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# Sport as a Crucible for Cultural and Ethnic Mixing: Its Educational Role and Function in Preserving Social Ties Among Young People in Saint-Louis, Senegal

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## Abstract

Sport is frequently presented as a driver of social cohesion, particularly in urban settings undergoing rapid economic and demographic change. Yet the concrete mechanisms through which it contributes to building social ties remain insufficiently documented in West Africa, where existing scholarship has focused mainly on the organisational dimensions of popular sport movements rather than on the interactions that unfold within them. This article examines the role of Community Sport and Cultural Associations (Associations Sportives et Culturelles, ASC) in producing social ties and cultural mixing among young people in Saint-Louis, Senegal, a heritage city confronted with coastal erosion, youth unemployment and intensifying irregular migration. The study draws on qualitative fieldwork combining twenty-five semi-structured interviews with young athletes, ASC leaders and institutional stakeholders, sustained participant observation across four neighbourhoods, and two focus-group discussions, analysed through reflexive thematic analysis. The findings show that the social effects of sport do not stem from physical activity alone but from the associative dynamics that structure the everyday life of ASCs: the learning of shared norms, the gradual construction of trust, the exercise of responsibility, and the reinforcement of neighbourhood belonging. These effects nonetheless remain conditioned by associative governance, the uneven distribution of resources across neighbourhoods, and the limited participation of young women. The article proposes the notion of territorialised sport mediation to account for a process whereby sport does not erase ethnic and cultural belonging but creates the conditions for its coexistence within a collective project anchored in the neighbourhood. Several limitations are also highlighted, most notably the inability of sport alone to address the structural determinants of unemployment and migration aspirations. The study thereby calls for a contextualised, rather than automatic, understanding of the social functions of sport in West African cities facing significant contemporary social and environmental change.

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## Introduction

Sport occupies a central place in contemporary debates on social cohesion, education, and youth integration. Long viewed primarily through the lens of performance or competition, it is now regarded by the social sciences as a privileged arena for examining the transformations taking place in contemporary societies. Sporting practices are not merely recreational activities; they bring individuals together, generate social norms, shape collective identities, and provide frameworks for socialization that extend far beyond the playing field (Moro & Ragi, 2003). In many African contexts, where economic transformations, urban restructuring, and

social vulnerabilities challenge traditional forms of solidarity, sport has emerged as both a revealing indicator of social dynamics and a space in which these dynamics are continually reshaped.

In Senegal, the social dimension of sport has particular significance. Beyond formal federated competitions, sporting activities are largely organized around Sports and Cultural Associations (Associations Sportives et Culturelles—ASCs), *navétanes* competitions—amateur football tournaments organized during the rainy season among neighbourhood teams under the auspices of ASCs—neighbourhood football grounds, and traditional wrestling stables. For several decades, these spaces have served as arenas of collective engagement, bringing together young people from diverse social, educational, and cultural backgrounds. Studies by Mbaye (1997, 2017), de Dieng (2023) et de Dieng et Diakhaté (2020), ainsi que ceux de Fall et Tine (2019) demonstrate that the *navétanes* movement extends well beyond its sporting function, contributing to local community activities, the development of associative leadership and responsibility, and the emergence of forms of grassroots citizenship. However, these studies have primarily focused on the organizational and institutional dimensions of the *navétanes* movement, rather than on the specific mechanisms through which sporting interactions contribute, in everyday life, to the formation or reconfiguration of social ties in territories undergoing profound transformation. It is precisely this knowledge gap concerning the finer mechanisms of social mediation through sport that the present study seeks to address.

This study is situated within this perspective and focuses on the city of Saint-Louis, Senegal, a former capital of French West Africa (Afrique Occidentale Française—AOF), whose history is characterized by cultural intermixing, commercial exchanges, and human mobility. Inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, the city is frequently regarded as one of the emblematic representations of Senegalese cultural diversity. This plurality remains visible today through the coexistence of Wolof, Fulani, Moorish, Guet-Ndar fishing-community, and mixed-heritage populations, who share the same urban space while retaining distinct historical and social trajectories.

This cultural and historical richness, however, is accompanied by growing vulnerabilities that make the question of social cohesion particularly pressing. The fishing neighbourhood of Guet Ndar, one of the most densely populated areas in the world, has reportedly lost nearly 800 metres of coastline over the past decade due to coastal erosion, prompting authorities to initiate a relocation programme involving several thousand residents (Agence Française de Développement, 2024). These environmental disruptions are compounded by longstanding economic difficulties associated with the crisis in the fisheries sector, widespread youth unemployment, and the increasing number of irregular migration departures by pirogue towards the Canary Islands. Coastal erosion, urban spatial transformations, and the intensification of migration aspirations are progressively reshaping traditional forms of solidarity and the mechanisms through which younger generations become socially integrated. It is precisely within this context of multidimensional vulnerability that the question of the social resources available to young people for sustaining cooperation and collective belonging becomes particularly relevant.

During the fieldwork, a recurring observation emerged. Football grounds, ASC headquarters, and other spaces occupied by young people were not merely venues dedicated to sporting activities. They also served as settings for ongoing discussions about education, difficulties in accessing employment, the departure of relatives to Europe, neighbourhood transformations, and responsibilities undertaken within the community. In many cases, the most meaningful interactions occurred before or after matches, when players, association leaders, former athletes, parents, and residents engaged in informal discussions about issues affecting their everyday lives. These observations gradually shifted our analytical perspective: rather than viewing sport merely as a factor of social cohesion, we came to understand it as a space of social mediation in which young people learn to establish cooperative relationships despite the diversity of their social, territorial, and cultural affiliations.

This perspective also calls for a more nuanced understanding of sport, avoiding overly idealistic assumptions about its social effects. Coalter (2007) and Coakley (2017) emphasize that the social outcomes of sporting practices are never automatic: sport may strengthen solidarity, but it may also reproduce social hierarchies, intensify territorial rivalries, or perpetuate inequalities, particularly gender-based inequalities. Bourdieu (1980), in turn, demonstrates that sporting practices remain embedded in power relations and mechanisms of social distinction, thereby cautioning against overly consensual interpretations of their social effects. More recently, synthesis studies in the sociology

of sport for development have confirmed that social cohesion is rarely defined with sufficient conceptual precision in empirical research, limiting the comparability of existing studies and the ability to identify the underlying mechanisms through which cohesion is generated (Moustakas & Robrade, 2022). These perspectives encourage a departure from the simplistic opposition between sport as an inherently integrative force and sport as merely competitive activity, in favour of examining the social, institutional, and territorial conditions under which sporting practices may—or may not—foster new forms of solidarity.

In this study, we hypothesize that the significance of the Saint-Louis context lies precisely in this tension. The young people interviewed do not describe sport as a space in which cultural differences disappear. Rather, they demonstrate that ethnic, familial, and territorial affiliations persist, but can coexist with collective action organized around a shared objective: representing the colours of an ASC, participating in a tournament, preparing for a competition, or representing their neighbourhood. In other words, sport does not eliminate differences; instead, it creates situations in which such differences can be negotiated, reinterpreted, and integrated into a shared collective experience.

Drawing on a qualitative study conducted among young athletes, ASC leaders, coaches, and institutional stakeholders in Saint-Louis, this article seeks to understand how sporting practices contribute to the development of forms of social mediation in a city experiencing profound urban, economic, and environmental transformations. The study pursues three complementary objectives:

- To analyse the mechanisms of cultural and social interaction observed in local sporting practices.
- To understand the processes through which these practices contribute to the socialization and education of young people.
- To examine the conditions under which sporting practices contribute to sustaining social cohesion in a context characterized by precarious living conditions, territorial transformations, and migration aspirations.

The central argument advanced in this article is that sport constitutes less an automatic instrument of integration than a form of territorially embedded social mediation, that is, a framework within which young people experience cooperation, develop civic competencies, and cultivate a sense of belonging to their local community without relinquishing the plurality of their identities. By elucidating these mechanisms through the case of Saint-Louis, this study seeks to contribute to contemporary debates on the social functions of sport in African societies while offering a renewed perspective on the relationships between sporting practices, youth, and the reconfiguration of social ties.

