



## The role of sports participation in fostering socialization and youth development in Namibia

*El papel de la participación deportiva en el fomento de la socialización y el desarrollo de los jóvenes en Namibia*

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### Abstract

**Introduction:** Sports play a pivotal role in youth socialization and development, fostering leadership, personal growth, and community cohesion. In the Namibian context, where social disparities and limited infrastructure persist, understanding the multifaceted impact of sports on youth becomes particularly critical.

**Objective:** This study aims to explore the role of sports in shaping social behavior, promoting leadership, addressing gender disparities, and evaluating economic implications.

**Method:** A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative surveys (n = 300) with qualitative interviews and focus group discussions (n=20) involving youth athletes, coaches, and policymakers. Quantitative data were analyzed using correlation and regression techniques, while thematic analysis guided the interpretation of qualitative responses.

**Findings:** Quantitative results revealed a strong positive correlation ( $r = 0.72, p < 0.01$ ) between sports participation and leadership development. Regression analysis showed that structured sports programs significantly predict improved social behavior ( $\beta = 0.65, p < 0.01$ ). However, barriers such as financial constraints, gender discrimination, and infrastructural limitations hindered broader participation, especially in informal settlements. Interviews showed that peer influence and coach mentorship drive youth sports engagement, fostering confidence, discipline, and social inclusion. While girls felt empowered, gender bias and lack of female coaches remain barriers. Youth from informal areas reported poor facilities but high interest in inclusive sports.

**Conclusion:** Sports foster youth leadership and cohesion but face access challenges due to socioeconomic and gender disparities. Targeted investments in infrastructure, gender-inclusive coaching, and life-skills integration are recommended. Community-led and peer-supported programs can broaden access and impact.

### Keywords

Gender equality; Namibia; socialization; sports participation; youth development.

### Resumen

**Introducción:** El deporte desempeña un papel fundamental en la socialización y el desarrollo de los jóvenes, fomentando el liderazgo, el crecimiento personal y la cohesión comunitaria. En el contexto de Namibia, donde persisten las disparidades sociales y una infraestructura limitada, comprender el impacto multifacético del deporte en la juventud se vuelve particularmente crucial.

**Objetivo:** Este estudio busca explorar el papel del deporte en la formación del comportamiento social, la promoción del liderazgo, la lucha contra las disparidades de género y la evaluación de las implicaciones económicas.

**Método:** Se empleó un enfoque de métodos mixtos, combinando encuestas cuantitativas (n = 300) con entrevistas cualitativas y debates en grupos focales (n = 20) con jóvenes atletas, entrenadores y responsables políticos. Los datos cuantitativos se analizaron mediante técnicas de correlación y regresión, mientras que el análisis temático guió la interpretación de las respuestas cualitativas.

**Hallazgos:** Los resultados cuantitativos revelaron una fuerte correlación positiva ( $r = 0,72; p < 0,01$ ) entre la participación deportiva y el desarrollo del liderazgo. El análisis de regresión mostró que los programas deportivos estructurados predicen significativamente una mejora del comportamiento social ( $\beta = 0,65; p < 0,01$ ). Sin embargo, barreras como las limitaciones financieras, la discriminación de género y las limitaciones de infraestructura obstaculizaron una participación más amplia, especialmente en asentamientos informales. Las entrevistas mostraron que la influencia de los pares y la mentoría de los entrenadores impulsan la participación deportiva juvenil, fomentando la confianza, la disciplina y la inclusión social. Si bien las niñas se sintieron empoderadas, los prejuicios de género y la falta de entrenadoras siguen siendo obstáculos. Los jóvenes de zonas informales informaron de instalaciones deficientes, pero mostraron un gran interés en el deporte inclusivo.

**Conclusión:** El deporte fomenta el liderazgo y la cohesión juvenil, pero enfrenta dificultades de acceso debido a las disparidades socioeconómicas y de género. Se recomiendan inversiones específicas en infraestructura, entrenamiento inclusivo de género e integración de habilidades para la vida. Los programas liderados por la comunidad y con apoyo de pares pueden ampliar el acceso y el impacto.

### Palabras clave

Igualdad de género; Namibia; socialización; participación deportiva; desarrollo juvenil.

## Introduction

Modern perspectives on socialization have evolved significantly, incorporating contemporary theoretical frameworks that highlight its multidimensional nature. Traditionally viewed through classical sociological lenses, socialization was regarded as the internalization of societal norms and values. However, recent developments in the sociology of sport, particularly those grounded in critical and feminist theories, argue for a more dynamic and active role of socialization in identity formation. Recent research highlights how female athletes do not merely adapt to social expectations but negotiate and reshape them within the sporting arena, making socialization a constitutive rather than secondary process (Mennesson, 2000; García-López & Sánchez, 2023).

Socialization, as conceptualized in contemporary sociology, refers to the lifelong process through which individuals internalize societal norms, values, and behavioral expectations (Lee, Jones, & Wegner, 2023; Sánchez et al., 2024). Modern theorists now frame it as a process that ensures both social continuity and transformation through the interaction between individual agency and social structures (Marqués-Sánchez et al., 2024). In the context of sport, socialization functions as both a product and producer of social relations, allowing individuals to construct and negotiate identity, belonging, and social meaning (Coakley, 2021; Choudhury et al., 2024).

Critical theorists of sport, such as Bourdieu (1984) and Mennesson (2012), established that socialization is never neutral but shaped by gender, class, and access to cultural capital. Building on these foundations, contemporary scholars highlight that sports serve as key arenas where social hierarchies are both reproduced and contested (Robertson & Roberts, 2022; Lee et al., 2023). For example, women and youth from marginalized communities use sport participation to resist stereotypes and construct empowered social identities (Marqués-Sánchez et al., 2024). Such insights underscore that socialization through sport extends beyond passive conformity—it is a site of negotiation, resistance, and identity transformation (García-López & Sánchez, 2023; Sikweyiya et al., 2023).

