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The Role of Sports in National Identity and Unity

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ABSTRACT

Sports play a vital role in shaping national identity and fostering unity by creating shared cultural experiences and strengthening communal ties. Major sporting events, such as the Olympics and FIFA World Cup, serve as platforms for nations to express their identity and showcase their strengths on the global stage. Historically, sports have reinforced national pride and political narratives, exemplified by cricket and football in England or baseball and sumo in Japan. Theoretical frameworks, including Social Identity Theory and Symbolic Interactionism, help explain how sports cultivate national loyalty and shape societal narratives. Beyond unity, sports diplomacy has been instrumental in fostering international relations, as seen in cases like "ping-pong diplomacy" between the U.S. and China. However, sports can also deepen national rivalries and highlight societal divisions, including gender disparities, racism, and exclusionary nationalism. The ongoing study of sports and national identity requires a critical examination of its dual role in uniting and dividing societies, particularly in historical and contemporary contexts.

Keywords: Sports and national identity, unity through sports, sports diplomacy, social identity theory, symbolic interactionism.

INTRODUCTION

Sports are an integral component of national identity. They have been the rooting factor in developing lasting friendships, social connections, and communal relationships. Indulgence in sports activities does not only provide a medium of entertainment but also works to create a sense of cultural identity. It has always played a significant role in developing an individual, a society, and a nation. The amalgamation of sports with the state doesn't make it an entity free from clashes, but with a sequence of practices associated with training, coaching, news coverage, viewership, etc., sports have created a niche in national unity. People have organized themselves, standing united behind their favorite teams and athletes during games, resulting in a profound impact on society for national integration. In the parade events, the large assembly of people in cities, the burst of sentiments, and the strong feelings developed, help in building strong glue termed nationalism. The social captivation has thus made people think how sporting activities are amalgamated with nationalism. Is it a smooth affair or the Turing effect as individuals become nations or enemies? The paper focuses on the part played by sports in the formation, reflection, and articulation of national identity and national unity beyond the limits of nationhood. Sports, like culture, have been traditionally seen as producing social glue for nation formation. The imagery of sports is, in many senses, a national one, from the personal experience of the fan through literature, film, and popular culture to the impact of the modern media upon any major events. As the practice of watching and discussing sports became part of the everyday life of the wider public, sports culture evolved to play an increasingly significant role in conceptualizing, performing, and reflecting national identity. In the same way, the achievements of sportsmen under the national flag are often seen to demonstrate the nation's strength. But at the same time, sports can provide a platform for individuals, groups, or teams who do not conform

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to the dominant national discourse to establish a counter-discourse that questions, challenges, or subverts it [1, 2].

Background and Significance

From the Olympic Games to the World Cup, sports serve as a source of national pride and cultural identity. As nations pursue independence, citizens strive to excel in sports. This fosters a sense of unity while creating a narrative that intertwines history and the political body. Sports quickly become a means of redefining national identity as concepts like delight and skill shift from monarchical to communal expressions. Amidst societal instability, sports provide a vibrant focus for collective identity. They are essential tools for modern state externalization, with deep historical ties to the regulation of bodies and speech. Many nations' sporting institutions prioritize health and community, ranging from humble boxing clubs to extravagant jousting events, which some criticize as excessive or threatening to societal order. [3, 4].

Theoretical Framework

The current study examines how national sporting culture values are embraced by adult residents of the nation. To find suitable cultures for examination, two conditions are required: a dominant national team exhibiting values like self-control and compassion and representative survey data on those values among residents. This study empirically investigates competition, individualism, compassion, and violence within U.S. baseball team culture and broader American culture. As time progresses and social changes occur, it is crucial to reevaluate sport's role in fostering patriotic sentiment. The NBA, once a significant vehicle for patriotic expression through military displays, now shows only localized, subdued remembrances compared to the passionate displays of football. However, this does not diminish sports leagues' potential national role. Individuals use diffusion and absorption tactics in societal interactions, where cultural elements yield symbolic meanings. National identity is shaped through social context and interaction, requiring an understanding of sport as a sociocultural product with varied meanings. For some Czech participants, sports events represent national pride and have led to a positive economic outlook regarding monopolies in sports. Social identity is tied to an individual's self-concept from group membership, influencing attitudes toward in-groups and out-groups. Social Identity Theory emphasizes differentiation, favoring the in-group while portraying it positively. The study aims to highlight how symbolic interactionism meets methodological needs to understand the evolving relationships between sport and society. [5, 6].

Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory suggests that individuals categorize themselves and others into social groups, fostering belonging and self-definition. The significance of these identities can shift based on context. While some may not feel closely tied to sports groups, national identities like American or Brazilian often intertwine with sports, enabling people to share in collective successes and failures. This theory is relevant as these identities shape behaviors towards other fans, promoting positive interactions within shared identities while generating negative feelings towards others. Loyalty in sports or terrorism often springs from collective identities. Establishing such identities involves defining boundaries, emphasizing differences, and fostering negative views of out-groups. Fans may align with in-groups through participation and national ties, exemplified by Brazil's rivalry with Argentina, often humorously expressed in sports. Social Identity Theory reveals that animosity between nations arises from in-group loyalty and animosity towards out-groups, with national pride intensifying alongside a sports team's achievements. Global sports competitions enhance national identity through measurable successes, while encounters with various nations deepen in-group versus out-group distinctions. During key events, national identity often becomes more pronounced, leading to the increased use of jokes that reinforce these distinctions. Though this promotes community, it risks exclusion, as strong in-group sentiments can highlight or create out-groups amidst ethnic or racial tensions. The drive to define the self against out-groups can lead to exclusionary actions. Moreover, not all shared identities relate to sports; sometimes, sports may deepen divides in indifferent communities, making the role of sports in shaping national identity a minor part of the larger picture. Thus, it's crucial to critically evaluate the downsides of measuring national pride through sporting success [7, 8].

Symbolic Interactionism

Dating back to their inception, sports have symbolized society at large. From the Olympic Games to the World Cup, they reflect tribalism that predates national borders. The nature of this symbolism is debated; sports can unite through camaraderie or create divisions even among twins. Fundamentally, sports

represent societal narratives of forgotten tales and aspirations passed down through generations. Participation and observation provide meaning from past mistakes and hopeful future endeavors on fields, courts, and ice. It is here that nationhood takes root. For instance, the Irish have stories of rebellion, while the Dutch celebrate renewal, yet history favors those on the "winning" side of geography. Lewis Henry Morgan viewed nations as societies moving in opposite directions, as if the earth were a cosmic coil playing out forgotten histories. The Victorian era popularized racial philosophies, as proposed by Sir Richard Francis Burton and later echoed by Henri Marie de Toulouse-Lautrec. The Great Exhibition and Phrenology linked social classes in a manner reminiscent of Linnaeus's categorization. Phrenology claimed that certain races lacked "sense" and gravitas, positing a civilizing obligation on others. While there was some truth to this view, much of the associated "science" has since been reassessed [9, 10].

Historical Perspectives

Sports and games have a long history of contributing to the building of national identity and unity. There is evidence of organized sporting events such as Panhellenic festivals in Ancient Greece attended by representatives of Greek 'city states'. Gladiatorial contests in Rome were not merely about the celebration of Roman power; they also allowed people to express their identity – whether it was Roman or provincial – and their opinion on political issues. One of the first examples of a 'football' match was the London v Paris game played in 1170, 1177, 1190, or 1205 – depending on which source is consulted. Contextual analysis shows how forms of play and sport were deeply embedded in specific historical and social circumstances and how they reinforced social hierarchies and bonds of community, too. Football, for example, has been seen at various periods in history as 'warfare', 'dangerous', and even as 'ungodly' – and the authorities have taken steps to outlaw it. There were numerous prohibitions on playing football in the belief that it encouraged 'disorder', and it was seen in times of military crisis as weakening national defenses. By the end of the seventeenth century, the violence displayed by 'football' had led to public indignation. The game had become associated with 'licentious' behavior, 'whores' and 'deeds of darkness'. On the other hand, public holidays were associated with games and sports, which helped create community bonds. This idea was gradually transformed, and in the eighteenth century, 'rural' sports such as cricket and horse racing were associated with national identity: they were seen as evidence of the superiority of the English gentlemen and the English breed of horse. The act of 'playing' a country is visually realized in films and documentaries. The very fact that it was a race meant that Britain took notice and seized upon the publicity it generated. All other British successes were secondary. As such, in the minds of many Scots, the exploits of cyclists who happened to represent Britain itself became 'British' victories. The event was not only about the contest; it was also about area names, so it allowed the Scots to defend their associations with a specific place or community. Once the British teams were eliminated, Scottish football watches dwindled from 10 million in Glasgow to only 0.1 million in 2002. Such broad responses demonstrate sport and its histories as being deeply relevant to the everyday life of contemporary populations. The national histories of cricket and football in England contribute to the general picture of British sport and nationalism, helping to tie together disparate narratives around regions and nations by emphasizing the importance of the fathers of the games to a common sense of sporting identity. Importantly, these sports emphasize England's competitive heritage, tales of decline and revitalization dovetailing with an official performative ideology of modernization and renewal. Thus, country sports tend to represent the weaker sportsperson: darts, angling, snooker, tennis, hitting the target Rory, and so forth, are chosen as a contrary case study to reflect whether or not they, too, reflect these dominant stories of heroism and renown [11, 12].