To address this research question, the article is structured into four sections. The first presents the theoretical and conceptual framework underpinning the analysis of the relationships between sporting practices, associative life, and social cohesion. The second outlines the methodological approach adopted and the conditions under which the fieldwork was conducted in Saint-Louis. The third presents the principal findings derived from interviews and observations, discussing them in relation to the relevant literature. Finally, the fourth section provides an overall discussion of the study's contributions and draws conclusions from the findings.

## Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Understanding how sport influences social cohesion requires drawing on several sociological traditions, whose critical interplay helps avoid both idealistic interpretations and overly critical perspectives.

### Sport as a Space for the Production of Social Ties

The sociological analysis of sport has gradually evolved in terms of its focus and scope. Long regarded primarily as a physical activity oriented towards performance or entertainment, sport is now considered a privileged space for examining social relations. Sporting practices involve rules, values, forms of collective organization, and interpersonal interactions that contribute to the construction of individual and collective identities. In this regard, sport constitutes a social phenomenon in its own right, revealing the dynamics of cooperation, competition, and solidarity that characterize society (Moro & Ragi, 2003; Coakley, 2017).

This perspective is particularly relevant to contemporary African societies, where traditional spaces of socialization are undergoing significant transformations driven by urbanization, economic change, and increasing mobility. Sporting grounds consequently become spaces in which young people experience new forms of social relationships, sometimes independently of the familial, ethnic, or occupational affiliations that historically

structured community life. Sport primarily functions as a space of sociability, creating opportunities for interaction among young people who might otherwise never have come into contact with one another. Repeated encounters through training sessions, matches, travel, and pre-match gatherings foster the gradual strengthening of interpersonal relationships and social bonds.

In this respect, sport constitutes more than a recreational activity; it represents a genuine form of socialization and informal education, whose effects unfold over time and are difficult to assess independently of the narratives through which participants recount their own life trajectories. This is precisely what the life histories collected and examined in the empirical section of this article are expected to corroborate. Accordingly, this study conceptualizes sport not as an end in itself, but as a space of social mediation in which cooperative relationships, collective learning processes, and renewed forms of belonging are developed.

## Mechanical and Organic Solidarity: Contributions and Limitations of the Durkheimian Perspective

Having established sport as a social phenomenon, it is necessary to examine more closely the mechanisms underlying the solidarity it may generate. One of the major theoretical contributions to understanding the social functions of sport is Durkheim (1893/2007) distinction between mechanical and organic solidarity. Durkheim demonstrates that social cohesion may be founded either on the similarities among individuals or on their functional interdependence. Team sports provide a particularly insightful illustration of this relationship: each player performs a specific role, yet the effectiveness of the team depends on the coordination and interdependence of all roles. Cooperation thus becomes a practical necessity before it develops into a moral value.
Nevertheless, the observations conducted in Saint-Louis, which are presented in the subsequent sections of this article, suggest the need to move beyond a strictly Durkheimian interpretation. The forms of solidarity emerging within Sports and Cultural Associations (ASCs) and *navétanes* competitions are not based solely on the functional complementarity of sporting roles. They also draw upon shared neighbourhood experiences, interpersonal relationships, and forms of associative engagement that extend interactions well beyond sporting competitions. In other words, the solidarity observed does not emerge exclusively from sporting activity itself; rather, it is progressively constructed through the multiple social experiences accompanying participation in sport.

## Sport as a Mechanism for Regulating Social Tensions

While solidarity constitutes one of the fundamental dimensions of social cohesion, sport also provides insights into how societies manage and contain internal tensions. The contributions of Elias and Dunning (1986/1994) offer a particularly valuable theoretical perspective in this regard. They demonstrate that modern sport constitutes a space in which social rivalries can be expressed within a highly regulated framework. Competition does not eliminate tensions; rather, it transforms them into forms of interaction that are socially acceptable and institutionally regulated.

This perspective is particularly relevant to the context of Saint-Louis. *Navétanes* competitions generate intense rivalries between neighbourhoods, sometimes rooted in longstanding local histories or strongly established territorial identities. Nevertheless, these rivalries are, in most cases, regulated through shared rules, the authority of referees, the leadership of ASC officials, and community-based mechanisms of conflict regulation. Sporting competitions consequently become spaces in which confrontation may paradoxically contribute to strengthening social relationships by providing recurring opportunities for interaction, negotiation, and mutual recognition.

## Social Capital and Integration: A Critical Perspective

Beyond the regulation of social tensions, a substantial body of literature explains the social effects of sport through the concept of social capital, which warrants critical examination. According to Putnam (2000), sports associations foster trust, networks of cooperation, and norms of reciprocity that facilitate participation in collective life. Senegalese ASCs exemplify this dynamic by mobilizing volunteers, association leaders, young people, and local residents around shared objectives that extend beyond sporting performance alone.

However, this optimistic interpretation requires qualification. Coalter (2007) emphasizes that the educational and civic benefits commonly attributed to sport do not automatically arise from sporting participation. Rather, they depend on the mechanisms of supervision and mentoring, the resources available, the quality of organizational structures, and the social contexts in which young people participate.

This caution is particularly important in the context of Saint-Louis. The social effects of sport cannot be understood independently of the specific conditions prevailing in each neighbourhood, the resources available to ASCs, the commitment of volunteer leaders, or inequalities in access to sporting infrastructure. Sport, therefore, generates social capital only when certain institutional, educational, and community-based conditions are in place. This perspective is further reinforced by recent scholarly synthesis, which conceptualizes social cohesion through a framework explicitly linking sporting practices, underlying mechanisms, and the conditions through which social cohesion is produced, rather than assuming an automatic relationship between sporting participation and social outcomes (Moustakas, 2024).

## Theoretical and Conceptual Framework (Continued)

### Power Relations within Sporting Practices

Although sport can contribute to the formation of social ties, it is also shaped by relations of domination, constituting a third theoretical strand essential to this research. Bourdieu (1980) analyses remind us that sporting practices also contribute to the reproduction of social inequalities. Access to sporting facilities, better-organized clubs, competitions, and leadership positions remains strongly influenced by individuals' economic, cultural, and social resources. This perspective calls for avoiding idealized interpretations of sporting practices. In Saint-Louis, differences between neighbourhoods in terms of infrastructure availability, the material resources of Sports and Cultural Associations (ASCs), and the participation of young women illustrate these mechanisms of social differentiation. Sport therefore emerges as an ambivalent space, capable of promoting integration while simultaneously reproducing certain forms of inequality. This ambivalence constitutes one of the central issues examined in the present study.

According to Bourdieu, these power relations operate across two interconnected domains that this research must examine jointly: the political sphere and the educational sphere. In *Questions de sociologie*, Bourdieu (1980) analyses the sporting field as a relatively autonomous space that is never entirely detached from the interests of the state and institutions, which may instrumentalize sport for various purposes, including youth supervision, social pacification, and the construction of a national image. As ASCs in Saint-Louis operate within municipal and associative arrangements for the local governance of youth, they cannot be understood independently of this ambivalent relationship with the political sphere. From an educational perspective, Bourdieu and Passeron (1970) demonstrate that socialization institutions, particularly schools, contribute to the transmission of habitus and cultural capital, whose unequal distribution reproduces social hierarchies. Applied to the sporting context, this perspective invites us to consider ASCs and *navétanes* competitions as parallel educational institutions in which dispositions such as discipline, respect for rules, and collective responsibility are acquired. These dispositions may reinforce, or in certain circumstances compensate for, those transmitted through school and family. This dual political and educational perspective makes it possible to move beyond a strictly functionalist interpretation of sport and to account for the tensions between institutional regulation and informal learning that characterize sporting practices in Saint-Louis.

