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# Sports Clubs: The ‘Lifeblood’ of a Cohesive and Participating Neighbourhood

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### Samenvatting

Sociale cohesie en sociale participatie in wijken zijn fundamentele prioriteiten voor beleidsmakers. De invloed van sportverenigingen op deze twee concepten heeft tot nog toe echter weinig aandacht gekregen in de literatuur. Daarom onderzoekt deze studie de relatie tussen sportvereniging lidmaatschap en de perceptie van sociale cohesie en sociale participatie in de buurt bij jongeren, rekening houdend met geslacht en etniciteit. Voor dit onderzoek zijn vragenlijsten mondeling en telefonisch afgenomen bij 81 jongeren tussen de 12 en 22 jaar, met een gemiddelde leeftijd van 16.64 jaar ( $SD = 2.18$ ). De deelnemers waren afkomstig uit 10 gemeenten in Nederland en data was verzameld tussen februari en april 2020. De perceptie van sociale cohesie werd gemeten met behulp van de Veiligheidsmonitor (2017) en sociale participatie werd gemeten met behulp van de sociale uitsluitingsindex (2014). De data zijn geanalyseerd door een multivariate analyse van covariantie (MANCOVA) uit te voeren. De resultaten lieten zien dat jongeren met een sportvereniging lidmaatschap (vergeleken met jongeren zonder lidmaatschap) een significant hogere perceptie hebben van sociale cohesie ( $M = 4.02$ ,  $SD = 0.07$  tegen  $M = 3.77$ ,  $SD = 0.08$ ) en sociale participatie ( $M = 3.11$ ,  $SD = 0.04$  tegen  $M = 2.95$ ,  $SD = 0.05$ ) in de buurt. Met deze kennis kunnen beleidsmakers problemen in buurten gerelateerd aan sociale cohesie en sociale participatie mogelijk aanpakken met het promoten van sportvereniging lidmaatschap.

*Kernwoorden:* sportvereniging lidmaatschap, sociale cohesie, sociale participatie, beleid, buurt

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**Abstract**

A socially cohesive and participating neighbourhood is a fundamental priority for Dutch policymakers. However, the influence of sports club membership on these two concepts has received little attention so far. Thus, this study examines the effects of sports club membership on young people's perception of social cohesion and social participation in the neighbourhood, while taking gender and ethnicity into account. For this research, data was collected during face-to-face interviews and via phone interviews amongst 81 young people aged between 12 and 22 years, with an average age of 16.64 years ( $SD = 2.18$ ). The participants were from 10 municipalities in the Netherlands and data was collected between February and April 2020. The perception of social cohesion was measured by using de Veiligheidsmonitor (the Safety Monitor; 2017) and social participation was measured by using the social exclusion index (2014). The data were analysed by conducting a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA). The results showed that young people with a sports club membership (compared to young people without a membership) have a significantly higher perception of social cohesion ( $M = 4.02$ ,  $SD = 0.07$  versus  $M = 3.77$ ,  $SD = 0.08$ ) and social participation ( $M = 3.11$ ,  $SD = 0.04$  versus  $M = 2.95$ ,  $SD = 0.05$ ) in neighbourhoods. With this knowledge, policymakers may be able to address problems in neighbourhoods related to social cohesion and social participation by promoting sports club membership.

*Keywords:* sports club membership, social cohesion, social participation, policy, neighbourhood

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### Sports Clubs: The 'Lifeblood' of a Cohesive and Participating Neighbourhood

Since 2012, loitering and nuisance from local youth are the most common problems described in Dutch neighbourhoods (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek [CBS], 2020c). This number has been declining from 90,712 nuisance reports in 2012 to 70,803 nuisance reports in 2018. However, in 2019, the police received 76,526 reports of complaints concerning youth nuisance in Dutch neighbourhoods (CBS, 2020a). The types of nuisance that youth commit are diverse (e.g., youth who disrupt the neighbourhoods with loud motorbikes, shouting late at night, vandalism, littering, and drinking alcohol) (CBS, 2020a). This sudden increase in complaints could be a reason for concern as it might indicate that there are underlying problems developing in the neighbourhoods (Lenzi, 2011).

An underlying reason for the nuisance from youth in neighbourhoods can be found in the job prosperity of young adults (Lenzi, 2011; Leventhal, Dupéré, & Brooks-Gunn, 2009). In the Netherlands, approximately 7% of young adults aged 15 to 25 years were looking for a job in 2019 (CBS, 2020b). The unemployment rate was twice as high in people with a migrant background (10%) compared to people with a Dutch background (5%) (CBS, 2020b). When unemployment in neighbourhoods among young people is high, adolescents' expectations about their future are likely to be related to feelings of hopelessness, which could cause problematic behaviour (e.g., loitering) (Bolland, Lian, & Formichella, 2005). Another reason for loitering and nuisance in neighbourhoods might be related to adolescent's perception of parental supervision. Janssen, Deković and Bruinsma (2014) found that adolescents who perceive less parental monitoring, less parental restrictions and have a relationship with their parents of low quality, spent more time loitering and were more likely to cause nuisance in neighbourhoods.