Ancient Civilizations and Sporting Events

The origins of competitive athletics may date back to the early inhabitants of the Eastern Mediterranean, particularly within the Egyptian civilization. Sports were integral to spiritual life, initially reserved for priests but later becoming more secular and competitive. They evolved into synchronized activities accompanied by flute music, marking the shift to competition coinciding with the decline of Egyptian civilization. Long-distance running emerged as the most prestigious sport, symbolizing eternal life. In contrast, sports in Mesopotamia were mainly limited to kings and select officials. The ancient Assyrians participated in a wide range of sports, including riding, javelin throwing, archery, and chariot racing, governed by strict rules differentiating social classes. Sports served to unify the country by linking royals with national deities. Although dance and music were once popular, they gave way to martial activities like riding and archery, which the war-like Assyrians esteemed greatly. Wrestling and mock battles were prevalent, with kings dedicating time to various sports to demonstrate their power to their god. The

soaked garments worn by priests and royals were highly valued, leading Assyrian combatants to often fight in water and launch assaults from boats. In contrast, the ancient Jews, considered an exception, largely neglected sports, prioritizing religious observance over athletic events, leading to the closure of gymnasias during the Hasmonean dynasty [13, 14].

Modern Examples of Sports and National Identity

In popular thought, sport is seen as a form of national identity, yet research linking the two is limited. This paper advocates for a new research agenda to examine how sport exemplifies, constructs, and reinforces national identity today. It is proposed that the nation's expressive potential is conveyed through sport. The article aims to define national identity as processual, plural, and relational, employing a genealogical approach to explore the nation-sport relationship. Four interconnected ways modern relations between sport and national identity are manifest will be analyzed: the influence of major international events like the Olympics and World Cup, media representation in national sporting narratives, public engagement with national teams, and examples from UK sports like cricket and rugby. This exploration highlights the evolving significance of sport for national unity. The connection between sport and national identity is increasingly acknowledged in academia, prompting questions about sport's role in national representation. However, empirical investigations often focus on successful nationally identified teams correlating with patriotism. Three assertions are identified: a conventional thesis positing that nations were first imagined through sport before political nation-states emerged, emphasizing the enduring representation of national identity in ancient games; a revised thesis that considers how modern national identities have been shaped and commercialized through leisure, entertainment, and media, framing the nation as narratives and symbols binding individuals to imagined communities, with sport serving as a crucial cultural practice in shaping collective identities [15, 16].