Recent sport sociology studies redefine socialization as a reciprocal, interactive, and culturally embedded process in which athletes co-create meanings through social interactions and institutional engagement (Smith & Jones, 2022; Zhao, 2025). This aligns with critical sport theory, which underscores the influence of power, gender, and culture on how individuals experience sports as a social space. In this sense, socialization in sport becomes not just a vehicle for learning norms but a field of contestation and transformation.

In this study, socialization is operationalized as a multidimensional construct that integrates interpersonal and structural dimensions of youth experience. It combines peer influence, family support, and engagement in sports activities, mass media, and community programs as key socialization agents. Together, these variables capture how young people internalize and reproduce values, behaviors, and social identities through sport participation. This operationalization aligns with recent sociological frameworks that view socialization as a layered system linking micro-level relationships (peers, family) with macro-level forces (institutions, media, and community programs) (Lee et al., 2023; Marqués-Sánchez et al., 2024; Zhao, 2025).

This conceptual framework is particularly relevant in understanding the dual role of sports as both a medium and a context for youth development. It challenges passive interpretations of social influence by emphasizing agency, reflexivity, and the negotiation of norms within gendered and institutional structures (Coakley, 2021). Sociologists have extended socialization research to include the effects of globalization, cultural hybridity, and social inequalities, acknowledging that young people's experiences in sport are shaped by these intersecting factors (Robertson & Roberts, 2022; Choudhury et al., 2024). Drawing from these developments, the present study clarifies its dual aims: to examine how sports promote socialization among Namibian youth and to evaluate the effectiveness of structured sports programs in fostering inclusion, leadership, and community cohesion.

Among youth populations, socialization through sport represents a transformative developmental process that extends beyond skill acquisition to include moral reasoning, teamwork, and civic engagement (Fredricks et al., 2022; Holt et al., 2023). However, outcomes vary across cultural and socioeconomic contexts. In Namibia, where inequalities in resources, infrastructure, and gender participation persist, socialization through sport reflects both structural constraints and adaptive resilience (Hamutumwa,



2020; Sikweyiya et al., 2023). For youth, sports can serve as a transformative platform fostering inclusion, empowerment, and social capital, provided access and representation are equitable. By examining how families, peers, coaches, and media interact as socializing agents, this study positions sports as a central mechanism of social learning, identity formation, and community integration (Kay, 2022; Light & Harvey, 2023).

Sporting activities also play a vital role in early social development by nurturing friendships, cooperation, and emotional regulation (García-López & Sánchez, 2023; Erdilanita & Ma'mun, 2025). However, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted these traditional pathways, restricting in-person interactions and transforming how young people engage with sports. The inability to attend events or train collectively diminished critical aspects of social bonding (McGuine et al., 2021). Though virtual and media-based participation emerged as alternatives, they lacked the embodied and communal dimensions central to social learning (Davis & Clark, 2021; Wilson, 2022). These disruptions underscored the enduring importance of physical sport environments as sites of social integration and solidarity (Spaaij, 2012).

Coakley (2021) and Light and Harvey (2023) emphasize that sport-based socialization contributes significantly to the development of social skills, ethical reasoning, and community belonging. Participation enables youth to interact with diverse groups, navigate conflict, and develop autonomy (Evans, 2021; Robinson & Patel, 2022). While competition can generate stress and exclusion, it also builds resilience, discipline, and confidence when appropriately managed (Eime et al., 2023).

Studies scrutinizing the impact of sports on social and psychological growth highlight the significance of structured athletic programs. For instance, research on a teenage girls' football program demonstrated how sports facilitate life skills development (Johnson, 2022). Sports socialization instills dedication, respect for authority, and other essential social skills necessary for effective societal participation (Garrett, 2021). Skills such as active communication, information synthesis, and self-decision-making are critical outcomes of youth sports engagement (Singh et al., 2023). Recent research themes have explored the role of mega-sporting events, global social movements in sports, and their contributions to social justice (Gaffney, 2010). Various socialization agents, including community, friends, family, and media, influence an individual's decision to participate in sports (Hughes, 2023).

Family, particularly the father and immediate relatives, plays a central role in a child's introduction to sports (Harwood & Knight, 2015). Children who receive encouragement from their parents are more likely to engage in sports than those who do not (Gao et al., 2024). Parents actively foster their children's basic motor skills, balance, and coordination by introducing playful sporting activities (Smith & Adams, 2022). For instance, a simple act of rolling a ball toward an infant encourages active participation. The presence of older male relatives, such as brothers and uncles, further reinforces early sports exposure, with male adults often serving as role models and sources of competition within families (Thompson, 2023). However, younger athletes sometimes struggle with meeting the expectations set by older siblings, leading to emotional and psychological challenges (Kim, 2022). Additionally, many parents introduce board games and other competitive activities to instill an understanding of rules, competition, and sportsmanship (Ramirez, 2023). Children who develop an early appreciation for competition tend to have a stronger inclination toward sports participation (White & Green, 2021).

Parental influence also extends to educational preferences and extracurricular activities. Some parents prioritize academic achievements and passive pursuits such as collecting coins or stamps over sports involvement (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006). Factors such as a parent's age and physical condition can shape a child's socialization into sports. Physically active parents are more likely to encourage their children to participate in sports, whereas those who face physical limitations may unintentionally hinder their children's involvement (Park, 2023). Furthermore, older parents may exhibit less willingness to engage in sports activities with their children due to their own physical constraints (Jordan, 2021).

Socioeconomic status and geographical location further influence a child's engagement in sports. Families with limited financial resources may restrict their children's participation in sports within their economic means, whereas wealthier households offer access to a wider variety of athletic opportunities (Tandon et al., 2021). Beyond the family, peer groups also play a critical role in sports socialization. Friends provide emotional support and a sense of community that encourages continued participation in sports (Howie et al., 2018). Children engaging in play with peers develop interests in various activities,

often favoring challenges that involve personal skill development, competitive experiences, and opportunities to strengthen friendships (Harrison, 2022).

