<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Muslim women and dragon boat racing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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</tbody>
</table>

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Youth in Physical Education and Sport

MUSLIM WOMEN AND DRAGON BOAT RACING

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In multi-racial Singapore, sports are often characterised by the promotion of inclusive participation. All racial groups are encouraged to participate, none are excluded. Moving beyond the functional value of sport – a perspective which views team activities as facilitating social cohesion – potential pitfalls along the path to harmonious engagement in sport can be identified. Individuals and groups may find an activity attractive, yet deeper cultural beliefs and values may keep people apart. In women’s activities no one is excluded, but in some activities there remains a dominance of one group over the others. There exists a low level of involvement by Muslim women in dragon boat racing. As the first record of dragon boating identifies the sport as being dominated by Chinese men, this finding is not surprising. There are indications that the numbers of Muslim women participating will increase, but currently, even among the younger generation there are barriers. With the aid of informal interviews with tertiary level participants, this paper attempts to put into perspective possible factors (relating to culture, motivation and team identity) that might deter some Muslim women from participating in dragon boat racing as a sport.

1 Introduction

Dragon boat racing was first introduced and organised by the Singapore Sports Council in 1978, but its history dates back more than 2000 years and is based on a traditional re-enactment of the race to save Qu Yuan, a poet and statesman, from drowning. The tradition of dragon boat racing is symbolic of Chinese culture, where an image of hegemonic masculinity is represented. The very representation of the boat – that of a dragon – is a very important symbol of Chinese culture and spirit. Whilst a preliminary study indicated that there has been an increase in female (Chinese) participation in dragon boat racing, it has been speculated that the ethnic identity of the sport amongst undergraduates has created a barrier for Muslim women’s participation in dragon boat racing in two Singapore universities.

This paper focuses on female participation amongst a small number of Muslim women and attempts to show in greater detail the nature of cultural barriers to participation in Dragon boat racing. There appear to be three values-related reasons that specifically deter Muslim women from participating to the same degree as Chinese women – notably culture, motivation and team identity.
2 Methods

Three groups of female participants were enlisted to identify reasons behind low rates of participation associated with Muslim women. All participants in the study are active in sport or have been in the recent past.

Group A included current members (including Muslims) of the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and National University of Singapore (NUS) dragon boat teams. Group B consisted of current NTU/NUS Muslim women who participate in sports but not in dragon boat racing. Group C was made up of Muslim women currently or previously involved in dragon boating, but not from NTU/NUS.

3 Analysis and Findings

According to the Singapore Dragon Boat Association (SDBA), there were 49 female teams participating in the Singapore Dragon Boat Festival in 2007. In 2008, the number increased to 54. However, in the same year only one Muslim woman participated in Dragon boat racing teams of NTU and NUS compared to 56 Chinese women. In the Singapore Management University, there was also only one Muslim woman in the dragon boat team.

In general, the informants in Group A felt that the dragon boat teams in Singapore had a "strong and rich" Chinese cultural identity. Informants in Group B perceived that the image portrayed is a masculine one. They chose not to join dragon boat racing as a sport simply because they were not intrinsically interested in it. The Muslim women in Group C (in their mid-30s) espoused the impression that the NUS and NTU teams are dominated by Chinese. They all had close to 10 years of paddling experience and they felt that this dominant identity has been quite a consistent characteristic.

4 Cultural Factors

Regardless of the observation that the dragon boat scene in Singapore is dominated by the local Chinese, it was noted that there is a "slow, yet increasing" number of non-Chinese participants, including Muslims.

Forty percent of the informants in Group A assumed that dragon boat originated in China and hence had a deep and strong Chinese flavor. This also explained why most of its participants were Chinese. Yet, the same 40% of informants suggested that the low level of involvement of Muslim women in dragon boating was due largely to a smaller population size (only around 15%).

Informant A6: I do see less Muslim-women participation. I guess it's because Muslims take up a smaller proportion in Singapore's population and dragon boat racing has only become more popular among the women in recent years. Only one informant felt that the reason for the low involvement could be due to constraints concerning clothing.
Informant B5: Yes, I think most Muslim women might find it troublesome to dress like what dragon-boaters would normally dress [i.e. singlets and shorts] during the sport—because most of them might be more conservative.... due to family traditions.

A founder of the Kelantan Family Research Institute mentions that low participation among Muslim women is because “people are not sure of whether or not sport involvement is culturally and religiously accepted.... because of this ignorance, parents may have imposed unnecessary barriers for their daughters”.

Informant B1 firmly believed that religion should not create any barrier to entry. Informant B1: Frankly, I don’t think religion has much to do about the participation in dragon boat. Though the sports attire may be an issue, I don’t think it’s a major issue or a big enough reason for the low participation in the sport. There are many ways in which other attires can be worn. I strongly believe that it is more of a cultural issue than a religious one.

Informant A1 agreed: I think Islam as a religion is not a contributing factor to low participation level in any sport for that matter. The only Muslim woman (Informant A1) in NUS also affirmed that the “seemingly” low participation rate of Muslim women in dragon boating is due more to a problem with ‘attire’ rather than religion.

It was speculated that the following verse from the Quran might act as a constraint on participation. O prophet, tell your wives, your daughters, and the wives of the believers that they shall lengthen their garments. Thus, they will be recognised (as righteous women) and avoid being insulted. God is Forgiver, Most Merciful. (33:59)

Dressing modestly, therefore, is a trait of believing Muslim men and women. According to Salman (date) “[m]any Muslim parents feel reluctant to allow their daughters to be involved in sport because the way sport activities are managed is commonly perceived to be contrary to Islamic teachings, e.g. the ‘aurat’ problem...”. That is, there are parts of the body that ought to be covered for the sake of modesty. The informants believed that too strict interpretation of what is stated in the Quran would only hinder or obstruct the pursuit of excellence.

