‘We’re all in this together’: Perspectives from within the Gulf Cooperation Council Women’s Games

Hussa K Al-Khalifa
Loughborough University London, UK

Dwa Al-Khalifa
Royal University for Women, Bahrain

Abstract
Sport has often been advocated as a tool to achieve various social development (SD) goals. It has also been used as a way of expanding soft power (SP) influence. Combining both concepts provides an opportunity to understand how SP and SD may interrelate through the use of domestic SP strategies in sport. In this paper, we discuss the identified themes of unity, pride, and collective identity that arise from a regional women’s sporting competition in the Arabian Gulf among the Gulf Cooperation Council members, as factors that strengthened the prominence of athletes’ shared identity and connectedness. Using the perspectives of the authors who were immersed in the sporting competition, we argue that this information is important for sports organisers to use as bases for SP strategies to achieve inwards-focused social goals.

Keywords
women sport, soft power, social identity, Muslim women, sport policy, sport for development, Gulf Cooperation Council

Introduction
Sport has often been advocated as a tool to achieve various social development (SD) goals (Coalter, 2013; Kidd, 2008). These developmental aims are broad-ranging, including conflict resolution, social cohesion, health promotion, and gender empowerment.
With a significant part of the sport for development (SFD) literature focused on youth-sport community initiatives (Schulenkorf et al., 2016), De Rycke and De Bosscher (2019) called for more studies that explore the social impact of elite sport.

One way of conceptualising these elite sports’ effects is through the concept of soft power (SP). As opposed to hard power, SP refers to ‘the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion’, arising from ‘the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideals and policies’ (Nye, 2004: 256). SP strategies in sport are used to build a nation’s image for international audiences and often form a major component of a nation’s sports policy (Nygård and Gates, 2013).

An overlooked, but critical aspect of sport’s SP is its domestic utility (Connell, 2018b; Nygård and Gates, 2013). As Connell explained, ‘soft power must therefore always be also focused inwards in the interests of national unity, stability and acceptance, allowing “ordinary people” to participate and support the nation detached from the political system’ (Connell, 2018a: 99). Similarly, Nygård and Gates (2013) identified domestic attempts to use SP strategies in sport for reconciliation, integration, and anti-racism. Although SP influence is often described in terms of national policy, it could also be regarded as an emergent phenomenon that grows, until it is noticed, directed, and utilised by state actors. It is on this basis that we build this paper’s argument.

The human activities that produce SP predate hard power as it is currently construed. Simply, SP grows until it is used, and discussions of contexts in which it grows are not determinative. As such, we argue that SP and its diverse applications can be a complementary feature of sport policy that can be utilised by nations and state bodies as they look to develop their own sport systems, as well as achieve social goals.

This paper explores the potential uses of SP strategies within regional sporting events by conceptualising how elite sport can have positive social influences on participants from within a common region. Our goal is to identify the types of outcomes expressed by participants and the associated mechanisms that lead to those outcomes. With such information, state bodies and nations can better utilise SP strategies to promote certain common social goals through regional sporting organisations. To expand on this point and why it may be particularly applicable within the context studied, it is necessary to understand the geographical, political, and social context within which this study was conducted, including a deeper understanding of regional identity and its meaning for our study.

Situating the research and discussion of the literature

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region

The GCC was formed in 1981 to strengthen security and establish political and economic alliances between the six nations of the Arabian Gulf: Bahrain; Kuwait; Oman; Saudi Arabia; Qatar; and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Although not strictly a homogeneous group, citizens of all six nations refer to themselves by the umbrella term Khaleeji (those from the Gulf), which is a recognition of the commonality between people from this region.

On a policy level, strengthening social bonds and utilitarian links that foster attachments between Khaaleejis is critical for the prosperity of the GCC entity where a common Gulf-wide policy framework in diverse sectors aligns many national policies. However,
there have been certain shortcomings when nurturing such bonds on a practical level between citizens. For example, Patrick (2009) observed a weakening of national coherence after GCC states tried to build national identity by superimposing indigenous symbols that some groups may not have related to such as Bedouin pastimes of falconry and poetry writing. He also critiqued the shortcomings of the GCC entity and the attempts of its organisational arms and institutions to foster a Gulf identity beyond religious and cultural ties stemming from shared histories. Institutionalisation alone, he argued, is not enough to unite members of the GCC. From a regional perspective, it is thus critical to find alternative ways of fostering such bonds between citizens of the GCC nations, and we argue that the role of sport must be acknowledged.