### The *Navétanes* Movement and Sports and Cultural Associations in Senegal

These general theoretical frameworks must ultimately be connected to the specific organizational form of sporting activity in the Senegalese context: the *navétanes* movement. The study of sport in Senegal cannot be separated from this movement, which constitutes one of the most distinctive forms of community-based sporting organization in West Africa. Emerging in the 1960s from informal neighbourhood tournaments and subsequently becoming progressively structured at the national level, the movement is based on Sports and Cultural Associations rooted in neighbourhood communities rather than on federated recruitment structures. Mbaye (1997, 2017) studies demonstrate that *navétanes* developed on non-institutionalized playing grounds, most often located in neighbourhoods facing social and economic difficulties, before evolving into spaces for the production of a syncretic culture in which sport serves as a catalyst for local sociability. Dieng (2023) reinforces this interpretation by demonstrating that *navétanes* are not merely spaces in which pre-existing social or political positions are reflected, but also settings in which new social ties and forms of grassroots citizenship are constructed, particularly among young people who are often underrepresented in other spheres of social life. In a complementary perspective, Dieng et Diakhaté (2020) analyse neighbourhood ASCs as frameworks for sociability and democratic learning, in which young people experience deliberative practices firsthand, including committee meetings, leadership elections, and internal arbitration processes. These experiences develop

competencies that extend well beyond the sporting field. Finally, Fall and Tine (2019), examine the *navétanes* movement through the lens of sustainable development and demonstrate that it fulfils functions extending well beyond sporting participation, including neighbourhood cultural activities, the organization of solidarity initiatives, and the development of associative responsibility.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate that, for many Senegalese young people, the ASC constitutes an initial space for the practice of citizenship, where engagement is motivated not merely by football participation but also by a sense of neighbourhood belonging and the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to the community. Findings from cities such as Thiès and Kolda invite further verification and investigation within the specific context of Saint-Louis, whose cultural diversity and environmental transformations, as discussed in the introduction, make it a distinctive field of study.

## Recent Debates on Sport, Social Cohesion, and Interculturality

The Senegalese literature on *navétanes* must also be brought into dialogue with more recent international scholarship, which both reinforces and qualifies the theoretical scope of this research. On the one hand, a series of systematic reviews published between 2022 and 2024 in the field of sport for development confirms the growing scholarly interest in the relationship between sport and social cohesion, while highlighting a recurring limitation in this field: the concept of social cohesion is often employed without a sufficiently precise definition, making it difficult to identify the underlying mechanisms and compare findings across contexts (Moustakas & Robrade, 2022). To address this limitation, a more recent conceptual framework proposes explicitly linking sporting practices observed in the field, the social mechanisms they activate—such as trust, cooperation, and recognition—and the resulting cohesion-related outcomes, rather than presupposing a direct relationship between sporting participation and social integration (Moustakas, 2024). This requirement to identify and specify the underlying mechanisms, rather than simply assume their existence, directly informs the empirical approach adopted in this article.

On the other hand, more critical studies, particularly those involving young people from migrant backgrounds in Europe, substantially challenge the assumption that sporting participation spontaneously promotes intercultural interaction. A recent analysis demonstrates that sport often tends to reinforce intragroup ties among young people who already share an ethnic background or common cultural references, rather than necessarily facilitating intergroup exchanges. This tendency may be particularly pronounced when young people's participation in specific sporting disciplines is itself shaped by community-based affiliations (Cerfontaine, 2025). This critical perspective is particularly valuable to the present study, as it cautions against assuming that the presence of young people from different backgrounds within the same ASC necessarily constitutes meaningful intercultural interaction. Instead, it underscores the importance of carefully examining the actual nature of interactions observed in the field rather than relying solely on the composition of sporting teams.

These recent debates converge on a common methodological and theoretical requirement: the mere presence of young people from diverse backgrounds within a sporting activity is insufficient to establish the existence of intercultural interaction that generates social cohesion. It is equally necessary to document in detail the interactions, hierarchies, and organizational conditions that determine whether such diversity translates into meaningful cooperation. This requirement underpins the methodological approach presented in the third section of this article.

At the conclusion of this theoretical review, it becomes possible to specify the central concepts mobilized in this research and establish their original articulation. The different theoretical perspectives converge on one fundamental principle: the social effects of sport are never automatic. They result from continuous interactions between territorial characteristics, organizational forms of sporting practices, and the lived experiences of participants. Within this framework, the present study draws on three central concepts.

Cultural intermixing is understood as a process of sustained interaction among young people belonging to different social, cultural, or ethnic groups, through which shared references may emerge without erasing distinct identities. This definition is deliberately more cautious than interpretations that implicitly assume the fusion of social identities, in light of the critical considerations discussed in the preceding section. **Social ties** refer to the relationships of trust, cooperation, recognition, and mutual assistance that enable individuals to perceive themselves as members of a shared community. Finally, the educational role of sport refers to informal learning

processes occurring through sporting practices, particularly those involving discipline, respect for rules, collective responsibility, conflict management, and civic engagement.

Building on these concepts, we propose conceptualizing sport as a space of territorialized sporting mediation (*médiation sportive territorialisée*). This concept refers to a process through which sporting practices, within a specific urban context, create opportunities for cooperation, negotiation of differences, and the development of a shared sense of belonging. In Saint-Louis, this form of mediation takes on particular significance owing to the city's historical background, cultural diversity, and the profound social, economic, and environmental transformations affecting it. Accordingly, rather than treating sport as a universal mechanism of integration, this study examines the specific conditions under which sporting practices contribute, or fail to contribute, to the reconfiguration of social ties among young people.

The theoretical developments presented above demonstrate that the social effects of sport cannot be understood independently of the contexts in which sporting practices take shape. They lead to the formulation of a conceptual model that integrates four analytical levels: the territorial context, grassroots sporting practices, the socialisation mechanisms observed, and the effects of these processes on young people's social ties (Figure 1). This model does not claim universal applicability; rather, it constitutes an analytical framework developed from the fieldwork undertaken in this study, which may offer insights into other African urban contexts exhibiting comparable characteristics.

Having presented the conceptual framework adopted to understand the social functions of sport, it is now necessary to outline the methodological choices that guided this research.

## Methodology

Understanding how the territorially embedded sports-based mediation described in the theoretical framework operates in practice requires a systematic account of how the research data were generated, collected, and analysed.

### Research Setting and Justification for the Selection of Saint-Louis

As indicated in the introduction, the selection of the research site was guided by specific scientific considerations; however, the geographical scope of the study and its temporal framework require further clarification. The fieldwork was conducted in the municipality of Saint-Louis, Senegal. The city is historically characterised by cultural hybridity and the coexistence of social groups with diverse backgrounds and trajectories. At the same time, it is undergoing profound transformations associated with coastal erosion, economic restructuring, youth unemployment, and the intensification of migration aspirations. These developments raise important questions about contemporary forms of solidarity and the mechanisms through which young people are socially integrated, making Saint-Louis a particularly relevant setting for examining the processes of social mediation through sport.

The fieldwork was conducted over a seven-month period, from September 2024 to March 2025, in four neighbourhoods representing the urban diversity of the municipality: Sor, a densely populated mainland neighbourhood characterised by ethnic diversity; Guet Ndar, a fishing neighbourhood situated on the Langue de Barbarie and directly exposed to coastal erosion; the Island of Saint-Louis, the city's historic and heritage centre; and Pikine-Diaminar, an expanding peripheral neighbourhood. In each neighbourhood, one *Association Sportive et Culturelle* (ASC) was selected as the primary site of observation on the basis of three criteria: more than ten years of organisational existence, active participation in Navétanes competitions during the three seasons preceding the study, and the explicit consent of the association's leaders to facilitate prolonged field observation. The decision to undertake an in-depth study of four ASCs, rather than a superficial examination of a larger number of organisations, directly reflects the epistemological position outlined in the preceding section: to document interactions in depth rather than prematurely generalise their frequency.

### Sampling Strategy and Participants

Following the delineation of the research setting, it was necessary to define precisely which individuals within the four selected ASCs and their institutional environments would be invited to participate in the study. The research employed purposive sampling based on typical-case selection, supplemented by snowball sampling within each selected ASC. The sampling strategy was designed to diversify participant profiles rather than achieve statistical representativeness. In total, twenty-five participants were interviewed individually,

with approximately six participants drawn from each neighbourhood under investigation. The participants comprised twelve young people who regularly engaged in football or traditional wrestling (aged 17–26 years, including three young women involved in women's football), six ASC presidents or officials, three coaches, two sports educators, and two institutional representatives involved in youth and sports affairs, including a representative of the Regional Youth Service and a representative of the National Organisation for the Coordination of Holiday Activities (*Organisme National de Coordination des Activités Vacances* – ONCAV).
Particular attention was paid to diversifying participants according to their neighbourhood of residence, educational trajectories, employment status, and self-reported sociocultural affiliations (Wolof, Peul, Moor, Guet-Ndarian, and mixed heritage). Empirical saturation, defined as the point at which additional interviews no longer yielded substantively new thematic insights, was reached within each participant category at approximately the twentieth interview. The final five interviews were therefore primarily intended to consolidate the established saturation rather than introduce previously unexplored themes.

