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Extracted Dreams: A Sociological Analysis of Why European-Funded Football Academies in West Africa Perpetuate Neo-Colonialism and Sports Trafficking

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Abstract. This paper examines why European-funded football academies in West Africa can perpetuate neo-colonial relations and contribute to the trafficking of minor athletes. It argues that football trafficking should not be understood as the product of a few rogue intermediaries, but as a structural consequence of the contemporary European football system, shaped by commercialization, labor extraction, and global inequality. Using a sociological analysis of existing case studies, the paper investigates four main factors: academy investment structures, the commercialization of football, the incentives facing young players and their families, and the broader framework of neo-colonialism and world-systems theory. The analysis finds that partnership, private, and unaffiliated academy models can enhance clubs' control over African talent while creating conditions exploitation and trafficking. It further argues that media commercialization, sportswashing, and image management can reduce scrutiny of abusive practices, while poverty, aspiration, and limited knowledge of transfer rules make minors facing assymetric information while deciding. Framed through neo-colonialism and world-systems theory, the paper concludes that football trafficking reflects an unequal global order in which African youth talent is commodified for European profit. It recommends policies such as education, minimum-wage protections for minors, and third-party oversight of player transfers, while acknowledging the study's reliance on secondary sources and limited primary evidence.

Keywords: Football trafficking, West Africa, European football academies, Neo-colonialism, World-systems theory

1. Introduction

Upon discussion of the football history, one must mention an African footballer. From Eto to Mohammad Salah, they all share the same manifestation of the "African Dream", where one based in Africa escapes from poverty to achieve immense wealth and fame through football.

Typically, it would be expected that the European football clubs that uphold massive wealth and assets would invest capital on local African scouting systems to discover more African football teenage talents. In fact, there are about 15,000 young players are moved out of West Africa each

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year under false pretenses. In addition, under the conditions of a lack of monitoring, the number of young minors being trafficked abroad could be way much higher.

European football evolved from a local and community-based sports activity into a global entertainment industry through three linked forces: Broadcast money, legal/competitive reforms, and international branding [1, 2]. By the year 1990, leagues and clubs had begun to turn matches into media products, globalize talent, and sell fan attention across borders. During the process, with the 1995 Bosman ruling transformed the labor market from a restrictive control over players into granting player's mobility to move around clubs [3, 4]. The 1995 Bosman ruling underlines two fundamental principles: Firstly, out-of-contract players can move to another club for free. Secondly, EU nationality-based player quotas are illegal. This creates more cosmopolitan squads, pushed wages upward, and made the bigger clubs even more attractive to top players [5, 6].

The commercialization of European's football creates incentive for European clubs to establish local scouting and training facilities in comparatively poor countries in west Africa to reduce cost of labor and more control over talents. Once football became a global business, the best clubs started treating talent development like a supply chain, and West Africa emerged as one of the most productive sourcing regions.

Gradually, the profit maximizing behavior of European football clubs lead to the phenomenon of trafficking: Minors are transported to foreign countries by intermediaries with intention who either abandon them to fend for themselves or control their mobility afterwards. Child trafficking is an issue that has long been under the public spotlight in football. Around 2010s, football administrators, academics, and human rights activists have drawn their attention toward some unsavory activities in West African football academies.

There are usually 8 steps in football trafficking (as shown in table 1) [7].

Table 1. Eight steps in football trafficking

Steps	Contents in each football trafficking
1	An intermediary identifies a player and offers him the opportunity to be signed by a foreign club under false pretenses [8].
2	The intermediary asks money to secure position. There are more funds required to cover living costs within the new country, which is referred as the "finder's fee"
3	The player's family often sell family assets, give up education or take out a loan to meet the costs.
4	The player arrives in a country abroad often on a short-term tourist visa. Travel conditions are not always dangerous or illegal. Players can arrive through legal channels or illegal channels.
5	Upon arriving in a country, the intermediary takes the player's documents and money as "safe keeping"
6	In the country, the player may attend a trial with a club. Sometimes the agent abandons the player in the country.
7	If the trial is successful, the player signs the contract. But its terms are not beneficial to the player. If not, the intermediary abandons him and takes his "finder's fee".

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Table 1. (continued)

8	Once the player realizes his complex situation, he is expected to be reluctant to return to his origin country and may decide to remain in the destination country illegally withouut legal jobs.