More recently, relations between Gulf countries have been strained by a political dispute dating from 2017 in which Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE severed diplomatic relations with Qatar for what they alleged was meddling in internal affairs (Kerr, 2017). Although the dispute has not resulted in drastic measures such as Qatar leaving the GCC and recent efforts have been made for reconciliation, the effects of the dispute have created tensions that have extended to multiple populations and undermined the Khaleeji identity, which is based on unity and a common interest (Parvez, 2020).

Our research investigated how sport can be used within this context to ease national tensions. We argue that regional state bodies and nations can better utilise SP strategies through sport to strengthen unity among GCC citizens, particularly in the wake of political tensions, by better promoting a GCC identity among athletes from the region. We aimed to explore the relationship between Gulf identity-building and sport through a particular sporting event, and examine how a common social identity (SI) might be fostered through SP strategies that influence relations between members of the GCC.

SI. When considering how to influence SI, it is essential to know that individuals may already derive their identities and senses of self from groups they are born into, such as nationality, race, gender (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), and social groups (Abrams and Hogg, 1988). In understanding how a particular identity is activated or developed within a situation, Stryker (1980) brought forth the concept of ‘salience’ and how an identity is formed from a situation or event where a social situation and context can trigger a particular SI (Hogg et al., 1995).

Understanding that there are multiple identities at play within our research subjects, who are female athletes from different GCC nations, we aimed to understand how their participation has shaped their Khaleeji identity and how this identity has, in turn, shaped aspects of their participation. While the paper is not meant to offer a solution to the political problem, it intends to help inform sport policy and management strategies in the region, which may support and strengthen the GCC. It is thus also necessary to establish the context for the sports sector and how it is organised, especially given the scarcity of relevant research from this region.

GCC sport

The transnational network that links the GCC countries together is reflected within sport and the various GCC nations’ sport development projects (Amara and Theodoraki, 2010).
A common sport policy framework at the regional level is implemented by such institutions despite the autonomy of each nation in developing its own domestic sport policy.

The pinnacle event resulting from these GCC sporting networks is the Gulf Cup, a men’s football tournament between the six nations. Baabood explained that ‘The Gulf Cup tournament is the regional apex of football competitions [. . .] it helps to promote popular Gulf culture and bolster national identity and the image of the GCC states’ (Baabood, 2008: 117). During the current political tension between the GCC nations, for example, the latest Gulf Cup provided a solid example of sport’s potential for strengthening GCC unity where ‘media outlets were quick to link Saudi and Emirati participation in the Arabian Gulf Cup, held in Doha in 2019, with behind-the-scenes diplomatic efforts to mend political ties between the feuding neighbours’ (Jahshan, 2019: 1).

Regional sporting events such as the Gulf Cup are important for strengthening regional and political and economic cooperation in the Gulf region (Amara, 2012). In this regard, our study advances the notion of the role of sport in identity-building within the GCC. Whereas previous research has focused on the GCC’s promotion to an outward audience of national brands through international sponsorships and the hosting of mega-sporting events (Chadwick, 2019) or the broader connections between wider Arab and Islamic identities and sport (Amara, 2012), this paper focuses on the inward promotion of a Gulf identity through sport and the effects of that identity on feelings of social bonds among athletes. Distinctively, we focus on a women’s sporting event in the GCC, which remains relatively uncharted academic territory for the Gulf region. The next subsection provides greater insight into cultural elements related to Gulf women and sport.

**GCC women and sport**

It is difficult to discuss the relationship of GCC women and sport without briefly introducing the position of women in the Gulf states. While it is not within the scope of this paper to thoroughly discuss the role of women within the GCC, we will present a very brief overview of specific issues as they relate to sport.

