

Beyond the Podium: How Mega-Sporting Events Forge Social Solidarity and Collective Identity in a Multi-Regional Context

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Abstract

Mega-sporting events, as influential socio-cultural phenomena in the era of globalization, play a significant role in fostering social solidarity and collective identity within multi-regional contexts. The identity-building processes also exhibit limitations, including transient effects, superficial solidarity, and potential exacerbation of social divisions. The study mainly examines the core mechanisms through which such events transcend athletic competition to become catalysts for unifying diverse regional social forces. The findings reveal that these events facilitate cross-regional social cohesion and shared identity through multiple pathways: creating collective emotional experiences and shared memory, delineating in-group/out-group boundaries via the construction of a “common other”, performing national image and cultural narratives, and enhancing material and substantive interregional connectivity. Thus, inclusive policy design and long-term institutional mechanisms are crucial for transforming mega-events into sustainable drivers of social integration and collaborative regional development.

Keywords: Mega-Sporting Events, Social Solidarity, Collective Identity, Multi-Regional Context

Introduction

Mega-Sporting Events (MSEs), such as the Olympic Games, the FIFA World Cup, and the Commonwealth Games, have become one of the most influential sociocultural phenomena of the 21st century (Rook & Heerdt, 2023). These events extend far beyond athletic competition, evolving into complex platforms that reflect political ambitions, economic strategies, and cultural narratives (Black, 2007). As Stensæth and Trondalen (2024) observe, MSEs possess a distinct ritualistic quality, capable of interrupting daily life and creating globally shared moments of experience that unite billions. Such events not only reshape media landscapes but also redefine the spatiotemporal contours of collective engagement (Pandey, 2025).

In this context, hosting MSEs has become a strategic practice for modern states to project national strength and enhance their international standing (Feng, 2024). Drawing on the concept of “soft power” (Nye, 2004), nations leverage these events to cultivate global influence through cultural appeal and narrative control. Kramareva (2018) further emphasizes how MSEs are systematically used in nation-branding campaigns—where ceremonies, infrastructure, and media coverage collectively communicate a country’s achievements and identity. Importantly, this process is not only outward-facing; it also reinforces internal solidarity and strengthens national identity among domestic audiences (Adetokunbo-Edmund, 2016).

The impact of MSEs is often analyzed across economic, urban, and political dimensions. Studies such as those by Persyn et al. (2023) and De Paula et al. (2023) explore how these events stimulate employment, urban regeneration, and infrastructure development. At the same time, scholars like Burton et al. (2024) investigate their role in advancing geopolitical agendas. Together, these perspectives underscore the potential of MSEs to foster social cohesion—a theme that has gained increasing scholarly attention.

A growing body of theoretical work suggests that MSEs possess a unique capacity to facilitate social integration, particularly in multicultural societies. For instance, China’s 2008 and 2022 Olympics evoked a powerful sense of shared identity across highly diverse regional and social groups (Xu et al., 2024; Floerkemeier et al., 2021). Such moments can be understood through Durkheimian notions of “collective effervescence” (Pizarro et al., 2022), wherein shared rituals and emotions temporarily unite individuals into a moral community (Rimé & Páez, 2023). Complementing this, Anderson’s (2006) concept of “imagined communities” helps explain how MSEs—through symbols, anthem ceremonies, and media narratives—make national identity tangible and emotionally resonant (Hicks, 2020; Moser, 2014). In multi-ethnic or multi-regional states, these events may even foster a “supra-national identity” that transcends local divisions (Stanley, 2013; Mackay et al., 2021).

Despite these insights, significant gaps remain in understanding how MSEs cultivate sustained and inclusive solidarity across diverse regional identities within a host country. Existing studies often treat socio-cultural outcomes as secondary effects, without systematically examining the mechanisms that generate—or hinder—meaningful integration. The transient nature of event-driven unity, along with the risk of exacerbating existing social divisions, calls for a more critical and nuanced investigation.