### **Social Cohesion and Social Participation**

As a result of loitering young people, social cohesion and social participation in neighbourhoods might be negatively affected (Sampson & Raudenbush, 1999; Van Bergeijk, Bolt, & Van Kempen, 2008). This is problematic because these concepts are seen as the glue that hold a social system together (Van Bergeijk et al., 2008). Over the last ten years, the concepts of social cohesion and social participation have gained increased attention as a means of understanding how communities might operate to become safer and more productive (Skinner, Zakus, & Cowell, 2008). They have become regularly used terms, especially by policy makers and politicians. An example is the Dutch scientific council of government policy who stated that the decreasing social cohesion in the Dutch society has undesirable social consequences like anonymity, alienation, insecurity, criminality and

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decreasing welfare (Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid (WRR), 2005).

However, the concept of social cohesion is difficult to operationalize because it is ambiguous and multidimensional (De Hart, 2002). The concept refers to the participation in social institutions and social relations between people, but also to their orientation of norms and values (De Hart, 2002). Moreover, it is applicable to different levels of society, such as clubs, neighbourhoods, cities, and countries, yet, social cohesion might not be present at every level in a similar manner. For example, people could feel strongly connected to their local community, but hardly connected to the country they live in (De Hart, 2002). This study deals with social cohesion at the neighbourhood level. This level's specific definition is, as for example given by De Hart (2002): "social cohesion at the neighbourhood level is the degree in which residents share values and norms, there is a certain degree of social control, the availability and interdependency of social networks ..., the existence of trust between residents and the willingness to collectively find solutions to collective problems" (De Hart, 2002, p. 12). Similarly, social participation in the neighbourhood can be identified as the extent to which people have social networks, and have norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness (Putnam, 1993). Looking at the definition of these concepts indicates that they are closely intertwined with each other (Putnam, 1993).

The link between social cohesion and social participation is further noticeable when looking at the resemblances. Both concepts are seen as a central dimension for the definition of social capital (Breedveld, 2003; Spaaij, 2011; Richard, Gauvin, Gosselin, & Laforest, 2009; Verweel, Janssens, & Rocques, 2005). According to Putnam (1993), social cohesion goes hand in hand with social participation. This is due to the ability of these concepts to create a favourable setting for the development of standards, reciprocity, and mutual trust, which in turn stimulates the collaboration between people. Additionally, social cohesion arises when there is interaction between people in neighbourhoods and when they are participating in everyday social life (Berkman, Glass, Brissette, & Seeman, 2000). Despite these resemblances, the main issue in studies is represented by a lack of agreement in the conceptualization of social cohesion and social participation (Onyx & Bullen, 2000; Vieno & Santinello, 2006). Therefore, in order to systematize the extensive literature on these concepts, the present study will adhere to the following components: social cohesion; the cognitive or intrapsychic components, such as trustworthiness in neighbours, and social participation; the behavioural components, such as amount of contact with neighbours (Lenzi, 2011).

The consequences of low social cohesion and low social participation could lead to people being less connected with each other and having fewer trusted connections which

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decreases the liveability in a neighbourhood (Van Marissing, 2008). Moreover, dissatisfaction in the neighbourhood increases residential turnover which decreases social cohesion even more (Kearns & Parkes, 2003; Sampson, 1988). The result is a negative spiral of neighbourhood liveability, mainly caused through a low level of social cohesion and social participation. Another problem is that people living in neighbourhoods that score low in social cohesion and social participation reported more frequent externalizing (e.g., delinquent and criminal behaviours, affiliation with deviant peers) and internalizing problems (mainly depressive symptoms) (Browning, Burrington, Leventhal, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; Chung & Steinberg, 2006; Molnar, Miller, Azrael, & Buka, 2004; Sampson, Morenoff, & Raudenbush, 2005; Tolan, Gorman-Smith, & Henry, 2003). Therefore, in order to tackle these neighbourhood liveability and mental health issues, it is not surprising that urban policy makers are trying to improve social cohesion and social participation in troubled neighbourhoods (Van Kempen & Bolt, 2009).

### **Role of Gender and Ethnicity**

An important criticism of studies researching social cohesion and social participation is the lack of examination of outside factors, such as gender (Kavanagh, Bentley, Turrell, Broom, & Subramanian, 2006). According to the social theory, women may be more influenced by social conditions in the neighbourhood due to various social factors such as individual preferences (e.g., perceptions of neighbourhood safety), differences in social stressors (e.g., unfair treatment of others), and domestic societal roles within the home and local organisations (Lee, & DeMaris, 2007; Stafford, Cummins, Macintyre, Ellaway, & Marmot, 2005). With respect to social cohesion, women seem to have a higher sense of feeling the importance to help people around them and care for their well-being compared to men (Einolf, 2011). This can be explained by the fact that women tend to be more sensitive to the values of reciprocity, mutual responsibility and care (Einolf, 2011). However, looking at social participation, men are more likely to take part in neighbourhood engagement (Li, Savage, & Pickles, 2003). These findings suggest that gender is undeniably important to consider as a factor when studying social contexts (Ahmad & Hafeez, 2011; Kavanagh et al., 2006; Valentova, 2016).

