

The Impact of Youth Sports Programmes on Social Cohesion and National Identity: A Study of Sports Groups in Tertiary Educational Institutions in Bayelsa State

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Abstract

The study examined the impact of youth sports programs on social cohesion and national identity in tertiary institutions in Bayelsa State. The study adopted a descriptive survey design. Three research questions guided the study. The population comprised all undergraduates in the 12 sports clubs existing in the 7 tertiary institutions in Bayelsa State. All 109 athletes' undergraduates from 3 institutions formed the sample. The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire tagged as the "Impact of Youth Sports Programs on Social Cohesion and National Identity Questionnaire" developed by the researchers and validated by experts. The reliability analysis was done using the Cronbach Alpha Formula, which yielded a value of 0.79. The research questions were answered using mean and standard deviation. Findings reveal that participation in sports groups significantly enhances participants' sense of belonging, increases interaction with diverse peers, fosters collaboration, improves communication skills, and raises awareness of the importance of teamwork. These outcomes highlight the pivotal role of sports groups in promoting inclusivity, cultural appreciation, and a stronger national identity among Nigerian youth. Recommendations include enhancing program accessibility, integrating cultural exchange initiatives, and embedding educational values within sports activities to further strengthen these positive impacts.

Keywords: Youth Sports Programs, Social Cohesion, National Identity, Tertiary Institutions

Introduction

Youth sports programs play a pivotal role in shaping social cohesion and national identity among participants within tertiary educational institutions. The integration of sports into academic settings provides a unique platform for fostering camaraderie, teamwork, and a shared sense of belonging among students. According to Stokowski (2020), sports not only promote physical fitness but also cultivate social skills and ethical values, contributing to a cohesive social fabric within communities. This research explores the multifaceted impact of sports groups within tertiary educational institutions on social cohesion and national identity, with a specific focus on how these programs influence interpersonal relationships and collective identities.

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the role of sports in promoting unity and solidarity among diverse student populations. Studies by Smith et al. (2019) and Jones (2021) emphasize that participation in sports groups fosters cross-cultural interactions and

mitigates social divisions by providing a common ground for students from various backgrounds to interact harmoniously. This interaction is critical in tertiary educational institutions, where students often come from diverse geographic, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds, seeking a sense of community and belonging.

The significance of sports in shaping national identity cannot be understated. According to Davenport and Vargas (2018), sports events and team affiliations serve as symbols of national pride and unity, reinforcing a collective identity among participants. In tertiary educational institutions, sports groups often represent microcosms of national diversity, where students rally behind their teams not only as athletes but also as ambassadors of their cultural heritage. This dynamic contributes to a broader understanding of national identity formation among the youth, as articulated by Gomez and Lee (2022), who argue that sports provide a platform for expressing and celebrating national values and traditions.

Moreover, the influence of sports on social cohesion extends beyond immediate team dynamics to impact broader campus communities. Research by Johnson and Thompson (2017) suggests that successful sports programs create ripple effects, promoting positive social behaviors and academic engagement among students. These programmes often serve as catalysts for community-building initiatives, fostering relationships between students, faculty, and local residents, thereby enriching the overall campus experience and strengthening institutional ties.

However, despite the perceived benefits, the relationship between sports, social cohesion, and national identity is complex and multifaceted. Critiques by Anderson (2016) and Lee (2020) caution against overemphasizing the unifying effects of sports, highlighting instances where competitive dynamics and exclusivity within sports groups may inadvertently reinforce social stratification and exclusionary practices. Such nuances underscore the importance of critically examining how sports programmes can be leveraged to promote inclusivity and equity, ensuring that all students feel valued and represented within their respective institutions.

Statement of the Problem

Youth sports programmes in tertiary educational institutions are often celebrated for their contributions to physical health and individual development. However, there is a significant gap in understanding the broader social implications these programmes have on social cohesion and national identity, especially in diverse regions like Bayelsa State. Despite the potential for youth sports to unite students from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds, there is limited research on how effectively these programmes achieve this goal within the

context of tertiary education in Bayelsa State. Without empirical data, it is challenging to ascertain the true impact of these initiatives on fostering a cohesive student community and a shared sense of national identity.

Aim and Objective of the Study

The aim of the study is to examine the impact of youth sports programs on social cohesion and national identity in tertiary educational institutions in Bayelsa State. Specifically, the study is set out to achieve the following:

- i. To examine how participation in sports groups within tertiary educational institutions in Bayelsa State influences students' sense of social cohesion.
- ii. To evaluate the effectiveness of sports groups in promoting inclusive and diverse social interactions among tertiary educational institution students.
- iii. To investigate the impact of youth sports programs on students' attitudes towards national unity and solidarity.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

- i. In what ways does participation in sports groups within tertiary educational institutions in Bayelsa State influence students' sense of social cohesion?
- ii. How effective are sports groups in promoting inclusive and diverse social interactions among tertiary educational institution students?
- iii. What impact do youth sports programmes have on students' attitudes towards national unity and solidarity?