The media serves as another significant agent of socialization, shaping public perceptions and engagement in sports. Over the past few decades, media and sports have increasingly merged, influencing socio-cultural contexts through entertainment, news, and advertisements (Clark & Johnson, 2023). The integration of media and sports has reinforced ideological structures and cultural dynamics. The expansion of social media has particularly altered how individuals interact with sports, with Western women utilizing digital platforms to communicate, maintain social connections, and engage with sports-related content (Sanchez, 2023). The entertainment-driven consumption of sports-related information on social media aligns with the uses and gratification theory, highlighting how digital platforms encourage sports participation (Williams, 2022). Participation in informal games helps children develop problem-solving skills, negotiation techniques, and adaptability (Harris, 2023). Casual games require players to maintain order, resolve conflicts, and make real-time decisions, fostering interpersonal skills essential for socialization.

In Namibia, where youth comprise a significant portion of the population, sports can serve as a strategic avenue for addressing social challenges, promoting positive behaviour, and enhancing skill development among young people (Lungarini et al., 2020). The significance of sports in shaping youth development extends beyond physical benefits; it also fosters essential life skills, enhances social cohesion, and contributes to nation-building (Hamutumwa, 2020). However, despite its potential, youth sports participation in Namibia faces several challenges, including inadequate facilities, limited funding, gender disparities, and accessibility issues, particularly in rural areas (Lungarini et al., 2020).

Programs such as the Physically Active Youth (PAY) initiative in Namibia have demonstrated the transformative power of sports in engaging young people positively. However, there is still limited research on the effectiveness of such programs and the overall impact of sports on youth development in Namibia, necessitating a comprehensive study to bridge this knowledge gap (Saavedra, 2009).

Studies from African nations, such as South Africa and Kenya, indicate that youth engagement in sports has led to improved academic performance, reduced delinquency, and enhanced community cohesion (Taylor et al., 2016). However, in Namibia, the extent to which sports influence youth socialization and development remains underexplored (Togobo & Osei, 2019). The accessibility of sports programs in Namibia remains a significant concern, particularly in rural areas where infrastructure and resources are often lacking (Togobo & Osei, 2019). While urban centers may offer more opportunities for youth participation in sports, rural youth frequently encounter barriers such as inadequate sports facilities, lack of trained coaches, and financial constraints (Togobo & Osei, 2019). This disparity limits the potential of sports as a development tool, underscoring the need for targeted interventions to enhance sports accessibility and inclusivity across different regions of the country (Taylor et al., 2016). Moreover, gender disparities in sports participation pose a critical issue in Namibia (Hayhurst & Kidd, 2019). Cultural norms and societal expectations often discourage young girls from engaging in sports, leading to lower female participation rates compared to their male counterparts (Charway and Strandbu, 2023). Despite efforts by organizations such as the Namibian Football Association (NFA) to promote women's sports, significant barriers persist. These include limited funding for female sports programs, lack of role models, and social stigma surrounding female athletes (Taylor et al., 2016). This research, therefore, aimed to examine the role of sports participation in fostering socialization and youth development. The research offered a significant basis for comprehending the possible impact of sports on socialization and youth development in Namibia by answering the following questions:

1. What is the status of youth sports participation in Namibia, and how does it impact the socialization and development of young people?
2. How can sports be used as a tool to promote positive social behavior, leadership, and life skills among young people in Namibia?
3. How does sports participation impact gender equality and economic development in Namibia?

## Method

This study used a cross-sectional research design to examine the impact of sports participation on socialization and youth development in Namibia. A mixed-methods approach was used, combining quantitative and qualitative data to provide a thorough understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Sentie et al., 2024). The integration of both approaches allowed for a comprehensive analysis of how sports participation influences youth socialization and development in Namibia. The quantitative component examined relationships among measurable variables, while the qualitative component provided in-depth insights into subjective experiences and contextual realities.

### *Participants*

The target population comprised youth aged 15 to 35, consistent with the definition provided by the African Youth Charter (African Union, 2006), which recognizes this age group as representing the youth demographic across Africa. This range captures a broad spectrum of young people transitioning from adolescence into early adulthood, encompassing critical stages of social, educational, and economic development. The study also included relevant stakeholders such as coaches and policymakers from various regions of Namibia to provide a comprehensive understanding of youth sports participation. A stratified random sampling technique was used for the quantitative component to ensure representation from different socio-economic backgrounds, gender groups, and geographical locations. Pre-existing lists from schools, sports organizations, and youth centers were used to generate randomized participant samples. A total of 300 participants with the mean age of 23.7 years (SD = 6.1) were included. From these, 48% were males and 52% were female respondents selected from various national universities and high schools. This also encompasses young individuals engaged in various sports activities. The qualitative sample consisted of 20 individuals, including 12 youth athletes, 4 coaches, and 4 policymakers, selected purposively based on their direct involvement in sports and youth development programs.

### *Procedure*

Before data collection began, the PAULESI IRB provided ethical approval. Participants were informed of the study's goal, their rights, and the confidentiality of their responses. All responders provided informed consent.

#### *Instrument*

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed based on prior validated instruments in sport sociology and youth development research (Coakley, 2015; Holt et al., 2017; Eime et al., 2013). The questionnaire was pretested with 20 respondents for clarity, reliability, and cultural appropriateness, and adjustments were made accordingly.

The survey included demographic items (age, gender, education, settlement type) and scalar items measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The scalar variables and their conceptual definitions were as follows:-

Sports Participation: frequency and intensity of involvement in organized or informal sports.

Peer Groups: perceived encouragement, influence, and support from peers in sports participation.

Family Influence: extent of parental or household support for youth engagement in sports.

Mass Media Influence: exposure to sports-related content in television, radio, and social media shaping motivation.

Coaching Expertise: availability and quality of trained coaches and their perceived role in development.

Self-Esteem: feelings of confidence, worth, and self-belief linked to sports engagement.

Life Skills: discipline, teamwork, time management, and conflict resolution attributed to sports participation.

Social Support: perceived emotional, instrumental, and informational support from community and institutions.

Economic Challenges: financial barriers affecting access to sports opportunities.



Gender Participation: perceptions of inclusivity and opportunities for male and female athletes.

