

Traditional Sports as a Catalyst for Unity Among High School Students: Challenges and Opportunities

Norhasdalina Hasim^{1*}, Adlin Zahida Daut², Ida Farina Md Yunus³, Hairin Nisa Meor Nordin⁴, Rohaiza Mohamad Idaris⁵

^{1,2,3,5} Faculty of Business and Accountancy, University Selangor (UNISEL), Selangor

⁴ Faculty of Business and Management, University Technology MARA (UiTM), Selangor

*Corresponding author

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the role of traditional sports as a catalyst for fostering unity among high school students in Klang Valley, Selangor. The objectives are threefold: first, to explore and understand the current landscape of traditional sports within this demographic; second, to identify the challenges faced in utilizing these sports as tools for promoting unity; and third, to uncover the opportunities that traditional sports present for enhancing social cohesion among students. Traditional sports, deeply rooted in cultural heritage, offer a unique platform for engagement and interaction among diverse student populations. However, the study reveals several challenges, including insufficient awareness and varying levels of interest among students. These barriers can hinder the effective implementation of traditional sports programs designed to foster unity. Conversely, the research highlights numerous opportunities for leveraging traditional sports to bridge cultural and social divides. By promoting inclusivity and collaboration through organised events, schools can create environments where students from different backgrounds can connect and build lasting relationships. Furthermore, integrating traditional sports into school curricula and extracurricular activities can enhance students' appreciation for their cultural heritage while simultaneously promoting teamwork and unity. Therefore, this study underscores the potential of traditional sports as a unifying force among high school students in Klang Valley, Selangor, while also addressing the challenges that need to be overcome. By recognizing and harnessing these opportunities, educators can foster a more cohesive and inclusive school environment.

Keywords: Traditional Sports; Unity; Challenges; Opportunities; High School Students

INTRODUCTION

Traditional sports, rooted deeply in the cultural fabric of many societies, serve not only as recreational activities but also as vehicles for transmitting values, customs, and collective identity (Paramio-Salcines et al., 2018; Zulkifli, 2022). In Malaysia, where cultural diversity is both a strength and a source of social tension, traditional sports such as '*sepak takraw*, *gasing*, and *wau*' have historically played an integral role in fostering communal ties (Zarei et al., 2018). The Klang Valley, with a pack population and a multicultural region of Selangor, presents a scaled version of Malaysia's broader societal dynamics, making it an appropriate setting for exploring the potential of traditional sports as a unifying force (Omar et al., 2010).

However, despite their rich heritage, traditional sports have experienced a marked decline in popularity among young people, overshadowed by the rise of modern sports and digital entertainment (Ha, 2020). This shift has not only led to a diminished cultural connection among younger generations but also eroded opportunities for intercultural engagement within school settings (Madgin et al., 2016). The growing heterogeneity of the student population further complicates efforts to maintain social cohesion, underscoring the urgent need to identify effective, culturally resonant strategies for unity-building (Meng et al., 2024). Existing literature acknowledges the role of sports in promoting teamwork and reducing social barriers (Costin, 2007; Spaaij, 2012). Yet, much of this scholarship focuses on mainstream, globalised sports, with scant attention paid to

traditional sports as deliberate instruments of social integration (Fyyaz, 2022). Moreover, initiatives to revitalise traditional sports in schools often lack strategic depth, addressing surface-level participation without tackling deeper issues of awareness, engagement, and sustainability (Zahari et al., 2024). These gaps reveal the need for a more nuanced understanding of how traditional sports can be repositioned within educational contexts to maximise their unifying potential.

This study, therefore, seeks to critically explore the landscape of traditional sports among high school students in Klang Valley, Selangor, with a focus on three key objectives: (1) to map the current state of traditional sports engagement; (2) to identify barriers that hinder their effectiveness as tools for promoting unity; and (3) to uncover actionable opportunities for leveraging traditional sports to enhance social cohesion. By situating this inquiry within both cultural and educational frameworks, the research aims to provide practical insights for educators and policymakers seeking to foster inclusive and cohesive school environments.

