



Spectator sports and its role in the social marketing of national unity: Insights from a multiracial country

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ABSTRACT

Spectator sports are a form of leisure that can be leveraged by social marketers to create myriad profound impacts on society. This article aims to examine the role of leisure in the form of spectator sports in the social marketing of national unity. Using sports for development and social marketing as lenses to inform an interpretive case study predicated on a thematic analysis of qualitative secondary sources on spectator sports in multiracial Malaysia, this article finds that leisure in the form of spectator sports can act as an entry point to, a promoter of, an educator of, a symbol of, an initiator of conversations and dialogs on, and a unifying mechanism for national unity. Specifically, these roles enacted by spectator sports contribute to uniting multiracial communities within and beyond a sporting cause, or inside and outside spectator sports, in which inherent differences are cast aside and commonalities are embraced.

KEYWORDS

Spectator sports as leisure; sports for development; social marketing; national unity; multiracial country; interpretive case study; thematic analysis

Spectator sports exist as a leisure activity that is characterized by the presence of spectators who watch competitions of participant sports (or players in physical and skilled activities, such as basketball, football, and tennis) during residual time free from obligations, paid and unpaid work, and tasks required for existing, such as eating and sleeping (Funk, Ridinger, & Moorman, 2004; Shamir & Ruskin, 1984). Its study in scholarly domains of sports and leisure has progressed remarkably in recent years, moving beyond investigations that treated sports as a form of entertainment and recreation that people partake during their free time to investigations that explore the potential of sports for engineering meaningful social change, progress, and development (Sherry, Schulenkorf, & Chalip, 2015), most notably in the areas of corporate social responsibility (Inoue & Kent, 2012), national identity (Bairner, 2015), social capital (Peachey, Borland, Lobpries, & Cohen, 2015), and social inclusion (Peachey & Sherry, 2016). Yet few studies have examined social marketing in spectator sports (or the use of spectator sports in marketing a social good) (Lough & Pharr, 2010). Moreover, spectator sports' potential for promoting and fostering national unity (i.e., a social good), especially in countries with communities of diverse backgrounds (e.g., multiracial), has not been explored explicitly.

The ability of spectator sports to pull large crowds for a common purpose suggests that they could be a potential solution to address the problem of national disunity by

becoming a means to promote and foster national unity. This potential is further amplified as a result of increasing broadcasting (e.g., live, highlights, and replays) and media reporting (e.g., commentary, statistics, and analysis) of spectator sports (Cummins & Gong, 2017). To date, no studies have explicitly attempted to evaluate the use of spectator sports as a means to address the problem of national disunity and to understand the role of spectator sports for the social marketing of national unity. Given that national disunity has been a common problem in many heterogeneous and pluralistic societies, such as Malaysia, in recent years (Awang, Sheikh, Lokman, & Saifuddin, 2016), this article argues that further study in this direction is not only necessary but also potentially fruitful. To address and fill in these gaps, this article adopts an interpretive case study approach predicated on a thematic analysis of qualitative secondary sources to examine the ways in which spectator sports can contribute to the social marketing of national unity in the context of a multiracial country confronted with issues of national disunity. In doing so, this article contributes to theory, by delineating the roles enacted by spectator sports in the social marketing of national unity, and to practice, by recommending strategic actions and interventions to support the social marketing of national unity through spectator sports.

Literature review and conceptual development

Sports and sports for development

The term *sports*, from a participatory perspective in leisure studies, refers to any individual- or team-based physical and/or skilled competitive activity in which people partake during their free time (Eime Harvey, Sawyer, Craike, Symons, Polman, & Payne, 2013; Eime, Young, Harvey, Charity, & Payne, 2013), and from a spectatorship perspective in leisure studies, it refers to the watching of that competitive activity during one's free time (Shamir & Ruskin, 1984; Funk et al., 2004). As an academic discipline, sports is a multidisciplinary scholarship that covers broad spectrums of science (e.g., biology, engineering, and medicine) and social science (e.g., management, marketing, and tourism). Of particular interest in this article is the disciplinary branch in sports that deals with the engineering of meaningful social change, progress, and development. This takes the form of what Schulenkorf (2012) and Schulenkorf, Sherry, and Rowe (2016) theorize as "sports for development."

Sports for development encapsulates the use of sports as a tool to create and sustain social impacts in numerous areas outside sports (Schulenkorf, 2012), including, but not limited to, conflict resolution (Cardenas, 2013), economic development (Gratton, Shibli, & Coleman, 2005), identity formation (Bairner, 2015), public health (Oliver, Hanson, Lindsey, & Dodd-Reynolds, 2016), resilience development (Johns, Grossman, & McDonald, 2014), and socialization (Peachey & Sherry, 2016; Sherry et al., 2015). The concept and domain has garnered significant attention and growing political and institutional support from governmental and nongovernmental agencies as well as from sports academics and practitioners around the world (Edwards, 2015; United Nations on Sport for Development and Peace, 2016). This popularity may be attributed to its ability not only to draw widespread attention among people who are interested in sports but also to use the momentum in and around sports as a strategic means to communicate, implement, and achieve developmental goals outside sports (Schulenkorf et al., 2016).

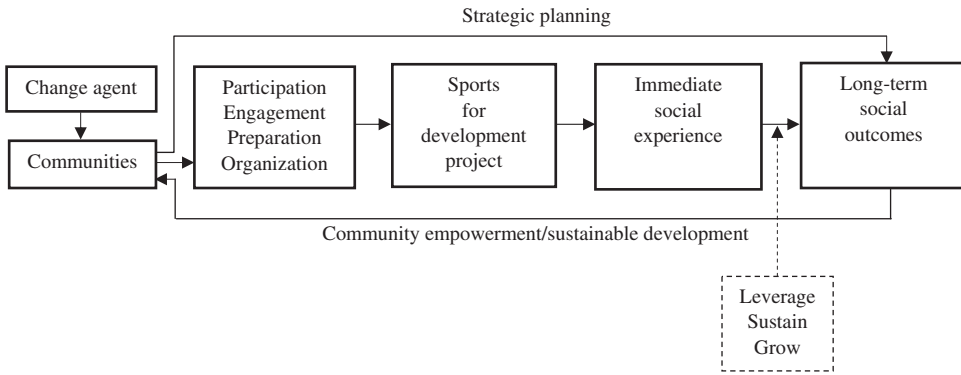


Figure 1. Schulenkorf's (2012) sports for development framework.