Another important factor to consider in the present study is ethnicity (Tolsma, Van der Meer, & Gesthuizen, 2009). Putnam (2007) argues that living in an ethnically heterogeneous environment is harmful to interpersonal trust and undermines social connections between and within ethnic groups. An explanation for this could be that diversity seems to trigger a 'hunker down' reaction. This means that people living in ethnically diverse settings appear to

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socially isolate themselves due to the high diversity (Putnam, 2007). Supporting these findings is research done by Fieldhouse and Cutts (2010) who underline the correlation of ethnic diversity in the neighbourhood and lower levels of social cohesion in the United States. With respects to social participation, previous studies have consistently found negative relations between having an ethnic background and social participation (Okten & Osili, 2004). An explanation for this could lie in the social-psychological aspects of majority-minority societal interaction, which indicates that the presence of diverse elements in communities (e.g., language) inhibits trust and reduces civic and cooperative behaviour among dominant groups (Uslaner, 2002). This in line with Rotolo (2000) who indicates that racial heterogeneity has a negative impact on social participation as heterogeneity reduces the possibility of making social network ties. Another argument stressing the influence of ethnicity can be found in the fact that racialized and immigrant groups tend to be much more conscious of existing barriers to participate in society compared to people from the dominant culture (Fernando, 2011). Given the above, it is clear that ethnicity is an important factor to consider in studies regarding social cohesion and social participation.

### **Social Impact of Sports Clubs**

It is plausible that the perception of social cohesion and social participation in neighbourhoods could be increased through sports club membership. Historically, the role of sports in government policy has changed over time, moving from raising general physical fitness and health to using sports as a form of social welfare policy (Green, 2004; Green & Houlihan, 2005). The most obvious manifestation of this was the development of a 'Sport for All' policy by the Council of Europe in 1966, which captured a progressive international sentiment (McIntosh, 1980). The broad sentiment of this manifestation was to encourage physical activity both from a traditional competitive sporting context (e.g., sacrificing 'life' for the game, seeking distinction, taking risks and challenging limits) to one that included informal sports that were inclusive for the masses (e.g., sport also just for 'fun', for women, the poor, and people with a disability). Nowadays, sports associations are seen by many as a source of social cohesion and social participation, especially since people can participate in different ways: by watching sports, participating in sport, and volunteering (e.g., umpiring, managing, coaching) (Harvey, Levesque, & Donnoly, 2007; Nicholson & Hoyer, 2008). This change of perspective resulted in an increase of research regarding the social benefits related to sports (Harvey et al., 2007).

There are several instances that showcase the relationship between social cohesion, social participation and sports club membership. Firstly, this can be seen in the assumption

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that participation in team sport has a beneficial social impact on sports club members (Theeboom, 2011). This assumption comes from the thought that sport clubs are a meeting place where different people are in contact with each other and work together, and therefore can foster better relationships (Harvey et al., 2007; Nicholson & Hoye, 2008; Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau [SCP], 2018). Delaney and Keaney (2005) concluded that members of a sports club have an increased social capital compared to non-members. Members of sports clubs are more satisfied with their lives, have more social encounters, and are more accepting of immigrants than people who are not members of a sports club (Lenzi, 2011). Secondly, results at a national level in Europe show that countries where the majority of people are members of sports clubs have more trust in politicians and other people compared to countries where low amounts of people are members of sports clubs (Delaney & Keaney, 2005; Okayasu, Kawahara, & Nogawa, 2010; Seippel, 2006). Thirdly, the functional dimension of sport consists of the ability to acquire social skills, such as conflict resolution (Bailey, 2008; Smith et al., 2010). Lastly, young people in sports clubs also seem to have more confidence in their peers than those who are not in sports clubs (Delaney & Keaney, 2005; Seippel, 2006; Van der Meulen, 2007). This body of literature suggests that sports club membership seems to be beneficial in relation to the perception of social cohesion and social participation in multiple contexts, which indicates that it might be beneficial in neighbourhoods as well.

### **Current Research**

Despite evidence for the value of sports club membership in relation to social cohesion and social participation, there are noticeable gaps in empirical studies concerning sports club membership (European Commission, 2007; Skinner, Zakus, & Cowell, 2008). To my knowledge, no studies examined the relationship between sports club membership, social cohesion and social participation specifically in the neighbourhood context. A reason for this could be the lack of concern to evaluate sports club memberships' social impact in neighbourhoods because the measurement of social impact requires consistent and dedicated work throughout the span of several years (Crabbe et al., 2006). Additionally, measuring social impact requires research to account for other factors that might have influenced the element you are trying to measure, which is overlooked or purposefully ignored due to it being time consuming (Crabbe et al., 2006). Moreover, publications on the relationship between sport and social cohesion often focus mainly on sport interventions and sports facilities in the neighbourhood (such as playgrounds) instead of sports clubs in the neighbourhood (Boonstra, Hermens, & Bakker, 2010; Breedveld, Romijn, & Cevaal, 2009).