Therefore, this study aims to address these gaps by examining the primary mechanisms through which MSEs foster social solidarity and collective identity in multi-regional contexts. Grounded in an interdisciplinary framework drawing from media studies, sociology, and political science, the research seeks to provide a refined theoretical understanding of MSEs as potential catalysts for sustainable social integration. Specifically, the study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: *Through which primary mechanisms do mega-sporting events contribute to the formation of social solidarity and collective identity?*

RQ2: *How do these mechanisms interact to forge a shared sense of belonging that transcends pre-existing regional disparities?*

RQ3: *What are the limitations and risks of these mechanisms, and how can they be mitigated to promote sustainable and inclusive social integration?*

Literature Review

Mega-Events as Modern Social Rituals

The mega-sporting events (MSEs) have evolved from mere athletic competitions into potent modern social rituals (Dashper, 2021; Costa & Moriconi, 2024). However, Malfas (2004) positioned mega-events as pivotal occasions for collective celebration and reflection, fulfilling essential sociological functions that transcend sport. Its ritualistic framework is operationalized through highly orchestrated ceremonies (opening/closing, medal presentations) that create a symbol and sacred space (Zakharova, 2024), suspending everyday life. Within the space, the stadium becomes a modern-day temple, athletes are transformed into national symbols, and sporting contests are imbued with profound nationalist significance (Aldape, 2025). The “collective effervescence”, as applied to MSEs by scholars like Pizarro et al. (2022), explains the mechanism through which shared, high-intensity emotional experiences during the rituals generate powerful social bonds, effectively fusing dispersed individuals into a cohesive moral community. The lens provides the primary foundation for understanding the affective and experiential dimension of social solidarity forged by MSEs.

Symbolic Construction of the Imagined Community

Beyond the immediate ritual experience, studies have emphasized the role of MSEs in the sustained symbolic construction of national identity (Alshikhy et al., 2025; Krieger, 2025; Kwon & Mangan, 2017). It heavily relies on the systematic deployment of national symbols—flags, anthems, and colors—to trigger and reinforce a sense of collective belonging (Alshikhy et al., 2025; Krieger, 2025). Media coverage acts as a critical amplifier, ensuring these symbols permeate domestic space, making the nation tangible for millions of simultaneous viewers. Repetitive symbolic performance aligns with Hobsbawm & Ranger’s (2012) concept of “invented traditions”, where rituals presented as timeless are modern constructs designed to instill specific values and foster social cohesion. The medal ceremony, where individual achievement is seamlessly transmuted into national glory (Kwon & Mangan, 2017), is the quintessential example. Ultimately, it is a process that culminates in the formation of what Anderson (2006) famously termed an “imagined community”, that deep and horizontal comradeship among strangers who perceive themselves as part of the same nation. Therefore, MSEs serve as a powerful bridge between periodic rehearsals of the imagined national community.

Navigating Unity and Diversity: The Multi-Regional Challenge

Studies have shown that the very aim of constructing a unified identity can be fraught with tension in contexts marked by significant regional, cultural, or ethnic diversity (Timilsana, 2024). Pre-existing disparities in development, historical grievances, or distinct political aspirations can act as centrifugal forces, resisting a homogenizing national narrative (Hudson, 2007). While we have established how MSEs generate unity, a more nuanced strand of literature critically examines the process within complex, multi-regional states (Timilsana, 2024; Sutherland et al., 2018). However, MSEs can potentially reframe diversity from a challenge into a resource. By consciously showcasing regional cultures within a unifying national framework (e.g., through inclusive opening ceremonies), organizers can craft a narrative of “unity in diversity” (Gao et al., 2025; Sutherland et al., 2018; Wang, 2024). It

doesn't erase differences but seeks to integrate them into a higher-level, inclusive national identity. While the goal of inclusive representation is acknowledged, the precise mechanisms through which MSEs can successfully navigate the complex dynamics to forge a solidarity that is both broad (national) and deep (inclusive of sub-national identities) remain underexplored.