The work of Schulenkorf (2012) informs the current study through the sports-for-development framework. This framework is a guide for understanding the social processes generated through participatory sport activities (see Figure 1). It is divided into three inter-related parts: sports project management, immediate social impacts, and long-term social outcomes. First, sports project management involves the strategic planning, organizing, and conducting of a sports-for-development project to encourage change agents—or project supporters that create a common and neutral platform for cooperation within and between groups—and local communities to engage and participate in sports projects and work toward desired social outcomes. Second, participation in sports projects, regardless of whether the projects are centered on participant sports or spectator sports, is a prerequisite for the production of immediate social impacts in the form of social experiences. Finally, continued participation in sports projects over time will grow and sustain the quantity and quality of social experiences that empowered participants can leverage and contribute to achieving lasting social consequences and sustainable development.

Nonetheless, Schulenkorf (2012) pointed out that the framework is to be understood and used as a loose frame for understanding the ways in which sports can produce immediate and sustainable social outcomes. Therefore, this article will employ this framework only as a conceptual guideline in the interpretive case study. The intention is to go beyond extending the application of this framework to making a fresh theoretical contribution by establishing a contextualized version of the framework based on the findings from qualitative secondary sources to account for the unique peculiarities in the social process that explains the role of spectator sports in the social marketing of national unity in a multiracial country.

Social marketing and national Unity

Social marketing is a process that uses marketing approaches to encourage and persuade members of a target market to accept social ideas and perform behaviors that will produce the desired social outcomes to benefit the individual as well as communities and society at large (Andreasen, 1994; Kotler & Zaltman, 1971). The concept has been employed in numerous fields and various ways. In ecology, social marketing has been used to promote proenvironmental behavior (Mckenzie-Mohr, 2000), marine

conservation (Hayden & Dills, 2015), and usage of energy-saving alternatives (Schultz, Colehour, Vohr, Bonn, Bullock, & Sadler, 2015). In health, the application of social marketing has been directed to improve public health, such as encouraging people to stop smoking (Gallopel-Morvan, Gabriel, Le Gall-Ely, Rieunier, & Urien, 2011), to exercise (Michaelidou & Moraes, 2014), and to go for health screening (Zainuddin, Russell-Bennett, & Previte, 2013). In tourism, social marketing has been employed as a means of demarketing tourism attractions, activities, and destinations as well as promoting sustainable tourism consumption (Hall, 2014).

In spectator sports, the potential of social marketing as a means to promote social causes is starting to gain recognition, and several sports academics have called for further investigation (Kim, Kwak, & Kim, 2010). However, the scope of social marketing application in spectator sports so far has been scarce—it has only been employed to demonstrate and promote corporate social responsibility in professional sports (Inoue & Kent, 2012). This represents a stark contrast to other closely related areas of marketing, such as health and sports marketing, where studies are high in numbers and wide in scope, as evidenced by comprehensive reviews of the literature in these areas (Quinn, Ellery, Thomas, & Marshall, 2010). This study contends that the potential of social marketing in spectator sports resides in the benefits of using the marketing lens to encourage and promote sports for development projects—that is, to create and sustain meaningful social impacts outside sports. Thus, the scarcity of studies in the area, along with the potential to produce meaningful social impacts, supports the call for further studies that can extend existing knowledge and create new knowledge in the area and that can serve as a stimulus and foundation for future research.

The current study identifies national unity—or the unification of heterogeneous communities in a country—as an area where spectator sports and social marketing can be of high relevance. National disunity arises due to many reasons, such as communalism, ethnocentrism, political prejudice, and racial polarization, and this has become a common problem in many heterogeneous and pluralistic societies around the world (Awang et al., 2016; Onyibor, 2016). Unlike other types of conflict (e.g., interpersonal, intrapersonal, and intragroup conflicts), national disunity is a form of intergroup conflict that may be impossible to resolve, at least in the short run. However, spectator sports, as a form of escapism, has the potential to play a key role in helping communities in conflict to come together. Spectator sports could activate a psychological process that gets communities to set aside the inherent differences and focus on celebrating the commonalities in supporting shared sporting goals (e.g., teams), at least for a short period (e.g., during competitive match and sports campaign periods). When applied to a national context, the study posits that spectator sports can be used to bring people of diverse backgrounds together and subsequently create an entry point to either reconcile or become more accepting and tolerant of any differences that the people may have in promoting a greater sense of national unity.

Case application: Spectator sports, social marketing, and national unity in multiracial Malaysia

Background

A multiracial country is a country with a mixed community of various races. Communities in a multiracial country live side by side, but they are often separated by a political unit

(or the boundaries set by the political authority) on the basis of race (Embong, 2002). Nonetheless, communities from diverse races are typically allowed to practice their respective religions, customs, cultures, languages, ideologies, and lifestyles as long as these practices are consistent with the laws and values of the country (Rex, 1987).

This study uses the context of Malaysia as a case study to examine the role of spectator sports in the social marketing of national unity. Malaysia, as a multiracial country, is one of the most heterogeneous and pluralistic countries in the world. The country is home to three major races—Malay, Chinese, and Indian—along with several other indigenous tribes, such as Bidayuh, Iban, Melanau, and Kadazan. Malaysia was governed under four colonial powers—Portuguese, Dutch, British, and Japanese—after the 16th century, before gaining independence in 1957. During the preindependence period, national unity among the diverse communities was pervasive, most notably in the build-up to and during the negotiation between a nascent nation and its erstwhile colonial masters to form an independent Malaysia (Brown, 2007; Cheah, 2003). However, Malaysia today is increasingly forced to confront the tensions arising from this source of diversity (or the politics of race) (Centre for Public Policy Studies, 2016).