Existing landscape of traditional sports among youth/high school

Traditional sports have long been an integral part of cultural heritage, reflecting the history and values of societies worldwide. Traditional sports have long been an integral part of a society's cultural heritage, reflecting its history and values worldwide. These activities serve as vehicles for preserving cultural identity, fostering community cohesion, and transmitting knowledge across generations. For instance, UNESCO emphasises that traditional and indigenous games express the world's rich cultural heritage and must be protected and promoted (UNESCO, n.d.). Similarly, a study on the Tangkhul Nagas, an indigenous community in Northeast India, highlights how traditional games are deeply woven into their societal fabric, influencing and reflecting their values, social structures, and identities (Shimray, 2024).

In recent years, there has been a renewed focus on these sports, especially among youth and high school students, as communities recognise their role in preserving cultural identity and promoting physical activity. Recent studies and reports indicate a growing interest in traditional sports among youth and high school students. For instance, the Wall Street Journal (2025) reported girls' wrestling has seen a significant surge in participation, with the number of high school girls involved increasing from less than 10,000 in 2014 to over 64,000 in recent years. This growth has also positively influenced boys' participation in wrestling, which experienced a 25% increase over the past two years.

Similarly, a study conducted in the Klang Valley region of Malaysia (Hasim et al., 2024) examined youth engagement with traditional sports. The research found that while there is a general awareness of traditional games such as *Batu Seremban* and *Gasing*, active participation rates remain modest. Figure 1 shows some examples of traditional games in Malaysia. Factors influencing engagement include cultural relevance, peer influence, and accessibility to game materials. The study emphasises the need for educational and community initiatives to promote these traditional activities among the younger generation.



(a) Congkak



(b) Gasing



(c) Wau



(d) Diabolo

Figure 1: Example of traditional games in Malaysia (pic source from Google)

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent Developments in Traditional Sports Among Youth

A 2024 study focusing on youth in Malaysia's Klang Valley explored awareness and engagement with traditional sports. The research revealed that while there is a general familiarity with traditional games such as *Batu Seremban* and *Gasing*, active participation rates remain modest. Factors influencing engagement include cultural relevance, peer influence, and accessibility to game materials. The study emphasises the need for educational and community initiatives to promote these traditional activities among the younger generation (Hasim et al., 2024).

In the United Kingdom, traditional sports dynamics are undergoing a shift. Historically dominant games, such as netball, are experiencing a decline in popularity among girls in favour of sports like football and cricket. This change is attributed to increased visibility and success of women's teams in these sports, inspiring more young females to participate. The trend highlights the evolving landscape of sports preferences among youth, influenced by contemporary cultural and societal factors (The Times, 2025).

Global Efforts to Preserve Traditional Sports

Recognising the cultural significance of traditional sports, UNESCO has been actively involved in their preservation and promotion. Traditional sports and games (TSG) are seen as vehicles for intercultural dialogue, youth empowerment, and the promotion of ethical sports practices. UNESCO's initiatives aim to safeguard these activities as part of the world's intangible cultural heritage, ensuring they remain a vibrant part of community life and youth engagement (UNESCO, n.d.). The landscape of traditional sports among youth and high school students is dynamic, influenced by cultural heritage, societal changes, and global initiatives. While challenges exist in maintaining active participation, especially with the allure of modern sports and digital entertainment, concerted efforts by educational institutions, communities, and international organizations are pivotal in preserving these rich traditions for future generations.

Sharing with Asian Countries

ASEAN nations share similarities in their national traditional sports culture, featuring common elements, yet displaying distinct cultural meanings across material, spiritual, and institutional dimensions. Traditional sports play a crucial role in fostering unity among Asian nations, as they encourage character development, social connections, and community cohesion. It also serves as a channel for cultural exchange and understanding between diverse ethnic communities. Incorporating traditional sports into educational and social systems enhances their ability to unite people. For example, in Malaysia, traditional games are incorporated into preschool education to foster the idea of unity from a young age. This can promote character development and increase student engagement and well-being (Jasmin, N. A., & Bakar, K., 2024; Azlan et al., 2019). Capinding & Salazar (2023) further supported this by demonstrating that traditional Filipino games can be effectively utilised as a teaching strategy to boost students' motivation, engagement, and academic achievement in science in the Philippines.