Conceptual Review

Sports programmes not only facilitate physical fitness but also serve as platforms for fostering interpersonal relationships and collective identities among participants (Stokowski, 2020). According to Smith et al. (2019), participation in sports groups within tertiary educational institutions enables students from diverse backgrounds to interact and collaborate toward common goals, thereby promoting cross-cultural understanding and unity. This interaction is crucial in fostering a sense of community and a sense of belonging among students who may otherwise feel isolated due to cultural or social differences (Jones, 2021). Furthermore, sports activities often embody symbols of national pride and unity, contributing to the formation and reinforcement of national identity among participants (Davenport & Vargas, 2018). Gomez and Lee (2022) argue that sports provide a visible platform for expressing and celebrating cultural heritage and values, thereby contributing to a broader sense of belonging within the national context.

However, the conceptualization of sports' impact on social cohesion and national identity also acknowledges potential challenges. Johnson and Thompson (2017) highlight that while sports programmes can foster positive social behaviours and community engagement, they may also inadvertently perpetuate exclusivity and social stratification within student populations. Anderson (2016) and Lee (2020) critique the notion of sports as a universal unifier, pointing out instances where competitive dynamics and selective participation criteria may marginalize certain groups. This dual perspective underscores the importance of critically examining how sports programs can be designed and implemented to maximize inclusive practices and equitable participation, ensuring that all students feel represented and valued within their respective educational environments.

In light of these considerations, this study aims to contribute to existing literature by conducting a comprehensive analysis of the impact of youth sports programmes on social cohesion and national identity within tertiary institutions. By examining the experiences and perceptions of participants in sports groups, this research seeks to identify key factors that enhance or hinder social integration and national unity. Ultimately, the findings aim to inform policy and practice in educational settings, offering insights into how sports can be effectively utilized as a tool for fostering inclusive communities and nurturing a shared sense of national identity among youth.

Empirical Review

Several empirical studies have examined the impact of parental involvement in youth sports programmes on child development and outcomes. For instance, Johnson et al. (2018) conducted a longitudinal study involving 300 youth athletes to investigate the influence of parental support and pressure on athletes' psychological well-being and performance. Their findings revealed that while moderate parental involvement positively correlated with athletes' motivation and self-esteem, excessive parental pressure was associated with increased stress and decreased enjoyment of sports activities, highlighting the nuanced role of parental influence in shaping youth sports experiences.

In a related study, Smith and Brown (2019) explored the effects of coach-athlete relationships on team cohesion and performance in collegiate sports settings. Using qualitative interviews with 20 coaches and 50 athletes across various sports teams, they identified that positive and supportive coach-athlete relationships fostered trust, communication, and unity within teams, ultimately enhancing team cohesion and improving performance outcomes. Conversely, strained coach-athlete relationships characterized by conflict and lack of support were found

to undermine team dynamics and negatively impact performance, underscoring the critical role of interpersonal relationships in sports team environments (Smith & Brown, 2019).

Martinez et al. (2020) investigated the role of sports participation in promoting social inclusion and reducing delinquency among at-risk youth. Their study employed a mixed-methods approach, including surveys and focus group discussions with 150 participants from urban communities. The results indicated that engagement in organized sports activities provided a structured environment for social interaction, skill development, and mentorship opportunities, which contributed to decreased involvement in delinquent behaviors and improved social integration among youth from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Moreover, a study by Thompson and Lee (2017) examined the impact of sports programs on academic achievement and school engagement among secondary school students. Using a quasi-experimental design with a sample of 500 students from schools with and without sports programs, they found that students participating in sports demonstrated higher levels of academic motivation, better attendance rates, and improved overall academic performance compared to their non-participating peers. This research highlights the positive educational outcomes associated with sports participation, emphasizing its potential to enhance student engagement and success in academic settings.

A cross-cultural study by Garcia and Nguyen (2018) explored cultural differences in youth sports participation and its implications for identity development. Conducting surveys and interviews with adolescents from diverse cultural backgrounds in the United States and Europe, they observed variations in attitudes towards sports, family expectations, and personal aspirations among participants. The findings underscored the influence of cultural norms and social contexts on youth sports experiences, suggesting that cultural sensitivity and awareness are crucial in designing inclusive and effective sports programmes that cater to diverse youth populations (Garcia & Nguyen, 2018).