National unity is a key target for government policies in Malaysia. Certainly, there are the commendable efforts of the government of Malaysia to promote and foster national unity, such as reducing racial polarization in the national school system through the National Education Blueprint and encouraging national unity by bringing together youth from a variety of backgrounds in one setting through the National Service Program. Yet numerous government policies differentiate between Malaysians on the basis of race, to the point that many feel they have been the target of racial discrimination. These include the New Economic Policy and other associated affirmative action programs dedicated to dampening the fears of the Malays about falling behind the rest of the nation socioeconomically, thereby raising concerns of government-backed discrimination among the non-Malays (Centre for Public Policy Studies, 2016).

The social marketing of national unity in Malaysia is no easy task. However, existing literature on sports, the sports-for-development theory, and the development and reception of spectator sports in the country appears promising for contributing toward that cause. The following section will discuss the procedures for conducting data collection and data analysis for the interpretive case study. The interpretive case study that follows will then elucidate on the role of spectator sports in the social marketing of national unity in a multiracial country confronted with issues of national disunity.

Method

Interpretive case study

This article uses a case study approach—a systematic empirical inquiry of a complex phenomenon through detailed contextual analysis of a specific event, geographical area, and group of people over a period of time (Baxter & Jack, 2008)—to delineate the role of spectator sports in the social marketing of national unity in a multiracial country. In particular, the case study focuses on Malaysia, a multiracial country with citizens who take great interest in spectator sports but are confronted with issues of national disunity as a result of politics and racial polarization. The overarching goal of abstraction and

conceptualization of the role of spectator sports in the context under study categorizes the current case study as an interpretive case study—a form of case study used to develop conceptual categories and relationships to construct theory (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). Using a case study as a research approach enables the examination of a contextualized set of data (or within the situation in which the activity takes place), the use of multiple sources and types of data (such as different types of qualitative secondary sources), and an in-depth explanation of the complexities of the research phenomenon, all of which are required in the current investigation and may not be thoroughly captured through other forms of research approaches, such as experiments and surveys (Yin, 1994).

Secondary qualitative data collection

In terms of data collection, the current interpretive case study collects secondary qualitative data sources in the form of commentaries and letters written by members of the public and published on online news portals, along with standard news articles written by news editors to cover a recent event. The selection criterion for inclusion of articles in the interpretive case study is coverage of spectator sports and national unity in Malaysia. Thus, keywords such as “sports,” “national unity,” and “Malaysia” are used and entered collectively to search for relevant articles in an online search engine (i.e., Google). Only original articles are included in the pool of articles for the interpretive case study. Any duplicate articles that are published on multiple online news portals have been eliminated. Thirty-four out of 164 search results produced by the online search engine were considered to be original, and they met the selection criterion for inclusion as secondary qualitative data sources for the interpretive case study. The interpretive case study includes and analyzes the content of all 34 relevant articles, of which 14 are categorized as “commentaries and letters” and 20 are classified as “standard news articles” (see Table 1).

Thematic analysis

The current interpretive case study uses thematic analysis of data. This is a flexible and useful method that provides a rich and systematic, yet complex, account of qualitative data under study. It was used to identify, analyze, and report patterns (or themes) from the selected commentaries and letters and standard news articles. The thematic analysis is done in several stages following the recommendations of Braun and Clarke (2006), starting with *familiarizing with qualitative data* (i.e., reading and noting initial ideas from selected commentaries and letters and standard news articles—e.g., ways a nation can unite through spectator sports), followed by *generating initial codes* (i.e., coding interesting features in selected commentaries and letters and standard news articles—e.g., types of spectator sports events and situations depicting national unity), *searching for themes* (i.e., organizing codes and relevant qualitative data from selected commentaries and letters and standard news articles into potential themes—e.g., the roles of spectator sports in the social marketing of national unity), *reviewing themes* (i.e., examining the adequacy and appropriateness of the themes in relation to the codes and entire set of qualitative data from selected commentaries and letters and standard news articles),

Table 1. List of secondary qualitative data.

Secondary data type	No.	Headline	Source
Commentary/letter (i.e., a non-news article written by a person on sports)	1	A case of <i>Ola Bola</i> overload	Abdul (2016)
	2	Did Chong Wei and Badminton really unite us?	Wan (2016)
	3	How to forge national unity?	H. S. Lee (2014)
	4	Go for gold	Kong (2016)
	5	Sports and national unity	Sethi (2011)
	6	<i>Ola Bola</i> kick-starts unity	William (2016)
	7	<i>Ola Bola</i> will make you believe again	Ma'rof (2016)
	8	One heart, one soul – sports can unite Malaysians	Yap (2016)
	9	Passionate roars of support	Velloo (2015)
	10	Sports, the answer to our unity	Fadzil (2015)
	11	The cultural significance of the Malaysian blockbuster film 'Ola Bola'	Dhanoa (2016)
Standard news article (i.e., an article written to cover an event by a news editor, which may include quotes from current and former prime ministers, deputy prime ministers, ministers, members of parliament, assemblymen, national athletes, sports actors, media personalities, and ordinary citizens of various races)	12	Use sports activities as a means to promote national unity	Sitheravellu (2015b)
	13	Sports as a driving force in fostering national unity	Sitheravellu (2015a)
	14	Use sports to foster unity	L. T. Lee (2016)
	1	Malaysians pan gloomy headlines on Olympic silver	<i>Malay Mail Online</i> (2016)
	2	Use magic of sports to unite people	<i>Borneo Post Online</i> (2016)
	3	Football can unite all, says Muhyiddin	<i>Free Malaysia Today</i> (2014)
	4	In conversation with Chiu Keng Guan, king of Malaysian movies	Hutt (2016)
	5	Leaders make Merdeka call for continued peace, unity	<i>Malay Mail Online</i> (2013)
	6	A short sit-down with Eric Teng who played 'Balak Eric' in the movie <i>Ola Bola</i>	<i>The Coverage</i> (2016)
	7	Mohd Noor returns FFM trophies, says 'ashamed as a Malay'	Chik (2016)
	8	Malaysian Oscars excludes non-Malay <i>Ola Bola</i> and <i>Jagat</i> from best film category	Khor (2016)
	9	<i>Ola Bola</i> – love it or hate it? Malaysians share their honest opinions	Mustafa (2016)
	10	Olympians receive heroes' welcome	Divakaran (2016)
	11	Heroes' welcome for Paralympians	Murad (2016)
	12	PM highlights 'moments of unity' in his N-Day	Spykerman and Anis (2016)
	13	Ridhuan rapped for 'unpatriotic sportsmen' remark	<i>Free Malaysia Today</i> (2016)
	14	Sports can unite Malaysians, says Lee Chong Wei	<i>Channel News Asia</i> (2016)
	15	Sports a platform to promote unity among M'sians: Manyin	Lidom (2016)
	16	Unity message in football film <i>Ola Bola</i> strikes a chord with Malaysians	<i>The Malaysian Insider</i> (2016)
17	Forging unity through sports	<i>The Star</i> (2015)	
18	Sports enhance unity in diversity	Shukri and Lidom (2016)	
19	Sports good 'unity tool' for nation – Abdul Karim	<i>Borneo Post Online</i> (2013)	
20	This video of Malaysians celebrating after V Shem-Wee Kiong's win will give you the chills	Tang (2016)	