In Riau Province, traditional sports represent local wisdom and are highly looked after and preferred by the younger generation. These sports are acknowledged and promoted through events and digital platforms, serving as a means of preserving culture, educating the community, and fostering social unity in Society 5.0 (Nofrizal et al., 2024). The qualitative data in the research by Kogoya et al. (2023) indicated that students in Surabaya, Indonesia, engaged in traditional sports and acquired the values of peace, including tolerance, respect, openness, care, and cooperation. These students uncover new insights through play, engaging in experimental learning that provides essential support for developing and improving their character compared to before. Furthermore, findings by Zulela and Iasha (2024) revealed that traditional games promote teamwork, accountability, and appreciation for local traditions in Indonesia. These sports also help children deepen their understanding of national identity.

Salaebing & Nugraheni (2023) researched 10 traditional games that have similarities between games in Thailand and Indonesia. The research findings indicate that traditional games embody five cultural values: attachment, mutuality, cooperation, honesty, and enjoyment. These values intend to serve as a mechanism for regulating students in their social environment.

While it can improve unity, issues like cultural misunderstanding and rivalry may occasionally result in divisions instead of togetherness. Not only that, challenges like restricted hours and children's preference for digital games delayed their implementation, as modernisation and globalisation have influenced the activity of young people. This could result in a reduction of cultural traditions and community bonding (Zulela & Iasha, 2024). The national traditional sports organizations in Asean might be more streamlined, allowing for quicker and more adaptable decision-making; however, they could experience shortcomings in policy enforcement (Tian, Z.; 2025). Therefore, addressing these challenges is crucial for enhancing the unifying capabilities of traditional sports within educational contexts.

The challenges associated with using traditional sports to foster unit

Traditional sports have the potential to make a significant contribution to unity among high school students, promoting teamwork, cultural appreciation, and a sense of belonging. According to Hananingsih et al. (2024), traditional sports games can be incorporated into physical education, as they aid in building character and imparting values such as responsibility, respect, cooperation, and integrity to the players. Nevertheless, traditional sports face significant challenges in achieving these goals, particularly in remaining relevant among modern youth and ensuring inclusivity. Teenagers and kids, particularly those in school, are more exposed to the world of technology. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a shift in children's play behaviours, with an increase in introverted activities, such as device use and internet games, rather than traditional outdoor pastimes (Kamaruddin et al., 2021). This is due to a lack of exposure to high school students, especially in traditional sports. Therefore, efforts must be made to keep these traditional sports from disappearing entirely.

Additionally, due to a lack of government support, low youth interest, and difficulties in integrating with modern education systems, these challenges are also identified as issues with traditional sports. (Susanto & Satria, 2024; Zhang & Shajinbat, 2024). While these traditional sports serve as a bridge to cultural heritage and social cohesion, there are also situations where students become alienated because they do not participate, particularly from other racial backgrounds. According to Alamri (2015), cultural and religious factors may present obstacles to some students' participation, for example, in Australian public high schools, female Muslim students face challenges in sporting activities due to their Islamic background. To address these issues, educators should receive training on equity issues related to ethnicity, race, culture, and religion (Alamri, 2015), ensuring that sports can truly catalyse unity among diverse student populations.

In Malaysia's multicultural context, managing ethnic relations through sports activities remains a complex challenge. (Esa et al., 2021). The diversity of languages, religions, and cultures in Malaysia presents ongoing obstacles to unity (Abdullah, 2012). However, spectator sports have shown potential as a social marketing tool for national unity in this multiracial country. They can serve as an entry point, promoter, educator, symbol, conversation initiator, and unifying mechanism for national unity by encouraging communities to set aside differences and embrace commonalities (Lim, 2019). Similarly, opportunities exist for innovative development. Promoting traditional sports through cultural festivals, educational programs, and integration with nationwide fitness initiatives can enhance cultural understanding and foster social harmony (Susanto & Satria, 2024; Zhang & Shajinbat, 2024). Furthermore, according to Liu (2024), aligning traditional sports with youth interests and leveraging new media platforms are also suggested as strategies to revitalise these practices and strengthen their role in promoting unity and preserving cultural heritage.

Leveraging Traditional Sports to Promote Unity Among High School Students

The integration of traditional sports, particularly those of ethnic minorities, into high school sports programs presents a valuable opportunity to foster unity among students. Research suggests that incorporating these cultural practices into school sports can enhance inclusivity, enrich the student experience, and promote national cohesion. Traditional sports not only preserve cultural heritage but also create opportunities for

students from diverse backgrounds to engage in shared activities, ultimately strengthening social bonds and mutual understanding.