Socialization: a multi-dimensional construct combining peer influence, family support, engagement in sports activities, mass media and community programs. Together, these variables captured both the interpersonal (peer, family) and structural (sports participation) processes through which youth acquire values, behaviors, and identities.

The qualitative component utilized semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The interview guide was designed to explore youth experiences with sports participation, perceived benefits, barriers, and the role of social agents (family, peers, coaches, and institutions) in shaping involvement.

### Data analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analysis, independent t-test and multiple regression model to assess relationships between variables. SPSS Version 28 software was used for statistical analysis. Qualitative responses were also analyzed using thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase method. This involved identifying recurring patterns and categorizing them into themes related to agents of socialization and sports participation. The qualitative findings were then compared with the quantitative results to assess alignment or divergence, providing a richer interpretation of the data.

## Results

The results shows with a balanced gender distribution of 52% females and 48% males, ensuring that the findings reflect perspectives from both genders. Out of a valid sample of 300, (61.3%) were aged between 20–29 years, followed by 24.3% aged 15–19 years, highlighting a focus on young adults and adolescents as key beneficiaries of sports and socialization initiatives. Regarding education, 69% of the respondents had tertiary education, indicating a well-educated sample, while the remaining 31% had secondary education. This suggests that sports engagement is prevalent among individuals with higher educational attainment, potentially reflecting better access to resources and opportunities.

In terms of residence, 71% of respondents were from formal settlements, while 29% were from informal settlements. This disparity underscores potential differences in access to sports facilities and programs between urban and less-developed areas, which could influence participation rates and outcomes. The data on sports involvement revealed that 53.7% of respondents were actively involved in sports, while 46.3% were not. This slight majority of participants offers a balanced comparison between the experiences and outcomes of those engaged in sports versus non-participants (Table 1).

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of respondents

No.	Variables	Frequency (N=300)	Percentage	
1.	Gender	Male	144	48
		Female	156	52
2.	Age	15-18	73	24.3
		19-24	184	61.3
		25-29	37	12.4
		30-35	6	2
3.	Education	Secondary	93	31
		Tertiary	207	69
4.	Location	Formal settlement	213	71
		Informal settlement	87	29
5.	Involvement	Yes	161	53.7
		No	139	46.3

### Descriptive Analysis of Scalar Variables

In addition to demographic variables, a descriptive analysis was conducted on key scalar variables measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). These variables reflect the core constructs related to socialization and youth development. Table 2 summarizes the mean, standard deviation, and range for each variable.



Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Scalar Variables

Variables	Mean	SD
Age	23.7	6.1
Sports Participation	3.68	1.33
Peer Groups	4.10	0.87
Family Influence	3.91	0.94
Mass Media Influence	3.74	0.88
Coaching Expertise	3.82	1.02
Self-esteem	3.44	1.01
Life Skills	3.55	0.96
Social Support	3.69	0.99
Economic Challenges	2.88	1.12
Gender Participation	3.59	1.07

### Reliability and Validity

Cronbach's alpha was calculated for each construct, yielding values between 0.72 and 0.89, indicating acceptable to high internal consistency (Table 3). Content validity was ensured through expert review by three specialists in sport sociology and youth development from University of Namibia, Namibia and Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia.

Table 3. Test results of Cronbach's alpha reliability

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha$ )	Remarks
Sports Participation	0.86	High internal consistency
Peer Groups	0.84	Reliable
Family Influence	0.81	Reliable
Mass Media Influence	0.78	Acceptable reliability
Coaching Expertise	0.89	High reliability
Self-Esteem	0.74	Acceptable reliability
Life Skills	0.83	Reliable
Social Support	0.80	Reliable
Economic Challenges	0.72	Acceptable reliability
Gender Participation	0.77	Acceptable reliability
Socialization (overall construct)	0.88	High reliability

### Analysis of Correlation Matrix

The following table correlation matrix provides a detailed understanding of the relationships between key variables related to sports participation, socialization, and youth development. The strongest correlation observed was between sports participation and peer groups ( $r = 0.952$ ), highlighting the pivotal role of peer influence in driving youth involvement in sports. This finding underscores the importance of social networks in fostering engagement, as peers often serve as motivators and facilitators of participation. Similarly, community programs showed a strong positive correlation with sports participation ( $r = 0.926$ ), suggesting that well-structured local initiatives significantly contribute to youth engagement and development.

Sports facilities ( $r = 0.904$ ) and coaching expertise ( $r = 0.906$ ) also demonstrated high correlations with sports participation, emphasizing the importance of infrastructure and quality coaching in promoting sustained involvement. These findings highlight that accessible facilities and skilled coaches are critical enablers for both participation and skill development. Mass media ( $r = 0.863$ ) further exhibited a strong positive relationship, reflecting the influence of media in shaping perceptions of sports and inspiring participation through exposure to role models and sports culture.

Moderate correlations were observed for variables like gender participation ( $r = 0.920$ ) and social support systems ( $r = 0.795$ ). These relationships highlight the role of inclusivity and community backing in enhancing sports outcomes. Interestingly, self-esteem had a relatively weaker correlation with sports participation ( $r = 0.595$ ), suggesting that while sports contribute to confidence-building, other factors like personal circumstances or educational environments may also play significant roles in shaping self-esteem.

The matrix also revealed interrelationships among independent variables. For instance, community programs were positively correlated with economic challenges ( $r = 0.841$ ) and social support systems ( $r = 0.710$ ), indicating that programs targeting financial and social barriers can have a cascading effect on participation. Similarly, peer groups correlated strongly with family influence ( $r = 0.781$ ) and mass media ( $r = 0.831$ ), reflecting the interconnected nature of socialization agents (Table 2).