defining conceptual boundaries of themes (i.e., ongoing analysis of refining the specifics of each theme and the overall story underlying each theme), and finally, *reporting thematic findings and their implications* (i.e., selecting and presenting compelling and vivid instances depicting the role of spectator sports in the social marketing of national unity with succinct description and analysis of each role, and discussing the implications of the findings for theory and practice).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research is the demonstration of rigor in the analysis of qualitative data (Guba, 1981). In essence, trustworthiness involves establishing *credibility* (i.e., internal validity through confidence in the “truth” of the findings), *transferability* (i.e., external validity and generalizability through the applicability of the findings to other contexts), *dependability* (i.e., reliability through consistency and repeatability of the findings), and *confirmability* (i.e., objectivity through the degree of neutrality or the extent to which the findings are shaped by the data and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest) in the analysis and interpretation of qualitative findings (Guba, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). This article establishes credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of its interpretive case study findings in five major ways. First, multiple sources of secondary qualitative data (i.e., commentaries and letters and standard news articles) are chosen for corroboration (Golder, 2000). This is a form of triangulation that contributes to the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). Second, the aggregate of commentaries and letters from members of the public, in addition to a collection of standard news articles, can be and has been used as a reliable indicator of generalized public opinion (Humphreys, 2010). This contributes to the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings. Third, the data collection and analysis procedures have been disclosed for future replications. This is a form of audit trail and thick description that contributes to the dependability and confirmability of the findings (Bowen, 2009). Fourth, the study uses multiple and comparable instances (or situations) to depict each role of sports in the social marketing of national unity. This is a form of triangulation that contributes to the transferability of the findings (Cohen et al., 2011). Fifth, the codes and themes developed have been cross-examined and agreed upon by two people of different races who are not part of the current study. This is a form of peer debriefing and triangulation that contributes to the dependability and confirmability of the findings (Cohen et al., 2011).

Findings

The interpretive case study in this article highlights the key roles played by spectator sports in the social marketing of national unity to disparate communities in a multiracial country (i.e., Malaysia). In total, six roles of spectator sports in the social marketing of national unity were identified and presented through six themes in the thematic analysis: as an entry point to, a promoter of, an educator of, a symbol of, an initiator of conversations and dialogues on, and a unifying mechanism for national unity. Two types of spectator sports activities, national athletes’ participation in international competitions over the years (e.g., badminton, football, Olympics, Paralympics) and a recent sports movie produced and screened in Malaysia (i.e., *Ola Bola* [Bakar, Tung, Lim, & Chiu, 2016]), were found to be widespread among the themes on spectator sports and national unity and were used to support the thematic interpretations in the case study. As a measure of trustworthiness, alternative explanations were considered and addressed, most notably, through the theme of the critique of spectator sports for national unity. In the end, these themes contributed to the production of a “spectator sports for national unity” framework, which extends and contextualizes the existing “sports for development” framework by Schulenkorf (2012).

Spectator sports as an entry point to national unity

National disunity in multiracial Malaysia is an outcome of race-based politics, where politicians use race cards and racial polarization strategies to win support and votes (Goh, 2016; Irsyad, 2015). Racial tensions have erupted and flared immensely of late, revealing the ugly sides of extreme biases and rage from racial communities across the country. The current case study reveals that many Malaysians from all walks of life consider spectator sports to be a unique platform that can serve as an entry point to break down the serious racial divide in the larger interest of improving national unity in the country:

(Sports) is color blind. When we talk about football or watch a game, all barriers disappear as we focus on our common passion. (Minister of Home Affairs M. Yassin in a standard news article; *Free Malaysia Today*, 2014)

In particular, people tend to have a common goal and understanding when it comes to spectator sports. Thus, the issue of race is often abandoned (or disappears—at least while the spectator sporting activity is happening):

When Malaysians support our (national) athletes (who are participating at international sports competitions), (the) race of athletes isn't an issue ... that's the beauty of sports as a unifying factor. (commentary/letter in *Malaysiakini*; H. S. Lee, 2014)

Notably, the role of spectator sports as an entry point to national unity is predicated on the ability of spectator sports to surpass the inherent differences that characterize people of different races. In a film inspired by the glories of the Malaysian national football team that qualified for the 1980 Summer Olympics (*Ola Bola*), sports is seen as a common language understood and shared by people in multiracial communities, both in the depiction in films and among the multiracial audiences in the country:

The film certainly depicted what it was like once upon a time in Malaysia where all races were united, and even used several languages such as Malay, English, Tamil and Mandarin to communicate. (commentary/letter in *Malaysian Digest*; Yap, 2016)

Having a shared goal and common understanding is akin to “speaking the same language” and “being on the same page.” This is considered the first and most important step in conflict resolution and tension mitigation (Zhang, Lowenstein, & Murnighan, 2007). Thus, through the language of sports, social marketers, especially those from government and civil societies, will have an entry point from which to reach out and initiate meaningful changes. These changes would include promoting the idea of national unity, encouraging greater understanding, acceptance, and tolerance of the inherent differences, and fostering widespread integration and unity among multiracial communities in heterogeneous and pluralistic countries.

