# The Role of Legal and Ethical Safeguards in Enhancing Contractual Fairness for Sustainable Youth Engagement in Esports

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## ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of the esports industry has created significant opportunities for young participants, but it has also brought legal and ethical issues, including poorly structured governance frameworks, inconsistent contractual standards, and insufficient legal safeguards for young players. These problems can lead to exploitation and harm to players' well-being, posing a risk to the sustainability of youth participation in esports. While research on esports governance has increased in volume, it still lacks systematic analysis of how legal and ethical protection measures can improve contractual fairness and ensure the long-term sustainability of youth participation. This study aims to develop a conceptual framework that analyzes the relationship between legal and ethical protection, perceived contractual fairness, and sustainable youth participation in esports. It uses a narrative literature review methodology based on publications that were retrieved from the Scopus database. The study used integrative thematic analysis to identify, synthesize, and interpret key concepts pertinent to esports governance, contractual regulation, ethics, and youth protection. The review indicates that legal and ethical safeguards are essential for enhancing perceptions of contractual fairness. The results also suggest that perceived contractual fairness is an important mechanism through which these safeguards build trust, organizational commitment, and sustained youth participation. Grounded in Organizational Justice Theory and Stakeholder Theory, the proposed conceptual framework extends governance and organizational justice perspectives to the esports context. In practical terms, the study offers insights for policymakers, regulators, game publishers, esports organizations, and other stakeholders to develop fair contractual practices and governance structures that better protect participants and support the sustainable development of the global esports ecosystem.

**Keywords:** Esports, Legal and ethical safeguards, Contractual fairness, Sustainable youth participation.

## INTRODUCTION

Esports is no longer a fringe field in digital entertainment; it has grown into a globally recognized competitive arena with millions of players, spectators, investors, and business stakeholders. Esports is becoming more professional, creating new economic opportunities for players, especially young people who want to pursue careers in competitive gaming through professional teams, sponsorships, streaming platforms, and international tournaments. However, esports growth has not kept pace with the development of legal and governance frameworks to protect the welfare of all involved (Kelly et al., 2022; Candeo et al., 2025). Unlike institutionalized sports leagues and governing bodies that have established standard practices and welfare protections for their athletes, esports have not yet consolidated into a similar governance structure with standardized contracts and welfare measures (Peng et al., 2020). As a result, young esports players often enter contractual agreements in an environment marked by inconsistent legal protections, ethical oversight, and

accountability mechanisms. This imbalance has raised concerns about their well-being and long-term and sustainable involvement in esports.

As these governance gaps have been increasingly acknowledged, scholarship has paid more attention to the legal and ethical aspects of esports. Past research has consistently shown that fragmented governance structures can lead to inconsistencies in contractual standards, integrity mechanisms, workers' rights, and players' welfare (Abanazir & Shinohara, 2024; Kelly et al., 2022; Candeo et al., 2025). Research suggests that internationally recognized human rights principles, such as the rights to fair working conditions, freedom of association, and access to effective remedies, can serve as valuable normative frameworks to safeguard esports competitors and strengthen contractual relationships (Gauthier & Jaén, 2026). Meanwhile, ethical aspects have gained importance, with researchers emphasizing the importance of addressing fair labor practices, inclusivity, anti-doping measures, protection from exploitation, and the physical and psychological well-being of players in the organization's policies and contractual terms (Buzzelli et al., 2025; Lapis, 2024). These studies indicate that legal safeguards create a formal regulatory framework for accountability, and ethical safeguards help to maintain organizational responsibility, trust, and participants' well-being.

Most literature, however, examines legal and ethical safeguards separately. Little research has explored how legal and ethical protections can work together to foster fairness in contracts and support youth's sustainable involvement in the esports industry. The impact of legal and ethical safeguards on contractual fairness has received limited conceptual exploration. Contractual fairness goes beyond legal compliance to include transparency, procedural justice, balanced obligations, informed consent, and the protection of vulnerable persons. These factors are especially important for young participants, who often have limited legal knowledge and receive varying levels of support in negotiating contracts (Holden et al., 2020). Without integrating legal and ethical safeguards, young players risk exploitation, which can erode trust in esports organizations and reduce long-term involvement. To address these issues, a more holistic conceptual approach is needed to explain not only the importance of these safeguards but also how they shape perceptions of fairness, which, in turn, may affect sustainable youth engagement in esports.

This paper addresses this gap by proposing a conceptual framework in which legal and ethical safeguards function as the independent variable, perceived contractual fairness serves as a proposed explanatory mechanism, and sustainable youth participation in esports represents the dependent variable. Nevertheless, the relationships depicted in the framework are theoretically derived propositions rather than empirically established causal relationships. The framework therefore does not presume that legal and ethical safeguards necessarily produce contractual fairness or sustainable participation; instead, it identifies relationships that warrant future empirical examination. Drawing upon Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984) and Organizational Justice Theory (Greenberg, 1987), the proposed framework explains how comprehensive legal protections and ethical governance practices may enhance perceptions of fairness in contractual arrangements and, in turn, may contribute to greater trust, well-being, and long-term participation among youth esports players. Stakeholder Theory can be applied to the esports industry to help identify and highlight that multiple stakeholders, including esports organizations, publishers, tournament organizers, regulators, parents, coaches, schools, and young players, have a shared responsibility for establishing a governance environment that is conducive to safeguarding the interests of young players and enabling the sustainable growth of the industry. Organizational Justice Theory complements this by showing that people's perceptions of justice affect trust, commitment, satisfaction, and continued participation. In the esports environment, legal and ethical protection mechanisms can help create clear governance frameworks and responsible contractual practices. Contractual fairness may serve as a key mechanism shaping young players' perceptions of justice. Therefore, sustainable youth involvement is expected to develop in situations where contractual relationships are transparent, fair, accountable, and provide proper safeguards for players' rights and welfare.

For conceptual clarity, this study uses "youth" or "young players" as an overarching category encompassing young esports participants, while recognizing that minors constitute a legally distinct and particularly vulnerable subgroup. A participant's legal status cannot be inferred from the general category of youth because the age of majority, contractual capacity, labor protections, requirements for parental or guardian consent, and esports-specific regulatory rules differ across jurisdictions. Accordingly, the framework is intended as a general

conceptual model, and its application may vary with participants' age and the governing legal and regulatory context.