There has been a large increase in women participating in public life in the Gulf states, mainly through state-led efforts (Alsharekh, 2007) and ‘significant gains in higher education and school education’ (Al Gharaibeh, 2015: 29). Krause explained that ‘the modality of state feminism . . . has enabled women to acquire some form of greater independence and self-development’ (Krause, 2009: 32). State-led efforts are thus critical for the advancement of women’s SD within the GCC, and this is also true for sport (Lysa, 2019). Traditionally, social norms and a culture of patriarchy (Alsharekh, 2007) have limited women’s involvement in specific sectors, such as sport. This is because women are seen as ‘symbols of tradition and identity’ (Alsharekh, 2005: 12), and a ‘fear of an eroding identity’ often impedes the redefinition of roles for women in the GCC (Krause, 2009: 23).

Gulf women in sport represent a closer-knit unit than Muslim or Arab women in sport because of their shared socialisation processes and social values. As Al-Qattan noted, ‘none of the six states of the Arabian Peninsula are insular from another in their development of sport and physical recreation for girls and women’ (Al-Qattan, 2005: 18). Furthermore, Al-Essa (2017) refers to successes in women’s sport in other Arab
countries, but questioned the GCC’s commitment to sport for women, lamenting the harsher restrictions placed on women in the Gulf in the name of religion and traditional values that, he contended, need to be revised. To provide an example, whereas Morocco celebrated its first Olympic gold medal won by a female athlete in 1984, it was not until 2012 that all the Gulf countries had female athletes in their Olympic delegations.

Consequently, women’s sport in the Gulf is seen as underdeveloped compared with other countries in the Arab and Muslim world due to shortcomings towards women’s sports development. Hence, elite women’s sport in the traditional sense of the term, whereby athletes aim to compete at the Olympic level and pursue sports as a career, cannot accurately describe female athletes’ relationship with sport in the Gulf. Rather, women’s sport is still developing and the mere existence of women’s national sporting teams is a step towards elite status.

Participation in sport for women in the Gulf entails careful considerations given to politics, religion and gender norms (Al-Haidar, 2004). In response to such issues, Lysa (2019), in her study on female footballers in Qatar, notes the importance of localised spaces for girls and women in the Gulf region to practise sport where they are free from the scrutiny of society and family pressure which Knez et al. (2014) identified as an important influence for GCC female athlete decision-making. These distinctions between Gulf countries and non-Gulf countries are important to note when considering Gulf sport policy for women and connections between members who share the commonality of being a female from the region interested in sport. The authors of this paper share this wider identity.

The birth of the GCC Women’s Games in 2008 represented a commitment towards advancing women’s sport development within the region. The Games were established with similar values to the Islamic Women’s Games (Amara, 2012) but focused inwards towards GCC women. Moreover, unlike the Islamic Women’s Games where men were barred and clothing restrictions were placed on athletes (Pfister, 2004), the GCC Women’s Games welcomed male spectators, especially family members, as well as male coaching staff. This distinction is essential as it carries the notions of Khaleeji identity within localised spaces beyond the dimensions of Islam and Arab commonalities in the same way that the Gulf Cup is seen as a cultural congregation of Gulf identity for men.

The Games are held every two years and are organised by the joint GCC Women’s Sport Organising Committee, which is funded through a contribution from each member country and composed of female sport policy-makers from each of the Gulf countries. These Games are thus a microcosm of the Olympics held at a regional level and give female athletes in the region a chance to compete on the international stage. The 1st GCC Women’s Games were held in Kuwait in 2008 with five of the six GCC countries participating across six sports. The 6th and most recent GCC Women’s Games, the subject of this study, were held in Kuwait in 2019 over 10 days in October and were historic for the participation of all six countries of the GCC, and included 11 sports with over 600 athletes participating.

From the perspective of the authors who were both immersed in the event in different capacities, this research provides insights from within the Games, where previous research has not been conducted. We identify potential SP strategies that were used or could have been better utilised by the committee organising the event to strengthen
relations between participating members and understand how the event reflected the distinct cultural, political, economic, and traditional ties between Gulf countries.