Although there are some degrees of publicity for the problem through media, but the media often blames "rogue agents: or fake scouts scamming families. However, child trafficking in sports should not be treated as a phenomenon that is individually driven. Instead, the issue is more of the structural consequences of the European football system.

This research aims to discover the hidden causes behind the European funded youth football academies participating in the activity of child trafficking. The desirable outcome of the research could be used for policymakers to devise helpful policies that would alleviate the damage done through child trafficking activity. Hence, this research would seek to measure the likely consequences towards society through the act of child-trafficking and propose policies that are evaluated that might eliminate the issue by its first place. In addition, the methodology that the research would use is through analyzing individual case studies conducted by previous research papers.

This study argues that rather than being a phenomenon of individual bad actors, there are systemic factors that fuel human trafficking because the stark global economic divide creates an infinite supply of desperate youth labor, while the economic and social incentives underpinning the European football demand the cheap extraction and commodification of young bodies, ultimately generating a massive, unregulated shadow market that strips minor athletes of legal protections and leaves them structurally vulnerable to exploitation and abandonment. I analyze several factors together that contribute to this phenomenon:

2. Academy investment

To understand why the presence of trafficking can exist, the structure of academy investment could provide a glimpse into one of the factors. Generally, there are four types of ownership model of academies [7]: The first type is direct supervision governed by the African Football Federation. The second type is under European partnership, which allows clubs to gain direct access towards players. The third type is the private foundation, which is profit driven. The fourth type is a temporary and unaffiliated football academy, which is not officially documented but could survive in distant regions which the football federation could not supervise. European clubs often enter West Africa through partnerships with local academies or by acquiring controlling stakes, creating nurseries that reserve African talents until legal transfer to Europe. Type 2 academies offer clubs substantial influence over African football talents' contracts and the extraction of them. Types 3 and 4 often leave the players most prone towards football trafficking, since exporting cheap African talents would not only bolster these clubs' financial accounts, but also largely reduce their operational costs, enabling them to earn higher profit. Types 3 and 4 clubs are less known relative to types 1 and 2 due to limited media coverage, though they create environments where trafficking is most likely to occur. This is because the mainstream sporting media does not consider this kind of situation an urgent threat to the football environment, since it has been a prolonged issue that has largely slipped under the radar due to the relative obscurity of these types of clubs. Additionally, these private actors lack institutional infrastructure and co-branding strategies necessary to actively generate media visibility through outreach and digital engagement.

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Academy types such as 2,3 and 4 all create an increasing level of exploitation for young football talents. From limiting players' contracts to limiting their living standards, all these types benefit European clubs rather than the players. As illustrated, the conditions in European clubs and their profit maximizing motives create a backdrop for trafficking to occur. Given these exploitative academy practices, it seems surprising that there isn't more public outrage that brings scrutiny to these institutions. Here, commercialization helps to suppress the spread of information regarding trafficking.

3. Commercialization

Commercialization provides protection for clubs to maintain their criminal behaviors without being spotted in public. This factor facilitates the trend of trafficking as a global phenomenon. There are several techniques that European clubs use to cover their behaviors in Africa towards international audiences. Generally, European clubs use sportswashing, media commercialization, and controlled sports journalism to hide their act of trafficking in football. Sportswashing refers to the act of clubs to distract the audience's attention from their behaviors by associating themselves with sporting success. In other words, making their players in spotlight rather than the club itself. For example, planning a highly televised global trip of the club would shift the attention towards players who are media sensations, fan culture, and excitement, rather than the exploitation these clubs engage in. Normalization offers another solution for the academies to cover their acts. Normalization refers to the gradual embedment of non-democratic regimes in the sports industry, making them barely noticeable towards the audience. This convention offers an excuse for the football fans to view the club's behaviors. In addition, there is the use of image politics, which is positive advertisement of the team's success as a distraction to the public away from their wrongdoings. For instance, Manchester City updates its social media after every Premier League match to gain attention and to distract the public from its illegal deeds in finance.

Accompanying these techniques is the media, as some media often fails to investigate corruption due to its obstacles and potential bribery that establishes the collective media's silence towards certain issues in the football leagues. In addition, there is the presence of the Ronaldo effect: the signing of an individual star player would drive global promotion of the club, covering their crimes that has a smaller amount of promotion. The signing of Christiano Ronaldo, a world class player, to Real Madrid is one example that raised public awareness of the club.