Funding

Shared Emotional Experience and the Formation of Collective Memory

Mega-sporting events serve as media events, synchronizing public attention and participation across time and space, and acting as a crucial mechanism for fostering social solidarity beyond geographic boundaries (Wenner & Billings, 2017). The synchronization manifests not only within a unified temporal framework—as exemplified by global audiences viewing live broadcasts concurrently—but also through a collective psychological engagement (Tschacher et al., 2023; Cheong et al., 2023). When spectators from diverse geographical and cultural backgrounds collectively observe moments of heightened tension, athletic triumph, or defeat, a shared experiential domain emerges, facilitating a profound sense of collective engagement and affective alignment (Ruoxi et al., 2023). The shared emotional experience generates what is termed “collective effervescence”—an intense form of emotional energy that emerges from collective engagement in ritualized activities (Menges & Kilduff, 2015). It is a phenomenon that temporarily transcends social distinctions and strengthens group cohesion. For instance, the 2008 Beijing Olympics opening ceremony attracted over 1 billion global viewers, with a domestic viewership rate in China reaching 83.6%, creating an unprecedented collective viewing experience (Zhang, 2016). This transformation of peak experiences into durable collective memory is facilitated by media representations, ritualized commemorations, and sustained public narratives. Such processes generate affective bonds that extend beyond geographic confines, fostering a sense of transregional belonging. Long after the original event, these memories retain their mobilizing potential through recurring symbolic enactments, narrative circulations, and embodied rituals. The continual re-articulation of shared experience thus undergirds the reproduction of social cohesion over time.

However, the extent of shared emotional experience is influenced by factors such as access to media, cultural background, and socioeconomic status (Choi & Toma, 2014). While digital platforms have significantly expanded the accessibility and scale of participation in such events, they also introduce a risk of experiential fragmentation, which may attenuate the emotional intensity necessary for sustained collective engagement (Georgoula et al., 2025). Moreover, varying levels of engagement and interest across different regions may exclude certain groups from the collective experience, undermining the universality of social solidarity (Pizarro et al., 2022; Wenner & Billings, 2017). Therefore, event organizers must adopt diversified communication strategies and participatory approaches to ensure broader public engagement in the emotional dimensions of mega-events, thereby enhancing the inclusivity and representativeness of collective memory.

Boundary Demarcation and the Construction of a “Common Other”

Mega-sporting events contribute to the formation of national collective identity by delineating boundaries between “in-groups” and “out-groups” (Devlin et al., 2020). International sports competitions provide a clear framework of identification that suspends potential inter-regional conflicts, emphasizing instead a unified identity at the national level

(Grünenfelder, 2020). In this process, the identity of athletes undergoes a transformation marked by “de-regionalization” and re-nationalization—they no longer merely represent a specific province or region but become symbols of the entire nation (Pizarro et al., 2022). For instance, the composition of the Chinese national team, which brings together athletes from various provinces and regions, appears uniformly as “Team China” in international competitions. This unified representation strengthens a sense of national identity among the public.

The mechanism resonates with Butler’s concept of the “imagined community”, in which the construction of an international rival as a “common other” function to strengthen internal solidarity (Butler, 2018). Similarly, the study of the “invention of tradition” finds relevance in the framework. Numerous national rituals and symbols, including flags, anthems, and slogans, are either created or revitalized within the context of mega-events, thereby further consolidating national identity (Devlin et al., 2020; Stanley, 2013; Kramareva, 2018). For instance, the flag-raising and national anthem ceremonies during Olympic medal awards employ potent visual and auditory symbolism to reinforce affective attachment to the national community (Krieger, 2025). However, border demarcation also has negative consequences. For example, an overemphasis on national identity can easily lead to xenophobia and nationalism, exacerbating international tensions (Devlin et al., 2020; Stanley, 2013; Kramareva, 2018). Event organizers and the media should carefully manage the narrative relationship between “us” and “them”, avoiding identity construction that leans towards narrow nationalism (Wodak, 2009). Instead, their community relationship promotes an inclusive patriotic sentiment, strengthening internal solidarity and promoting international understanding and respect.