This study goes beyond describing regulatory deficiencies by explaining how perceived contractual fairness may serve as a key mechanism linking governance safeguards with sustainable participation outcomes. It contributes to the literature on esports governance by integrating legal and ethical dimensions into a unified conceptual framework that clarifies their possible impact on contractual fairness and sustainable youth engagement. The framework offers practical implications for policymakers, legislators, esports organizations, publishers, player associations, parents, and educational institutions seeking to develop responsible governance practices and standardize contracts for youth in esports. At the policy level, the study offers insights that could inform the development of contractual guidelines, child protection measures, and governance and regulatory policies. The rest of this paper is structured as follows. Next, it reviews literature on legal and ethical safeguards, perceived contractual fairness, and sustainable youth engagement in esports. This is followed by the theoretical basis of the proposed framework, the development of research propositions, the presentation of the conceptual framework, and the theoretical, practical, and policy implications of the study. Finally, it presents conclusions and recommendations for future studies.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

## Legal and Ethical Safeguards

Legal and ethical safeguards cover the institutional measures, regulatory frameworks, and governance policies put in place to prevent exploitation of esports participants and ensure accountability, transparency, and responsible industry growth. However, the rapid growth of the esports sector has also highlighted gaps in legal and governance frameworks, especially in safeguarding young players who often compete at professional or semi-professional levels without the protections they would likely find in traditional sports. The literature consistently identifies fragmented governance as a key challenge to achieving fair contractual relationships. Regulatory power is distributed across various bodies in the esports industry, such as game publishers, tournament organizers, esports organizations, and private stakeholders, rather than concentrated in a single governing body (Kelly et al., 2022; Candeo et al., 2025; Novák et al., 2025; Abanazir & Shinohara, 2024). This fragmented and flawed legal landscape leads to an unstandardized contractual framework, inadequate age-verification systems, few dispute-resolution mechanisms, and weak welfare safeguards, all of which expose young esports players to exploitative contractual practices (Kang, 2026). As a result, legal safeguards have grown in importance in setting minimum standards to protect young esports participants through clear contractual clauses, labor protections, parent/guardian engagement (where applicable), accessible legal remedies, and uniform governance structures. In addition to domestic law, recent scholarship advocates for the international recognition of human rights principles as the basis for the governance and contractual regulation of esports, such as the right to just and favorable working conditions, the right to freedom of association, the right to collective bargaining, the right to non-discrimination, and the right to access to effective remedies (Gauthier & Jaén, 2026; Jaén, 2023). However, scholars also recognize that complying with the law alone is not enough to address the ethical issues that have emerged with the commercialization of esports. Ethical safeguards are also important to strengthen legal protections by fostering integrity, transparency, inclusivity, responsible organizational conduct, anti-doping efforts, and the safeguarding of players' physical and psychological well-being (Buzzelli et al., 2025; Park et al., 2025). Overall, the literature indicates that legal safeguards provide institutional mechanisms to ensure accountability and enforceability, while ethical safeguards strengthen organizational responsibility. Together, these safeguards can foster a governance environment that supports the sustainable engagement of young people in fair contractual relationships.

For the purposes of the proposed framework, legal and ethical safeguards are conceptually distinguished while remaining part of the broader safeguarding construct. Legal safeguards encompass four principal dimensions: (i) contractual protection and transparency, including clear terms concerning remuneration, duration, termination, intellectual property, and player rights and obligations; (ii) age and capacity protection, including age verification, contractual capacity requirements, and parental or guardian consent where legally required; (iii) labor and welfare protection, including reasonable working or training conditions, health and safety, education, and protection against exploitation; and (iv) access to remedies and accountability, including complaint

procedures and independent dispute resolution. Ethical safeguards are conceptualized through (i) integrity and responsible conduct, (ii) transparency and accountability, (iii) inclusivity and non-discrimination, and (iv) participant welfare and well-being. This distinction matters because conduct may comply formally with applicable law while still raising ethical concerns about fairness, welfare, or exploitation. Conversely, ethical commitments cannot substitute for enforceable legal protections where participants possess legally recognized rights.

**Perceived Contractual Fairness**

Although perceived contractual fairness is important for fostering participants' trust and organizational commitment in esports, the construct remains a relatively underexplored area in the literature. Existing scholarship shows that contractual fairness extends beyond the legal enforceability of agreements to encompass participants' perceptions that contractual terms are transparent, balanced, and equitable, protect their rights and legitimate interests, and are implemented through fair procedures. In esports, this includes provisions on payment, sponsorship, exclusivity, intellectual property, streaming rights, termination, player welfare, and accessible dispute-resolution mechanisms (Novák et al., 2025; Gauthier & Jaén, 2026). Young participants, in particular, may not fully understand the consequences of contractual obligations because of limited legal knowledge, unequal bargaining power, financial dependence, and limited negotiation experience (Kang, 2026; Kang & Kim, 2025). Similarly, although an agreement may be legally valid, it can be perceived as unfair if it favors organizations or fails to protect the individual's education, health, career development, and well-being. The literature also shows that perceptions of fairness relate not only to the contract's content but also to organizational behavior, such as transparency in negotiations, ethical decision-making, consistent application of rules, and respect for participants' rights (Kelly et al., 2022). Contractual fairness in human rights scholarship also points to dignity, equality, accountability, and access to justice (Gauthier & Jaén, 2026; Jaén, 2023). Although awareness of these issues is growing, past research has focused on governance failures, labor rights, or legal protections themselves, and little work examines how legal and ethical safeguards shape participants' perceptions of contractual fairness. In this way, perceived contractual fairness may influence how institutional safeguards lead to positive experiences among young esports participants.