**Methods**

This paper draws on a more extensive study that explored the relationship between elite women’s sport and SD. For this research, we used data collected during the GCC Women’s Games in 2019, during which time both authors jointly adopted a phenomenological method. The choice to use a phenomenological method was aided by two factors: the authors’ positions as embedded members of the Gulf sporting scene; and the desire to understand the lived experiences of women athletes from the Gulf region in a local sports event. Within the literature on SFD, the discussion surrounding local versus global dimensions on the production of knowledge was compelling, with prominent and growing calls for the production of local knowledge to further understand the contextual uses of sport for SD (Hayhurst, 2016; Nicholls et al., 2010; Ratna, 2018).

The authors’ positions as Khaleeji sports practitioners and academic researchers provided a solution to the power/knowledge nexus that has often beleaguered the SFD literature, which has been characterised by Western researchers aiming to communicate local knowledge (Hayhurst, 2016; Nicholls et al., 2010). For this study, both authors are Muslim women and citizens of a Gulf state, similar to the subjects of this study. Academically, author one is a PhD researcher in a United Kingdom-based university and author two is a lecturer at a Gulf-based university. Both authors are active members of the Gulf women’s sports sector, with author one having over 18 years of experience as an executive of women’s sports and author two having 15 years of experience as a national-level athlete.

Notably, the authors are sisters who wished to share their knowledge about and experiences with sport through academia and encourage readers to broaden their understanding of women from this region. This brings us to the second point behind the methodological choice: the portrayal of Muslim women and sport. Toffoletti and Palmer critiqued the representation of Muslim women in sport and identified ‘a need to examine Muslim women’s encounters with sport in new and more expansive ways’ that do not theorise Muslim women’s experiences in binary terms, ‘whereby Muslim women are configured as “outside” sport within a Eurocentric imagining of the Western self that occupies privileged “insider” status in the sporting domain’ (Toffoletti and Palmer, 2015: 147). Accordingly, we aim to diversify the voices and viewpoints that shape knowledge about Muslim women in sport, specifically Gulf women in sport, which remains an under-researched area in the sports literature.

Phenomenology and its aim to ‘explore and understand the lived experience’ of its participants aligns with this research’s intentions. Specifically, given the authors’ positionality, Heidegger’s (1962) approach to phenomenology was a better fit for the research than Husserl’s (1970) pioneering work in the field. Whereas Husserl (1970) advocated objective separation between researcher and data, Heidegger (1962) acknowledged the preconceptions of researchers, that ‘people, therefore, encounter the world with reference to their own background understanding, and [that] therefore their interpretation of the lived experience will reflect this background’ (Edwards and Skinner, 2009: 376). As such,
we adopt the stance of a growing number of SFD scholars who advocate a move away from measuring numerical impacts and towards evidence-based on experiences that can encourage new understanding and knowledge within the field (Nicholls et al., 2010).

Fieldwork was carried out during the span of the GCC Women’s Games held in Kuwait between 20 October 2019 and 30 October 2019. The authors investigated complementing aspects of the sporting experience whereby author two immersed herself in the playing experience as an athlete in one of the team events and author one embedded herself within the managerial side of the Games. With their combined efforts, the authors aimed to provide a more holistic account of an under-explored research area pertaining to the experiences of Gulf women in sport. It is important to recognise that the personal connectedness of the authors provided for richer interpretive opportunities to examine the socio-cultural dimensions of the event and communicate the nuances of the experience, especially given the limited time window for data collection.

Throughout the research, a total of 53 semi-structured interviews were conducted during the concluding days of the Games, with 31 interviews conducted at the site of the Games, and 22 carried out at team residences. 10 of the interviews involved team coaching-staff members, and 43 were conducted with athletes. Purposive sampling was employed whereby interview participants were selected from a range of sports and from each of the Gulf nations. However, to avoid adding another layer of identity to the study, we did not interview participants from Paralympic sports. Interviewing a range of athletes and staff members across diverse sports and from different countries offered insights into how the sporting experience was viewed from multiple aspects, and what meanings may be attributed to the participation and experiences of Gulf women in sport.

Author one conducted interviews with staff members and author two, being an athlete herself, conducted the athlete interviews to build rapport and trust. Each interview lasted 20–30 minutes. These times were allocated to the researchers by the official delegations, who welcomed the interviews after the day’s matches for each sport, but restricted the timings that athletes and staff were away from their delegations. As such, the window for interviewing was short, and an interview protocol was necessary for consistency. Respondents were asked questions about meanings attributed to the Games, emotions felt during the competition, social impacts experienced, and any influences or attitudinal changes towards the GCC entity and region as a result of participation in the Games. Interviews were conducted in English or Arabic, according to the preference of the interviewee (both authors are fluent in both languages). These interviews were later translated and transcribed and then imported into NVivo software.