Olympic Games

Developments in nontraditional sports in Japan have signified the growing significance of sports in national identity. Despite a continuing ambivalence toward sports, particularly vis-a-vis its foreignness and its nationalistic past, sports such as baseball, golf, and sumo wrestling have become essentially Japanese. Consequently, Japanese athletes have come to symbolize the yuppie and the global success of Japan, an image further constructed during Japan's successful hosting of the Winter Olympics in Nagano. At the same time, Japan epitomizes the globalization of sport. Indeed, the worldwide acceptance of baseball and its incorporation into Japanese society serves as a prime example of the transcultural nature of modern sports. Instead of diffusing national characteristics, sports symbols such as the yen network television system, mandatory retirement at age 60 for company employees, and the "Galapagos" phenomenon were reaffirmed by the 1964 Tokyo Olympics. Whether or not they share such traits, nations in the international sphere are mainly seen as different entities, with sporting assumptions reflecting this division. Women's sports assume particular importance in this context. Arguably a site in both the constitution and reproduction of the world capitalist system, the importance of Japanese sport is intertwined with indissoluble domination and cultural repression. Moreover, the persistence of traditional sports suggests how an agricultural story and the commodification of cultural forms in capitalism are linked to modes of social regulation and control [17, 18].

FIFA World Cup

Sports play a crucial role in shaping national identity, and this identity also helps fans connect with sports. Domestic sports leagues unite diverse regions and demographics under a national banner, while international events often emphasize national divisions. Examining three case studies provides insights into the relationship between sports and national identity: the historic 1970 World Cup match between El Salvador and Honduras, the national identity displays at the 2004 Athens Olympics, and commemorations of the Munich Massacre during the 2012 London Olympics. This paper aims to examine the interplay between sports and national identity during major international events and at the individual spectator level, offering a dual perspective on how these dynamics shape understanding [12, 19].

Sports Diplomacy

Historically, sports and international relations were separate, but globalization and soft power have made sports integral to foreign policy. Sports can enhance diplomatic ties and foster communication. One early example of sports as a peace-building tool occurred during World War I when Pope Benedict XV organized a soccer match between the Axis and Allied powers. Today, sports continue to connect diverse groups. The United Nations endorses sports as a dialogue platform, advocating for a truce during the

Olympic Games. The recent summer games featured athletes from Iran and Israel sharing a moment of solidarity despite their adversarial relations. This exemplifies how sports can foster interaction and understanding even among conflicting nations. Initiatives like the One Team Project in Greece harness basketball to reduce bullying and marginalization among disabled youths, enabling them to contribute to their communities. Sports also transcend political divides, turning competitive events into opportunities for cooperation. 'Ping-pong diplomacy' in 1971 helped open relations between China and the U.S., while cricket diplomacy in 2004 addressed tensions between Pakistan and India. Football matches have also served as a medium for friendly exchanges between Japan and North Korea. Such examples illustrate sports' unique capacity to promote unity and cooperation among countries. Local sports programs can further peace-building through person-to-person networks. These efforts have facilitated knowledge sharing and technology transfer in conflict zones, with sports playing a crucial role in post-conflict stabilization by fostering respect and trust among former adversaries [20, 21].

International Relations and Sports

International relations and sports have a unique link that is often overshadowed by cultural and sociological narratives. The realm of sportsmanship, as with military preparedness, reveals an implicit link to nationality. Nations frequently use sporting events as a means to bolster international prestige, forge new relationships, or as a form of soft power projection. Historically, these intent-laden encounters have accounted for outright war, as with soccer matches between Honduras and El Salvador in 1969, but they can also produce goodwill on a global scale, as seen in the "ping-pong diplomacy" of the 1970s between the United States and China. On the frontlines, while rival nations vie against one another on the pitch, their athletes act as informal ambassadors, fostering unions across nationalized boundaries—a sort of Coliseum without the bloodshed. The promulgation of these internationalized events, however, raises a host of ethical questions about these athletes who carry their country's banner, particularly in nations plagued with lingual, religious, or ethnic division. Viewed alternatively, how do sports and major international competitions, such as the Olympics or the FIFA World Cup, become battlegrounds for geopolitical narrative, complicating the simple joy of having twenty-two people on a field trying to kick a ball into a net? Beyond the comparisons of what separates 'us' and 'them', the omnipotence of sports to serve as an instrument for diplomacy, economic development, or cultural understanding is a well-worn narrative dating back to the ancient Olympics. Nonetheless, each historical epoch throws up new obstacles to the understanding and navigational goals of sporting endeavors at an international level. Engendered by this is a continued effort to illustrate how sports fit within a broader range of political actions, both of the state and non-state actors, while considering the impact on and potential of international relations. In an era when global corporations and sports teams operate unhindered by the barriers of trade and cultural indifference, it behooves the scholar to understand the role that sports now play within national histories as well as the broader processes of globalization [22, 23].