Accordingly, perceived contractual fairness is conceptually operationalized through four interrelated dimensions derived from Organizational Justice Theory: distributive fairness, referring to the perceived equity of contractual benefits, burdens, rewards, and risks; procedural fairness, referring to the transparency, consistency, and impartiality of contractual negotiation and enforcement processes; interpersonal fairness, concerning respectful and dignified treatment within the contractual relationship; and informational fairness, concerning the adequacy, clarity, accuracy, and accessibility of information provided to young participants. These dimensions conceptualize contractual fairness as a participant-level perception rather than an objective determination of a contract's legal validity. A legally enforceable contract may therefore still be perceived as unfair, while perceived fairness does not itself establish legal validity or enforceability.

**Sustainable Youth Participation in Esports**

Sustainable youth engagement in esports is not just about recruitment and retention, but sustained engagement in an environment that promotes overall well-being, integrity, personal development, and equitable opportunities throughout a competitive career. In recent years, however, there has been growing recognition in the literature that the sustainability of esports is not only about commercial expansion and technological advancements but also about establishing governance frameworks that prevent participant exploitation and build trust between players, families, educational institutions, and key players in the industry (Kelly et al., 2022; Tzoumaka et al., 2024). A lack of legal protection, inconsistent ethical principles, poor governance practices, and unfair contractual arrangements have been linked to a higher risk of exploitation, excessive workloads, psychological stress, physical health issues, and premature departure from esports, which affects not only the sustainability of an individual esports career, but also the legitimacy of the overall esports ecosystem (Kang, 2026; Kang & Kim, 2025; Candeo et al., 2025). However, those that provide full legal protections, strong governance processes, participant-focused welfare policies, and clear contracts are more likely to foster trust, commitment to the organization, and sustained participation among young competitors (Buzzelli et al., 2025; Tzoumaka et al., 2024). Moreover, scholars highlight the need for collaborative governance among various stakeholders,

including publishers, tournament organizers, regulators, educational institutions, player associations, and families, to ensure consistent adherence to legal and ethical guidelines within the esports ecosystem (Abanazir & Shinohara, 2024; Sebata & Li, 2024). While previous research recognizes the role of governance, integrity, and participants' welfare, little research clarifies how legal and ethical protection leads to sustainable youth participation. This conceptual gap underpins the current study, which posits that legal and ethical safeguards positively and directly affect sustainable youth participation, and indirectly through the development of perceived contractual fairness.

In this study, sustainable youth participation is conceptually understood through four dimensions: (i) continuity of participation, reflected in the willingness and ability to remain involved in esports over time; (ii) participant well-being, encompassing physical, psychological, and social welfare; (iii) developmental sustainability, including compatibility between esports participation, education, personal development, and longer-term career interests; and (iv) safe and responsible engagement, referring to participation within an environment that minimizes exploitation, excessive demands, discrimination, and other foreseeable harms. Sustainable participation therefore does not mean maximizing the duration or intensity of youth involvement; rather, it refers to participation that can be maintained without compromising the rights, welfare, education, or development of young participants.

### Youth, Minors, and Jurisdictional Context

Although the terms "youth" and "young participants" are used throughout this study to capture the broader population of younger esports participants, minors require separate conceptual consideration because their legal position may differ substantially from that of young adults. A participant who is legally a minor may have restricted contractual capacity, may require parental or guardian consent, and may be subject to specific protections relating to employment, working hours, education, health, safeguarding, or participation in commercial activities. By contrast, young adults who have reached the applicable age of majority may possess full contractual capacity while remaining vulnerable because of limited legal literacy, unequal bargaining power, financial dependence, or lack of professional representation. The framework therefore treats minority status as legally distinct from the broader concept of youth rather than assuming that all young esports participants possess the same rights, capacities, or vulnerabilities.

These distinctions are further complicated by jurisdictional variation. The age at which an individual acquires full contractual capacity, the legal consequences of contracts entered into by minors, requirements for parental or guardian consent, the classification of esports players for labor or employment purposes, permissible working or training conditions, and the existence of esports-specific regulation vary across legal systems. Consequently, identical contractual provisions or safeguarding practices may have different legal effects depending on the participant's age, legal status, place of residence, the contract's governing law, and the jurisdiction in which the relevant esports activity occurs (Star & Dhankar, 2022). The proposed framework should therefore be interpreted as context-sensitive rather than universally invariant. Jurisdictional context may shape the form, strength, enforceability, and practical effects of legal and ethical safeguards and, consequently, how those safeguards relate to perceived contractual fairness and sustainable youth participation. Future empirical studies should therefore test the framework separately across jurisdictions and, where possible, distinguish minors from young adult participants.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study uses a narrative literature review to develop a conceptual framework explaining the link between legal and ethical safeguards, perceived contractual fairness, and sustainable youth participation in esports. Unlike systematic reviews that primarily answer narrowly defined research questions through rigid inclusion protocols, a narrative review enables a broader, more interpretative synthesis of existing knowledge by integrating theoretical perspectives, identifying emerging themes, and highlighting conceptual relationships across multidisciplinary literature (Green et al., 2006; Baumeister & Leary, 1997). Because research on esports, youth protection, governance, ethics, and contractual fairness spans law, sports management, business, public policy,

psychology, and digital governance, a narrative review is an appropriate method for examining the breadth of scholarly discourse and identifying areas needing further conceptual development. The narrative review approach is particularly suitable for conceptual studies because it facilitates critical analysis rather than merely summarizing previous findings (Augustine & Lucas, 2026). Through an iterative process of reviewing, comparing, and synthesizing relevant studies, this methodology identified recurring themes, theoretical perspectives, and knowledge gaps in the existing literature. In the present study, the narrative review integrates multidisciplinary evidence on legal safeguards, ethical safeguards, contractual fairness, governance, participant well-being, and youth engagement in esports. The synthesis of these interrelated concepts provides the theoretical foundation for a conceptual framework explaining how legal and ethical safeguards may enhance perceived contractual fairness and, in turn, promote sustainable youth participation in esports.

**Carrying out the Narrative Review**

The narrative review was conducted through a structured search of the Scopus database, selected due to its extensive coverage of peer-reviewed publications across diverse fields such as law, sports management, business, public policy, social sciences, and information technology. Scopus covers contemporary esports scholarship and provides a reliable source for identifying studies that examine legal regulation, governance, ethics, contractual relationships, participant welfare, and youth engagement. Using a single comprehensive database also ensured consistent retrieval of scholarly publications while maintaining the quality and credibility of the literature included in the conceptual review.