When dealing with human experience, semi-structured interviews offer an advantage compared with the pre-coded, restrictive answers of structured interviews, as it is necessary to ‘delve beyond the obvious’ (Roller and Lavrakas, 2015: 2). To access these insights, rapport and trust were capitalised on to uncover the meanings that the participants attributed to the sporting events. Here, the interviewers’ identities and existing networks allowed for easy access and helped build trust (Morgan and Guevara, 2008). For these reasons, each interview was conducted in the preferred language, and immediately after event participation, which helped to reduce any post-experience misremembering (Shipway and Fyall, 2017).
To experience social practices associated with this women’s sporting event, the authors also conducted participant observation, which took place as author two participated in one of the sports over five days of competition, and author one conducted her managerial role with one of the delegations. The authors practised reflective journal writing to recognise their position as an ‘insider’, which can be considered ‘paradoxical’ (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994: 123) due to the advantages of being attuned to the finer points of the subject at hand while at the same time trying to limit bias and presumptions. Reflecting helped to recognise deep-rooted beliefs and challenge assumptions that the authors may have had about the experiences of Gulf women in sport (Karp and Kendall, 1982). Reflections on the interviews conducted were also recorded within these journals.

All necessary approval for the ethical conduct of this research was obtained by author one by virtue of her extensive network of relationships with the organising committee and in accordance with the United Kingdom Data Protection Act of 1998. In accordance with her university’s ethical policy framework, all interviewees were asked to sign informed consent forms whereby they were given anonymity options, and participant information sheets were distributed that provided details about the study.

For the qualitative data analysis, we used the transcribed interviews, and observational field notes gathered within NVivo 12 software to analyse the two data types simultaneously. This allowed for an exploration of the links between explicit statements and implicit meanings that were inferred (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Each author transcribed a selection of the interviews, and the meanings were discussed together as the interrelated themes became more apparent. Open coding, whereby a series of preliminary codes were gathered from the transcribed text, was first used to condense the data. Then basic themes were developed, and the codes were re-evaluated by both authors together and refined into axial codes. Selective coding, as opposed to line-by-line coding, was used, as encouraged by Creswell (1998), to provide greater accuracy in terms of categorisation.

Given the large data sets that were collected, for the purpose of this paper and to present a more in-depth nuanced analysis of the event, the authors’ field notes alone are presented within the data findings, as they encompass the interview reflections and observations from the perspective of the authors. This treatment allows for more depth of critical understanding that achieves our research aims within the limited scope of this paper.

**Findings**

The GCC Games are built around implicit assumptions about the importance of the Khaleeji bond between athletes and delegations, but the findings suggest that there is no explicit plan by organisers to strengthen or highlight that bond. Below are selected field notes taken in relation to each identified theme of unity, pride, and collective identity, which are followed by a discussion on the implications of the findings.
Sense of unity and links

The sense of unity between participating athletes was identified as a theme from the findings. These are explained through the following reflective field notes excerpt from author one:

Upon entering the sports hall, it is hard to miss the overarching message from the Games: Gulf women coming together to play the sports they love. A match between the UAE and Saudi Arabia had just ended, and I observe the Saudi players heading to their dressing room in tears. A few minutes later, after a pep talk from their coach, I noticed that the UAE players, instead of heading to their own dressing room, headed towards their counterparts. I waited for a few minutes to see when they would realise their mistake, but as time passed, I realised that this was deliberate. I looked around at the stadium towards the fans and around the sports hall. I could see some fans holding up miniature flags, which were distributed by an event organiser. As their hands waved, I could see the GCC flag, which represented the GCC political entity printed on one side, and the nation’s flag on the other. I recognised one of the spectators from within my own Bahrain delegation; she was proudly waving the Kuwait flag and gave me a big smile. In the meantime, I heard some clapping, and the Saudi dressing room door opened. The UAE players emerged wearing their opponent’s team jerseys, and some Saudi players wore the UAE uniform. I was reminded of World Cup matches where players are often seen exchanging jerseys. The players posed for selfies, and I watched as they chatted and began adding each other on social media.