Spectator sports as a promoter of national unity

Building on the previous theme in which spectator sports is considered to provide an entry point to national unity, the narratives that fall under the current theme provide insights into the role of spectator sports as a promoter of national unity. In marketing, *promotion* refers to activities that create and raise awareness about a corporate or product brand, sales, and loyalty (Constantinides, 2006). When applied to social marketing



Figure 2. A multiracial scene from *Ola Bola* (Bakar, Tung, Lim, & Chiu, 2016) that inspires Malaysians to unite for their country.

and, specifically, to the context of marketing the social idea and the good of national unity, the case study shows that spectator sports is a social marketing tool that plays an important role in generating awareness, hype, traction, and critical mass on national unity.

In Malaysia, national unity appears to be a distant memory (or history) for many of its citizens. Sports, however, offers the opportunity to re-create those memories and experiences for people in the current generation (or the present). In doing so, it generates awareness, interest, and hype among communities of diverse races in the country on the need to integrate and unite for an amicable and harmonious country and society. *Ola Bola*, which has been heralded as one of the most successful Malaysian films to hit theaters, is a testament to this cause.

Released in January 2016, the movie communicates the glories of the Malaysian national football team in the 1980s. Here, promotion of national unity takes an experiential form by taking the audience on a journey through scenes depicting the many distinct aspects of being a Malaysian as well as the fruits that come from being united in both good and bad times. In the process of doing so, the movie inspires the hearts of its audiences and reminds Malaysians of the close bond and unity they once shared as a nation (see Figure 2).

More important, the producers and actors of *Ola Bola* noted that the sports-based movie was more than just a nostalgic tribute to an era when Malaysian football was respected across Asia (Hutt, 2016). It had a clear social mission: to engineer and instill a positive attitudinal and behavioral change by encouraging multiracial Malaysians to set aside inherent differences and unite for a better and greater Malaysia. Indeed, many others who have watched the movie have acknowledged this message:

The producers of *Ola Bola* have been able to do for Malaysia what many politicians cannot do, (that is) to remind us as a nation and as Malaysians, '*kita menang sama-sama, kita kalah sama-sama*' (we win and lose together). (*The Star* group managing director C. W. Wong in a commentary/letter in *Free Malaysia Today*; Abdul, 2016)

However, caution should be exercised to avoid a common pitfall of excessive promotion in the social marketing of national unity:

Ola Bola could be a fabulous movie about determination and unity and the Malaysian spirit. But thanks to the public relations and marketing team and their overwhelming bombardment of promotions and force-fed publicity, I think I will need to detox my system of *Ola Bola*. (commentary/letter in *Free Malaysia Today*; Abdul, 2016)

Although no clear indication was found on whether those who were overwhelmed by the promotion of the movie became inclined or disinclined to the notion of national unity, it may be necessary for social marketers to avoid the bombardment of promotions and force-fed publicity. They could instead look for alternative ways of sending the social message (e.g., word of mouth) beyond the traditional ways of organization-led promotion (e.g., paid advertising).

Spectator sports as an educator of national unity

Apart from promoting the notion and the importance of national unity, spectator sports also plays a key role in educating multiracial communities about national unity. This is done by using spectator sports to facilitate learning, most often experiential, so that multiracial communities can acquire the necessary knowledge and values characterizing a united nation:

There are a lot of values we can learn from this movie (*Ola Bola*, such as) patriotism, team spirit, self-sacrifice, (among others). (Minister of Primary Industries T. Kok in a commentary/letter in *Free Malaysia Today*; Abdul, 2016)

(Spectator sports) capture that spirit that you and I know is waning, or worse, lost in the country. (It teaches us about) the spirit of unity and togetherness that (is) lacking in many Malaysians as a result of all the negative news reports (about racial issues in) the country. (S. Tam in a standard news article; *The Malaysian Insider*, 2016)

More important, the case study reveals that national unity takes the form of the spirit of togetherness produced by spectator sports. This spirit can be cultivated by adopting a mind-set predicated on civic and patriotic values and by engaging in unselfish behavior (or behavior that prioritizes the greater good of the nation). In turn, the experiential nature of information disseminated, shared, and exchanged through spectator sports produces a contagion effect, which encourages multiracial communities across the country to embrace the idea of national unity and unite for a sporting purpose, most notably by rallying all Malaysians to collectively support the national representatives in any sporting activity regardless of race.

Spectator sports as a symbol of national unity

A symbol is a sign that represents something unique and important (DeLoache, 2004). It is a medium of conception for people to make sense of the world around them.

This medium has regularly emerged in spectator sports. In particular, sports participants, such as athletes and supporters from multiracial communities, are often considered to be symbols of national unity. Former minister of youth and sports, K. Jamaluddin, in a standard news article (The Star, 2015), stated that “when an athlete suits up in national colors, he represents each and every Malaysian, not the athlete’s race, state, religion, family, or employer.” Many prominent figures in society as well as ordinary citizens have also echoed this sentiment:

(There have been a few) recent moments (or symbols) of unity. These included the badminton fans, most of whom were Malays, cheering on badminton singles player (C. W.) Lee at Dataran Putrajaya during the Rio Olympics final. (Our national athletes such as) cyclist A. Awang, men’s doubles shuttlers (V. S.) Goh and (W. K.) Tan, and diver (P.) Rinong and her synchronized diving partner (J. H.) Cheong are all icons of (national) unity. (former prime minister of Malaysia N. Razak in a standard news article in *The Star*; Spykerman & Anis, 2016)

Thus, the role of (spectator) sports as a symbol of national unity is seen to be enacted through national athletes who represent the multiracial communities of the country when they compete at the international stage, and through prominent figures and ordinary citizens when they put away their differences and pour in their unconditional support for our national athletes through good (e.g., celebrate their success together) and bad (e.g., offer emotional support instead of playing the blame game or the race card) times.