In the perspective of market structure, the market for football varies between monopolistic competition and oligopoly across regions. What's common is the incentive to profit maximization. One way of achieving the goal is through reducing cost, which includes obtaining cheap labor. This incentive, thus, promotes the action of football trafficking.

4. Incentives of the independent player

In the field of football trafficking, all stakeholders share some extent of cause. In terms of individual players, their incentives and desires also push them into becoming the victim of football trafficking activity. There are several incentives that often push an individual to accept the offerings from a football trafficking intermediary: Individuals aspire to become stars; the intermediary praises deceive their mind and confirms with their aspiration. This would make the individual to think irrationally and accept any offers from the intermediary without fully understanding its costs. Some families live in poor conditions, where becoming a football player could largely alleviate the economic pressures. This also becomes a pressure that urges poor players to accept offerings of

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intermediaries. In addition, they might be unaware of transferring rules, which the intermediaries take advantages on.

The odds of obtaining a high salary as an amateur footballer are significantly low. At the same time, being the victim of football trafficking would often lead to the loss of property, homelessness, and perhaps mental illness, which would affect the society. In Esson's argument, he says they knowingly choose this and suggesting otherwise undermines their agency [9]. His point makes sense in some degrees, but not all.

To start with, the scale of victims doesn't fit. There are 70% of football-related irregular minor migrants in the city of Paris in 2001 [9]. If all the decisions are based upon a rational mind evaluating the tradeoffs, the quantity of victims and the scale would be a lot smaller.

Besides, these minors face cognitive bias upon making decisions. For example, individual obsession of football distorts their judgement system. Once the agencies advertise in a way that they prefer, they would selectively receive the beneficial information rather than the adverse information towards their decision. In addition, there is the FOMO (fear of missing out), which dictates the minors mind and stops them to make the right decision. Moreover, there are some proportions of minors that are susceptible towards the flattery from intermediaries, which would lead them to make the incorrect decision.

5. Culture: neocolonialism, world systems theory

To understand why child trafficking in football occurs without generating enough attention to prevent, it helps to frame it as a structural consequence of global capitalism using the concepts of neocolonialism and world system theory. The world systems theory states Europe as the financial center of the world. According to the world systems theory, there are three types of countries: developed, developing, and underdeveloped. Typically, underdeveloped countries have a history of being colonized by developed countries. European, in this sense, is among developed countries, which is the top tier in this classification theory. In addition, with the sense that Africa is being colonized arises the sense that Africa is still being financially colonized by European countries [10]. This financial environment accompanied by the global environment that the world system's theory helps to explain provide the fundamental culture that provokes trafficking activities to occur in football without bringing enough media attention and guilt among clubs, football federations, and the general football fans.

6. Suggestions for controlling human trafficking in the sports industry

There is no perfect policy that could completely eliminate the act of trafficking. However, there are policies that could alleviate the issue gradually in the long term:

The primary policy recommendation will be the Government spending on education. To further protect minors from being deceived by football intermediaries require some extent of football knowledge within the minor's decision-making process. A spending on regional promotion and education on minors could enable them to think critically before making a life-long impacting decision.

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The policy of minimum wage towards minors could not only protect the minor's personal finance but also forcing clubs to reconsider their recruiting decision of players to maximize their utility.

Establishing a third-party firm to supervise over the trading of players within a region would make the football transaction process more transparent towards the public. Through this act, clubs and intermediaries have to reconsider their strategy of profit maximization and its impacts on themselves.

In terms of limitations, this study does not rely on primary resources such as interviews, surveys, and field study. To further explore the area of football trafficking requires massive surveys, interviews, and field study. At the same time, there are only a limited variety of sources within the academia that could offer credible information towards this study. With only a limited variety of sources cited, this study could not offer a quite perspective and solid conclusion that accounts for all reasons behind football trafficking.

7. Conclusion

In summary, this study analyzed factors including academy investment, commercialization, individual incentives and culture to illustrate how rather than being a phenomenon of individual bad actors, there are systemic factors that fuel human trafficking because the stark global economic divide creates an infinite supply of desperate youth labor, while the economic and social incentives underpinning the European football demand the cheap extraction and commodification of young bodies, ultimately generating a massive, unregulated shadow market that strips minor athletes of legal protections and leaves them structurally vulnerable to exploitation and abandonment.

These factors should be understood together rather than in isolation to paint a systematic problem because football trafficking involves various parties and interests. As trafficking typically requires the involvement of multiple actors, it is unlikely to occur on a mass scale when only one side benefits from it.

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