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Known examples of sports areas in public spaces in the Netherlands are Cruyff Courts and Krajicek Playgrounds. The Cruyff Foundation and the Richard Krajicek Foundation have a common goal, which is to enhance social cohesion in neighbourhoods with the construction of sports facilities (Boonstra et al., 2010; Breedveld et al., 2009). Another reason could be due to the focus of present Dutch urban restructuring policies. Current policies aim to improve social cohesion and social participation by diversifying the neighbourhoods' population by upgrading houses (Van Kempen & Bolt, 2009) and (profit and non-profit) neighbourhood facilities (e.g., playgrounds and parks) (Van Bergeijk et al., 2008). Improving these houses and facilities in terms of quality and quantity would attract new residents, increase liveability and social interaction, as well as the socioeconomic opportunities of the residents (Van Bergeijk et al., 2008; Völker & Flap, 2007; Völker, Flap, & Lindenberg, 2007). These processes show that in existing policies on social cohesion and social participation, the focus is mostly on the effects of population composition, socioeconomic characteristics, and/or meeting places instead of sports club membership (Dekker & Bolt, 2005; Veldboer, Kleinhans, & Duyvendak, 2002; Van Bergeijk et al., 2008).

Therefore, in order to fill the gap in the existing knowledge and to possibly change the perspective of policy makers, the focus in this study will be put on examining the value of being a member in a sports club and how this relates to a member's perception of social cohesion and social participation in the neighbourhood. With this knowledge, other approaches of tackling neighbourhood liveability and mental health issues might be developed. The main research question that ensues is as followed: To what extent is there a difference between young people who are a sports club member, and young people who are not concerning their perception of social cohesion and social participation in the neighbourhood, when controlling for gender and ethnicity? The expectation was that young people who are a member of a sports club perceive a higher social cohesion and social participation in the neighbourhood, compared to young people who are not a member of a sports club. This is based on the body of literature which suggests that sports club members have more social encounters, have more trust in other people, and have higher social skills (e.g., conflict resolution) than people who are not members of a sports club (Delaney & Keaney, 2005; Harvey et al., 2007; Nicholson & Hoye, 2008; Seippel, 2006; Van der Meulen, 2007).

## Method

### Design and Recruitment

The aim of this cross-sectional study was to determine whether there is a relationship between sports club membership and young people's perception of social cohesion and social participation in the neighbourhood, when controlling for gender and ethnicity. This study defined young people as individuals in the 10-24 age group (World Health Organization, 2020). Due to convenience, the participants in this study were part of a larger ongoing research project "Young Leaders" (YL) conducted by the research institute Noorda & Co. This project is a pedagogical activation program based on scientific knowledge about interventions aimed at promoting the competence and social participation of young people. By attending this program, young people are better able to deal with the high-risk conditions they are confronted with when they grow up. Another characteristic of this program is the focus on youth in socioeconomically disadvantaged neighbourhoods. These are environments in which they are exposed to multiple risks (e.g., poverty, insecurity in the neighbourhood or lack of support from home) that can have negative consequences for their development.

Noorda & Co were in the stage of collecting post-program evaluations by interviewing the participants who completed the YL program. Data was collected among participants from eight pilot locations in 11 Dutch municipalities between April 2019 and April 2020. Recruitment of the participants for the YL program was done by 16 youth workers employed by the welfare and sports organizations involved in the YL program in these eight pilot locations. Participants of the YL program had to be aged 10-25 and be motivated to take part in a training course after school hours and organize social activities for their communities. Except for age, there were no exclusion criteria. Before the interviews, participants were given verbal instructions about the process (e.g., how the data will be used and their rights during the interview) and gave permission to participate in the evaluation.

As mentioned before, due to convenience, the participants of this study were also part of the YL program. YL participants that had to be evaluated were asked if they would also like to participate in a study on sports club membership, social cohesion and social participation in the neighbourhood. However, a large number of the participants from the pilot locations were already evaluated before this study's design was developed, making it difficult to approach these participants again for more questions. Therefore, YL participants outside the pilot locations were contacted as well. The participants in this study were from eight municipalities related to the YL pilot locations and two municipalities outside the YL pilot locations, and data were collected every week between February and April 2020. To

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partake in this study, participants needed to be between the age of 10 and 24 years and part of the YL program. There were no exclusion criteria. Participants received verbal instructions about the interview and gave permission to participate in this study (active informed consent). If participants were under the age of 16, parents also received instruction by phone in order to give consent. The overall response rate was 92%. Some parents and participants declined due to personal reasons.

### **Sample**

In total, 190 participants living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, aged between 12 and 23 years, participated in the eight YL pilot locations. From these 190 participants, 65 participated in the present study. Furthermore, since a large number of the participants from the pilot locations were already evaluated before this study's design was developed, YL participants outside the pilot locations were also contacted. From these locations, 20 participants were contacted, and 16 participants took part in the present study. Thus, a total of 81 participants were included in this study. The average age of these 81 participants was 16.64 years ( $SD = 2.18$ ) and consisted mostly of males (77.9%). The majority of sampled youths were in secondary (vocational) education (medium education level; 53%), followed by participants in primary education or pre-secondary vocational education (low education level; 44%) and participants in higher vocational education or university (high education level; 3%). The participants were predominantly born in the Netherlands (97.4%). Yet, the participants varied in their ethnicity (Dutch: 31.2%; other-western background: 10.4%; non-western background: 58.4%).