Spectator sports as an initiator of conversations and dialogs on national unity

For many people, the hard part of socializing, especially between different races, is to initiate and carry on decent and enjoyable conversations and dialogs. With the advent of social media, many people communicate. But very often, when it comes to communication between people of different races, it becomes heated with exchanges of unpleasant accusations and statements. However, through spectator sports, such heated conversations tend to subside, and more positive and supportive exchanges of words tends to occur:

The social media sphere, which is normally used as a forum to argue, exchange unsavory words or throw nasty accusations, is now filled with positive and inspiring words that come from Malaysians of all walks of life, backgrounds, skin color, religions and political affiliations. (commentary/letter in the *New Straits Times*; L. T. Lee, 2016)

Conversations initiated through spectator sports span multiracial communities at all levels in society. In most instances, congratulatory and supportive messages are posted on social media to support sports activities or participants of sports activities. For example, the former prime minister of Malaysia N. Razak took the opportunity on Twitter to congratulate P. S. Chan and L. Y. Goh for winning a silver medal in badminton at the recent Olympics in Rio (see Figure 3).

Indeed, such messages tend to carry on as conversations and dialogs between different people over time. For example, the former youth and sports minister K. Jamaluddin followed up on the former prime minister’s post by sharing an inspiring back story on Chan’s and Goh’s Olympic successes (see Figure 4). Other Malaysians were quick to rally behind their national heroes, expressing their heartiest congratulations for their

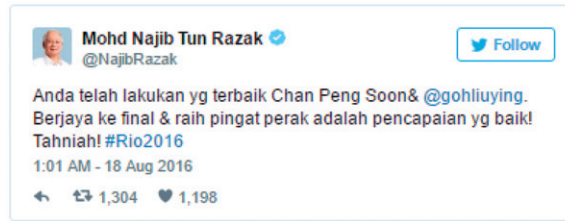


Figure 3. A tweet by the former prime minister of Malaysia congratulating sports winners. Translation note: “You have done your best, (P. S.) Chan and @gohliuying. (Your) success (in getting) into the finals and winning a silver medal is a good achievement. Congratulations! #Rio2016.”



Figure 4. A tweet by the former youth and sports minister sharing the story behind sports success.

amazing feat at the sporting event (see [Figure 5](#)). The athletes also acknowledged and participated in these conversations and dialogs.

One video that stood out from the rest was taken moments after the men’s doubles semifinal match at the Rio Olympics. It perfectly captured the lively atmosphere at a



Figure 5. Tweets by Malaysians to congratulate the achievements of sports winners.



Figure 6. Facebook comments by Malaysians that resonate with a video depicting a moment of national unity through sports.

local condominium. The video was shot by J. Singh and posted by a fellow Facebook user, K. Singh (<https://www.facebook.com/kashminder/videos/10153670451596610/>). In the video, loud cheers from residents break out on the streets as Malaysians cannot contain their excitement when Team Malaysia secures yet another ticket, bringing the nation closer to glory at the 2016 Rio Olympics (Tang, 2016). The video was viewed more than 480,000 times and shared more than 4,500 times as of October 10, 2016, showing that the incident resonated with many people of different races in the country as it reminded them how sports could be a mechanism to unite multiracial communities (see Figure 6).

Moreover, when negative comments and headlines come out in public (e.g., newspapers), sports, as an initiator of conversations and dialogs on national unity, can spark



Figure 7. Sports-related responses by the deputy minister of women, family, and community development and multiracial people over news headlines detrimental to national unity.

massive communicative reactions among multiracial communities in a heterogeneous and pluralistic country to rise, unite, and condemn any degrading remarks detrimental to national unity. For example, when national newspapers *Berita Harian* and *Kosmo* used headlines to suggest that the national athletes had disappointed millions of citizens by winning only a silver medal at the Olympics, Deputy Minister of Women, Family and Community Development H. Yeoh responded with a Facebook post stating that there was no need for such headlines and that the achievement of the national athletes should be considered a great feat (see Figure 7). The post received over 3,000 clicks (in terms of likes and sad and angry expressions), over 2,000 shares, and over 500 comments in a single day.

Spectator sports as a unifying mechanism for national unity

The current theme encapsulates the role of spectator sports as a unifying mechanism. Under this theme, spectator sports is recognized as a platform to unite people from multiracial communities. In particular, spectator sports, as a unifying mechanism, facilitates the creation and maintenance of relationships between multiracial communities inside and outside sports arenas:

Sports events (not only) produce healthy and fit individuals, but also strengthen the unity among the people of many cultures and backgrounds. (former chief minister of Sarawak A. Satem in a standard news article in *New Sarawak Tribune*; Shukri & Lidom, 2016)

In addition, when national athletes compete at the international stage, citizens are often seen to initiate gatherings among themselves to watch and support their flag bearers in those games, regardless of race. The unity seen through these self-initiated gatherings is also replicated in spectator sports activities that are not part of the national setup. In other words, spectator sports is a unifying mechanism for national unity regardless of whether the sports activity is participated in by national or international athletes, as spectator sports is something that is shared and loved by people of all races in the country:

It was also heartening to see that in the past two weeks, Malaysians were more united than we had been in recent months as we cheered and supported our Olympians competing with the world's greatest athletes. Whenever our shuttlers scored points or won a match, Malaysians shouted and clapped in unison, be it in their homes, workplaces, mamak stalls, restaurants, and public spaces, such as Seri Pentas in Selangor (state), Dataran Putrajaya in (Putrajaya, federal territory), and the open space at Gurney Paragon Mall in Penang (state). This shows that sports is able to foster unity as it helps us put aside our differences so that we can support our Olympic team. (commentary/letter in *New Straits Times*; L. T. Lee, 2016)

Even when there is some limitation to group participation in spectator sports, such as when the event is broadcast late at night and thus ordinary citizens may have to watch the match alone, the sense of national unity continues to exist:

