The Power of Sport to Unite a Nation: The Social Value of the 2010 South African World Cup

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Hosting a mega sport event (e.g., FIFA World Cup) has become a highly competitive and very complex undertaking. Despite the lofty financial price-tag for the host, many governments perceive mega-events as conduits for increased patriotism and pride due to the attention they garner. However, academics and economists have questioned the aggregate economic value of these events (Baade & Matheson, 2002), and work on the social aspects is limited. In response, governments have made stronger claims about the social impacts derived from mega sport events. In particular, the capacity of sport to enhance national identity and social capital among a country’s residents has been a significant point of debate.

One of the most notable examples of national identity enhancement was witnessed in South Africa, where former President Nelson Mandela used the 1995 Rugby World Cup as an instrument to bridge the long-standing social and political gap between the Afrikaners and Blacks. Traditionally, South African rugby is viewed as a symbol of Afrikaner oppression and Mandela’s act of embracing the South African rugby team (i.e., Springbok) was seen as a symbolic statement that a new regime was seeking reconciliation. Popularized in the film ‘Invictus’, Mandela attended the matches proudly wearing a Springbok jersey. This simple act was a catalyst that assisted the former President in gaining Afrikaner support and political unity in South Africa (Nauright, 1997). However, support for the Springboks winning the 1995 tournament was confused with support for organizing the event. It remains unclear whether social cohesion could have been achieved simply by hosting the tournament, without the Springbok success. While much anecdotal evidence has supported the capacity of sport to enhance social unity, doubts have been levied as to whether this actually takes place. During the event, researchers have documented feeling of euphoria, enhanced national pride, and unity (Ohmann, Jones, & Wilkes, 2006; Waitt, 2003), however, the question remains about the sustainability of these social outcomes (Smith, 2009). Little evidence has suggested that heightened social unity provides positive (and moreover, lasting) outcomes for a nation. In particular, the relationship between national identity and certain elements of social capital (e.g., openness to diversity and willingness to undertake community action) has been assumed but not empirically tested.

In the summer of 2010, South Africa played host to the FIFA World Cup and contrary to 1995, the country was unable to capitalize on the success of their national team since ‘Bafana Bafana’ failed to advance past the first round of the tournament. Given the absence of the confounding effect of success, this event provided an opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of hosting a mega-event to enhance national identity. The South African example is particularly germane when examining national unity because of the complicated demography and the multifaceted societal make-up of racial, ethnic, and tribal groupings that comprise the country’s population (Price, 1997). Despite strides the ‘rainbow nation’ has made over the last decade, divisions based on race and ethnicity still loom as the largest challenges for South Africa. In light of this issue and the enormous financial investments these mega events require, examining the influence of the FIFA World Cup on the national identity of South Africans makes an important contribution to the literature. Employing the constructs of social identity and social capital this study was driven by two research questions:

Research Question 1: Does national identity in South Africa influence perceived social capital among the nation’s residents?
Research Question 2: Can a mega sport event (i.e., FIFA World Cup) increase national identity among residents of a host nation?

To assess social capital at the community level, the scale developed by Onyx and Bullen (2000) was used and contained the following five dimensions: (1) collective action (i.e., community participation), (2) trust and safety (i.e., trustworthiness and helpfulness), (3) social connections (i.e., friends, family, and community support), (4) tolerance of diversity (i.e., fairness and respect of others), and (5) value of life (i.e., personal value in the community). In line with the multi-dimensional view of social identity, items used to measure the national identity of South Africans were adopted from the group identity scale developed by Heere and James (2007), comprised of the following five dimensions: (1) private evaluation, (2) public evaluation, (3) sense of interdependence, (4) behavioral involvement, and (5) cognitive awareness.

Because of the magnitude of the World Cup it was not possible to use a control group for the event manipulation. Therefore a pre-experimental design consisting of a one-group pretest-posttest protocol (O–X–O) was employed. To achieve sample representativeness, we opted against a repeated measures design since the dropout rate of respondents associated with this approach would be too high. Instead, a trend analysis whereby different participants from similar demographic backgrounds completed the pre- and post-event questionnaires (Gursoy et al., 2011). The self-report questionnaire about the 2010 FIFA World Cup contained items asking about national identity, social capital, and demography. The first data collection commenced four months prior to the event and the second six months after; among the residents of five major match sites for the FIFA World Cup (i.e., Johannesburg, Nelspruit, Polokwane, Pretoria, and Rustenburg). The data collection procedure yielded n = 1,749 in the pre-event condition and n = 2,020 in the post-event condition (N = 3,769).

A significant coefficient for the overall multivariate model (β = .432, p < .001) indicated the model's robustness. More specifically, national identity significantly influenced the sub-dimensions of social capital, namely collective action, trust and safety, tolerance of diversity, social connections, and value of life. Overall, national identity explained approximately 11% variance on each of the social capital measures; and for two social capital constructs, all national identity processes were significant, while for three other social capital constructs, all but one national identity process were significant predictors of social capital. The MANCOVA procedure for national identity indicated the interaction effect (pre-post × NAT ID) was significant (Pillai's Trace = .040, F = 21.787, p < .001, n² = 4%). Following Cohen (1988), the overall effect size was small indicating that NAT ID was only marginally influenced by the event. We also tested if the demographic categories of race, gender, and level of education were influenced by the event and no significant differences were found for any of these study variables. Both ‘private’ and ‘public evaluation’ increased significantly after the World Cup, while ‘interconnection with the group’ and ‘cognitive awareness’ remained unchanged. ‘Sense of interdependence’ and ‘behavioral involvement’ both decreased after the FIFA World Cup.

The results suggest several substantive points. First, testing national identity as a psychological indicator of national unity revealed a significant, albeit minor impact on social capital, explaining only 10% of its variance. Second, the pre- and post-event comparison revealed that the World Cup tournament had little effect on the national identity of South Africans. Third, measuring national identity multi-dimensionally allowed for a more holistic view of how certain identity markers influence social capital. For example, a common way to understand identity, for political purposes, is through a private evaluation statement (i.e., “I am proud to think of myself to be a part of [insert nation, political party, race, etc.]”), which surprisingly was one of the least predictive identity processes. Fourth, because of the minor influence of national identity on social capital, governmental policies and initiatives that seek to increase national identity and social cohesion should be critically evaluated. Hosting a sport mega-event provides a significant case in point for this assertion. Over the last several decades, major sport events have been anecdotally considered powerful governmental instruments to increase national identity and social cohesion among residents of a host nation. As such, billions of dollars are typically earmarked to successfully bid for and host the event. The results presented bring into question these assumptions. Perhaps, there is an alternative approach that has not been implemented when hosting these mega-events. Chalip (2006) suggested that it is insufficient for event outcomes to materialize without actively leveraging them. In the case of mega-events, the author proposed a program of social leveraging if host communities and governments are to achieve their desired outcomes. As well, we know that psychic income, which includes pride in nation and a collective identity, accrues from hosting such events (Kim & Petrick, 2006; Wautt, 2003), however, the task becomes how to leverage psychic income for sustainable social outcomes (e.g., increased social capital)?