Traditional sports serve as a bridge between cultures, providing students with an interactive and engaging way to appreciate and participate in diverse cultural practices. In Yunnan Province, China, the integration of minority traditional sports into high school programs has enriched the sports curriculum while promoting national unity by emphasising ethnic and regional identities (Wang, 2017). This approach not only safeguards cultural heritage but also fosters collaboration and inclusivity among students from diverse backgrounds. By participating in traditional sports, students develop a deeper appreciation for the customs and traditions of their peers, reducing cultural barriers and strengthening intergroup relationships (Zhang & Shajinbat, 2024).

Traditional sports, particularly those with ethnic roots, help students appreciate and understand diverse cultures, fostering national unity and social harmony. They provide a platform for cultural exchange and integration among various ethnic groups, which is crucial for fostering a sense of community and national identity among students (Hou, 2023; Liu & Qiu, 2023; Zhang & Shajinbat, 2024). Traditional sports also promote emotional well-being and social interaction, which are essential for building strong, unified student communities (Luchoro-Parrilla et al., 2024; Kang et al., 2024). Traditional sports are not only about physical activity but also about instilling values such as sportsmanship, respect, and fair play. These values contribute to a positive school environment and foster students' positive attitudes towards one another (Jin, 2023; Wijayanti et al., 2023).

Yong, C. (2018) believes that, as a form of cultural heritage, traditional national sports culture is an integral part of traditional culture, embodying the nation's cohesion and spirit. It primarily examines the inheritance mechanism of traditional national sports culture education in colleges and universities, suggesting that it is feasible to implement this type of education in these institutions. This demonstrates how traditional sports may bring high school students united.

Promotions through schools describe efforts by local communities, governments, or sports governing bodies to promote the sport to students using school settings; these efforts do not always involve students' actual participation in the sport. According to Aizawa et al., (2021), they identified nine categories illustrating how schools participated in the leveraging of the National Sport Festival of Japan for sport participation: (1) programs within the school setting, (2) promotions through school, (3) schools as venues, (4) school sport events, (5) teachers and educators, (6) sporting culture in school, (7) graduates, (8) sporting success, and (9) the existing culture. This demonstrates that all parties are involved and play a role in leveraging traditional sports, which can foster unity among high school students.

Beyond cultural integration, traditional sports play a significant role in students' moral and character development. Research by Burgueno and Medina-Casaubon (2020) found that sport education models enhance students' sportsmanship orientations, including respect for rules, referees, opponents, and social conventions. Through structured participation in traditional sports, students cultivate essential social values such as teamwork, cooperation, and mutual respect, all of which are critical for fostering unity in diverse school environments.

School-based sports programs play a crucial role in students' overall well-being, addressing not only their physical development but also their emotional, intellectual, and social growth (Kang et al., 2024). By incorporating traditional sports into school curricula, educators can promote inclusivity by ensuring that all students, regardless of background, have access to meaningful and culturally rich activities. This inclusivity fosters a sense of belonging, which is vital for unity and social cohesion within the school community.

Traditional sports are effective in developing essential social skills, including teamwork, responsibility, perseverance, and empathy. These skills contribute to building a cohesive and supportive school environment where students collaborate, support one another, and develop a strong sense of responsibility (Syamsuddin et al., 2024). The cooperative nature of many traditional sports encourages positive social interactions, which can further strengthen unity among students from different backgrounds.

Wang and Chen (2024) found that participation in sports can enhance team cohesion, particularly when student leadership is involved. While no significant changes in team cohesion were observed over time, leadership played a crucial role in gradually strengthening cohesion. This indicates that promoting leadership within sports teams can effectively foster unity among students.