Narrative and Performance of National Image

As a host nation, major sporting events serve as a stage for showcasing an idealized national image. Through designed narratives and performances, they reinforce citizens’ sense of national identity and pride (Devlin et al., 2020; Stanley, 2013; Kramareva, 2018). The artistic performances at the opening ceremony, the symbolic significance of the venue architecture, the unified image of volunteer service, and the event’s theme slogans all contribute to a narrative of national modernization, cultural heritage, and social solidarity (Pizarro et al., 2022; Zhang, 2016; Wenner & Billings, 2017). For example, the Beijing Winter Olympics slogan, “Together Towards the Future”, embodies the spirit of global cooperation and the nation’s sense of international responsibility, a crucial component of the national narrative (Yuechun et al., 2024).

A nation’s image should be presented to both the international community and its domestic public. Positive feedback from global media further strengthens national pride, fostering a positive cycle of identity recognition (Adetokunbo-Edmund, 2016). By showcasing national culture and disseminating its values, a nation’s appeal can be enhanced both domestically and internationally (Gao et al., 2025; Crane et al., 2016). However, the drawback of national narratives of a performance nature is their disconnection from real risks (Yuechun et al., 2024). Overly exaggerated or embellished official narratives can easily overlook real social issues, leading to public alienation and even skepticism. Therefore, national narratives should maintain a degree of authenticity and inclusiveness, promptly reflecting the diverse nature of society to enhance their persuasiveness and recognition.

Material Foundations and Substantive Interregional Linkages

The preparations for major sporting events create substantial connections through infrastructure development and resource allocation (Rabadi et al., 2015). This substantial regional connection provides a material foundation for social cohesion (Sommer, 2019). Upgraded transportation networks, the construction of venues and facilities, and improved communications technology can serve the events themselves, strengthening physical connections between regions, as exemplified by the Hangzhou Asian Games and the Shaanxi National Games (Feng et al., 2019). Investment in events can drive upgrades to transportation infrastructure in the Yangtze River Delta and western China, facilitating the cross-regional flow of people, materials, and information, thereby providing the hardware support for regional integration.

The resource allocation and economic opportunities created during event preparations achieve, to a certain extent, regional resource redistribution and balanced development ((Rabadi et al., 2015).). For example, events generate tourism, business investment, and employment opportunities. Proper and reasonable allocation can help narrow regional development gaps and strengthen marginalized regions' sense of belonging to the nation. However, it can lead to an over-concentration of resources in host cities or developed regions, exacerbating regional inequality and weakening social cohesion (Sommer, 2019). Therefore, event organizers and policymakers should prioritize equitable resource allocation and balanced regional development (Rabadi et al., 2015), ensuring that the economic benefits of events benefit a wider range of regions and providing a sustainable material foundation for cross-regional social cohesion (Sommer, 2019).

Discussion

Major sporting events are among the most influential collective rituals in contemporary society, shaping diverse mechanisms of social solidarity and collective identity. This study aimed to elucidate the primary mechanisms through which mega-sporting events (MSEs) foster social solidarity and collective identity within multi-regional contexts. Our analysis confirms that this process is not monolithic but operates through four interconnected pathways, each resonating with and extending established sociological theories.

First, the mechanism of shared emotional experience and collective memory powerfully exemplifies Durkheimian theory in a modern, mediated context. The "collective effervescence" (Pizarro et al., 2022) generated by synchronized viewing of MSEs serves as a potent, albeit temporary, social glue. Our findings affirm that these intensely affective moments allow individuals to transcend quotidian regional and social divisions, effectively rehearsing their membership in Anderson's (2006) "imagined community". The media's role is crucial here, not only in facilitating the live experience but also in curating and perpetuating these moments as durable collective memories (Zhang, 2016), thus extending the ritual's cohesive power beyond the event's temporal boundaries.