The review process consisted of several key steps (Theile & Beall, 2024). First, the researchers developed relevant keywords and search strings based on the study's principal constructs, including esports, legal safeguards, ethical safeguards, contracts, contractual fairness, governance, youth participation, and sustainability. Second, the researchers screened studies retrieved from Scopus for relevance by examining their titles, abstracts, and keywords to determine alignment with the objectives of the present study. Third, the selected publications were reviewed in full to identify their theoretical perspectives, key findings, and contributions to understanding legal protection, ethical governance, contractual fairness, and sustainable youth engagement in esports. Finally, the evidence was critically synthesized through thematic analysis, allowing common themes, conceptual relationships, and research gaps to be identified and integrated into a coherent conceptual framework.

The data collection and review strategy are as follow: Data collection was conducted on 15 September 2026 through a two-stage search involving Scopus AI and the conventional Scopus database. The initial stage used Scopus AI to explore relevant literature and identify publications through three questions: (1) "What is the role of legal and ethical safeguards in enhancing contractual fairness for sustainable youth engagement in esports?" (2) "How do legal frameworks influence contractual agreements in esports for youth participation?"; and (3) "What ethical considerations should be addressed in esports contracts for young players?" These queries generated 12, 6, and 10 records, respectively. After removing duplicate records, 21 publications remained. Three non-English publications were subsequently excluded, leaving 18 records for further consideration. Scopus AI served as an exploratory tool rather than a replacement for the conventional database search. Its reliance on information available in abstracts could omit relevant publications whose abstracts did not explicitly address the queries, while the absence of date and language filters limited control over initial retrieval.

The second literature search was conducted systematically using a structured approach with Boolean operators and synonymous keywords that encompass the study's main concepts. The search string used was:

("esports" OR "electronic sports") AND ("contracts" OR "agreements" OR "legal documents" OR "legal frameworks") AND ("legal" OR "law" OR "regulatory" OR "jurisprudence") AND ("ethical" OR "morality" OR "principles" OR "standards") AND ("safeguards" OR "protections" OR "measures" OR "provisions")

To increase the likelihood of capturing related studies with different wording, the researchers used alternative keywords for each construct. Publications were first filtered by titles, abstracts, and keywords and their relevance to the objectives of this study. Eligibility criteria restricted the search to English-language articles, book chapters, conference papers, and review articles published from 2016 to 2026. Included subject areas were Social Sciences; Computer Science; Medicine; Psychology; Business, Management and Accounting; Health

Professions; Arts and Humanities; Engineering; Economics, Econometrics and Finance; and Multidisciplinary. The review excluded other subject areas listed in the documentation to maintain the intended disciplinary scope. The search returned 548 records, and 31 were selected after title screening. A reference spreadsheet was used to track publications and identify duplicates across both search stages.

Combining the 31 records from the conventional search with the 18 records identified through Scopus AI yielded 49 records. The researchers removed 12 duplicates, leaving 37 records for further screening. Twelve records were later excluded for irrelevance to the study, leaving 25 publications for full-text retrieval. Of these, we could not obtain full texts for three publications, leaving 22 records available for full-text eligibility and quality assessment. The researchers independently assessed full-text articles that explicitly addressed legal regulations, ethical governance, contracting relationships, participant protection, youth, and sustainability in esports in greater detail. We excluded technical game development, game design, and other non-legal, non-ethical, non-governance, or non-contractual aspects of digital games. We resolved any disagreements regarding the selected full texts through discussion and consensus. We considered borderline publications based on their contribution to the central narrative. This process supported a focused narrative synthesis while accommodating literature relevant to conceptual development.

After identifying the relevant literature, the selected publications were analyzed using an integrative thematic analysis. This approach was chosen because it integrates evidence from diverse theoretical and disciplinary perspectives, making it particularly appropriate for conceptual research aimed at developing new theoretical relationships rather than statistically synthesizing empirical findings (Augustine & Lucas, 2026). The analysis involved six interconnected phases (Lochmiller, 2021) i.e., (1) familiarization: Researchers first read and reread the publications to develop an understanding of their arguments and findings; (2) initial coding: relevant segments of the publications were assigned codes; (3) theme development: the codes were compared across publications and grouped into candidate themes. (4) theme review: these themes were repeatedly checked against the underlying evidence, refined, merged, or separated where necessary; (5) theme definition: the themes were given clear definitions and names; and (6) synthesis: the final synthesis compared convergent, divergent, and complementary findings across the selected literature to clarify how legal and ethical safeguards may relate to perceived contractual fairness and sustainable youth participation in esports. The three constructs provided the review's conceptual focus, while the specific themes emerged through iterative engagement with the publications rather than being assumed in advance. The review integrated legal principles, ethical responsibilities, governance arrangements, contractual practices, and participant welfare considerations to inform the proposed conceptual framework. The resulting relationships were treated as theoretically informed propositions requiring future empirical investigation.

The key findings from the narrative review are summarized in Table 1 below. The narrative review revealed some dominant themes around legal and ethical protective measures in the context of fostering fair contracts and sustainable youth involvement in esports.