Table 4. Analysis of Correlation Matrix

Variables	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.	14.	15.
1. Sport Participation	1														
2. Sport Facilities	0.904	1													
3. CommunityPrograms	0.926	0.860	1												
4. EconomicChallenges	0.899	0.808	0.841	1											
5. SocialSupport	0.795	0.677	0.710	0.674	1										
6. CoachingExperise	0.906	0.848	0.858	0.826	0.673	1									
7. Lifeskills	0.729	0.616	0.667	0.659	0.521	0.739	1								
8. GenderParticipation	0.920	0.830	0.844	0.796	0.729	0.829	0.624	1							
9. Selfesteem	0.595	0.462	0.489	0.447	0.434	0.412	0.304	0.506	1						
10. Family	0.811	0.755	0.755	0.675	0.615	0.766	0.590	0.761	0.443	1					
11. Schools	0.652	0.556	0.648	0.506	0.518	0.604	0.411	0.619	0.367	0.811	1				
12. PeerGroups	0.952	0.966	0.954	0.859	0.720	0.886	0.653	0.881	0.502	0.781	0.630	1			
13. MassMedia	0.863	0.812	0.772	0.787	0.652	0.745	0.482	0.790	0.505	0.648	0.497	0.831	1		
14. Religion	0.900	0.897	0.846	0.774	0.690	0.772	0.569	0.846	0.498	0.760	0.621	0.908	0.872	1	
15. Workplace	0.840	0.671	0.728	0.702	0.629	0.693	0.547	0.734	0.871	0.663	0.512	0.730	0.695	0.677	1

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

### Analysis of independent t-test

The independent t-test was conducted to compare the socialization and development outcomes between young people who participate in sports programs and those who do not. The results revealed that participants in sports programs had a slightly higher mean score for socialization and development ( $M = 3.698$ ,  $SD = 1.3275$ ) compared to non-participants ( $M = 3.572$ ,  $SD = 0.7299$ ). However, this difference was not statistically significant ( $t = 1.041$ ,  $p = 0.299$ ), indicating that there is no meaningful distinction in these outcomes between the two groups (Table 3).

The lack of a significant difference suggests that while sports participation contributes to socialization and development, other factors may provide similar benefits for non-participants. These could include involvement in non-sports extracurricular activities, such as arts programs, academic clubs, or community volunteering, which also foster teamwork, discipline, and interpersonal skills. Additionally, the relatively small mean difference could reflect overlapping experiences between the two groups, such as shared access to supportive community programs or educational resources.

Table 5. Independent t-Test Results

Variable	Group Statistics					
	Involvement in Sport	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	
SportParticipation	Yes	161	3.698	1.3275	.1046	
	No	139	3.572	.7299	.0619	
Independent Samples Test						
Levene's Test for Equality of Variances						
	F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Equal variances assumed	29.995	.000	1.000	298	.318	.1265
Equal variances not assumed			1.041	255.357	.299	.1265

### Regression Analysis

Table 4 shows the regression analysis of the joint contribution of sports participation on socialization. The model explained 96.4% of the variance ( $R^2 = 0.964$ ) in sports participation outcomes. The regression was highly significant ( $F = 1305.858$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating that sports participation has a substantial impact on socialization among young people in Windhoek. Key predictors such as peer groups ( $\beta = 0.514$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), workplace ( $\beta = 0.263$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and mass media ( $\beta = 0.139$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) emerged as significant contributors.



Peer groups were the strongest predictor, underscoring the critical role of social interactions in fostering sports participation and socialization. Sports provide a collaborative environment where peers influence each other's behaviors, attitudes, and engagement, leading to improved interpersonal skills, teamwork, and a sense of belonging. The significance of workplace environments highlights the role of organized sports and recreational activities in enhancing professional relationships and reducing isolation, especially for young adults transitioning into professional settings. Additionally, mass media was found to significantly influence socialization through its ability to promote sports culture, inspire participation, and provide role models.

Interestingly, predictors like family ( $\beta = 0.088$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and religion ( $\beta = 0.056$ ,  $p = 0.083$ ) had weaker impacts on socialization compared to peer groups, workplace, and media. This suggests that while family and religious values may contribute to shaping attitudes toward sports, their direct influence on socialization through sports participation is relatively limited in this context. Similarly, schools ( $\beta = 0.019$ ,  $p = 0.331$ ) showed no significant impact, reflecting a potential gap in institutional support for sports-driven socialization within the educational system.

Table 6. Regression analysis on the contribution of sports to socialization

Model Summary					
R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate		
.982 <sup>a</sup>	.964	.963	.2095		
ANOVA					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	343.831	6	57.305	1305.858	.000
Residual	12.858	293	.044		
Total	356.689	299			
Coefficients					
Variables	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	.140	.043		3.262	.001
Family	.079	.022	.088	3.627	.000
Schools	.015	.015	.019	.973	.331
PeerGroups	.460	.027	.514	17.289	.000
MassMedia	.124	.022	.139	5.722	.000
Religion	.046	.026	.056	1.737	.083
Workplace	.245	.016	.263	15.177	.000

a. Dependent Variable: SportParticipation

b. Predictors: (Constant), Workplace, Schools, MassMedia, Family, PeerGroups, Religion

From Table 6, the model shows 98.4% of the variance ( $R^2 = 0.984$ ) accounted for youth development outcomes. The regression was highly significant ( $F = 2302.756$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating that sports participation substantially influences youth development across multiple dimensions, including social behavior, life skills, and leadership.

Key predictors, such as gender participation ( $\beta = 0.208$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and economic challenges ( $\beta = 0.182$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), emerged as critical factors. The significant contribution of gender participation highlights the role of sports in promoting inclusivity and empowering both male and female youth by breaking down traditional stereotypes and encouraging equitable opportunities. Similarly, the influence of economic challenges suggests that while sports can serve as a tool for skill development and socioeconomic mobility, affordability and accessibility remain barriers that need to be addressed.

Additional predictors like self-esteem ( $\beta = 0.135$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and life skills ( $\beta = 0.091$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) demonstrated that sports participation fosters personal growth by enhancing confidence, discipline, and critical thinking. These findings underscore the transformative potential of sports in equipping youth with essential tools for navigating personal and professional challenges. The impact of social support systems ( $\beta = 0.127$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) further reinforces the importance of community and family backing in amplifying the developmental benefits of sports.