The next match was about to start. Players lined up as the teams’ national anthems were being played. I found myself singing along to Kuwait’s national anthem. As the match was being played, an old acquaintance from Qatar came up to me to say hello. We had met a few years ago during a sports competition, and she commented on how the Bahrain team had improved, and she even remembered some of the players’ names. She asked about one of the players who wasn’t there; I explained that she was injured, and we joked that this was probably good news for the other teams.

After the match was over, there was a medal award ceremony. Saudi Arabia was receiving the bronze medal; it was Bahrain’s head of delegation who gave them the medals. I noticed that those who were giving out the medals were always the heads of delegations of other GCC nations. When it was Bahrain’s turn to receive their medals, for example, it was the Kuwait representative who handed them theirs and so forth. It was a way of emphasising the camaraderie between nations.

As one of the interviewees simply put it, the GCC Women Games were an opportunity to ‘bring the GCC countries together and [it] help[ed] us build bridges through meeting new people on other teams’; I felt this as true too, and I was encouraged that so many interviewees shared the same sentiment. (28 October 2019)

From the excerpt above, it is clear that a sense of community existed among the athletes and it was unsurprising to learn from the interviews that meeting other athletes from the region, who share the same passions and interests contributed to the positive experiences attributed to the competition and helped facilitate social relations within the female sports community in the GCC region. Author two was able to shed further light on the role of social media in forging such relations:
Looking around at other teams in the arena, we were all alike really. We speak the same language and listen to the same songs. I remember hearing a current Khaleeji popular song blaring from the dressing room next door before our match, I felt a pang in my heart that I wanted to open the door and join them instead of sitting in my own dressing room listening to tactics.

In the area outside the dressing rooms, one of the players from another team came up to me. She looked like someone I knew from back home. We talked about how excited we were to be playing. Before she left, we added each other on Instagram. After the Games were over, she sent me a message to say, ‘Next tournament, we want you to play for us’, knowing full well that players cannot play for other national teams. Before long, we were working together on what our GCC dream team would look like if we ever got the chance to compete as one. (26 October 2019)

The excerpt above is testament to the familiarity and strength felt by participants of the GCC Women’s Games afforded by common social characteristics and interests and highlighted through the Games. This was further evidenced by the lack of tension observed between athletes whose countries were at opposite ends of the GCC political spectrum. Rather than observing a proxy rivalry played out in the sports arena, author two explains that the sports setting served to remove boundaries and create new links based solely on a joint interest in sport:

As we were standing in the queue to enter the arena, a few volleyball national team players passed by us carrying their first-place trophy; they had just finished their games that were scheduled before the football tournament kicked off. One of them turned towards us and said, ‘We got the gold medal, can you match us?’ This clearly shook one of our star players, as I could see her visibly struggling before our match, feeling the weight of their words given that she was a former volleyball player herself.

A UAE football player overheard the conversation. She turned to us and said, ‘Look at the number of people in the stands!’ I glanced up to a sea of girls and families wearing different jerseys celebrating. She continued with a wink, saying ‘There is no way their sport can draw this crowd or any other sport I think.’ (25 October 2019)

After we secured the first place medal and trophy, I recalled the conversation above. I made sure the volleyball players saw us ascend the podium. It was our first time in the tournament and we matched their first place standing, I’m sure our players felt relief, too. We’re all in this together. But anything they could do, we could do too. (30 October 2019)

Any hint of animosity sensed between members was thus not one between nations, but within sporting categories with athletes playing certain sports seemingly forming smaller in-groups. Despite this sport-related rivalry, no enmity towards the broader GCC region or individual nations was seen, thereby keeping intact the sense of unity felt within the Games and links formed between athletes (especially those who played the same sport). In addition to unity and links, there was also a feeling of common pride and collective agency, as we explain in the next subsection.
Sense of pride and collective agency

The notion of pride was evident from the interviewees’ answers. This was complemented by a sense of common struggle of being a GCC female athlete, which helped participants to feel proud of their accomplishments. The following excerpt from author one’s reflective field notes explains:

I was proud to see women’s football being played at this level. The stands were almost full of spectators, both men and women. There was live coverage on national TV [television], and updates from the Games were included in the daily news. I remembered not so long ago when I had to fight for the right to launch the first women’s national football team in the region. Today, on seeing so many people come out in support of Gulf women playing sports, I was in awe.