Gender and National Identity in Sports

The literature on sports and national identity often emphasizes male athletes, overlooking female athletes' contributions. Institutions and media may portray men and women differently, leading to unequal representation and recognition of women in national sports. While women may embody desirable national traits as understated representatives or by presenting new national identities, sportswomen's practices relate closely to national ideas across local and regional levels. This topic connects insights from women's studies, nationalism, and media rather than offering new empirical evidence on sport and nationalism. However, it still reveals the exploitation that women face in symbolic sports. Historical attitudes toward gender in elite sports have shifted. The Olympics showcased male physicality from Ancient Greece, marking masculinity as integral to national identity, while women's organized sport is a more recent development, not allowing female participation until 1920. Sport, often viewed as 'war minus shooting,' largely analyzes national identity through male athletes, while female athletes are marginalized by media depiction, aligning national identity with broader traits such as deportment and charitable actions. Despite this, women athletes can also be viewed as symbols of national distinctiveness, akin to 'earth mothers,' or champion causes like gender equality, complicating gendered national identities beyond simplistic categories of nationalism [24, 10].

Challenges and Controversies

Sports and national identity are deeply linked, serving as a means to express national values, heritage, and solidarity. While they can foster pride, they also reflect flaws, leading to contempt and division. The rise of right-wing hooligan groups in Western Europe highlighted underlying nationalist and xenophobic

tensions, resulting in violence. Contemporary sports grapple with racism, discrimination, gender equality, and fair competition, impacting both athletes' and fans' identities. The persistence of racism and xenophobia particularly taints football, with fans voicing hatred, leading to political ramifications for host nations. However, this crisis sparked a call for change, as athletes began to challenge societal issues, emerging as role models who influenced national discussions and unveiled deep-seated discontent [25, 26].

Racism and Discrimination in Sports

This subsection examines the rampant issues of racism and discrimination in sports, reflecting societal biases at a league level. Athletes from marginalized backgrounds echo the struggles of their supporters, paralleling the rise of racial and xenophobic populism. High-profile examples include Clay A. Ali experiencing draft rejections due to his race, Hank Aaron's historic contract response to hate for breaking Babe Ruth's record, and Robbie Fowler facing fines for racist gestures. Eliminating racism in sports is feasible, yet socio-cultural campaigns are necessary to shape attitudes and activate new activists. Many victims of racism in sports are often reluctant to become activists, especially if they aspire to professional careers. Minority athletes frequently encounter hostile crowds during competitions, facing the challenge of integrating into a sport traditionally steeped in homogeneity. Furthermore, an ingrained racist narrative in sports can foster a shared responsibility among organizations to combat these biases. Within Turkish society, sports often become a tool for exclusion, complicating national identity. Turkish fans typically unify against teams associated with any social divisiveness. The ideology of the Turkish nation-state, since the Republic's founding, has promoted a narrow, homogeneous societal vision, marginalizing non-Turkish ethnicities. The principle of "How bright home country is/ Be the same language!" has pushed non-Turkish speakers towards assimilation. Despite this, the multiethnic fabric of the Ottoman Empire persists. In the late 20th century, as the USSR collapsed, ethnic conflicts surged throughout the Caucasus and Balkans, leading to violence and ethnic cleansing. Kurdish insurrection met brutal repression in the 1990s, violating human rights extensively. Turkish nationalism adapted to these shifts, notably as Istanbul clubs representing non-Turkish ethnicities faced unprecedented relegation from the top football league [27, 28].

CONCLUSION

Sports are a powerful force in shaping national identity and fostering unity, providing a shared cultural platform for expression, pride, and diplomacy. While they serve as tools for national representation and international cooperation, they also reflect and sometimes amplify societal tensions, including gender disparities, racism, and nationalism. Understanding the role of sports in national identity requires a balanced perspective—recognizing both their unifying potential and their ability to expose and challenge deep-seated social issues. As the world continues to evolve, sports will remain a dynamic and influential space for national and global discourse.

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