| Key Finding | Description | Key Supporting Literature |
|---|---|---|
| **Fragmented governance limits youth protection** | Esports industry lacks unified governance structure, which contributes to inconsistent legal standards, contractual practices, welfare protections, and regulatory oversight. This leaves young participants vulnerable because protections may differ substantially across publishers, organizations, jurisdictions, and competitions. | Kelly et al. (2022); Candeo et al. (2025); Kang (2026); Abanazir and Shinohara (2024); Star and Dhankar (2022); Novák et al. (2025) |
| **Young participants are vulnerable to exploitation** | Young esports participants may face unequal bargaining power, limited legal knowledge, limited legal representation, insufficient contractual understanding, and inadequate institutional support. These conditions can expose them to unfair remuneration, excessive obligations, restrictive contractual clauses, and insufficient welfare protection. | Abanazir and Shinohara (2024); Kang (2026); Kang and Kim (2025); Chee and Karhulahti (2020); Holden et al. (2020). |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Legal safeguards strengthen contractual protection** | Legal protections such as clear contractual terms, age verification, parental or guardian informed consent, labor protections, welfare standards, and accessible dispute-resolution mechanisms can reduce exploitation and improve accountability in contractual relationships involving young players. | Kang (2026); Gauthier and Jaén (2026); Star and Dhankar (2022) |
| **Ethical safeguards reinforce organizational responsibility** | Ethical safeguards complement formal legal rules by promoting integrity, transparency, inclusivity, fair labor practices, responsible conduct, anti-doping measures, and protection of physical and psychological well-being. These encourage organizations to protect young participants beyond minimum legal requirements. | Park et al. (2025); Kelly et al. (2022); Lapis (2024); Buzzelli et al. (2025). |
| **Human rights principles support contractual fairness** | Human rights principles provide an important normative basis for fair contractual treatment, particularly in relation to just and favorable working conditions, freedom of association, non-discrimination, access to remedies, and protection of vulnerable participants. | Gauthier and Jaén (2026); Jaén (2023). |
| **Contractual fairness extends beyond legal validity** | Contractual fairness encompasses more than whether an agreement is legally enforceable. It also includes transparency, clear and understandable terms, balanced rights and obligations, informed consent, procedural fairness, equitable bargaining conditions, and effective mechanisms for addressing disputes. | Gauthier and Jaén (2026); Kang (2026); Kelly et al. (2022). |
| **Transparency promotes fairness and trust** | Clear disclosure of contractual rights, obligations, remuneration, workloads, welfare provisions, and dispute procedures can reduce uncertainty and exploitation while strengthening trust between young players, their families, and esports organizations. | Kelly et al. (2022); Candeo et al. (2025); Shinohara (2023); Kang and Kim (2025). |
| **Participant well-being is integral to sustainable engagement** | Sustainable participation requires protection of physical and mental health, reasonable training demands, educational continuity, career development, and appropriate support systems. Where these protections are absent, risks of stress, burnout, and premature disengagement increase. | Lapis (2024); Kang and Kim (2025); Kang (2026). |
| **Integrity and ethical conduct support long-term sustainability** | Ethical governance and integrity mechanisms addressing corruption, match-fixing, doping, harmful sponsorship, and other unethical practices contribute to a safer and more trustworthy environment, thereby strengthening the legitimacy and sustainability of esports participation. | Tzoumaka et al. (2024); Shinohara (2023); Park et al. (2025); Chambers (2020); Buzzelli et al. (2025). |
| **Stakeholder collaboration is essential for governance reform** | Effective youth protection and sustainable governance cannot depend on individual organizations alone. Collaboration among publishers, tournament organizers, teams, regulators, educational institutions, parents, player representatives, and other stakeholders is necessary to establish consistent and enforceable standards. | Abanazir and Shinohara (2024); Sebata and Li (2024); Kelly et al. (2022); Ertz et al. (2026); Candeo et al. (2025); Hong (2023); Hong (2025); Peng et al. (2020). |
| **Legal and ethical safeguards collectively promote sustainable youth participation** | Legal and ethical safeguards operate in a complementary manner. By reducing exploitation, improving transparency, protecting welfare, strengthening organizational accountability, and increasing trust, these safeguards create conditions that are more conducive to sustained youth participation in esports. | Kelly et al. (2022); Kang (2026); Gauthier and Jaén (2026); Tzoumaka et al. (2024). |
| **Perceived contractual fairness is theoretically expected to provide a link between safeguards and sustainable participation** | The safeguards are likely to influence participation most effectively when young players perceive contractual arrangements as transparent, balanced, respectful, and enforceable. Perceived contractual fairness therefore provides a plausible explanatory mechanism linking legal and ethical safeguards with sustainable youth participation. | Kang (2026); Kelly et al. (2022); Gauthier and Jaén (2026); Tzoumaka et al. (2024). |

**Table 1. Key Findings from the Narrative Review**

Table 1 shows that esports governance is fragmented, causing inconsistent protections and standards for young players. The studies highlight the importance of legal safeguards like fair contracts, labor rights, age verification, parental consent, and dispute resolution to reduce exploitation. However, regulation alone is not enough for fair contracts. Ethical safeguards such as transparency, integrity, inclusivity, anti-doping, and player welfare policies support fairness by fostering accountability and trust. The review also emphasizes that global human rights principles can strengthen protections and promote fair treatment in esports.

The review shows that perceived contractual fairness is theoretically expected to link institutional safeguards to youth participation. Rather than focusing only on legal enforceability, individuals judge contracts by transparency, balanced obligations, informed consent, justice, and available remedies. These perceptions affect their trust, continued engagement, and well-being. Youth are vulnerable due to unequal bargaining power, limited legal knowledge, and inadequate institutional protection. Organizations that can combine legal and ethical practices are better positioned to build trust, protect the players' welfare, and foster ongoing participation. These findings support the study's proposed framework, suggesting legal and ethical safeguards improve youth sustainable involvement in esports by enhancing perceived contractual fairness.

**Theoretical Background and Development of Conceptual Framework**

The study is grounded in two theories, namely Organizational Justice Theory and Stakeholder Theory. Together, they explain how legal and ethical measures enhance contractual fairness and support sustainable youth engagement in esports. Developed by Greenberg (1987) and later refined by Colquitt (2001), Organizational Justice Theory explains how individuals assess fairness in their organizational relationships and how they respond to these perceptions in terms of trust, commitment, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions. The theory introduces four components of justice: distributive justice (fairness of outcomes), procedural justice (fairness of procedures), interpersonal justice (fairness of interactions), and informational justice (fairness of information) (Colquitt, 2001). Organizational justice is related to how esports athletes feel about the fairness of resource allocation (e.g., playing time, rewards, prize money allocation, team selection, and pay), decision-making procedures (e.g., rule transparency, fairness of selection, and disciplinary measures), interpersonal treatment (e.g., communication quality and respect), and information sharing (e.g., on matters concerning the organization or competition). It is important to note here that these perceptions impact individual and team attitudes, behaviors and outcomes.