This diversity of participants was intended to generate multiple perspectives and facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of the various social functions attributed to sport, while acknowledging the limitations inherent in a sample of this size, which are discussed in the conclusion of the article.

## Data Collection Techniques

Three complementary data collection techniques were employed. Their respective contributions and interrelationships warrant detailed explanation to clarify how each informed and enriched the others.

## Field Observations

Moderate participant observation constituted the most substantial component of the fieldwork. A total of thirty-four observation sessions were conducted, averaging eight to nine sessions per ASC. These sessions comprised training activities (eighteen sessions), Navétanes competitions (ten matches, including two neighbourhood-level finals), internal ASC meetings (four executive committee meetings), and informal interactions among young people outside organised sporting activities (two occasions).

Each session was documented using structured field notes organised around an observation framework encompassing six dimensions: interactions among players, decision-making processes, intergenerational relationships, forms of cooperation, conflict situations and their resolution mechanisms, and the social uses of sporting spaces before and after competitions. These observations revealed that sporting grounds function as spaces of sociability extending well beyond formal sporting activities. In several neighbourhoods, interactions continued long after training sessions had concluded, encompassing discussions about education, employment opportunities, economic hardship, migration aspirations, and sporting outcomes.

## Semi-Structured Interviews

The twenty-five individual interviews, each lasting approximately fifty minutes on average, were conducted in Wolof or French, depending on participants' preferences, and subsequently transcribed in full and translated where necessary.

The interviews were guided by a thematic interview protocol covering participants' sporting trajectories, motivations for engagement, relationships among young people, perceptions of cultural differences, learning experiences associated with sport, and perceived transformations within their neighbourhoods. Nevertheless, the interview protocol remained sufficiently flexible to allow participants to elaborate freely on issues and dimensions that may not have been explicitly anticipated in the interview guide.
This methodological flexibility facilitated the emergence of particularly rich narratives concerning solidarity, conflict, migration, and responsibilities within sporting associations.

## Group Discussions

Two group discussions, each involving six to eight young people from different ASCs, were organised towards the end of the fieldwork. One discussion was conducted in Sor and the other in Guet Ndar. These discussions were designed to present preliminary findings to participants for collective deliberation and to directly examine points of agreement, disagreement, and shared perceptions of sport. They were particularly valuable in understanding how neighbourhood identities are constructed and negotiated while simultaneously accommodating forms of cooperation that transcend community-based affiliations.

The integration of these three data collection techniques followed a sequential logic. Initial weeks of field observation informed the refinement of the interview guide; the interviews subsequently provided interpretative insights into the interactions observed; and the group discussions, in turn, served as an interpretative validation mechanism for the analytical categories developed from the first two data sources.

## Data Analysis Procedure

The material gathered through interview transcripts, field observation notes, and reports of group discussions was subsequently subjected to a systematic analytical procedure. Since the implementation of this procedure directly underpins the validity of the findings presented in the following sections, it is important to explain each stage in detail rather than merely outline the analytical approach adopted.

The analysis followed the six phases of reflexive thematic analysis as formulated by Braun and Clarke (2021). This approach was preferred over a classificatory content analysis because it is consistent with the interpretivist position adopted in this research. In particular, it explicitly acknowledges the active role of the researcher in constructing themes, rather than assuming that themes naturally "emerge" from the data.
More specifically, the analytical process involved the following six phases:

1. **Familiarisation with the data:** The first phase involved a comprehensive rereading of the entire dataset by the researcher, accompanied by the preparation of analytical memos for each of the twenty-five interviews and thirty-four observation sessions.
2. **Initial coding:** An initial level of open and inductive coding was undertaken, resulting in seventy-three descriptive codes directly grounded in the language used by participants. Examples included "playing for the neighbourhood", "helping younger players", and "waiting until the end of the Navétanes season".
3. **Generating candidate themes:** These codes were subsequently organised into preliminary themes through a process of manual comparison and association, supported by QDA Miner Lite software for dataset management and classification.
4. **Reviewing and refining themes:** Each candidate theme underwent a review process to assess its internal coherence in relation to the coded extracts and its distinctiveness from other themes. This process resulted in the merging of two initially separate themes, namely "trust among players" and "trust in association leaders", into a broader theme concerning the gradual development of trust.
5. **Defining and naming themes:** The retained themes were subsequently defined and assigned their final names, resulting in the four analytical dimensions presented in the "Results and Discussion" section of this article.
6. **Producing the analytical account:** Finally, continuous engagement between the established themes and the scientific literature incorporated into the theoretical framework enabled further refinement of the proposed interpretations, particularly in light of the reservations expressed in recent studies concerning the limitations of intercultural integration through sport (Cerfontaine, 2025).

This approach was intended less to test predetermined hypotheses than to understand the social mechanisms revealed through the fieldwork, while maintaining a critical dialogue with the theoretical frameworks employed in the study.

## Reflexivity, Triangulation, and Quality Criteria

An interpretative approach of this nature, in which the researcher assumes an active role in constructing analytical categories, requires particular vigilance regarding the credibility of the interpretations produced. The researcher's prolonged involvement in the field, having grown up in Saint-Louis and maintained personal relationships with several of the ASCs under investigation, constituted an important advantage in gaining access to participants and understanding certain local realities that might have been difficult for an external researcher to apprehend through a short-term investigation.

Nevertheless, this proximity required continuous reflexive awareness to minimise the potential influence of familiarity on the interpretation of the data. Accordingly, a reflexive research diary was maintained throughout the research process, documenting initial assumptions, their successive revisions, and situations in which the researcher's proximity to the field could potentially have influenced the interpretation of observed interactions.

With regard to research quality criteria, the credibility of the analysis was strengthened through systematic triangulation of the three data sources. Findings derived from interviews were compared with corresponding field

observations and, wherever possible, discussed during the group sessions conducted towards the end of the fieldwork. Confirmability was reinforced through the maintenance of a coding register documenting interpretative decisions, which could be consulted whenever necessary.

Finally, the transferability of the findings, rather than their statistical generalisability, which would be incompatible with the design of a qualitative case study, was facilitated through a detailed contextual description (*thick description*) of Saint-Louis. This enables readers to assess independently the extent to which the identified mechanisms may also be applicable to other Senegalese or West African cities exhibiting comparable characteristics.

These methodological requirements of rigour were accompanied by specific ethical obligations towards the individuals who agreed to participate in the research. All participants were informed of the research objectives before the commencement of the interviews, and their participation was based on the principle of free and informed consent, obtained orally and documented in writing. The testimonies presented in this article were anonymised by replacing participants' first names with initials to protect their confidentiality. In certain cases, the names of the ASCs to which participants belonged were also withheld when the content of a testimony could potentially reveal the identity of its author.

For participants who were minors, prior authorisation was systematically obtained from a parent or legal guardian, in accordance with the ethical requirements governing social science research involving minors.

The methodological approach outlined above enabled the collection of a rich dataset comprising interviews, field observations, and group discussions. The findings derived from this analysis are presented and discussed in the following section.

## Epistemological Positioning

The present research adopts a qualitative approach grounded in interpretivism, more specifically taking the form of an exploratory and explanatory single-case study focused on Saint-Louis. This choice is based on the assumption that the social effects of sport cannot be adequately understood through quantitative indicators alone. Rather, they require an in-depth examination of the meanings that individuals attribute to their practices, interactions, and lived experiences within sporting environments.

The objective was therefore not to statistically measure the intensity of the social cohesion generated by sport, but to analyse the mechanisms through which social ties are constructed, negotiated, or weakened within a particular urban context. This epistemological position entails viewing sporting practices as situated social phenomena, closely connected to the historical, cultural, and territorial realities of Saint-Louis.

This positioning has direct implications for the research design, as detailed in the following sections: the selection of a deliberately limited number of neighbourhoods for in-depth investigation rather than a geographically dispersed sample covering the entire municipality; the prioritisation of prolonged field observation over one-time interviews; and the adoption of inductive thematic analysis rather than the mechanical application of deductive codes derived from the theoretical framework.
This epistemological position also requires clarification of the researcher's role within the research process. Having been born and raised in Saint-Louis and being personally involved in the local sports association movement, the author occupies an insider position that facilitated access to the research setting, the establishment of trust with participants, and a nuanced understanding of local cultural and linguistic codes.

