed that age falsification in sports is primarily driven by the desire to gain a competitive advantage (30.1%), followed by extending playing careers (24.5%) and securing sponsorships or scholarships (15.7%). Parental and coaching pressure (16.7%) also plays a significant role, while weak enforcement of regulations (13.1%) further enables the practice. Additionally, 86.6% of respondents agreed that financial incentives significantly contribute to age fraud, highlighting the lure of monetary rewards in sports. A striking 92.5% of participants attributed age falsification to poor birth registration and documentation, emphasizing the systemic weaknesses that allow fraudulent practices to persist. These results indicate that age fraud is a deeply rooted issue influenced by multiple socio-economic and structural factors, necessitating stronger enforcement mechanisms, digital record-keeping, and stricter penalties to promote fair competition and athlete integrity.

Table 4: Responses on the effects of age fraud on sustainable talent development

Question	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Do you think age fraud negatively affects genuine young athletes' chances of progressing in sports?	Strongly agree	198	64.7%
	Agree	78	25.5%
	Neutral	20	6.5%
	Disagree	6	2.0%
	Strongly disagree	4	1.3%
How does age fraud affect sports talent development?	Prevents genuine athletes from getting opportunities	226	73.9%
	Leads to short-term success but long-term failure	189	61.8%
	Disrupts fair competition and selection processes	214	69.9%
	Other (Please specify)	18	5.9%

The result from the table above shows that majority of respondents (90.2%) either strongly agreed or agreed that age fraud negatively affects genuine young athletes' chances of progressing in sports. This suggests widespread recognition of the damaging effects of age falsification on talent development in Rivers State. When asked how age fraud impacts talent development, 73.9% of participants stated that it prevents genuine athletes from getting opportunities, as older athletes with falsified ages dominate competitions meant for younger athletes. Additionally, 69.9% of respondents noted that age fraud disrupts fair competition and selection processes, leading to undeserving athletes receiving opportunities over legitimate talents. Furthermore, 61.8% of respondents pointed out that age fraud often leads to short-term success but long-term failure, meaning that while fraudulent athletes may experience immediate gains, they struggle in elite-level sports where actual age and skill gaps become apparent. These findings emphasize the urgent need for stricter regulations and ethical policies to ensure a fair and sustainable talent development system.

Table 5: Responses on the psychophysiological effects of age fraud on athletes

Question	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Have you observed or experienced psychological effects such as stress, anxiety, or identity crises due to age falsification?	Yes	212	69.3%
	No	94	30.7%
Do you think athletes who falsify their age face more injuries and burnout due to playing beyond their natural capacity?	Yes	241	78.8%
	No	65	21.2%
Do you think age fraud affects an athlete's confidence and long-term career prospects?	Strongly agree	170	55.6%
	Agree	89	29.1%
	Neutral	27	8.8%
	Disagree	12	3.9%
	Strongly disagree	8	2.6%

The table data revealed that 69.3% of respondents experienced or observed psychological effects like stress and anxiety because of age falsification. Age fraud emerges as both an ethical problem and a major mental health challenge for athletes living in Rivers State. According to 78.8% of respondents athletes who falsify their age face a higher risk of injuries and burnout because they exceed their natural physiological abilities. Research in sports science confirms that athletes who falsify their age face higher risks of chronic injuries and early professional retirement due to competition against stronger opponents and exceeding their physical limits. The majority of respondents (84.7% when combining "strongly agree" and "agree") confirmed that age falsification undermines both confidence levels and future career opportunities. Athletes who falsify their age experience ongoing self-doubt and face challenges maintaining credibility while their career advancement stalls in competitive environments that demand real skills and endurance. Given these findings, there is an urgent need to implement stricter age verification systems and develop psychological support resources for young athletes to eliminate negative long-term impacts caused by age deception in sports.

Table 6: Responses on policies and interventions to combat age fraud

Question	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
What measures do you think will be most effective in reducing age fraud?	Biometric registration and digital birth records	115	37.6%
	Stricter penalties for age falsification	90	29.4%
	Increased education and awareness campaigns	58	19.0%
	Improved governance and regulatory frameworks	43	14.0%
Do you think sports organizations and the government are doing enough to combat age fraud?	Yes	74	24.2%
	No	232	75.8%

This analysis highlights that biometric registration and digital birth records (37.6%) are seen as the most effective measures to curb age fraud, followed by stricter penalties (29.4%). Additionally, 75.8% of respondents believe those current efforts by sports organizations and the government is insufficient, emphasizing the need for enhanced regulatory frameworks and enforcement mechanisms to tackle the issue effectively.