I completely understood when interviewees kept emphasising how ‘proud and privileged’ they felt to be playing the Games. Twenty years ago, there was no such opportunity for their predecessors. To see athletes realise their privilege in being able to play the sport they love at a regional level, I was proud too. Proud to be a woman from the Gulf, in a competition that was showcasing so much talent. (24 October 2019)

The sense of pride explained above was not measured by victories or competitive success, but rather by a sense of participation and representation. Being historically underrepresented put women athletes in the GCC on a common platform. The realisation that the Games were a historic milestone for women’s sport in the region was not lost on the athletes, as author two explains:

Outside the sporting venues, I was surrounded by ‘can do’ attitudes. On the wall of the Salwa Al Sabah Club was a quote: ‘Strength does not come from physical capabilities but from invincible willpower’. Another message read: ‘Let the biggest challenge in your life be developing yourself and building yourself through sport’. These were accompanied by graffiti-like images of girls playing sport. It was easy to feel inspired and enter the facilities with a sense of accomplishment simply by being there.

Speaking to other athletes, I shared their feeling of pride to be able to represent my country in a sport that I loved. I also felt that it was a ‘dream come true’ as one of the interviewees told me. When the Saudi national anthem was played, I got goosebumps at the idea of such a historic moment happening in front of my eyes because it was the first time the country had participated in a regional women’s sports competition. It was nice to finally see girls being celebrated for playing sport instead of being ostracised.

When I heard one of the sports officials explain that it was our responsibility to pave the way for other girls in sport, I nodded my head. I was doing this for the next little girl who kicks a ball around and hears the words ‘that’s a boy’s sport’. I was doing this for the future of women’s football in the Gulf. (27 October 2019)

There was agreement on the joy of Gulf women being recognised after experiencing a common deprivation of opportunities in the sports sector. Responses among
participants showcased the breakthroughs of participation, which led to a sense of pride and acknowledgement of collective agency that made it possible to ensure the future of girls and women in sport in the region. These shared experiences and struggles specific to being a Gulf female athlete strengthened the participants’ sense of ‘we’, whereby collective agency (Melucci, 2009) was fostered among participating athletes. This again helped support the feeling of a common GCC female sporting community within the Games.

In this way, the GCC Women’s Games helped to cultivate a functional community (Anderson, 1983) between participants in the competition, in addition to the geographical connections that bind them. By emphasising the common interests between participants as well as their common struggles, social relations are strengthened between participants across the Gulf through the shared experience of sport. The implications of these reflections for sport policy strategy are discussed in the next section.

Discussion and conclusion

The empirical findings discussed in this study contribute to understanding how commonalities between GCC female athletes were accentuated through their participation in the GCC Women’s Games. However, the extent to which such influences were planned for or considered by the organising committee were limited. In this section, we discuss the strategies that might be based on these findings.

The identified themes of unity, pride, and collective identity are factors that participants said strengthened the prominence of their shared identity. These, we argue, offer an opportunity for official sports organisations to use for building SP strategies to encourage social cohesion within the region.

We drew on the correlated concepts of identity salience and prominence (Brenner et al., 2014) to explain the potential of SP strategies for regional sports organisations. Our data demonstrate that intergroup relations between members of the female sporting community in the Gulf were positively influenced through participation in the GCC Women’s Games. This, we argue, has to do with common identity features.

The interactions within the setting being studied amplified subjective senses of value towards being a Khaleeji female athlete, and effectively created links between members as a result of this identity prominence and the resulting collective identity. McCall and Simmons (1978) argue that identity prominence is linked to interactions within settings. Here, we recall Coakley’s (2015) explanation of sport settings as sites for socialisation and creating meaningful experiences.