Freeman (1984) introduced Stakeholder Theory, which extends analysis by positing that organizations are responsible not only to shareholders but also to all stakeholders affected by organizational decisions. In the esports ecosystem, stakeholders range from players and parents/guardians to esports organizations, game publishers, tournament organizers, regulators, educational institutions, sponsors, and player associations. Stakeholder theory helps identify and map these groups, supporting the development of inclusive governance frameworks that account for the interests and influence of all concerned (Peng et al., 2020). It also underscores the importance of stakeholders' needs and well-being, especially players'. Understanding stakeholder perspectives is essential for informing policies and practices that promote player health, career prospects, and the industry's overall sustainability (Kelly et al., 2022; Hong, 2025).

Together, these theories offer behavioral and governance lenses that inform the current study by explaining how young players perceive fairness and why organizations share responsibility for ensuring adequate legal and ethical measures to protect young esports players' rights and well-being. This is especially relevant given the current state of governance in the esports industry, including the unequal distribution of bargaining power among game publishers, organizations, and players; inconsistent regulatory oversight; and the lack of protection for young players in the industry (Kelly et al., 2022; Candeo et al., 2025). Based on Organizational Justice Theory, young players' perception of contractual fairness is likely higher when contractual terms are clear, decision-making is consistent, rights and obligations are balanced, and organizations respect players' welfare. Legal safeguards such as regulatory compliance, clear contractual provisions, age verification, labor protections, and dispute mechanisms improve fairness by ensuring equity and consistent practices. Ethical safeguards, including organizational integrity, inclusivity, accountability, player welfare policies, and responsible governance, foster

respectful treatment and transparent communication. Stakeholder Theory emphasizes that these safeguards are shared responsibilities among all involved in esports, including game publishers, organizers, teams, regulators, schools, and parents, with the aim of prioritizing youth welfare, integrity, and sustainable growth. The framework suggests that legal and ethical safeguards, created through stakeholder collaboration, boost perceived fairness and promote ongoing youth engagement in esports.

Organizational Justice Theory and Stakeholder Theory, when combined, provide some significant theoretical and practical contributions. The suggested framework can be seen as a way to further develop Organizational Justice Theory in the new area of esports governance by demonstrating that contractual fairness is a crucial intervening factor between institutional protections and sustainable participation outcomes. It also expands Stakeholder Theory by showing how collaborative governance among diverse stakeholders helps create equitable contractual relationships that balance commercial goals with participant protection. The framework moves beyond separate research on governance, legal regulation, ethics, and youth well-being, and brings these concepts together in a single explanation of sustainable esports participation. This integration also suggests that contractual fairness should be viewed not only as a legal outcome but through a holistic lens that includes transparent governance, ethical organizational behavior, and stakeholder accountability. In practice, the framework guides stakeholders and policymakers in creating contract standards that reflect principles of distributive, procedural, interpersonal, and informational justice and demonstrate an understanding of shared responsibility, as promoted by Stakeholder Theory. These include clear contracts, fair sharing of rights and responsibilities, robust grievance and conflict-resolution processes, extensive welfare safeguards, ethical management processes, and meaningful stakeholder participation. In conclusion, applying Organizational Justice Theory and Stakeholder Theory together offers a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding how legal and ethical measures support contractual fairness and, in turn, sustainable youth engagement in esports. The framework thus provides a good conceptual foundation for future empirical studies on the governance, contractual, and behavioral aspects of youth participation in the fast-changing esports sector.

Based on the literature synthesis and the integration of Organizational Justice Theory and Stakeholder Theory, Figure 1 presents the proposed relationships among legal and ethical safeguards, perceived contractual fairness, and sustainable youth participation in esports. The arrows in the framework represent theoretically proposed relationships and should not be interpreted as empirically established causal effects. The framework proposes a direct relationship between legal and ethical safeguards and sustainable youth participation and further identifies perceived contractual fairness as a proposed explanatory mechanism through which safeguards may be associated with sustainable participation. Accordingly, the framework is propositional rather than confirmatory and provides a basis for future empirical testing.

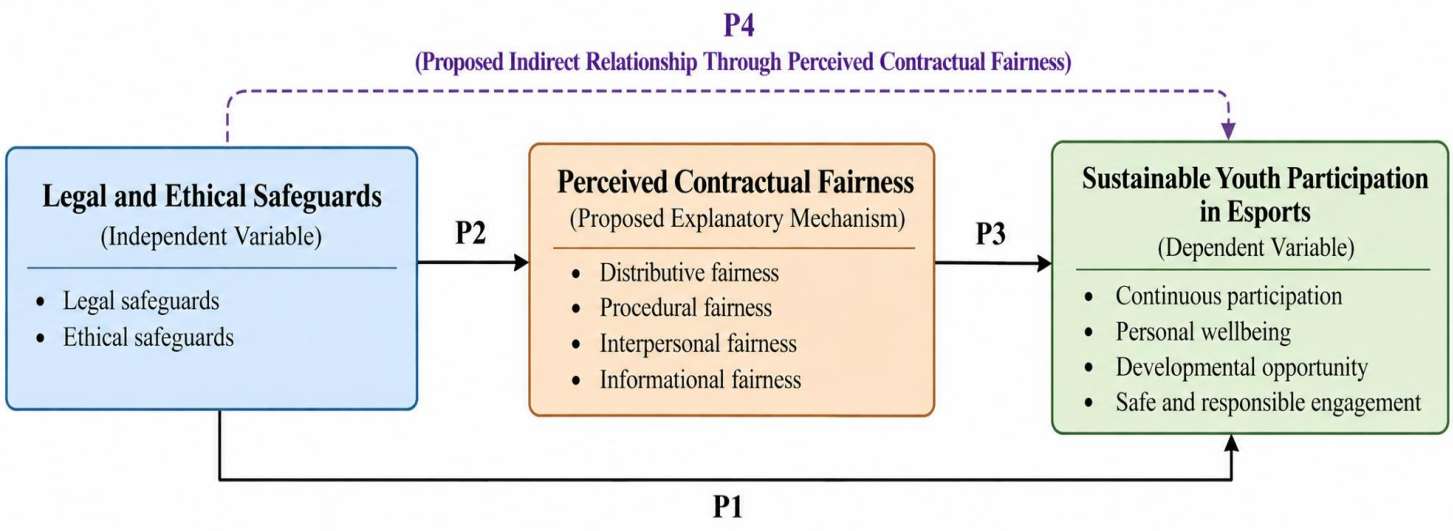



**Figure 1.** Proposed conceptual relationships among legal and ethical safeguards, perceived contractual fairness, and sustainable youth participation in esports. The arrows represent theoretically proposed relationships and do not indicate empirically established causal effects.