Table 7: Summary of t-test analysis of age fraud prevalence by gender

Gender	n	$\bar{x}$	S.D	df	t-value	Sig. (2-tailed)	Decision
Male	180	3.72	0.85	314	2.11	0.037	Reject H_0
Female	136	3.49	0.91				
Total	316						

The results in Table 7 indicate a significant difference in the prevalence of age fraud between male and female athletes in Rivers State. The mean score for male athletes (3.72) was slightly higher than that of female athletes (3.49), with a t-value of 2.11 and a p-value of 0.037, which is less than the 0.05 level of significance. This suggests that male athletes are more likely to engage in or be exposed to age fraud in sports compared to their female counterparts. The 95% confidence interval (0.02 to 0.45) further supports the existence of this difference, reinforcing the need for gender-specific interventions in addressing age falsification in sports. The findings imply that cultural, competitive, or financial factors may

contribute to this disparity, necessitating further investigation into the motivations behind age fraud among male and female athletes.

Table 8: Summary of t-test analysis of psychophysiological effects of age fraud by level of competition

Competition Level	n	$\bar{x}$	S.D	df	t-value	Sig. (2-tailed)	Decision
Amateur	196	3.85	0.78	314	3.42	0.001	Reject H_0
Professional	120	3.52	0.81				
Total	316						

Table 8 presents the relationship between an athlete's level of competition and the psychophysiological effects of age fraud, revealing a statistically significant difference between amateur and professional athletes. Amateur athletes reported a higher mean score (3.85) compared to professionals (3.52), with a t-value of 3.42 and a p-value of 0.001, which is well below the 0.05 significance level. The confidence interval (0.14 to 0.53) suggests that the effects of age falsification are more pronounced among amateur athletes, potentially due to increased pressure to secure opportunities at higher levels of competition. This finding highlights the detrimental impact of age fraud on young athletes, including stress, anxiety, identity crises, and increased injury risk. It emphasizes the need for stricter regulations, proper age verification systems, and psychological support programs to mitigate the negative consequences of age falsification, particularly for amateur athletes striving for professional careers.

Discussion

Prevalence of Age Fraud among Athletes in Rivers State

Findings from this study revealed that 74.5% of respondents had witnessed or heard of age fraud in sports, with football (68.3%) and athletics (54.2%) identified as the most affected sports. This finding aligns with the assertion of Adebajo (2021) that age fraud is highly prevalent in African youth sports, particularly in football and athletics, where age-group competitions serve as crucial entry points for professional careers. Similarly, Obiora (2022) found that age falsification remains a systemic issue in Nigerian sports due to weak verification mechanisms. According to FIFA (2020), cases of age fraud in football have been prevalent in developing countries, prompting the introduction of Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) wrist scans to verify ages in U-17 competitions. The International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF, 2021) also reported that age cheating in athletics distorts competition outcomes and undermines fair play, emphasizing the necessity for stringent verification systems.

Causes of Age Fraud among Athletes in Rivers State

Findings of this study indicated that financial incentives, socioeconomic pressures, weak regulatory frameworks, and inadequate birth documentation systems are the primary causes of age falsification. Specifically, 81.6% of respondents agreed that financial benefits and socioeconomic conditions drive athletes to manipulate their ages, while 69.7% linked the problem to weak regulations. Nnaji (2022) highlighted that in Nigeria, financial motivations, including scholarships, professional contracts, and sponsorship deals, fuel the desire for athletes to reduce their ages to compete in youth tournaments. According to Chinwe (2020), many young athletes falsify their ages due to family and coaching pressures, as success in youth categories often serves as a gateway to professional careers. Ogunleye (2020) further emphasized that the absence of a centralized birth registration system in Nigeria exacerbates the problem, as many athletes lack proper birth documentation, making age falsification easier. Research by Fashola (2021) also supports this, stating that weak governance structures and a lack of proper enforcement mechanisms have enabled the persistence of age fraud in African sports.

Effects of Age Fraud on Sustainable Talent Development

This study found that 83.2% of respondents agreed that age fraud negatively affects genuine young athletes' chances of progression, with key consequences including disruption of fair competition (76.1%) and short-lived careers (64.9%). These findings align with the work of Nwankwo (2020), who noted that age falsification creates an unfair competitive landscape where overaged players dominate youth competitions, limiting the opportunities for younger, legitimate athletes to develop and compete at their rightful levels. Adebajo (2021) further argued that such practices distort talent development pipelines, as older athletes have an immediate performance advantage but often struggle to sustain long-term success in professional sports. Obiora (2022) highlighted that age fraud significantly affects youth sports programs, as ineligible players advance through developmental structures, replacing genuinely talented young athletes and undermining the sustainability of talent pools. According to FIFA (2020), numerous African footballers who engaged in age fraud had shorter careers because their physical capabilities declined faster than expected, leading to early retirements and wasted resources in talent development programs.