Nevertheless, this proximity did not, at any stage, determine the conduct of the investigation or influence the overall findings in either direction. The data collection protocol, including the interview guide, observation framework, and group discussion guidelines, was established in advance and applied consistently across all the neighbourhoods and associations studied, irrespective of the personal relationships the author might have maintained with certain participants.

Furthermore, the data coding process followed explicit rules that were discussed and stabilised before the interpretative stage, thereby minimising the influence of intuitions unsupported by the empirical material. Finally, as indicated in Section 2.3.5, a reflexive research diary was maintained throughout the investigation to document instances in which personal proximity to the research setting might have introduced potential bias. Ultimately, no adjustments to the findings were considered necessary on this account.

The author's connection to the research setting should therefore be understood as a resource facilitating access

and contextual understanding, rather than as a factor that influenced the conduct or conclusions of the present research.

## Research Findings

The thematic analysis of the dataset revealed four major analytical dimensions, which are presented successively and examined in relation to the tensions and limitations they expose.

### Sporting Practices as a Space for Intercultural Mediation: Neighbourhood Identity and the Reconfiguration of Ethnic Affiliations

The first major theme emerging from the dataset concerns the ways in which the cultural diversity of young people becomes visible in everyday interactions on sporting grounds. The findings indicate that sporting spaces in Saint-Louis serve as important meeting places for young people from different cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds. This diversity is particularly evident within the Sports and Cultural Associations (ASCs), whose membership is primarily determined by neighbourhood affiliation rather than ethnic origin. Consequently, the teams observed frequently bring together young Wolof, Peul, Moor, and Guet-Ndarian participants who share a common sporting objective without allowing their cultural differences to become, at least apparently, sources of division.

During observations conducted at training sessions and Navétanes competitions, interactions among players focused primarily on tactical aspects of the game, match preparation, and the internal affairs of their associations. References to ethnic affiliations were relatively uncommon and, when they did occur, generally took the form of humour or expressions of familiarity rather than genuine sources of social division.

This reality is illustrated by the testimony of B.K., a 19-year-old player from ASC Diaminaar in the Sor neighbourhood:

"In our team, there are Peul, Wolof, and Moor players. Nobody looks at your ethnicity. If you train seriously and respect the group, you become part of the team just like everyone else."

Beyond this individual testimony, the interviews consistently reveal that young people are considerably more likely to refer to their neighbourhood than to their ethnic affiliation when describing their involvement in sporting activities.

This observation does not imply that cultural identities disappear altogether. They remain present in the languages spoken, family practices, and everyday social interactions. However, participation in sporting activities contributes to reducing the extent to which these affiliations determine collective action. The neighbourhood consequently becomes a shared reference point through which individuals with different social trajectories can unite around a common objective.

This dynamic was particularly evident during matches between different ASCs. Before kick-off, players frequently called out to one another by referring to their neighbourhood colours and using expressions strongly associated with territorial belonging. Following matches, friendly interactions between players from opposing teams were frequently observed, sometimes involving the sharing of tea or spontaneous conversations near the sporting ground.

### This Process Is Exemplified by the Personal Trajectory of O.M., a 21-Year-Old Young Man from a Moorish Family That Settled in Sor Approximately Ten Years Ago

Having remained on the margins of neighbourhood activities for a considerable period, he explains that he initially hesitated to join the local ASC, fearing that he might not be accepted by the other young people because they perceived him as an "outsider". Two Navétanes seasons later, he has become a regular starting right-back and actively participates in the association's executive committee meetings. His testimony illustrates how neighbourhood affiliation gradually takes precedence over ethnic origin in determining who is considered a member of the sporting collective.

At the level of an individual life trajectory, this account corroborates what the collective observations had already suggested: sporting grounds function as spaces for multiple and repeated encounters which, through successive interactions, generate lasting bonds among young people who initially had little reason to associate with one another. O.M.'s journey, from his initial hesitation to his full integration into the association's executive committee, provides a concrete illustration of this process of sociability and gradual socialisation.

The coach of ASC Manko, located on the Island of Saint-Louis, describes a similar mechanism in the context of

Navétanes competitions, particularly when teams travel to play away matches. He observes:

"During the Navétanes season, players eat together and sometimes stay at one another's homes before away matches. Nobody asks whether someone is Peul or Moor; instead, they ask who is available for the 4 p.m. training session."

Our observations are consistent with Durkheim (1893/2007) analysis of organic solidarity: within sporting teams, each player performs a specific function upon which the effectiveness of the collective depends. However, the Saint-Louis context invites us to extend this interpretation. The solidarity observed is not based solely on the complementarity of sporting roles; it is also sustained by a shared neighbourhood history, common experiences, and associative engagement that extends well beyond the periods of competition.

This interpretation calls for a reconsideration of an idea frequently encountered in studies examining sport as a vehicle for social integration. The findings of this research do not demonstrate that sport eliminates cultural differences; rather, they suggest that it creates situations in which such differences become secondary to the pursuit of a collective objective. Sport therefore functions less as an instrument of cultural homogenisation than as a mechanism of mediation through which multiple identities can coexist within the same organisation.

This interpretation departs from an occasionally idealised understanding of "cultural mixing", a term that may suggest the gradual fusion of different identities and affiliations. In accordance with the caution expressed in recent research on this subject (Cerfontaine, 2025), it is important to emphasise that such coexistence cannot be taken for granted. It was specifically examined through our observations rather than simply inferred from the culturally diverse composition of the teams. It is the recurrence of directly observed cooperative interactions, including joint match preparation, mutual assistance with logistical tasks, and exchanges following competitions, that justifies the identification of a mediation process, rather than the mere presence of players from different backgrounds within the same team.

The young people interviewed in Saint-Louis continue to affirm their cultural identities while simultaneously developing associative and territorial identities that facilitate cooperation with individuals from other cultural groups. We propose interpreting this process as territorially embedded sports-based mediation, defined as a set of interactions generated through sporting practices that make sustained cooperation possible among individuals from different cultural backgrounds without undermining their original identities and affiliations.

This conceptual proposition contributes to the development of Putnam (2000) work on social capital. In the context of Saint-Louis, trust is not established solely through membership in an association; rather, it develops through repeated experiences involving training sessions, travel for competitions, ASC meetings, the organisation of community activities, participation in family ceremonies, and solidarity initiatives. Social capital thus emerges as a relational process that is continuously sustained through associative life.

Nevertheless, this dynamic remains fragile. Several ASC officials interviewed during the study emphasised that tensions between neighbourhoods can re-emerge during the final stages of competitions, particularly when sporting stakes become significant. These episodes, which will be examined in greater detail later, demonstrate that the mediation generated through sport is never permanently secured. Instead, it requires continuous efforts in supervision and regulation by association leaders, referees, former athletes, and community leaders.

## ASCs as Spaces for Socialisation and Citizenship Education

Beyond intercultural mediation, a second major analytical dimension emerging from the dataset concerns the specifically educational role of ASCs, which extends considerably beyond their original sporting objectives. Both interviews and field observations consistently demonstrate that these organisations function as important learning environments in which young people develop social, interpersonal, and civic competencies.

This educational function is first evident in the organisational structure and everyday functioning of the associations. Young people are not involved exclusively as players; they also participate in preparing training sessions, maintaining sporting grounds, organising matches, attending executive committee meetings, and undertaking various community activities. Their gradual involvement enables them to assume responsibilities that introduce them to the functioning of collective life, as explained by A.D., President of ASC 8000, interviewed in the Guet Ndar neighbourhood:

"Here, we do not simply train footballers. Above all, we try to develop young people who are capable of respecting others, assuming responsibilities, and serving their neighbourhood."

This statement was corroborated by our field observations. Before each sporting event, several young people arrived well ahead of the scheduled start of training sessions to prepare the playing field, arrange equipment, or welcome opposing teams. These unpaid tasks formed part of the implicit obligations associated with membership in the association and were regarded as a normal way of contributing to collective functioning.

Such practices illustrate a process of experiential socialisation in which the principles of solidarity, cooperation, and mutual respect are not merely communicated through verbal instruction but are progressively internalised through practical experiences. This dimension is also reflected in the testimony of F.N., a young player from ASC Téranga in Sor:

"Before joining the ASC, I was mainly interested in playing. Today, I understand that I also need to help younger players, participate in meetings, and represent my neighbourhood with dignity in different forums."