Interestingly, variables like coaching expertise ( $\beta = 0.125$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and community programs ( $\beta = 0.145$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) also played significant roles, indicating that structured and well-organized sports environments are vital for maximizing youth development outcomes. These findings highlight the need for skilled coaches and community-based initiatives to create safe and supportive spaces for youth to thrive.

Table 7. Regression analysis on the contribution of sports to youth development

Model Summary					
R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate		
.992	.984	.984	.1381		
ANOVA					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	351.142	8	43.893	2302.756	.000b
Residual	5.547	291	.019		
Total	356.689	299			
Coefficients					
Variables	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	.138	.028		4.952	.000
SportFacilities	.125	.014	.149	8.954	.000
CommuntyPrograms	.127	.016	.145	7.888	.000
EconomicChallenges	.168	.014	.182	12.064	.000
SocialSupport	.093	.008	.127	11.343	.000
CoachingExpertise	.113	.016	.125	6.874	.000
Lifeskills	.061	.007	.091	8.262	.000
GenderParticipation	.183	.014	.208	12.781	.000
Selfesteem	.086	.006	.135	15.573	.000

a. Dependent Variable: SportParticipation

b. Predictors: (Constant), Workplace, Schools, MassMedia, Family, PeerGroups, Religion

The regression model revealed an extraordinary 99.6% of variance ( $R^2 = 0.996$ ) in sports participation outcomes, with a highly significant result ( $F = 5393.010$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). These findings affirm that sports exert a comprehensive and powerful influence on both socialization and youth development when multiple factors are considered together.

Among the predictors, peer groups ( $\beta = 0.174$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and workplace environments ( $\beta = 0.232$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) emerged as dominant contributors. The importance of peer interactions highlights how group dynamics in sports foster trust, teamwork, and social bonds, making sports a key socializing tool. Workplaces also played a significant role by providing platforms for collaboration and professional growth, demonstrating the dual benefit of sports in fostering both personal and professional development.

Other notable predictors included mass media ( $\beta = 0.093$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and social support systems ( $\beta = 0.104$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Mass media's ability to amplify the cultural value of sports and inspire participation through role models is evident, while social support from family, friends, and community networks reinforces the social benefits derived from sports. Additionally, gender participation ( $\beta = 0.114$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) highlighted sports' critical role in promoting inclusivity and challenging societal norms, particularly by encouraging female involvement. The significance of economic challenges ( $\beta = 0.126$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) emphasizes the need for affordable and accessible sports opportunities to enable participation, especially among economically disadvantaged youth.

Variables such as schools ( $\beta = 0.042$ ) and religion ( $\beta = 0.100$ ), while statistically significant, had relatively smaller impacts compared to social and workplace factors. This finding suggests that schools and religious institutions may act more as supporting structures rather than primary drivers of the combined effects of sports. Interestingly, self-esteem ( $\beta = -0.035$ ) showed a negative association, indicating that while sports benefit socialization and development, their influence on self-esteem may vary depending on individual experiences or competitive pressures (Table 8).

Table 8. Joint relative contribution of sports on socialization and youth development

Model Summary					
R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate		
.998	.996	.996	.0686		
ANOVA					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	355.347	14	25.382	5393.010	.000
Residual	1.341	285	.005		
Total	356.689	299			
Coefficients					
Variables	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	.026	.015		1.818	.070



SportFacilities	-.001	.022	-.001	-.033	.973
CommunnyPrograms	.009	.018	.010	.472	.637
EconomicChallenges	.116	.008	.126	15.378	.000
SocialSupport	.077	.004	.104	18.515	.000
CoachingExperise	.070	.009	.078	7.843	.000
Lifeskills	.072	.004	.107	18.185	.000
GenderParticipation	.100	.008	.114	12.403	.000
Selfesteem	-.022	.006	-.035	-3.681	.000
Family	.001	.008	.001	.087	.930
Schools	.033	.006	.042	5.940	.000
PeerGroups	.156	.040	.174	3.884	.000
MassMedia	.082	.008	.093	10.589	.000
Religion	.083	.010	.100	8.619	.000
Workplace	.216	.012	.232	18.053	.000

a. Dependent Variable: SportParticipation

b. Predictors: (Constant), Workplace, Schools, MassMedia, Family, PeerGroups, Religion

### *Thematic Analysis of Respondent Narratives*

Thematic analysis of the interviews with athletes, coaches, and policymakers revealed a nuanced and multifaceted picture of youth sports participation in Namibia. Peer influence emerged as one of the most powerful motivators for initial involvement. Many participants credited their friends for introducing them to sports and sustaining their interest. As one 18-year-old female athlete shared, "I never thought I'd play any sport, to be honest. But when my friends invited me to just 'try out,' I ended up loving it. They stuck with me through the hard parts, and now I can't imagine not playing every week." This highlights the critical role of peer groups in shaping participation and fostering long-term engagement, often compensating for the absence of other support structures.

Family support was another factor that influenced sports involvement, but responses were mixed. Some participants recalled positive encouragement, especially from fathers who took an active interest in their children's athletic development. "My father used to take me to the field every Saturday morning," recounted a 20-year-old male athlete. "It made me feel like what I was doing mattered." However, this was contrasted with narratives of gender-based exclusion within households. A 20-year-old male added, "My sister never got the same support—my family said sports aren't for girls," illustrating how traditional gender roles still restrict female participation in some communities.

Infrastructure disparities between urban and rural or informal areas were frequently mentioned. Youth in underserved areas spoke of dilapidated facilities and lack of basic resources. A 17-year-old girl from Katima Mulilo shared, "In my neighborhood, we share one broken netball hoop among all the kids. It's rusty and barely stands, but it's all we have." In contrast, urban youth described better conditions, with access to coaches and facilities that made participation smoother. These differences point to systemic inequalities that affect who can participate and how often.

Coaching quality and mentorship were consistently highlighted as essential for both athletic and personal development. Athletes valued coaches who supported them holistically, not just in performance. A 19-year-old female athlete remarked, "Our coach isn't just about drills and matches. He checks in on our schoolwork, helps us sort out problems at home, and even gives us advice when we're feeling down." This underscores the psychosocial role coaches play, serving as mentors, counselors, and trusted adults in young people's lives.