### **Procedure**

YL participants that had to be evaluated were asked if they would like to participate in a study on sports club membership, social cohesion and social participation in the neighbourhood. There were no exclusion criteria. Participants received verbal instructions about the interview and gave permission to participate in this study (active informed consent). These were done at locations such as youth centres to maximize the chance that YL participants would participate in this study. In order to minimize socially desirable answers, it was emphasized that the data would be collected and processed anonymously. If participants were under the age of 16, parents also received instruction by phone in order to give consent. After obtaining consent, participants were asked to complete a  $\pm 30$  minute questionnaire during a structured face-to-face interview. Every question was read out loud followed by an answer from the participants. After the interviews were complete the participants were debriefed by asking if they had any questions. Finally, the participants were thanked for their

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cooperation and their time. It is important to note that due to the developments surrounding COVID-19, data from 20 participants were collected via phone calls instead of face-to-face interviews. However, apart from the location, the procedure remained the same.

### Measures

Several sociodemographic indicators were assessed in the questionnaire, including age, gender (male/female) and ethnicity (Dutch/other-Western/non-Western). In addition, three other indicators were assessed: sports club membership, social cohesion, and social participation. These three indicators were assessed in an 11-item questionnaire.

**Sports club membership.** Sports club membership of individuals was the independent variable. Two groups were formed by making a distinction between participants who joined a sports club and participants who did not. This distinction was assessed by asking participants closed questions about the current status of their club membership (yes/no). Sports club membership involved competitive and/or recreational participation, although competition is the predominant form of activity provided by sports clubs in the Netherlands (Alles over sport, 2019).

**Social cohesion.** To my knowledge, there was no proper Dutch questionnaire that was solely designed to measure the concept of social cohesion. However, the questionnaire ‘de Veiligheidsmonitor’ (the Safety Monitor; 2017) includes 12 domains in which various topics in the field of quality of life and safety are discussed. This questionnaire is a recurring population-based questionnaire into safety, quality of life, and victimization. Other topics of this questionnaire are nuisance in the neighbourhood, disrespectful behaviour, preventive measures, functioning of the police, municipal security policy, and social cohesion. For the present study, only the domain social cohesion was used. This component included statements like: “I have a lot of contact with other neighbours” and “I feel at home with the people that live in this neighbourhood”. For this domain, participants have the option to choose between the scale of (1) “strongly disagree” and (5) “strongly agree”. An average of the response scores from the 6-items was calculated and used as an indicator of social cohesion, with higher scores reflecting greater levels of social cohesion. The reliability of these items could not be found in the manual or description of the questionnaire, therefore calculation was needed. Results showed that the items had a high reliability, Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .81$  (Field, 2013).

**Social participation.** The second dependant variable is social participation which was assessed with the Social Exclusion Index (SCP, 2014). In the 2014 report, SCP measured social exclusion by covering four domains; material deprivation, social participation, access

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to fundamental social rights, and normative integration. For the present study, only the domain social participation was relevant. Before this domain could be used, statements had to be tailored to the specific concepts of this research question (i.e., including the term ‘neighbourhood’ in the statements to clarify the questions). Consequently, this domain consisted of three statements (e.g., “I feel isolated from other people in the neighbourhood”) with three answering options (yes/sometimes/no) and one statement (i.e., “How often do you have contact with neighbours”) with four answering options (never/at least once a week/one to three times a month/a few times a year). An average of the response scores from the 4-items was calculated and used as an indicator of social participation, with higher scores reflecting greater levels of social participation. The index included the reliability of these statements, Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .79$ , which is considered acceptable (Field, 2013; SCP, 2014). The reliability of these statements in correspondence with this current study’s data set is Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .67$ , which is also considered acceptable (Field, 2013).

### Statistical Analysis

A multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was performed to examine the relationship between being a sports club member (yes/no) and young people’s perception of social cohesion and social participation in the neighbourhood, when controlling for gender (male/female) and ethnicity (Dutch, other-western, non-western). In advance of the statistical analysis, three items of the dependent variable social participation and one item of the dependent variable social cohesion needed to be recoded so that higher scores reflected greater levels of social cohesion and social participation. Moreover, the covariate ethnicity needed to be recoded as dummy variables due to the categorical nature of the variable (Field, 2013). In addition, several assumptions of the MANCOVA were examined by performing descriptive analyses, regression analyses, and Pearson correlation analyses.

The assumption which allows the use of covariates was not violated, therefore the covariates were included in the analyses. However, a few assumptions were violated and were taken care of as followed. Based on the Mahalanobis Distances, four cases were detected as multivariate outliers and were removed from the data as they exceeded the critical  $\chi^2$  for  $df = 2$  of 13.82. The remaining analyses were done with a total of 77 participants. With respect to the assumption of univariate normality, the Shapiro-Wilk tests, histograms, and boxplots were inspected for both dependent variables. The results showed that the normality was violated for social participation, because of the significant Shapiro-Wilk test ( $W(77) = .97, p < .001$ ). However, because a MANCOVA is considered robust with respect to univariate non-normality when group sizes exceed 30, this was not considered problematic

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(Allen, Bennett, & Heritage, 2014). Finally, with respect to the assumption of homogeneity of variances, the Levene's test of Equality of Error variances was analysed by following the guidelines of Allen et al. (2014) and Brown and Forsythe (1974). No problems were found concerning social cohesion. However, because social participation showed a skewed distribution, a statistically significant result was shown,  $F(1, 75) = 13.61, p < 0.001$ . Yet, this was not considered problematic as the  $F$  ratio is generally quite robust with respect to violations of the homogeneity of variance assumption (Lindman, 1974). Because two assumptions of the MANCOVA were violated, the more robust Pillai's Trace was used to interpret the multivariate test (instead of the commonly reported Wilks' Lambda, Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). The remaining assumptions were met, and no adjustments needed to be made.