The trajectory of M.F., a 20-year-old Deputy General Secretary of ASC Pikine Centre, illustrates this gradual assumption of responsibility. Having initially joined the association as an ordinary player, he progressively became responsible for issuing meeting notices, managing player registrations, and handling correspondence with the local competition zone.

He recounts that these responsibilities enabled him to learn how to prepare meeting minutes and mediate disagreements between players older than himself. These are skills that he now draws upon in his search for employment. This personal account provides a particularly clear illustration of how informal socialisation and education develop progressively: it is the repeated performance of associative responsibilities, rather than participation in sporting activities alone, that transforms an ordinary player into an active contributor to strengthening social ties within his ASC.

This process of assuming responsibility is not limited to the most visible organisational tasks, as illustrated by K.D., an 18-year-old young woman and one of the few female football players interviewed in Sor:

"I look after the first-aid kit and the jerseys. It may seem like a small responsibility, but if I am not there, nobody else does it. I have learned that we must be reliable, even when it comes to things that people do not notice."

Our observations further confirm this gradual transformation in the nature of participants' engagement. During preparatory meetings for Navétanes competitions, discussions were often lively and sometimes intense. Nevertheless, decisions were generally reached through collective deliberation, with young participants encouraged to express their views while association officials sought to maintain an atmosphere of attentive listening and mutual respect.

These deliberative spaces constitute meaningful opportunities for democratic learning, allowing participants to experience the principles of consultation, negotiation, and shared responsibility. This observation directly reinforces the analyses of Dieng et Diakhaté (2020) concerning ASCs as institutional settings for democratic learning. The present study extends this understanding by documenting these processes at the level of everyday interactions rather than examining them exclusively from an institutional perspective.

These findings are also consistent with Coalter (2007) argument that the educational effects of sport do not arise automatically from sporting participation itself but depend largely on the quality of supervision, the values promoted by organisations, and the interactions developed among participants. The Saint-Louis case strongly supports this perspective: the learning processes observed result less from physical activity itself than from the everyday functioning of associations and the sustained commitment of their voluntary leaders.

Nevertheless, our research calls for a more nuanced understanding of the educational role of ASCs, which is sometimes presented in overly idealistic terms. Not all associations have access to the same human or material resources. Some benefit from experienced leadership and substantial involvement from former athletes and respected neighbourhood members, whereas others face difficulties associated with inadequate funding, insufficient infrastructure, or challenges in leadership renewal.

This heterogeneity was clearly evident during field observations. In certain ASCs, officials devoted considerable time to mentoring younger participants, emphasising respect for rules, emotional regulation, and

the prevention of violent behaviour. In others, organisational priorities appeared to be more strongly oriented towards sporting performance, sometimes at the expense of educational support. This diversity demonstrates that the social effects of sport cannot be understood independently of the governance arrangements and organisational practices of the associations concerned.

Furthermore, several participants emphasised that ASC activities extend considerably beyond the sporting domain. These organisations undertake neighbourhood cleaning campaigns, health awareness initiatives, fundraising activities to support families experiencing hardship, and the organisation of cultural events. Such initiatives strengthen young people's sense of social usefulness and reinforce their participation in community life.

The findings of this research therefore invite us to move beyond an instrumental conception of sport as merely a tool for preventing juvenile delinquency or idleness. In Saint-Louis, ASCs provide young people with spaces for recognition, participation, and identity formation, thereby contributing to the development of a form of **grassroots citizenship** rooted in the everyday realities of neighbourhood life.

## Sport as a Resource for Social Cohesion amid the Contemporary Transformations of Saint-Louis

A third analytical dimension, more directly connected to the transformations described in the introduction, concerns the capacity of sporting practices to provide spaces of stability within a social environment undergoing profound change.

Interviews conducted with young people, ASC officials, and institutional stakeholders indicate that sporting activities respond not merely to recreational needs but also provide collective reference points in a context where economic hardship, unemployment, migration, and urban transformations are weakening traditional forms of solidarity.

Several participants emphasised that training sessions and competitions provide opportunities to temporarily distance themselves from everyday concerns. For many young people, participation in ASC activities offers a regular framework that structures their time, sustains social relationships, and reduces feelings of isolation. This is illustrated by A.B.C., one of the young participants interviewed: "When we come to the sporting ground, we forget our problems for a while. We meet our friends, prepare for matches, and talk together. It helps us maintain our morale despite the difficulties we face."

This dimension of social continuity is particularly evident in the account of T.S., a 22-year-old young man interviewed in Guet Ndar following a late-afternoon training session. Several of his childhood friends had left the neighbourhood in an attempt to undertake the perilous pirogue crossing to the Canary Islands, and T.S. acknowledged that he himself had considered this possibility on several occasions. However, he explained that he had postponed his departure as the Navétanes final stages approached, believing that he could not abandon his team at a time when it was counting on his contribution.

Behind this personal account lies a deeper social mechanism: sporting engagement generates reciprocal obligations that strengthen individuals' sense of belonging to a local collective. Sport obviously does not eliminate the economic motivations underlying migration; however, it can contribute to maintaining forms of social rootedness that delay or reshape certain migration plans. T.S.'s account is not merely illustrative. Considered within the broader dataset, in which several other participants describe similar mechanisms of reciprocal obligation that postpone, without necessarily cancelling, their plans to leave, it constitutes an important piece of sociological evidence concerning one of the most tangible mechanisms underlying territorially embedded sports-based mediation.

The case of I.N.'s family, which was relocated to Boudiouck in 2023, far from Guet Ndar, under a resettlement programme for populations exposed to coastal erosion, further illustrates this function of social continuity. Although his family had left the neighbourhood, I.N. chose to continue travelling, sometimes over distances exceeding 10 km, to train with his original ASC. As he explained, "*leaving one's home does not mean leaving one's team*". This decision, despite the considerable costs in terms of time and transportation, reflects the strength of the bonds established within the association, which have proved capable of withstanding, at least partially, the disruption of his living environment.

Taken together, the accounts of T.S. and I.N. independently corroborate the proposition that sport is not merely a space for occasional encounters but also a

setting for the development of lasting social connections. By multiplying opportunities for interaction through training sessions, matches, travel for competitions, and journeys undertaken to reach sporting grounds, sport transforms neighbourhood relationships into reciprocal commitments sufficiently strong to influence major life decisions, including migration plans and involuntary relocation. It is this accumulation of convergent life histories, rather than any isolated mechanism, that provides the basis for identifying a genuine strengthening of social ties through sport.

B.C.T., an elder from the Guet Ndar neighbourhood and former official of ASC Noflaaye, summarises this role of sport as a stable point of reference within an environment undergoing rapid transformation:

"With everything happening here, the advancing sea and young people leaving, the ASC is one of the few things that has remained unchanged. Children know that they can always come to the sporting ground."

Observations conducted during Navétanes competitions further confirm this integrative function on a broader social scale. Sporting events attract far more than the players themselves: families, former athletes, traders, association officials, and neighbourhood residents gather around their respective neighbourhood teams. Matches thus become social events that reactivate solidarity networks and strengthen intergenerational relationships in a city where neighbourhoods possess strong historical identities.

The findings also demonstrate that this dynamic depends heavily on voluntary engagement. The association officials interviewed devote a substantial proportion of their time to securing financial resources, organising competitions, supporting young people, and addressing the difficulties encountered by their organisations. This reality is consistent with research on community social capital, while also demonstrating that such capital should never be regarded as an established or permanent resource. Rather, it is continuously generated and sustained through the everyday efforts of volunteers, sports educators, former players, and residents who maintain a long-term commitment to their associations.
Nevertheless, the findings call for a critical examination of this integrative function, which is discussed in greater detail in the following section. Indeed, the participants unanimously acknowledged that sport alone cannot resolve the structural difficulties confronting young people. Unemployment remains the most frequently expressed concern throughout the interviews, and several young participants explained that their involvement in an ASC helps them maintain personal stability and positive social relationships without necessarily improving their prospects for professional integration.

As A.F., one of the participants, explained: "Football helps us stay together, but after training, everyone goes back to looking for work." This observation serves as a reminder that the social effects of sport must be analysed with caution. Sporting practices contribute to strengthening social cohesion, but they cannot replace public employment policies, vocational training programmes, or the economic opportunities required to achieve sustainable improvements in living conditions.