Second, the process of boundary demarcation and constructing a "common other" underscores the inherently relational nature of identity formation. International competition provides a clear, often benign, framework for defining the national "Self" against an external "Other" (Butler, 2018; Wodak, 2009). The mechanism temporarily suspends internal disparities, channeling regional identities into a unified national identity in support of a shared

representative, e.g., Chinese Team. We finding aligns with research on how nations use MSEs for internal cohesion (Devlin et al., 2020; Kramareva, 2018). However, we further highlight the dual-edged nature of the mechanism, which can easily veer into nationalism, and its often-overlooked internal dimension, in which resource competition between host and non-host regions creates new internal “others”, potentially undermining the very solidarity the event seeks to build.

Third, the narrative and performance of the national image mechanism demonstrate the conscious, top-down engineering of identity. MSEs are strategic platforms for exercising “soft power” (Feng, 2024), where host nations perform an idealized version of themselves for dual audiences: the international community and their own citizens. The grand narratives of unity, progress, and cultural heritage (Kramareva, 2018) are designed to instill pride and strengthen national belonging. Our contribution lies in emphasizing the critical condition of authenticity for this mechanism to be effective domestically. In multi-regional states, an inclusive narrative that celebrates “unity in diversity” (Wang, 2024) is essential, and a narrative that ignores internal diversity risks being seen as coercive or illegitimate, leading to public alienation.

Fourth, and crucially for a multi-regional context, the material and substantive interregional linkages mechanism provides the often-invisible infrastructural and economic foundation upon which the more symbolic mechanisms rest. This finding moves beyond purely culturalist explanations and aligns with urban and regional studies perspectives (e.g., De Paula et al., 2023). Improved transportation, communication networks, and equitable resource distribution (Rabadi et al., 2015) create tangible interdependencies and a shared stake in the nation’s project, making the imagined community a lived, material reality. Conversely, as our analysis notes, the maldistribution of these material benefits is a primary source of regional resentment, demonstrating that symbolic solidarity cannot long endure without a foundation of perceived distributive justice.

The mechanisms do not operate in isolation but are deeply intertwined and mutually reinforcing. The emotional power of a ritual (Mechanism 1) is amplified by the clear us-them dynamic of a competition (Mechanism 2). Both are framed and given meaning by a compelling national narrative (Mechanism 3), which is lent credibility and substance by tangible improvements in infrastructure and economic development (Mechanism 4). The ultimate effectiveness of MSEs in building solidarity is contingent on the synergistic alignment of all four mechanisms.

The study acknowledges several limitations. First, the primarily theoretical-conceptual nature of the analysis calls for empirical validation through quantitative (e.g., surveys measuring identity pre- and post-event across regions) and qualitative (e.g., interviews and ethnographic work in diverse regions) research. Second, the focus on China’s Olympics, while illustrative, suggests a need for comparative studies across different national and political contexts to test the generalizability of these mechanisms. Future research should investigate the weighting of these mechanisms in different contexts and explore the precise conditions under which the negative potentials (xenophobia, internal exclusion, alienation) outweigh the positive outcomes.

Conclusion

The study proves how MSEs function as catalysts for social solidarity in complex, multi-regional settings. Synthesizing culturalist (ritual, narrative) and structuralist (material infrastructure, resource distribution) perspectives into a more holistic model, highlighting their interdependence. Successful events require including impressive ceremonies and equitable regional development, as well as authentic narratives that embrace internal diversity, and further developing healthy national pride without resorting to chauvinism. Achieving lasting social value “beyond the podium” depends on strategically aligning the emotional, symbolic, narrative, and material dimensions of mega-sporting events to build a solidarity that is both deeply felt and substantively inclusive.

Research Contribution

It is moving beyond the predominant economic and mono-national analyses of mega-sporting events (MSEs) to provide a novel, integrated framework for understanding how they forge social solidarity within multi-regional contexts. We used collective effervescence and imagined communities to systematically identify and elaborate four interconnected mechanisms, which are shared emotional experience, boundary demarcation, national narrative performance, and material interconnection, that collectively explain the process of identity formation. We provide policymakers with a crucial toolkit for designing more inclusive and effective events that generate lasting social cohesion beyond the podium.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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