The questionnaires were collected either face to face or by phone, consequently there were no missing data. With respect to the MANCOVA, the analysis was done by entering the predictors and covariates simultaneously. Some researchers believe that this method is the only appropriate method, because stepwise techniques are influenced by random variation in the data and thus seldom providing replicable results if the model is retested (Studenmund & Cassidy, 1987). Univariate ANCOVAs and discriminant analyses were performed to get a better understanding of the relationships between the independent and dependent variables (Field, 2013; Pituch & Stevens, 2016). All statistical analyses were performed in SPSS (version 25). Results were considered statistically significant if two-sided  $p$  values were  $\leq .05$ . Univariate ANCOVA results were interpreted at a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of .025 (0.5/2). Finally, 95% confidence intervals (CI), effect sizes, and  $p$  values are reported.

### Results

In total, 77 participants were included in the analyses of this study. Table 1 presents the results of the MANCOVA. Using Pillai's Trace, the results of the MANCOVA showed that there was a significant difference between participants who had a sports club membership and participants who did not on the combined dependent variables social participation and social cohesion,  $V = 0.11, F(2, 71) = 4.36, p = .016, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .11$ . Because the MANCOVA was significant, both social participation and social cohesion were analysed individually with univariate ANCOVA's.

#### Social Cohesion

For social cohesion, the univariate ANCOVAs revealed that the covariate gender was not significantly related to social cohesion,  $F(1, 72) = 0.05, p = .876, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .00$ .

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However, the covariate ethnicity was significantly related to social cohesion,  $F(1, 73) = 9.33$ ,  $p = .003$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .11$ , whereas the non-western group was not significantly related to social cohesion,  $F(1, 73) = 9.33$ ,  $p = .003$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .11$ . After accounting for both variables, a univariate ANCOVA displayed a statistically significant effect of sports club membership on social cohesion,  $F(1, 72) = 5.45$ ,  $p = .022$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .07$ . An inspection of the adjusted mean scores indicated that sports club members scored significantly higher for social cohesion ( $M = 4.02$ ,  $SD = 0.07$ ) compared to non-sports club members ( $M = 3.77$ ,  $SD = 0.08$ ).

### Social Participation

For social participation the univariate ANCOVAs revealed that the covariate gender was significantly related to social participation,  $F(1, 72) = 6.24$ ,  $p = .015$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .08$ . However, the covariate ethnicity was not significantly related to social participation,  $F(1, 73) = 0.43$ ,  $p = .514$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .01$ . After accounting for both covariates, a univariate ANCOVA displayed a statistically significant effect of sports club membership on social participation,  $F(1, 72) = 5.73$ ,  $p = .019$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .07$ . Having a closer look at the difference indicated that sports club members scored significantly higher for social participation ( $M = 3.11$ ,  $SD = 0.04$ ) than not sports club members ( $M = 2.95$ ,  $SD = 0.05$ ).

Table 1

*Overview of the Relationship Between the Combined Dependant Variables, and Sports Club Membership, Gender and Ethnicity*

Variables	Pillai's Trace	F	df	$\eta^2$
Sports club membership	.11	4.36*	2,71	.11
Gender	.09	3.44*	2,71	.09
Ethnicity (non-western = reference)				
Dutch	.11	4.32*	2,71	.11
Other-western	.05	1.92	2,71	.05

*Note.*  $\eta^2 = .01$  (small effect),  $\eta^2 = .06$  (moderate effect),  $\eta^2 = .14$  (large effect). \*  $p < .05$ .

### **Discriminant Analysis**

In order to get a better understanding of the underlying dimensions within the data, a discriminant analysis was performed, which revealed one discriminant function. This function explained 100% of the variance, canonical  $R^2 = .13$ . The discriminant function significantly differentiated the two groups,  $A = 0.87$ ,  $\chi^2(2) = 10.71$ ,  $p = .005$ . Furthermore, the correlations between outcomes and the discriminant functions revealed that social cohesion loaded higher than social participation ( $r = .88$  for social cohesion and  $r = .70$  for social participation).

### **Discussion**

Sports associations are seen by many as a source of social cohesion and social participation (Harvey et al., 2007; Nicholson & Hoye, 2008). However, so far the majority of policies and researchers have put the focus on increasing social cohesion and social participation in the neighbourhood by targeting population composition, socioeconomic characteristics, and/or meeting places (Dekker & Bolt, 2005; Veldboer et al., 2002; Van Bergeijk et al., 2008). This study offers a different perspective by looking at the association between sports club membership and the perception of social cohesion and social participation of young people when controlling for gender and ethnicity specifically in the neighbourhood context. The main finding of this study is that sports associations seem to be positively associated with young peoples' perception of social cohesion and social participation in the neighbourhood. This result indicated that young people with a sports club membership perceived a higher social cohesion and social participation in the neighbourhood compared to young people who did not have a sports club membership. The effect on both social cohesion,  $\eta^2 = .07$ , and social participation,  $\eta^2 = .07$ , seemed to be moderate (Cohen, 1988). Furthermore, the discriminant analyses showed that sports club membership affected social cohesion and social participation in a similar way. These findings support this study's hypothesis which suggest that sports club members experience more social cohesion and social participation compared to young people who aren't in sports clubs. This is in line with previous studies suggesting a positive relationship between sports clubs, social cohesion and social participation (Delaney & Keaney, 2005; Seippel, 2006; Van der Meulen, 2007). This knowledge can be used to pursue policy makers into developing policies that stimulate sports club membership, especially in neighbourhoods with low social cohesion and low social participation. Various studies suggest that sports club membership can be promoted by