## The Limitations and Tensions of Territorially Embedded Sports-Based Mediation

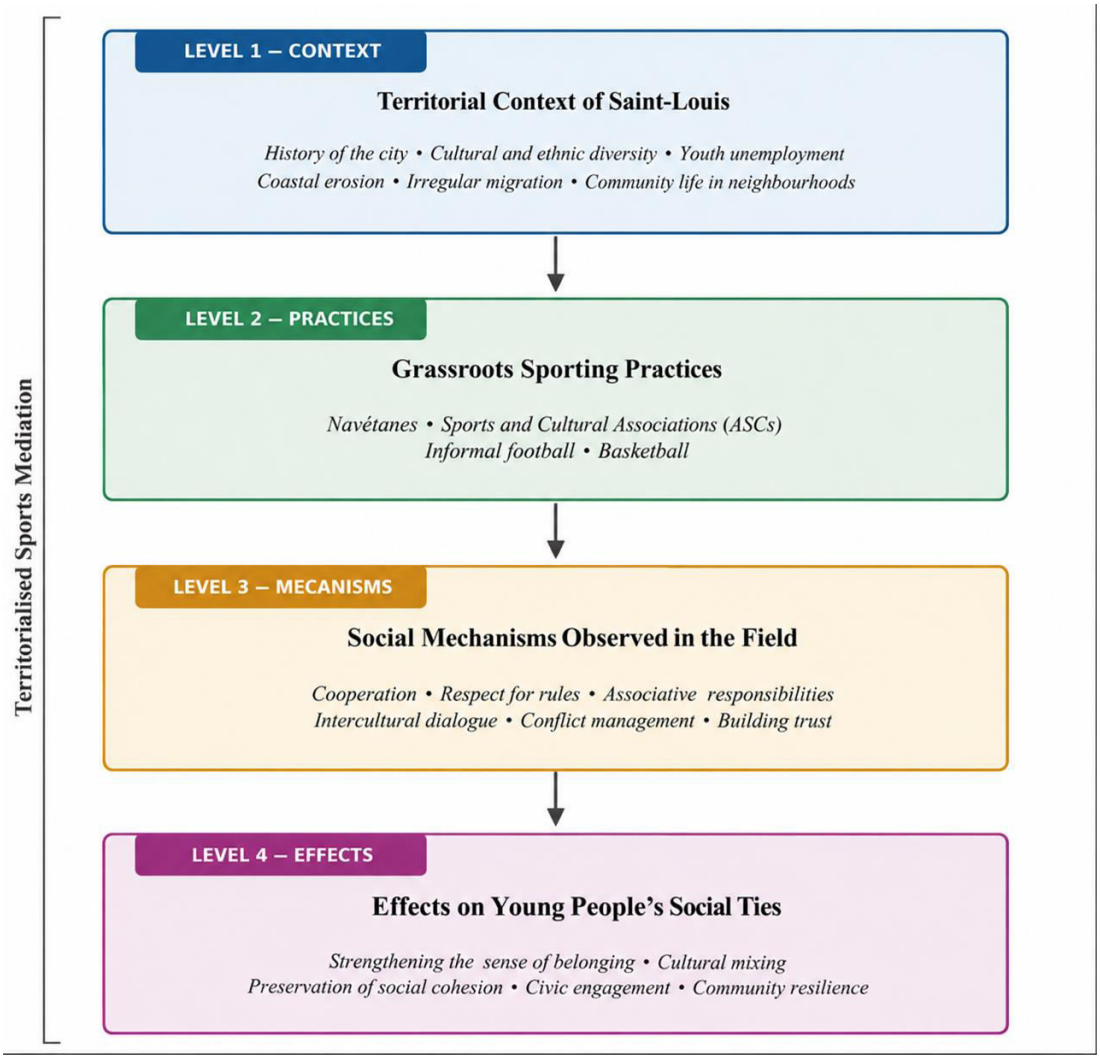
The three preceding analytical dimensions might suggest that sport generates a largely established form of social cohesion in Saint-Louis. The empirical material collected, however, calls for a more critical interpretation, which constitutes the fourth and final dimension of the research findings.

First, rivalries between ASCs never disappear entirely and may, under certain circumstances, reactivate longstanding territorial divisions. Several officials interviewed reported incidents during highly contested final-stage matches, in which sporting tensions escalated into verbal confrontations and, in many instances, physical altercations between supporters from historically rival neighbourhoods.

Nd. W., a supporter of ASC Juboo from Sor, describes one such incident:

"After the semi-final against the other team from the neighbourhood, tensions escalated around the sporting ground. The elders had to intervene to prevent the situation from getting out of control. By the following day, everyone was talking to one another again, but at that moment, things were very tense."

**Figure.1** Conceptual Model of Territorially Embedded Sports-Based Mediation in Saint-Louis.




**Source:** Author's own fieldwork, 2026.

These episodes confirm, in the context of Saint-Louis, the cautionary observation made by Cerfontaine (2025). The coexistence of young people from different backgrounds within the same team is not sufficient to guarantee a harmonious intercultural environment across the competition as a whole, where territorial affiliations may, conversely, be intensified by the stakes involved in winning.

Secondly, inequalities in access to sports facilities emerged recurrently from the interviews and participant observations. ASCs on the Island of Saint-Louis and in Sor benefit from better-maintained playing fields and more regular access to sports equipment than those in Guet Ndar, where the limited availability of space, directly linked to the coastal erosion discussed in the Introduction, forces young people to share a very restricted number of playing areas. An association official from the neighbourhood summarised this situation with evident frustration:

"We have two footballs for thirty young people and a playing field that gets smaller every year because of the sea. In Sor, they have a proper playing field with changing rooms. Here, we have to make do with what we have."

This observation concretely illustrates Bourdieu (1980) analysis of the reproduction of social inequalities through unequal access to sporting facilities and resources. The territory, therefore, is not merely the setting within which sports-based mediation takes place; it also partly

determines the unequal conditions under which such mediation can be practised.

Thirdly, the limited participation of young women constitutes one of the most pronounced limitations of the observed dynamics. Among the 25 participants interviewed, only three young women regularly engaged in organised sporting activities, and none held a position within the leadership structures of the ASCs visited. The experience of D.S., aged 17, illustrates the obstacles faced by many young women seeking to participate in organised sport. Having been passionate about football since childhood, she explains that she had to discontinue her participation in her neighbourhood's women's football team after her family deemed the training schedule incompatible with the domestic responsibilities assigned to her. She continues to play informally with her friends, but without access to the coaching and training programmes available to boys of her age. The officials interviewed attributed this situation to a combination of interrelated factors, including social norms surrounding women's participation in sport, training schedules that are incompatible with the domestic responsibilities undertaken by young women, and the absence of dedicated sports facilities. These findings caution against generalising the mediation mechanisms described in the preceding sections to the entire youth population of Saint-Louis, as they primarily concern sporting practices in which young men predominate.

Fourthly, as demonstrated by the testimony of the participant cited in the preceding section, the limitations of sport in addressing unemployment and migration aspirations remain a concern repeatedly emphasised by all respondents. Neither the ASC officials nor the young people interviewed regarded sporting engagement as a sufficient response to these structural challenges. Sport may postpone or reshape certain migration plans, as illustrated by the case of T.S., but it does not alter the underlying economic causes driving such aspirations.

These four limitations do not undermine the existence of territorially embedded sports-based mediation in Saint-Louis. Rather, they delineate its scope and the conditions under which it can operate. They demonstrate that such mediation remains partial, gendered, unevenly distributed across neighbourhoods, and unable to address the structural determinants of precarity. This calls for a more nuanced interpretation of sport, avoiding the assumption that it constitutes an automatic or unequivocal driver of social cohesion, and provides a direct foundation for the general discussion presented in the following section.

## General Discussion

The findings presented reveal a more complex reality than that commonly associated with the social functions of sport. It is therefore necessary to examine their broader implications by explicitly relating them to the theoretical frameworks introduced in the first part of this study and to previous research.