## Proposition Development

### 1. Legal and Ethical Safeguards and Sustainable Youth Participation in Esports

Legal and ethical safeguards that protect youth participants from exploitation and ensure a safe, transparent, and competitive environment are key to the long-term sustainability of youth participation in esports. The lack of coordinated governance structures has led to varying contractual practices, regulatory frameworks, and welfare measures for minors, leaving them vulnerable to legal and ethical risks as esports becomes a highly commercialized sector (Candeo et al., 2025; Kang, 2026; Kelly et al., 2022). The literature consistently agrees that the institutional basis for ensuring equitable engagement and reducing contractual exploitation lies in legal protections such as age verification, contractual transparency, labor protections, dispute settlement mechanisms, and human rights-based protections (Gauthier & Jaén, 2026). Beyond these legal instruments, ethical safeguards such as organizational integrity, inclusivity, participant well-being, anti-doping measures, and responsible governance encourage esports organizations to consider young players' physical, psychological, and educational well-being, going beyond legal compliance. Together, these protections foster a safer space for young players to compete, build greater legitimacy for the organization, and improve trust in the esports environment.

Legal and ethical safeguards support sustainable youth participation, as supported by Organizational Justice Theory and Stakeholder Theory. According to Organizational Justice Theory, organizations with clear rules, fair governance procedures, and policies that consider participants' interests promote fairness perceptions that elicit commitment and sustained involvement (Colquitt, 2001; Greenberg, 1987). At the same time, the Stakeholder Theory postulates that the different actors in the esports industry, such as esports organizations, publishers, tournament organizers, regulators, parents, and educational institutions, should have a joint responsibility to protect the interests of young players and maintain a balance between profit and well-being (Freeman, 1984). By working together to ensure strong legal and ethical protections are in place, these stakeholders can foster a culture of accountability, integrity, and trust within the governance framework, encouraging young players to continue participating in esports. However, without adequate protection, players risk exploitation, health issues, contractual conflicts, and dropping out of competitive esports, which undermines the overall sustainability of the esports industry (Kang, 2026; Kelly et al., 2022; Tzoumaka et al., 2024). Based on this, the following proposition is put forward: Proposition 1 - Legal and ethical safeguards positively affect sustainable youth participation in esports.

### 2. Legal and Ethical Safeguards and Perceived Contractual Fairness

Legal and ethical protections are critical governance structures and can influence young esports participants' perceptions of fair contractual interactions. In the fast-changing world of esports, contracts generally cover aspects of salary, Intellectual Property rights, sponsorship obligations, player training, dispute resolution, and player welfare. However, esports governance remains fragmented, leading to contract inconsistencies, regulatory uncertainty, and unequal protection for players, especially minors (Candeo et al., 2025; Kelly et al., 2022; Kang, 2026). Strong legal protections for minors and young participants include clear contractual agreements, age verification measures, accessible dispute resolution processes, worker protections, and the inclusion of internationally recognized human rights principles, which offer more certainty, accountability, and protection for young people (Gauthier & Jaén, 2026). Ethical safeguards also aim to ensure the organization's integrity and transparency, participants' inclusion and well-being, responsible governance, and reduced opportunities for exploitation, which helps build trust in contractual arrangements (Buzzelli et al., 2025). Together, these institutional protections create a setting where young players in the esports sphere are more likely to see player contracts as fair, transparent, and balanced.

Organizational Justice Theory and Stakeholder Theory underline the positive relationship between legal and ethical safeguards and perceived contractual fairness. Organizational Justice Theory suggests that people assess fairness based on equitable outcomes, fairness of procedures in decision-making, the quality of interpersonal treatment, and information exchange in organizational processes (Colquitt, 2001; Greenberg, 1987). In the context of esports, legal safeguards relate to distributive justice and procedural justice and provide for the fair establishment and enforcement of contractual rights and obligations, as well as respectful treatment and transparent information disclosure, while ethical safeguards concern interpersonal justice and informational

justice and involve respectful treatment and transparency in communication and in participant-centered governance. At the same time, Stakeholder Theory suggests that esports stakeholders, including esports organizations, publishers, tournament organizers, regulators, parents, and others, have a shared responsibility to ensure that esports practices are safe for youth, and that governance strategies are developed in conjunction with work that supports the business side of esports while also safeguarding the well-being of the youth participants (Freeman, 1984). In this case, when these stakeholders work together to create robust, legal, and ethical protections, young players may feel that contracts are reasonably fair, reliable, and in their best interests over the long term. Thus, we hypothesize that stronger legal and ethical protections will lead to greater perceived contractual fairness in the esports industry. Therefore, this study proposes the following proposition: Proposition 2 - Legal and ethical safeguards have a positive impact on perceived contractual fairness.

### 3. Sustainable Youth Participation in Esports and Perceived Contractual Fairness

Contract fairness is an important factor in sustaining youth participation in esports, as it can shape young players' trust in their organization and their desire to continue playing competitively. Legal enforceability is essential for the formal validity of contractual agreements, but literature also highlights that perceptions of fairness in contractual relationships are crucial to whether they are considered legitimate, transparent, and conducive to participants' interests (Gauthier & Jaén, 2026). Additionally, young participants are more likely to be affected by concerns about contractual fairness due to their limited understanding of the law, unequal bargaining power, and lack of experience in negotiating commercial agreements (Kang, 2026). This means that contracts that make both rights and obligations clear, as well as those that have provisions for fair benefit sharing and accessible dispute resolution mechanisms and include provisions to protect the physical, psychological and educational health of players, are more likely to be considered fair. These perceptions can help reduce uncertainty and increase trust in esports organizations, which in turn can lead to long-term retention of young players in the esports ecosystem (Kelly et al., 2022; Tzoumaka et al., 2024).