Methods

Descriptive survey design was adopted in this study. The population comprised all undergraduates in the 12 sports clubs existing in the 7 tertiary educational institutions in Bayelsa State. A purposive sampling technique was used to select Niger Delta University, Federal University Otuoke, and Isaac Jasper Boro College of Education, Sagbama out of the other three higher institutions. All 109 athletes' undergraduates from the 3 institutions formed the sample. The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire tagged as the "Impact of Youth Sports Programs on Social Cohesion and National Identity Questionnaire" developed by the researchers. It was structured on a 4-point Likert scale. The instrument had

four sections, namely; sections A, B, C, and D. Section A measured the demographic characteristics of the respondents, and sections B, C, and D measured the items for research questions 1, 2, and 3. The instrument was validated by experts in measurement and evaluation and human kinetics. It was subjected to pilot testing, and the outcome was analyzed using the Cronbach Alpha Formula, which yielded a coefficient of 0.83. A one-on-one mode of questionnaire administration was adopted, and a 100% return rate was achieved. Mean, and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions. The decision rule for answering the research questions was arrived at by finding the average of the 4-point scale, thus; $\frac{4+3+2+1}{4} = \frac{10}{4} = 2.50$ thus, any item with a mean of 2.50 and above was interpreted as agreed, while a mean score below was interpreted as disagreed.

Results

Research Question 1

In what ways does participation in sports groups within tertiary educational institutions in Bayelsa State influence students' sense of social cohesion?

Table 1: Mean and standard deviation on participation in sports groups within tertiary educational institutions in Bayelsa State influence students' sense of social cohesion

S/N	STATEMENT	X	SD	REMARK
1.	Participation in sports groups has helped me develop a sense of belonging within the institution	3.28	.85	A
2.	Being part of a sports team has increased my interaction with students from different backgrounds.	3.04	.74	A
3.	Through sports, I have formed lasting friendships with my peers	3.14	.50	A
4.	Sports group activities have fostered a sense of unity among students.	2.73	.53	A
5.	I feel more connected to my institution because of my involvement in sports	2.90	.48	A
6.	Participation in sports has improved my communication skills with other students	2.88	.53	A
7.	Being involved in sports has made me more aware of the importance of teamwork	2.91	.51	A
	GRAND MEAN	2.98		A

Source: Fieldwork (2024) *D=Disagree, A= Agree

Table 1 above shows the mean and standard deviation of participation in sports groups within tertiary educational institutions in Bayelsa State influence students' sense of social cohesion. All items had a mean value above the cut-off value of 2.50, which implies that respondents

agree that participation in sports groups within tertiary institutions in Bayelsa State has improved participants' sense of belonging, increased interaction, and sustained collaboration, improved communication skills with other students and improved my awareness of the importance of teamwork in Bayelsa State.

Research Question 2

To what extent do sports groups promote inclusive and diverse social interactions among tertiary educational institution students?

Table 2: Mean and standard deviation on the extent to which sports groups promote inclusive and diverse social interactions among tertiary educational institution students?

S/N	STATEMENT	X	SD	REMARK
1.	Participation in sports groups has increased my interaction with students from diverse backgrounds	3.78	1.60	A
2.	Being part of a sports group has made me feel more included in the campus community.	3.70	.56	A
3.	I have formed friendships with individuals from different cultures through sports groups	3.51	.64	A
4.	Sports groups at my institution promote inclusivity among students of different cultural backgrounds.	3.07	.35	A
5.	I feel that sports groups help break down social barriers between students	3.07	.30	A
6.	Participation in sports groups has enhanced my understanding and appreciation of diversity	3.08	.68	A
7.	I believe that sports groups at my institution are effective in promoting inclusive social interactions	3.18	.60	A
	GRAND MEAN	3.34	0.68	A

Source: Fieldwork (2024) *D=Disagree, A= Agree

Table 2 above shows the mean and standard deviation of the responses on the extent to which sports groups promote inclusive and diverse social interactions among tertiary educational institution students. All items had a mean value above the cut-off value of 2.50, which implies that the extent to which sports groups promote inclusive and diverse social interactions among tertiary educational institution students is high.

Research Question 3

What impact do youth sports programs have on students' attitudes toward national unity and solidarity?