Gender dynamics were another recurrent theme. While some young women shared empowering experiences, many described the challenges of participating in male-dominated environments. "When we first joined the football team, some of the boys laughed at us and said we wouldn't last," said a 21-year-old female athlete. "But after a few months, they started passing the ball to us, cheering us on." This demonstrates gradual shifts in gender norms through inclusive participation. However, others noted the persistent lack of female leadership in sports. "There are no female coaches around here, and it makes it harder to open up sometimes," said an 18-year-old female participant. "It feels like we always have to prove ourselves twice as much." These voices call for more representation and targeted support for young women in sports.

In terms of personal development, many respondents described how sports helped them acquire life skills such as discipline, conflict resolution, and emotional regulation. A 20-year-old male reflected, "Football taught me more than just how to score goals. It helped me control my temper and think before



I act, even outside the game." Others linked sports with building confidence and leadership. "The day I was picked as team captain changed how I saw myself," explained a 17-year-old athlete. "I used to be quiet and unsure, but suddenly people were looking to me for decisions. It made me realize I had a voice and something valuable to offer." Such narratives reinforce the idea that sports can be transformative, particularly when participants are given recognition and responsibility.

From the policy and coaching perspective, structural challenges were emphasized, particularly around access and equity. A government official noted, "We still see a lack of resources in informal settlements. Even if youth have the passion, they lack the facilities or safe spaces to train. Until we address these gaps, we'll keep missing out on potential talent." Coaches, too, stressed the importance of emotional support and consistency. "These kids don't just need coaching—they need someone who listens, who shows up consistently," said a youth coach in Windhoek. "When they see that you care about their school, family, and health, they start caring too. That's when real change happens."

## Discussion

The demographic profile of the study sample provides vital insights into the contextual landscape of youth sports participation in Windhoek, Namibia. The sample comprised an almost equal distribution of males (48%) and females (52%), ensuring gender inclusivity and enabling a comprehensive examination of gender-specific experiences and patterns in sports engagement. This balance is significant, as it aligns with Eime et al. (2013), who emphasized the importance of gender representation in sports research for capturing diverse impacts and motivations. However, Kay (2009) cautioned that even when studies achieve gender balance, systemic and structural barriers such as cultural expectations, unequal resource allocation, and safety concerns often continue to limit actual female participation. This points to a potential disconnect between representational parity in research and real-world accessibility and equity.

In terms of age distribution, the majority of respondents (61.3%) fell within the 19–24 age bracket, with an additional 24.3% aged between 15 and 18 years. This age concentration reflects a focus on late adolescence and young adulthood, which is a critical period for identity formation, social integration, and the development of life skills through structured activities such as sports. Fredricks and Eccles (2006) identified this life stage as particularly formative for personal and social development, where youth begin to internalize behavioral norms, set long-term goals, and develop social capital through peer engagement and extracurricular participation.

The educational background of respondents revealed that 69% had attained tertiary education. This suggests a notable correlation between higher educational attainment and participation in sports, a trend supported by Holt et al. (2017), who found that access to and engagement in organized sports often align with educational privilege. Tertiary institutions typically provide better access to structured sports programs, facilities, and mentorship, creating more favorable environments for participation. Conversely, Coalter (2007) argued that individuals with lower levels of education may experience more pronounced barriers to sports access, including limited exposure, affordability issues, and lack of institutional support. These discrepancies may skew participation data toward more advantaged segments of the population and obscure the experiences of marginalized groups.

Regarding residential status, 71% of respondents resided in formal settlements, while 29% were from informal settlements. This split reflects entrenched inequalities in access to sports infrastructure, public amenities, and recreational spaces. Spaaij (2011) highlighted that youth living in informal settlements often contend with inadequate facilities, safety concerns, and financial constraints that limit their ability to participate in organized sports. Despite these challenges, the participation of nearly one-third of the respondents from informal settlements in this study is noteworthy. It suggests a latent potential for inclusive, community-driven sports programs that can engage underserved populations. This finding indicates the importance of localized strategies and grassroots interventions that can bridge the infrastructural and socio-economic gaps between different residential areas.

Participation rates in sports were modest, with 53.7% of respondents indicating active involvement, while 46.3% reported non-participation. This near parity aligns with Denault and Paulin (2009), who

observed that involvement in extracurricular activities, whether sports, arts, or volunteering, often divides youth populations in roughly equal proportions. The relatively high participation rate may also reflect improving opportunities and awareness in Windhoek, driven by urbanization and policy initiatives aimed at youth development. Nevertheless, it is crucial to explore the enabling and inhibiting factors that shape these participation patterns.

The study's correlation analysis offered strong statistical evidence of the environmental and social enablers of youth sports participation. Peer groups exhibited the strongest correlation ( $r = 0.952$ ), underscoring the central role of social motivation, peer reinforcement, and group belonging in fostering engagement. Weiss & Wiese-Bjornstal (2009) and Sentie et al. (2025b) similarly identified peer encouragement as a key determinant of sustained involvement in youth sports, particularly in team-based contexts. Community programs ( $r = 0.926$ ), sports facilities ( $r = 0.904$ ), and coaching expertise ( $r = 0.906$ ) also demonstrated high positive correlations with participation. These findings confirm the significance of institutional and environmental support, echoing conclusions by Coalter (2010) and Spaaij (2011), who highlighted that quality infrastructure, mentorship, and program accessibility are essential components of successful sports delivery, particularly in resource-constrained settings.

Mass media also showed a strong positive correlation with sports participation ( $r = 0.863$ ), reinforcing its role as a cultural and aspirational force. Lines (2001) argued that media can positively influence youth by promoting role models and showcasing success stories. However, this study's qualitative findings revealed more ambivalent perspectives. Some respondents expressed skepticism toward mass media portrayals, particularly those that idealize elite athletes and perpetuate gender biases. This critique aligns with Mennesson (2012) and Coakley (2015), who cautioned that mainstream sports media often marginalize local talent and fail to represent the realities of most youth athletes.