Organizational Justice Theory, which suggests that employees will feel more committed, trust, and remain in the organization if their relationships and decisions are viewed as fair along the distributive, procedural, interpersonal, and informational aspects (Colquitt, 2001; Greenberg, 1987), is consistent with the positive relationship between perceived contractual fairness and sustainable youth participation. In the esports world, fair contractual terms mean more than equity; they reflect a clear negotiation process, respectful handling, and transparent communication that foster trust in the organizations that guide their careers. The link is further strengthened by the Stakeholder Theory, which states that organizations achieve sustainable value by recognizing and safeguarding the interests of all stakeholders, including vulnerable groups like youth participants (Freeman, 1984). By promoting fair contractual practices among all stakeholders, including esports organizations, publishers, tournament organizers, regulators, and parents, fair play, trust, and responsibility to young players can be upheld, encouraging greater participation and long-term careers in esports. Conversely, perceptions of contractual unfairness may erode organizational legitimacy, reduce trust, increase dissatisfaction, and lead to early exit from the competitive esports environment. Hence, perceptions of contractual fairness are likely to play an important role as an antecedent of sustainable youth participation in esports. Based on this, the study proposes the following: Proposition 3 - Perceived contractual fairness may positively influence sustainable youth involvement in esports.

### 4. Perceived Contractual Fairness as a Proposed Explanatory Mechanism

The proposed relationship between legal and ethical safeguards and sustainable youth participation may operate partly through young participants' perceptions of contractual fairness. Because this study is conceptual and does not empirically test mediation, it treats perceived contractual fairness as a proposed explanatory mechanism rather than an empirically established mediator. It is equally essential to have a structural mechanism in place to safeguard young people from exploitation and ensure responsible participation through legal and ethical measures, such as clear contractual terms, age verification systems, dispute resolution mechanisms, human rights protections, codes of conduct, and player welfare policies (Kelly et al., 2022; Kang, 2026). But these protections are unlikely to drive long-term participation if they're not seen as fair, transparent, and applied uniformly. Organizational Justice Theory proposes that individuals judge organizational practices based on their perceptions of distributive, procedural, interpersonal, and informational justice, which in turn affect their trust, commitment,

and behavioral intentions (Colquitt, 2001; Greenberg, 1987). In the esports world, the legal and ethical aspects are designed to promote a sense of fairness in contracts, ensuring that players understand their obligations, rights, benefits, and responsibilities, and that they are treated consistently, which in turn strengthens their confidence in the esports organizations and minimizes their perception of exploitation and unequal treatment (Gauthier & Jaén, 2026).

Stakeholder Theory also suggests that organizations can achieve sustainable results when they consider and support the interests of all stakeholders, such as youth players, parents, esports organizations, tournament organizers, publishers, regulators, and governing bodies, through fair governance structures (Freeman, 1984). In this view, legal and ethical protections serve as governance tools to improve contract fairness, encouraging sustainable youth involvement through trust, legitimacy, and commitment. The results of recent research into esports scholarships consistently indicate that the lack of a single governance body, contract inconsistencies, and insufficient welfare protections foster an environment that is not perceived as fair and consequently deters players from continuing to engage in the sport (Candeo et al., 2025; Kelly et al., 2022; Peng et al., 2020). However, contracts with legal safeguards, ethical guidelines, clear communication, and robust welfare measures encourage youth players to stay involved, foster dedication to the organization, and strive for sustainable careers in the esports industry (Kang, 2026; Tzoumaka et al., 2024).

Taken together, Organizational Justice Theory and Stakeholder Theory provide a theoretical basis for expecting a sequential relationship in which legal and ethical safeguards are associated with stronger perceptions of contractual fairness, which are subsequently associated with more sustainable forms of youth participation. This indirect pathway remains a theoretical proposition requiring empirical examination, and its strength may differ between minors and young adults and across jurisdictions with different rules governing contractual capacity, parental consent, labor protection, and esports regulation. Accordingly, the following proposition is proposed: Proposition 4 (P4): Perceived contractual fairness is proposed as an explanatory mechanism through which legal and ethical safeguards positively influence sustainable youth participation in esports.

## CONCLUSION

Drawing upon Organizational Justice Theory and Stakeholder Theory, the study highlights that robust legal protections, ethical governance practices, and collaborative stakeholder responsibilities are fundamental to establishing fair contractual relationships that safeguard young participants and promote long-term engagement within the esports ecosystem. The proposed framework contributes theoretically by extending Organizational Justice Theory to esports contractual governance while integrating Stakeholder Theory to provide a broader governance perspective that emphasizes industry actors' collective responsibility for protecting youth participants. From a practical standpoint, the framework offers valuable guidance for policymakers, regulators, game publishers, esports organizations, tournament organizers, educational institutions, parents, and player representatives in developing transparent contractual standards, ethical governance mechanisms, effective dispute-resolution processes, and comprehensive player welfare policies that foster trust, accountability, and sustainable participation. Nevertheless, this study is conceptual and has not empirically validated the proposed relationships, limiting its ability to support causal inferences. Furthermore, the framework does not account for contextual differences across legal jurisdictions, esports genres, or cultural settings that may influence contractual practices and governance approaches. The relationships advanced in this study are theoretically proposed rather than empirically established; therefore, perceived contractual fairness is conceptualized as a proposed explanatory mechanism rather than a mediator. The framework is also necessarily sensitive to age and jurisdiction: minors should be distinguished from the broader youth population because contractual capacity, parental consent requirements, labor protections, contract enforceability, and esports-specific regulation may vary substantially across legal systems. These contextual differences may alter how safeguards operate and how they relate to fairness perceptions and sustainable participation. Future research should therefore empirically test the proposed relationships using quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method designs; compare minors and young adults; conduct cross-jurisdictional analyses; and examine whether age, legal status, governing law, regulatory maturity, or access to parental and professional representation condition the proposed relationships. Other factors, such as organizational trust, legal literacy, parental participation, quality of governance, and comparative legal/policy frameworks, can be examined to strengthen contractual protections and support the sustainable development of youth participation in the global esports industry.

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