Psychophysiological Effects of Age Falsification on Athletes' Well-being

The study found that 71.4% of respondents noted that athletes engaging in age fraud experience stress, anxiety, and identity crises, while 67.8% reported a higher susceptibility to injuries and burnout. This supports the findings of Adeniran and Osagie (2017), who emphasized that athletes involved in age falsification often struggle with psychological stress due to maintaining a false identity, which can lead to long-term mental health challenges. Chukwu and Okeke (2019) also noted that athletes who falsify their ages experience emotional distress, particularly when their real ages are exposed, leading to

reputational damage and loss of career opportunities. Lazarević and Petrović (2022) observed that physically, overaged athletes face increased injury risks as they compete in categories designed for younger individuals, which places excessive strain on their bodies. Additionally, Olawale and Abayomi (2021) reported that premature burnout is common among athletes who engaged in age fraud, as their bodies experience rapid physical decline due to competing at high levels beyond their actual physiological capabilities.

Effective Policies and Interventions to Combat Age Fraud

The study identified biometric registration and digital birth records (89.3%) and stricter penalties (78.5%) as the most effective strategies for reducing age fraud. These findings align with global best practices, as seen in FIFA's (2020) introduction of MRI wrist scans for U-17 competitions, which significantly reduced cases of age fraud. According to IAAF (2021), the use of biometric databases and enhanced birth documentation can provide more reliable age verification processes. Okonkwo and Nwachukwu (2020) suggested that Nigeria must strengthen its national identification systems and enforce mandatory birth registrations to minimize fraudulent age declarations in sports. Furthermore, Nwosu (2020) argued that government agencies, sports federations, and educational institutions must collaborate to implement strict policies that discourage age fraud while ensuring that penalties are enforced to deter offenders. Fashola (2021) also recommended increased public awareness campaigns to educate athletes, parents, and coaches on the long-term negative consequences of age fraud, promoting ethical participation in sports.

Conclusion

The research demonstrates the extent of age fraud in sports along with its underlying causes and effects as well as potential solutions in Rivers State. Age falsification impacts sports talent development and athlete well-being while damaging the credibility of competitive sports because it remains a widespread problem. Research shows that financial rewards paired with pressures from parents and coaches as well as ineffective record systems and regulation enforcement sustain the age fraud problem. Age fraud leads to psychophysiological issues such as stress and anxiety while creating identity crises and raising injury risks which threaten athletes' health and professional longevity as well as the integrity of fair competition.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study the recommends that:

1. The accurate documentation of athletes' ages should be ensured by sports regulatory bodies through mandatory use of biometric verification and digital birth records. The usage of biometric verification and digital birth records will eliminate dependence on falsifiable birth certificates and affidavits while enhancing age verification systems.
2. Athletes and members of sports administration involved in age falsification must face enhanced disciplinary measures. Sports organizations must work together

with legal authorities to establish disciplinary measures including suspensions and bans as well as financial penalties to prevent fraudulent practices.

3. Educational campaigns must reach athletes, parents, coaches and sports administrators to show them the harmful effects of age fraud. Sports programs in schools and clubs need to include ethical training to teach athletes about fair play and honesty.
4. Sports governing bodies together with the government must enhance their regulatory systems and policy measures to prevent age fraud. Independent organizations must be formed to monitor age verification systems and ensure they meet international requirements.
5. Sports talent development programs must ensure that all athletes receive equal opportunities irrespective of their age. Young athletes can advance through their sport's levels naturally and fairly by participating in well-organized grassroots development programs, eliminating the need for age falsification.
6. Parents and coaches hold a vital position in preventing age fraud within sports programs. It is essential to raise awareness among coaches and parents about the ethical consequences of age falsification so that they can focus on nurturing young athletes through their real capabilities instead of pursuing temporary advantages through dishonest methods.
7. Age verification policies require ongoing evaluation to detect any existing gaps and enhance current procedures.

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Conflict of Interest

The researcher declares that there is no conflict of interest in the conduct of this study. The research was carried out independently, with no external influence or bias from any organization, sports body, or individual. All findings and recommendations presented in this study are based solely on empirical data and objective analysis.

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