My 10-year-old told me this morning that he was up last night watching Malaysia beat China to win a spot in the men's doubles finals in the Rio Olympics. The pride in his face when he said (this) was unmistakable. He was rooting for his fellow countrymen in their quest for Olympic glory. This says a lot about the role of sports in the unity of a country: (commentary/letter in *Malaysiakini*; Kong, 2016)

Furthermore, the sense of national unity produced by spectator sports in its role as a unifying mechanism extends from good to bad times. It is often during challenging times that national unity is put to test, and spectator sports has the ability to excel even in undesired situations:

Malaysians come together as one for sports not only in good times, but in challenging situations as well. There is no better example than the overwhelming support for badminton ace (C. W.) Lee during his doping ordeal. Throughout the ordeal, the 33-year-old Lee was not alone. Based on the support from Malaysians—from (Former) Youth and Sports Minister K. Jamaluddin to the (multiracial) people on the street—Lee knew he was not fighting the war alone as he prepared to face the Badminton World Federation hearing. (commentary/letter in *The Star*; Velloo, 2015)

Indeed, people from different races and at all levels of society share the sense of national unity cultivated through spectator sports. This sense goes beyond watching a sports match or movie as several instances show that multiracial communities with a high sense of national unity are willing to go the extra mile to celebrate the diversity in sporting achievements. For example, large groups of prominent multiracial figures, such as the former prime minister of Malaysia N. Razak and his wife, R. Mansor, and former ministers K. Jamaluddin, T. L. Liow, and K. S. Wee, and ordinary citizens, such as A. Faiz, 20, and S. Chin, 17, turned up at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport as early as two hours before the scheduled arrival of the Malaysian Olympic athletes to

welcome them home from the Rio Olympics 2016 (Divakaran, 2016). The crowd let out a loud roar the moment they caught a glimpse of the athletes entering the arrival hall. The players were greeted by Malaysians waving the Malaysian flag, beating drums, and chanting “Malaysia Boleh” to celebrate their heroes’ return. Similarly, Malaysia’s Paralympic athletes received a rousing heroes’ welcome by hundreds of multiracial citizens when they touched down at the airport (Murad, 2016).

Spectator sports and its critics on national unity

Despite the general consensus among multiracial communities on the roles that spectator sports can play for national unity, some critics and detractors question the legitimacy of spectator sports and its role in fostering national unity. For example, Wan (2016) argued that spectator sports is used as a means to fuel nationalistic pride and ego rather than to foster actual and long-lasting unity among multiracial citizens in a heterogeneous and pluralistic country. In another instance, controversial academic R. T. Abdullah contended that Malaysian Olympic medal winners are unpatriotic and compete in sports only for monetary rewards. In response, Malaysian Chinese Association former youth secretary-general K. S. Leong said that sports transcends the diversity of race. In particular, he mentioned that:

Malaysia’s badminton exponents, who coincidentally are ethnic Chinese, united all Malaysians, irrespective of race and religion, during their semi-final and final matches at the Rio Olympics. (K. S. Leong in a standard news article; Free Malaysia Today, 2016).

There are also many occasions that offer evidence to support the efficacy of spectator sports and its roles for national unity. For example, the nomination of K. G. Chiu’s *Ola Bola* for Best Picture in the non-Malay category at the 28th Festival Filem Malaysia (or FFM [Malaysian Film Festival]) in 2016, instead of the main Best Picture category, sparked outrage both among the public and within the film industry. Much as others did in the uproar surrounding the Academy Awards’ mostly white nominees in the infamous #OscarsSoWhite controversy, Malaysians took to social media to voice their dissatisfaction over the segregation of nominees, particularly after the movie aroused their sense of national pride and unity (Khor, 2016). In addition, a seven-time FFM nominee, M. Noor, was nominated for Best Cinematographer again this year for the *Bravo 5* combat film but had declared his decision to withdraw from the 28th FFM scheduled for September 1 to 3 and, a day later, announced that he would return his trophies unless the awards organizers canceled the existing list of nominees and held fresh nominations (Chik, 2016).

Indeed, these instances illustrate the potency of spectator sports in responding to its critics in two major ways. The first relates to the immediate consumption of a spectator sports activity and the product of national unity that takes place in that moment of consumption (e.g., collective actions by multiracial communities showing support for a common sporting goal). The second relates to the impact of spectator sports in fostering attitudes and behaviors reflecting national unity after the consumption of spectator sports activities (e.g., collective actions by multiracial communities showing support for national unity beyond a common sporting goal).

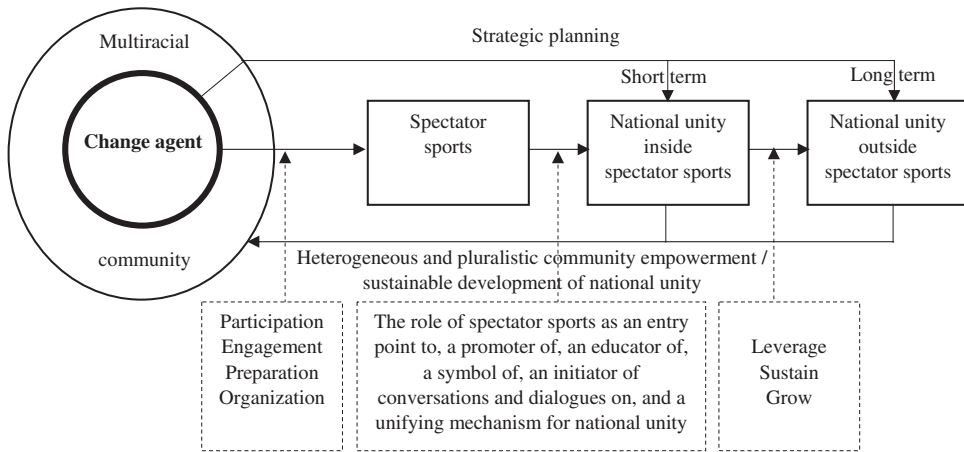


Figure 8. Spectator-sports-for-national-unity framework.