Table 3: Mean and standard deviation on the impact of youth sports programmes on students' attitudes toward national unity and solidarity

S/N	STATEMENT	X	SD	REMARK
1.	Participating in youth sports has encouraged me to work collaboratively towards common goals	3.12	.38	A
2.	Youth sports programs have taught me to appreciate and respect individuals from different cultural backgrounds	3.21	.89	A
3.	I am more likely to support national events and causes after being involved in youth sports programs	3.08	1.52	A
4.	I believe that youth sports can help bridge differences between people from various regions of our country	3.03	.358	A
5.	Youth sports programs have made me more aware of national issues and concerns	3.03	.30	A
6.	Playing sports with peers from diverse backgrounds has increased my sense of solidarity with others	3.14	.35	A
7.	I feel a stronger connection to my country after participating in youth sports programs	3.12	.38	A
	GRAND MEAN	3.10		A

Source: Fieldwork (2024) *D=Disagree, A= Agree

Table 3 above shows the mean and standard deviation of the responses on the impact of youth sports programmes on students' attitudes toward national unity and solidarity. All items had a mean value above the cut-off value of 2.50, which implies the respondents agree that youth sports programs encourage working with individuals from different cultural backgrounds, create awareness of national unity, increase a sense of solidarity with others, and foster a stronger connection to Nigeria.

Discussion

Findings from research question 1 revealed that participation in sports groups within tertiary educational institutions in Bayelsa State has improved participants' sense of belonging, increased interaction, and sustained collaboration, improved communication skills with other students, and improved my awareness of the importance of teamwork in Bayelsa State. This implies that an enhanced sense of belonging fosters a supportive campus community, potentially reducing feelings of isolation and enhancing overall well-being among students. Increased interaction and sustained collaboration indicate a more cohesive student body, likely promoting diversity appreciation and mutual understanding. Improved communication skills are crucial for academic and professional success, while heightened awareness of teamwork underscores the development of essential interpersonal skills needed in both

academic and future career settings. Collectively, these outcomes suggest that sports groups play a pivotal role in shaping a positive and inclusive campus culture in Bayelsa State's tertiary educational institutions. This supports Johnson et al. (2018), Smith and Brown (2019), Martinez et al. (2020), Thompson and Lee (2017) Garcia and Nguyen (2018)

Findings from research question 2 revealed that the extent to which sports groups promote inclusive and diverse social interactions among tertiary educational institution students is high.

The finding that sports groups promote high levels of inclusive and diverse social interactions among tertiary institution students carries significant implications for fostering a vibrant and harmonious campus environment. It suggests that these groups effectively break down social barriers and create opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds to interact, collaborate, and form meaningful relationships. Such interactions not only enhance students' social skills and cultural competence but also contribute to a sense of belonging and community on campus. Moreover, by promoting inclusivity, these sports groups can mitigate social isolation and discrimination, fostering a more equitable and supportive educational environment where all students feel valued and respected. Ultimately, the high extent of inclusive and diverse social interactions facilitated by sports groups underscores their role in promoting a rich and inclusive collegiate experience. This supports Johnson et al. (2018), Smith and Brown (2019), Martinez et al. (2020), Thompson and Lee (2017) Garcia and Nguyen (2018)

Findings from research question 3 revealed that youth sports programmes encourage working with individuals from different cultural backgrounds, create awareness of national unity, increase a sense of solidarity with others, and foster a stronger connection to Nigeria. This finding underscores the profound implications of youth sports programmes in Nigeria, highlighting their role in promoting cultural integration, national unity awareness, solidarity among participants, and fostering a stronger national identity. By encouraging collaboration with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, these programmes nurture essential social skills and mutual understanding among youth. The increased awareness of national unity cultivated through sports participation suggests a potential pathway to bridge societal divides and cultivate a shared sense of belonging among Nigerian youth. Fostering a stronger connection to Nigeria among participants not only promotes patriotism but also potentially contributes to a more cohesive and unified national identity, crucial for the country's social cohesion and development. Thus, youth sports programmes emerge as pivotal in shaping future generations with a deepened appreciation for cultural diversity and national unity in

Nigeria. This supports Johnson et al. (2018), Smith and Brown (2019), Martinez et al. (2020), Thompson and Lee (2017) Garcia and Nguyen (2018)

Conclusion

Based on the findings discussed above, it is evident that youth sports programmes play a pivotal role in shaping positive attitudes toward cultural diversity, national unity, and solidarity among participants. These programmes not only encourage interaction and collaboration with individuals from diverse backgrounds but also foster a heightened awareness of national identity and unity. By providing a platform for young people to engage in teamwork, communication, and mutual respect, sports programs contribute significantly to building inclusive communities and promoting social cohesion. The findings underscore the importance of integrating sports initiatives into educational and societal frameworks as effective tools for promoting tolerance, understanding, and a shared sense of belonging among youth, thereby contributing to a more unified and harmonious society.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were raised:

1. The government through its relevant agencies should enhance the accessibility and inclusivity of youth sports programmes by offering diverse sports options that cater to various interests and abilities.
2. Stakeholders should implement cultural exchange initiatives within sports programmes to actively promote interaction and understanding among participants from different cultural backgrounds.
3. Policy makers should integrate educational components into sports activities to explicitly teach values of teamwork, respect, and national unity, reinforcing these principles beyond the playing field.

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