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cooperating closely with citizens in developing policies and strategies (Raja, Ball, Booth, Haberstro, & Veith, 2009; Wagemakers, Vaandrager, Koelen, Saan, & Leeuwis, 2010). As a result of sports club membership, social cohesion and social participation could increase, consequently liveability and mental health in neighbourhoods could improve (Chung & Steinberg, 2006; Van Marissing, 2008).

A somewhat surprising finding of this study is that there was a non-significant relationship between the covariate gender and young people's perception of social cohesion in the neighbourhood. The absence of a significant relationship may have been due to a difference in sample characteristics between previous studies and the present study. The samples in previous studies that found a positive relationship between gender and social cohesion was largely represented by adult males and females with an average age of approximately 40 years (Ahmad & Hafeez, 2011; Einolf, 2011; Lee & DeMaris, 2007; Valentova, 2016). In contrast, the present study is largely represented by young people with an average age of 16.64 years ( $SD = 2.18$ ). Research showed that adult women seem to be more capable of creating and maintaining local social networks that connect families and communities compared to adult men, given their social role of interpersonal caring and comforting characteristics (Warr, 2006). Additionally, young women and young men ( $M = 14.39$  years) seem to display more equal attitudes towards gender roles compared to adults (Sani & Quaranta, 2017). Thus, this study's young age sample could explain the non-significant relationship between the covariate gender and young people's perception of social cohesion in the neighbourhood. More research concerning the inconsistencies could improve our understanding of how gender relates to social cohesion.

The present study found a significant positive relation between having an ethnic background and social cohesion. The effect seemed to be moderate (Cohen, 1988). Having a closer look at this outcome indicated that non-western young people scored higher on social cohesion compared to Dutch young people. This is opposite to the direction hypothesized (i.e., being a minority in a country is negatively associated with social cohesion; Fieldhouse & Cutts, 2010; Putnam, 2007). An explanation for this result could be found in the composition of this sample's neighbourhood. Since the participants are from vulnerable neighbourhoods, it is very likely that they live in an ethnically diverse neighbourhood (Albeda, Tersteeg, Oosterlynck, & Verschraegen, 2018). Research suggests that Dutch natives in such neighbourhoods perceive lower social cohesion and are more likely to have a wish to leave (Havekes, Coenders, & Van der Lippe, 2014). Therefore, neighbourhood composition could explain why Dutch young people scored lower on social cohesion

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compared to non-western young people. Another close look at the outcomes related to ethnicity showed that there was no significant difference between (1) Dutch and other-western young people and (2) non-western and other-western young people in their perception of social cohesion. This contradicts earlier research that emphasizes the negative relationship between ethnicity and social cohesion (Fieldhouse & Cutts, 2010; Okten & Osili, 2004; Putnam, 2007). An explanation for this can be found in the growing body of literature that suggests that the Putnam hypothesis, which argues that ethnicity negatively impacts social cohesion in neighbourhoods, only holds to a limited extent in the Dutch context (Gijsberts, Van der Meer, & Dagevos, 2012). Research found that the only aspect on which ethnic diversity has a negative effect in neighbourhoods is the amount of contact in the neighbourhood (Gijsberts et al., 2012). This is in line with Tolsma et al. (2009) who conclude that there is not a consistent negative relationship between ethnic diversity and social cohesion in Dutch neighbourhoods. Evidently, the difference in context might explain the inconsistencies with previous literature on social cohesion compared to non-western young people.

Another finding of this study is the significant association between gender and social participation. More specifically, the results of the present study showed that males have a higher perception of social participation compared to females, which is in line with previous findings (Ahmad & Hafeez, 2011; Lee & DeMaris, 2007; Stafford et al., 2005; Li et al., 2003). This indicates that males are more likely to have trust in neighbours leading to more neighbourhood engagement (Ahmad & Hafeez, 2011; Li et al., 2003). However, ethnicity seemed not to be significantly related to social participation. The absence of a significant relationship may have been due to the scarce examination of essential characteristics, concerning participants, in the present analyses that are strongly related to ethnicity. Studies that confirm a relationship between ethnicity and social participation take characteristics like socioeconomic status and education into consideration (Foster-Bey, 2008; Gallego, 2007; Jugert, Eckstein, Noack, Kuhn, & Benbow, 2013). However, this study doesn't take these essential characteristics into consideration, which may explain the non-significant relationship in the present study. More research concerning the inconsistencies, could improve our understanding of how these factors relate to social participation.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