A first key finding of this research is that sporting practices do not automatically generate social cohesion. Our findings demonstrate that the most significant social effects do not arise from sporting activities themselves, but rather from the interactions and relationships that develop around Sports and Cultural Associations (ASCs). This interpretation aligns with and extends Coalter (2007) analysis, which emphasises that the social benefits of sport are invariably contingent upon the quality of organisational support and the contexts within which sporting practices take place. It also corresponds, at a broader level, with the principal conclusions of recent review studies in the sociology of sport for development, which emphasise the need to identify and specify the intermediate mechanisms—such as trust, cooperation and recognition—that link sporting participation to social cohesion, rather than presupposing a direct relationship between them (Moustakas, 2024). Our study directly addresses this requirement by empirically documenting four such intermediate mechanisms: the gradual development of trust through repeated interactions, the learning of collective deliberation within ASCs, intergenerational mobilisation around sporting competitions, and the maintenance of reciprocal obligations that reshape, without necessarily eliminating, certain plans to migrate.

The present study findings also extend Putnam (2000) work on social capital. The fieldwork conducted in Saint-Louis largely supports the proposition that associations foster trust, cooperative networks and civic participation; however, it also demonstrates that social capital cannot be understood independently of its territorial context. The solidarities observed are rooted in neighbourhood histories, neighbourly relationships, intergenerational ties and the commitment of association leaders. They therefore emerge from a territorially embedded process that extends beyond the functioning of sporting organisations alone. This conclusion is corroborated by the work of Dieng et Diakhaté (2020) on democratic

learning within neighbourhood-based ASCs, to which our investigation contributes by specifying the concrete mechanisms operating at the level of everyday interactions.

Durkheim (1893/2007) analyses also provide insights into the mechanisms observed. Cooperation among players is based on a division of roles that reflects the principles of organic solidarity. Nevertheless, our investigation demonstrates that this functional complementarity alone cannot account for the forms of cohesion observed. Relationships developed within ASCs are rooted in a shared history, common experiences and reciprocal commitments that extend well beyond sporting activities themselves. It is precisely in this articulation between territory, associational life and sporting practices that one of the principal contributions of this research lies.

The data collected demonstrate that young people identify not only as members of a sporting team but also as actors within their neighbourhoods, representatives of their associations and participants in a local community. This plurality of affiliations contributes to strengthening solidarities without erasing existing cultural identities.

In this respect, the findings call for a substantial reconsideration of the commonly used expression *cultural mixing* (*brassage culturel*) in public discourse. Our observations do not indicate a gradual disappearance of cultural affiliations in favour of a shared identity. Young people continue to assert their languages, family traditions and cultural references. Sporting practices, however, create repeated situations of cooperation in which these differences cease, at least temporarily and under certain conditions, to constitute obstacles to collective action. This qualification directly echoes Cerfontaine (2025) caution regarding young people from migrant backgrounds in Europe, for whom sporting participation often tends to reinforce intra-group solidarities rather than promote inter-group interactions. The Saint-Louis case, however, presents a significant difference in terms of its structural configuration. Unlike migrant contexts in which the sporting offer itself may be organised according to ethnic affiliations, with certain groups tending to gravitate towards particular sporting disciplines, ASC recruitment in Saint-Louis is organised primarily around neighbourhood affiliation rather than ethnic origin, thereby structurally facilitating diversity within teams themselves. This structural difference plausibly explains why our findings, while not contradicting Cerfontaine (2025) reservations regarding the limitations of spontaneous cultural mixing, nevertheless document genuine, albeit partial and fragile, forms of inter-group cooperation within teams. At the same time, the neighbourhood-based rivalries examined earlier confirm that such intra-team cooperation does not automatically extend to the Navétanes movement as a whole.

It is from this perspective that we propose interpreting the findings as a whole through the concept of territorially embedded sports-based mediation. This concept refers to the process through which sporting practices, when durably embedded within a territory and supported by an active associational life, foster the development of relationships of trust, cooperation and mutual recognition among individuals belonging to different social or cultural groups. Such processes, however, are neither automatic nor uniform, nor are their outcomes permanently secured. This is not intended as a concept claiming universal applicability, but rather as an analytical proposition derived from our investigation, which may be further examined and tested in other urban contexts.

Our study also highlights practical implications for public policy. The findings suggest that investments in sport would benefit from moving beyond the mere construction of sporting infrastructure or the organisation of competitions. Strengthening the capacities of ASCs, training volunteer leaders in educational and youth-support approaches, supporting initiatives aimed at increasing girls' participation in sport, ensuring a more equitable distribution of sporting infrastructure across neighbourhoods—particularly in Guet Ndar, where coastal erosion is already restricting the space available for other activities—and developing partnerships between local authorities, associations and educational institutions emerge as potential levers for consolidating the social functions of sport identified in this research. These initiatives, however, should not replace employment and vocational training policies, the continued absence of which remains a significant constraint on the trajectories of young people in Saint-Louis.

This research also presents several limitations that warrant explicit acknowledgement. It is based on a qualitative investigation conducted across four neighbourhoods in a single Senegalese city over a seven-month period. Consequently, the mechanisms observed cannot be statistically generalised to all urban contexts in Senegal or West Africa, although the thick-description

approach adopted enables readers to assess their potential transferability. Furthermore, the study primarily focused on male sporting practices. The under-representation of young women in our sample reflects the realities of the field rather than a methodological choice; nevertheless, it correspondingly limits the scope of our conclusions and highlights the need for research specifically devoted to women's sporting trajectories in Saint-Louis. Future comparative research conducted in other Senegalese cities, such as Dakar, Thiès, Kaolack, Ziguinchor and Tambacounda, would make it possible to examine the extent to which the processes observed in Saint-Louis are reproduced in different territorial contexts, particularly those less directly exposed to coastal erosion and irregular migration.

These considerations now make it possible to identify the principal findings of this research and draw the overall conclusions.

At the conclusion of this investigation, it is appropriate to briefly reconsider its principal contributions, which emerged from an initial observation: the limited knowledge available regarding the concrete mechanisms through which sport contributes, or fails to contribute, to the production of social ties in West Africa. Focusing on Saint-Louis, Senegal, a historic city confronted with coastal erosion, youth unemployment and the intensification of irregular migration, this study examined the role of Sports and Cultural Associations in fostering social ties and facilitating the coexistence of cultural and ethnic affiliations. A qualitative investigation combining 25 semi-structured interviews, 34 observation sessions and two group discussions, analysed using the principles of reflexive thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2021), enabled the findings to be grounded in a detailed examination of interactions rather than merely in the observation of diversity among participants.

The findings demonstrate that the social effects of sport do not derive from physical activity itself, but from the associational dynamics that structure the everyday functioning of ASCs: the learning of collective norms, the gradual development of trust, the exercise of responsibilities and the strengthening of neighbourhood belonging. These dynamics have, in several documented individual trajectories, influenced decisions relating to migration or forced relocation. They do not erase ethnic and cultural affiliations; rather, they organise their coexistence within a collective project rooted in the territory. This process is what the present article has proposed to conceptualise as *territorially embedded sports-based mediation*. These effects nevertheless remain conditional. Association governance, the unequal distribution of resources across neighbourhoods and the limited participation of young women constrain their scope, as does the inability of sport, on its own, to address the structural determinants of unemployment and migration aspirations.

These findings should be interpreted in light of the limitations inherent in the research approach adopted. Based on a qualitative investigation conducted in four neighbourhoods of a single city over a seven-month period, this study does not permit statistical generalisation of the observed mechanisms. Furthermore, the under-representation of young women in the research corpus, which reflects field realities rather than a methodological choice, further restricts the scope of the conclusions concerning gender.

Finally, this research opens up several avenues for further investigation. Comparative studies conducted in other Senegalese cities would help assess the applicability of the mechanisms identified in Saint-Louis, while research specifically devoted to women's sporting practices and the trajectories of young people experiencing vulnerability would deepen understanding of these processes. A further conceptual avenue would involve more systematically mobilising the concept of social capital in dialogue with Marx (1867/1993) and Bourdieu (1980), in order to investigate who, within the volunteer engagement of ASCs, ultimately generates and appropriates the social value created, thereby refining a less consensual interpretation of territorially embedded sports-based mediation. Ultimately, this study invites us to avoid treating sport as a singular or unequivocal solution to the social and environmental fractures affecting Saint-Louis, and instead to regard it as one among several arenas in which forms of social ties in West Africa are negotiated on a daily basis, through processes that remain uncertain and are not without tensions.

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