5 Motivation to Participate in Dragon Boat Racing

The sole Muslim woman in Group A had yet to think of reasons why she joined Team NUS. The majority of informants (67%) in group A joined their school teams because of interest (intrinsic motivation). This result is similar to that of Group C where 100% of the informants assert that ‘interest’ is the main reason why they join dragon boat racing. The remaining (33%) informants in Group A picked up dragon boat racing because it was an activity in which no prior experience was needed.

Similar results could also be found from the informants in Group B, where 83% of the informants chose not to join the dragon boat team in their schools “due to lack of interest”. One informant was worried that she might not be able to take the physical demands of the training. The findings from Group C (Muslim women not from
NTU/NUS) revealed that Muslim women were not deterred by cultural/religious factors (such as ‘aurat’ problem) nor social factors such as peer group pressure).

While 83% of the informants in Group B were not in their school dragon boat teams, they were involved in other team sports or outdoor activities. such as netball, kayaking, trekking, Taekwondo, soccer and ultimate frisbee. These sports are not traditional Malay sports (perhaps except for soccer which is very popular among the Malay population in Singapore) and kayaking actually requires the paddler to get into the water – which dispels the myth that “[m]uslims are very bad swimmers” (Informant B1).

Interviewer: Why do you think the involvement of Muslim women in dragon boat racing is relatively low?

Informant B5: … probably because most Malay Muslim families aren’t aware of such water sports – which aren’t very popular within the Malay community itself. … Most traditional Malay-Muslim families would rather not have their children participate in such sports.

Therefore, this evidence further supports the suggestion that Muslim women do not involve themselves in dragon boat racing because of its strong Chinese culture and traditions, but simply because they are not interested; and/or cannot commit.

Informant A1 felt that it is not just about interest, but more accurately an effort to challenge the assumption that women cannot do what men do. Hegemonic masculinity, to her, is not a fixed character type, but is a contestable position (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Connell, 2005). Her involvement in dragon boating has challenged the idealised passivity and weakness of “emphasised” femininity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

6 Team Identity (Dominant Identity of NTU/NUS DB)

There were a variety of responses to the question of the presence of a dominant identity associated with dragon boat teams in Singapore. Most had clear masculine undertones, some reflected on the Chinese aspect. The physicality of the event also featured prominently.

Informant A6: Yes, kind of. The kind of never-say-die-attitude…
Informant B1: Guys with a muscular upper body
Informant B2: Buffed and dark men
Informant B3: People from dragon boat are tough and very concerned with their fitness. I think the physical demands of the training and the very sport itself constitute this identity.

All informants from Group B perceived that dragon boat racing was a sport that required brute strength and prowess, and was predominantly a man’s sport. Ironically, they did not mention that the main dominant identity as being a very Chinese one – in fact, the word ‘Chinese’ was not mentioned at all.

One informant from Group B played in the school’s ultimate frisbee team, a non-aggressive activity that does not involve bodily contact. She revealed that she was not
drawn to water sports like dragon boat racing, feeling that she derived more challenge and enjoyment from ultimate Frisbee than any other sports. Thus, a possible reason for the low Muslim women involvement in dragon boating could be due to limited intrinsic motivation and interest level – for an ability that requires high physical output.

The responses from informants in Group A are relatively similar. They do not think that it is a ‘predominantly Chinese sport’ but instead, attribute the identity to one that is about goal achievement, in pursuit of excellence and intrinsic motivation. The informants in Group C, partially viewed the dominant identity of the school teams in Singapore as one that is dominated by Chinese, while the expatriate teams were dominated by Caucasians.

It can be suggested that the collective cultural identity of dragon boat as a team sport does not create any barriers for Muslim women in NTU/NUS. However, the notion of dragon boat racing in Singapore strongly suggests that a culturally normative ideal of male behaviour does exist. It is one characterised by hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Perhaps, this is one of the reasons why Muslim women, or rather, women in general do not choose to get involved with this sport. This brings us back to considering the significance of the intrinsic quality of the sport.

Informant A1: ... the identity is not distinctly Chinese although dragon boating is a distinctly Chinese sport that is fun and exciting.

Her response, in contrast, reveals a sort of participatory ideology that promotes fun, ‘hedonism, involvement, self-actualisation, ‘flow’ (Csikzentmihalyi, 1990), living for the moment, ‘adrenalin rushes’ and other intrinsic rewards. She feels that it is a “distinctly Chinese sport” but that it is not solely a sport “for Chinese”.

6 Conclusion

It is apparent that the influence of religion does not actually create insurmountable barriers for Muslim women to partake in sports. The Quran actually encourages physical activity among women within certain guidelines and these are essential tools for sustaining healthy lives. The majority of the informants felt that it is the intrinsic interest level that has a more direct relationship to sports participation. There are other reasons that might account, in part, for the low involvement of Muslim women in sports like dragon boat racing. These factors – appropriate themes for future study – focus on the influence of socialisation within the family. A drive to encourage more participation would require more effective and visible role models. Ultimately iconic figures within the community are needed to increase the numbers of participants. It is important that the family takes on a more active role in encouraging girls to be more pro-active in sports and to take up a wider range of vigorous programmes.
References