To my knowledge, this is the first study that examined the relationship between sports clubs membership, social cohesion, and social participation in the neighbourhood context. Previous attempts to examine the relationship between sports clubs membership, social

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cohesion, and social participation put the focus on other contexts such as sports (e.g., social cohesion within teams or social participation in sports clubs; Delaney & Keaney, 2005; Seippel, 2006; Van der Meulen, 2007). However, in this study, this relationship was analysed by taking it outside the usual contexts and inspecting the association it could have on young people in neighbourhoods. The knowledge could offer a different perspective for policymakers into how they could tackle neighbourhoods scoring low on social cohesion and social participation. A second strength of this study concerns the method of the data collection. Generally, survey-based research could be vulnerable to unanswered questions or misinterpretation of questions. However, in this study, all data were collected by phone or in-person, allowing the participants to ask questions and prevent unanswered questions. Finally, social cohesion and social participation are commonly assessed by general instruments. However, this study followed the advice of Mohnen, Groenewegen, Völker, and Flap (2011), and the SCP (2014) by assessing neighbourhood social cohesion and social participation by using items that focus specifically on access to neighbours and general local contacts in the neighbourhood. This way the results regarding the concept of social cohesion and social participation are better represented. The distinctive examination in this study, which looked at the association between sports clubs, social cohesion and social participation specifically in neighbourhoods, resulted in new insights (i.e., sports clubs members having a higher perception of social cohesion and social participation in the neighbourhood compared to non-sports club members). These insights could be important for the development and/or improvement of current policies concerning the increase of social cohesion and social participation specifically in neighbourhoods.

The present study had several limitations. Firstly, the data were collected at one moment (i.e., cross-sectional). As a result, this study could not look at the developments through time. Therefore, no causal relations can be concluded. A recommendation for future research would be to perform a longitudinal research (Maxwell & Cole, 2007). This way, a better understanding of the relationship can be achieved. Secondly, the sample consists of young people from 10 different municipalities in the Netherlands, which indicates that the results could be representative in the Netherlands. However, it is not clear whether the findings from this study conducted in the Netherlands are generalizable to other places in the world, particularly to other young people, who may have different cultural traditions and face different life situations in other countries. A third limitation is the fact that this research was done together with the evaluations for the YL program. Meaning that the participants were asked a set of questions for the evaluation of the YL program and a different set of questions

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for this study in one sitting. Subsequently, due to the large amount of questions the participants were asked, survey fatigue might have developed which could lead to less reliable results (Porter, Whitcomb, & Weitzer, 2004). Future replication of this study could reduce the risk of survey fatigue by carrying out interviews with questions exclusively for the purpose of this study. Finally, the results showed that the assumption of normality was violated for social participation, which was left skewed. This was not considered problematic, because a MANCOVA is considered robust when group sizes exceed 30 (Allen et al., 2014). Nonetheless, caution is needed in interpreting these results.

### **Implications for Practice**

Taking the limitations into consideration, it could be carefully stated that there is a positive association between sports club membership and young people's perception of social cohesion and social participation in Dutch neighbourhoods. These results are important as they have the potential to create awareness and to shift current policy and practice beyond traditional means of improving neighbourhood liveability by increasing social cohesion and social participation in the neighbourhood. In this context, it is crucial that youth participate in sports clubs. However, in the last decade, sports club membership dropped in the Netherlands (Vrijetijdsomnibus (VTO), 2019). Fortunately, Dutch policy makers are aware of this trend and have signed a national sports agreement (Alles over sport, 2019). This agreement focuses on increasing sports club membership, by for example providing monetary aid to youth who can't afford it.

Another implication is related to the findings regarding gender and ethnicity. Further research concerning the inconsistencies could improve our understanding of how these factors relate to social cohesion and social participation. The current study showed that females scored lower on social participation compared to men. Furthermore, there are less females in sports clubs than men in the Netherlands (VTO, 2019). With this current study's results and the discrepancy in genders regarding sports club membership, initiatives could be developed that specifically focus on increasing female sports club membership. These initiatives could focus on eliminating factors that disrupt female sports club membership (such as limited opportunities) and educate them on the benefits sports club membership could have.

### **Conclusion**

The social context of neighbourhoods plays a vital role in young people's development (Delaney & Keaney, 2005; Lenzi, 2011; Seippel, 2006; Theeboom, 2011; Van der Meulen, 2007) and neighbourhood liveability (Kearns & Parkes, 2003; Van Marissing,

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2008). The findings of the present study offers support to the idea that sports club membership is beneficial to young people's perception of social cohesion and social participation in the neighbourhood. From this, steps can be made in the right direction to create awareness of this relationship and aid policy makers to increase neighbourhood liveability beyond traditional means. In order to achieve this, it is important to address the benefits of sports club membership and create policies and programs that engage youth to join sports clubs. In this study, the factors gender and ethnicity and their relationship with social cohesion and social participation had some inconsistencies with previous literature. However, further research concerning the inconsistencies, could improve our understanding of how these factors relate to social cohesion and social participation. This knowledge could further assist with the creation of a more informed and reliable recommendation which can be given to policy makers to increase social cohesion and social participation in neighbourhoods. In short, sports club membership might play a vital role in increasing social cohesion and social participation in neighbourhoods resulting in better neighbourhood liveability.

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