Spectator sports for national unity framework

Using the sports-for-development framework as a conceptual guideline and on the basis of a collection of contextualized findings from the current interpretive case study, this article introduces a spectator-sports-for-national-unity framework as a guide for social marketers and stakeholders to understand the social process that takes place when intending to promote and foster national unity through spectator sports (see Figure 8). In essence, the framework places the key themes in the form of the roles of spectator sports in the social marketing of national unity into perspective by delineating the conceptual boundaries and the social process in a systematic manner. In doing so, the framework provides comprehensive qualitative insights into the antecedents and consequences of spectator sports for national unity.

The spectator-sports-for-national-unity framework suggests that the change agent, as a person or as an entity, is the catalyst of transformation that encourages and persuades the multiracial community in a heterogeneous and pluralistic country to adopt the idea and practice of national unity through sports in the form of spectator sports. As a person, a change agent could be someone from the multiracial community who values national unity and wants to see people of different races unite and develop a sense of togetherness as citizens of a country. As an entity, a change agent could be a stakeholder in society, such as government or nongovernmental agencies, business and social enterprises, and civil societies, with a similar outlook as an individual change agent with regard to the value and expectations of national unity. Nonetheless, it is important to note that entities consist of people, and in a heterogeneous and pluralistic country, people are part of the multiracial community, thus explaining the position of change agents residing within the multiracial community.

Change agents may collectively participate in, engage in, prepare, and organize spectator sports activities, such as watching sports matches (e.g., Olympics, World Cup) and movies (e.g., *Ola Bola*), and/or they may get others in the multiracial community to do so. In doing so, the roles of spectator sports in the social marketing of national unity to the multiracial community become activated, namely, as an entry point to, a promoter

of, an educator of, a symbol of, an initiator of conversations and dialogs on, and a unifying mechanism for national unity. In turn, the social marketing of national unity through spectator sports produces two major outcomes: attitudinal and behavioral moments and situations of national unity inside (e.g., celebrate and support national athletes competing in international tournaments regardless of race) and outside (e.g., stand up against racial discrimination) the spectator sports activity, with the former being an immediate and short-term outcome and the latter being a long-term outcome as a result of leveraging, sustaining, and growing the immediate product of spectator sports activities conducted over time.

More important, the framework suggests that strategic planning is needed to ensure that spectator sports activities produce the desired immediate and sustainable longitudinal outcomes for national unity. This responsibility is placed on the change agents who have greater understanding and desire for national unity in the country. Indeed, change agents are often in the best position to initiate meaningful changes as they are often leaders in their own communities or entities in a position of influence (Van Dijk & Van Dick, 2009). In turn, the efforts invested in and by change agents will help empower more people from the multiracial community to become change agents themselves in the pursuit of sustainable development of national unity, both inside and outside spectator sports activities.

Discussion

The potential of spectator sports to engineer meaningful social change, progress, and development is promising. Through the interpretive case study, this article contributes to and extends the extant literature on this potential, especially through the lens of sports for development and social marketing. More specifically, the case study offers qualitative insights into the ways in which social marketers can use spectator sports, as a leisure activity, to promote and foster national unity among citizens in a heterogeneous and pluralistic country, such as a multiracial one. These ways take the form of roles, which the case study has uncovered to be an entry point to, a promoter of, an educator of, a symbol of, an initiator of conversations and dialogs on, and a unifying mechanism for national unity.

Theoretical implications

To place these roles in perspective for greater conceptual comprehension of the social process to develop them and their subsequent impact on national unity, the article, through the case study, has developed and presented a spectator-sports-for-national-unity framework. This framework makes a fresh theoretical contribution to the extant literature through the contextualization of the sports-for-development framework based on the findings of qualitative secondary sources. In particular, the spectator-sports-for-national-unity framework accounts for the unique peculiarities in the social process that take place by using leisure in the form of spectator sports for the social marketing of national unity in a heterogeneous and pluralistic country. Thus, through this framework, the antecedents and consequences of using leisure in the form of spectator sports

as a platform for national unity can be accentuated, specifically in terms of the role of change agents and multiracial communities in participating in, engaging in, preparing, and organizing leisure activities in the form of spectator sports and the ways in which these activities, through the role of spectator sports, produce a united nation inside and outside those leisure activities.

Managerial implications

The findings of the case study, which satisfy the criteria of trustworthiness for qualitative research, have three major practical implications for social marketers who are interested in using leisure in the form of spectator sports to address the problem of national disunity.

First, the case study offers empirical support to potential strategies that intend to use leisure in the form spectator sports as a means of developing and fostering national unity among its citizens. It has shown in many instances the moments of national unity that spectator sports have produced.

Second, the key roles of spectator sports in the social marketing of national unity can be used to formulate actionable strategies for national unity. The case study offers insights to suggest that spectator sports can be deployed as an entry point to reach multiracial communities and subsequently used as a means to promote, educate about, and initiate conversations and dialogs on national unity. Symbols of national unity can be established to show physical evidence of its existence and to inspire and foster greater integration among multiracial communities within and beyond spectator sports in the short and long runs.

Third, the spectator-sports-for-national-unity framework, which is a product of the case study, offers a clear overview of the social process that takes place when spectator sports is used to cultivate and build national unity. Through this process, social marketers can target specific areas for desired attitudinal and behavioral change in the short and long runs for sustainable development of national unity.

Conclusion

The article has shown that leisure in the form of spectator sports can be an attractive and feasible alternative for social marketers to use for the social marketing of national unity. In particular, the article, through the interpretive case study, recognizes the potential of spectator sports to help forge solidarity and cooperation and to foster tolerance. It acknowledges the need to strengthen efforts at all levels to maximize the potential of leisure, especially spectator sports, in the sustainable development of national unity. Unity in diversity is one of the main agendas contributing to the development of a country. Thus, leisure, particularly spectator sports, should be valued as a platform to strengthen national unity, especially among the diverse communities in heterogeneous and pluralistic countries. As the late South African president Nelson Mandela put it:

(Spectator) sports has the power to unite people in a way that little else can. It can create hope where once there was only despair. It breaks down racial barriers. It laughs in the face of discrimination. (Spectator) sports speaks to people in a language they can understand.

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