Interestingly, self-esteem had a weaker correlation with participation ( $r = 0.595$ ) and showed a negative regression coefficient ( $\beta = -0.035$ ). This suggests a complex and possibly bidirectional relationship. While participation in sports can build confidence and self-worth for some youth, it may undermine it for others, especially in hyper-competitive environments or where exclusion and underperformance are prevalent. Dworkin et al. (2003) emphasized that when success in sports is narrowly defined by performance metrics, those who fail to meet these standards may experience diminished self-concept and motivation.

Regression analysis revealed that peer groups ( $\beta = 0.514$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) were the most significant predictors of socialization outcomes, followed by workplace environments ( $\beta = 0.263$ ) and mass media ( $\beta = 0.139$ ). These results reinforce the foundational assumptions of ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) and social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), which posit that youth behavior and identity are shaped by interactions with key social agents and reinforced by environmental stimuli. Conversely, schools ( $\beta = 0.019$ ,  $p = 0.331$ ) and family ( $\beta = 0.088$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) had minimal direct influence on sports-related socialization in this context. This finding deviates from studies in developed countries, such as Coakley (2015), where schools and families are often central to athletic development. It suggests a need for greater investment in school-based sports programs and parental engagement in Namibia.

In terms of youth development, gender participation ( $\beta = 0.208$ ) and economic challenges ( $\beta = 0.182$ ) emerged as particularly influential predictors. These findings support the work of Hozhabri et al. (2022) and Saavedra (2009), who demonstrated that sports can challenge traditional gender roles, promote empowerment, and offer avenues for social mobility. However, Kay (2009) and Spaaij (2011) emphasized that such benefits are conditional upon the presence of equitable policies, inclusive programming, and sustained funding, which are often lacking in developing regions. Other significant variables included self-esteem ( $\beta = 0.135$ ), life skills ( $\beta = 0.091$ ), and social support ( $\beta = 0.127$ ), confirming the multidimensional developmental potential of sports. These findings align with Papacharisis et al. (2005) and Holt et al. (2017), who highlighted sports' ability to foster confidence, discipline, leadership, and teamwork. Nonetheless, these outcomes are not automatically achieved and often depend on the quality and inclusiveness of the sports environment.

The independent-samples t-test showed no statistically significant difference ( $t = 1.041$ ,  $p = 0.299$ ) in socialization and development outcomes between participants and non-participants. This suggests that similar developmental benefits may be derived from other extracurricular domains, such as music, arts, or community service. Eccles and Barber (1999) and Fredricks and Eccles (2006) similarly found that



diverse engagement pathways can promote social competence, self-regulation, and identity development. Bailey et al. (2015), however, argued that while other activities may support development, sports offer unique benefits related to physical health, resilience, and goal-setting, which may not be replicated in non-physical domains.

Qualitative insights added depth to the quantitative findings. Thematic analysis revealed recurring narratives around peer influence, infrastructural limitations, gender disparities, and empowerment through sports. Participants consistently highlighted the motivating role of peers in encouraging attendance, effort, and persistence in sports. This supports the strong statistical correlation found between peer groups and participation. Coaching quality and mentorship also emerged as key themes. Respondents described coaches not only as skill instructors but also as moral guides and behavioral monitors. This reinforces findings by Fraser-Thomas et al. (2005) and Sentie et al. (2025a) suggested that effective coaching contributes to holistic youth development.

Gender-based exclusion was another significant theme. Female participants shared experiences of limited visibility, unequal resources, and societal pressures that discouraged athletic participation. These accounts validate Mennesson's (2012) work on gender and identity in sports and underscore the need for targeted interventions to create safe and empowering spaces for girls. Media influence was also viewed with caution. Many respondents expressed disillusionment with the portrayal of elite, often foreign athletes in mainstream media, arguing that these representations feel unattainable and disconnected from local realities. This criticism highlights the importance of promoting relatable, community-level role models to foster aspiration without alienation.

## Conclusions

The findings demonstrate that sports function not merely as recreational activities but as vital platforms for building life skills, fostering peer relationships, and promoting inclusivity. Peer groups, coaching expertise, and access to community programs were shown to be strong predictors of sports participation, highlighting the importance of social and structural support systems. While sports contributed significantly to socialization and personal development, particularly in promoting gender inclusion and enhancing life skills, factors such as economic challenges and unequal access to infrastructure continue to limit participation for many youth, especially in informal settlements. The non-significant difference between sports participants and non-participants in some developmental outcomes suggests that other extracurricular avenues, like arts and volunteering, may offer comparable benefits, supporting a holistic approach to youth development. Qualitative narratives revealed both empowering experiences and persisting barriers, including gender-based exclusion and infrastructural inadequacies, reinforcing the need for equity-focused policy interventions. To maximize the developmental potential of sports, there is a pressing need for more inclusive policies, improved coaching standards, expanded infrastructure, and community-driven initiatives that prioritize both accessibility and emotional well-being. Overall, this study affirms the transformative potential of sports in youth development while calling for a more integrated and context-sensitive strategy to address structural and social barriers that may inhibit full participation.

## Recommendations and Practical Implications

Expanding community-based sports initiatives, particularly in underserved areas, can enhance accessibility and inclusivity. Subsidized programs and targeted efforts to increase female participation are essential for broader engagement. Schools and workplaces should integrate sports to promote life skills, while training coaches in youth development approaches can maximize impact. Leveraging digital platforms can raise awareness, and partnerships with public and private sectors can secure sustainable funding. Scholarships and data-driven evaluations will further support long-term success.

This study underscores sports as a vital tool for youth socialization and development, particularly in Namibia. By integrating Ecological Systems Theory and Social Learning Theory, it highlights how sports foster leadership, resilience, and social cohesion. The findings provide insights into economic, cultural, and systemic barriers, offering a framework for similar contexts. Empirical evidence strengthens the link between sports participation and youth empowerment, making it a valuable reference for future research.



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