By showcasing the GCC female athlete identity in terms of common struggles, a sense of belonging, and similar characteristics, the GCC Women’s Games fostered greater feelings of pride and unity among athletes. They offered an opportunity for female athletes in the region to compete at an ‘elite’ level despite the underdevelopment of the women’s sporting sector in the region. This even allowed for some sports to gauge their level of development compared with other sports by contrasting podium placings and numbers of fans. The GCC Women’s Games thus served to support female athletes in GCC countries by collectively supporting the development of women’s sport in the region. Furthermore, the Games offered participants an opportunity to expand their social networks through contact with those who share similar characteristics.
We argue that such settings can make ideal situations for regional organisations, such as the GCC Women Sport Organising Committee, to utilise domestic SP strategies to achieve social cohesion goals, specifically when faced with tense political situations such as the one currently affecting the GCC. This can be done through treating such sites as locations to activate identity salience (Stryker, 1980) through the use of identity prominence (Brenner et al., 2014), which in this case, relates to being a member of the GCC female sports community. In other words, to use sporting events for fostering stronger attitudes towards being members of the GCC, there must be a greater deliberate promotion of common in-group feelings among participants in events such as the GCC Women’s Games.

Several missed opportunities by the organisers to foster such unity are evident. The decision to accommodate the teams in separate hotels generated a feeling of isolation (field notes) and did not create connections between team members, except within ‘the arena’. Furthermore, the lack of organised social gatherings between teams, as is done in other competitions, was also a gap that could have been better leveraged for contact experiences. Such gatherings within competitions can lead to positive feelings (Shipway et al., 2012) and have the potential to create social capital and activate new social relationships (Chalip, 2006); a post-tournament dinner gathering or ceremony would have been an ideal opportunity to do this but was overlooked by the organisers.

Another example is seen through the use of the GCC flag which, although present, was spread sporadically and could have been complemented by a tournament-specific flag or mascot and merchandise, given the role of such items in building on consumers’ temporal identities and constructing a more solid long-lasting affiliation (Wilson and Liu, 2012). Having a common and culturally neutral symbol in a mascot and logo could offer something that all female athletes could relate to despite different nationalities.

There is also evidence that post-tournament feelings of pride are ‘small-short term eruptions’ according to Elling et al. (2012: 1). In that light, a sustained post-event effort from the organisers would have been advisable perhaps along the lines of a GCC Sports Alumni membership alongside the symbolic tribute that was seen in the announcement of the next GCC Women’s Games with the passing on of a ‘torch’ to the new host nation. This will help build on the social capital gained by linking participants with longer-term networks to counterbalance the transience of a sporting event (Schulenkorf, 2013).

Building on this paper’s findings, the next GCC Women’s Games can benefit from a more strategic method to build SP strategies that will hopefully generate greater effects. Given that the GCC is ultimately a political entity and that regional sporting organisations are institutional arms of this entity, we suggest that sporting events are in a prime position to achieve socio-political goals in addition to their obvious role in developing the women’s sporting sector. Events can thus be designed with such aims in mind and can be better achieved through careful planning and strategies although such mechanisms are neither guaranteed nor completely controllable (Nygård and Gates, 2013). As the Games become more established, and women’s sport becomes more normalised and more competitive, these strategies may also have to change as the novelty offered by the Games has no doubt aided in fostering the friendly non-aggressive atmosphere and sense of unity among participants.

As initiated within this paper, the concept of using domestic SP strategies to foster identity prominence, specifically through sport, opens up new research opportunities and
expands the relationship between SP, SI, sport, and SD. Further research is necessary to ascertain the effectiveness of potential inwards-focused SP strategies in follow-up studies, as well as their comparison to other contexts, acknowledging the GCC’s position as a more homogeneous cultural group compared with other regional political blocs and female athletes’ connectedness through the shared feeling of marginalisation in sport.

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**ORCID iD**

Hussa K Al-Khalifa https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6382-8214

**Notes**

1. The 2008 GCC Women’s Games saw the participation of Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, and Oman in Athletics, Table Tennis, Taekwondo, Shooting, Basketball, and Paralympics.
2. These sports were Athletics, Table Tennis, Taekwondo, Shooting, Fencing, Bowling, Basketball, Volleyball, Handball, Futsal, and Paralympics.

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