Integrating traditional sports into high school programs offers numerous benefits, particularly in fostering unity among students. By providing opportunities for cultural exchange, character development, and social skill enhancement, traditional sports serve as powerful tools for building inclusive and harmonious school environments. Schools that actively incorporate traditional sports into their curricula can play a pivotal role in strengthening social cohesion, both within the educational system and in the broader community. Encouraging the adoption of traditional sports not only preserves cultural heritage but also lays the foundation for a more unified and interconnected student body.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative descriptive design to investigate the role of traditional sports in promoting unity among high school students. A structured survey was the main instrument for data collection, enabling systematic capture of students' experiences, perceptions, and attitudes. Figure 2 shows the research framework for this study. A total of 161 high school students from Klang Valley, Selangor, participated in the study. Participants were selected using simple random sampling, which allowed for easy access to respondents within the targeted demographic. The sample consisted of both male and female students aged between 13 and 21 years, representing diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. The data were collected through a structured questionnaire which are developed in alignment with the purpose of the study. The survey questions covered the following sections: (1) Awareness and Knowledge; (2) Interest and Willingness; (3) Barriers and Challenges:

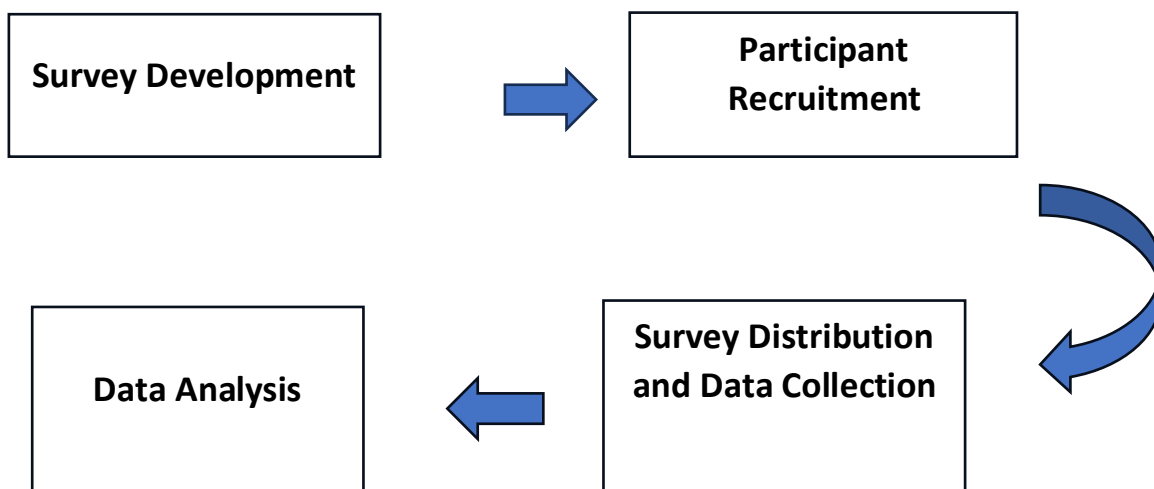


Figure 2: Research Framework

The analysis was conducted using SPSS software. The data were analysed using quantitative statistical methods to systematically address the study's objectives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 presents the demographic breakdown of participants' awareness of traditional sports, categorised by gender and age group. The findings demonstrate high overall awareness across the sample, with some variation by age. The result shows that 97.7% of male and 98.1% of female students reported awareness. This indicates minimal gender difference. However, the awareness varied by age. The youngest group (13-15 years) had the lowest awareness, at 75%, while awareness rose to 98.2% among students aged 16-18 years and reached 100% for those aged 19-21 years. While for participants aged 22 and above. Awareness was slightly lower at 93.8%.

Table 1: Demographic Breakdown of Awareness and Participation in Traditional Sports

Group	Items	Not Aware (%)	Aware (%)
Gender	Male	2.1	97.9
	Female	1.9	98.1
Age Group	13-15	25	75
	16-18	1.8	98.2
	19-21	0	100
	22 above	6.2	93.8

As depicted in Table 2, the relationship between awareness and participation in traditional sports is shown. Among students who were not aware of traditional sports, 66.7% had still participated, while 33.3% had not. In contrast, 73.9% of students who were aware reported participation, with 26.1% indicating non-participation. These findings suggest that awareness is positively associated with participation, though a notable proportion of unaware students also engaged in traditional sports. Figure 3 illustrates the main barriers to participation. The most commonly reported barriers included limited access to equipment, a lack of knowledge about the rules, and a preference for modern games. Time constraints and peer influence were also noted as contributing factors. These berries highlight both logistical and motivational challenges that hinder regular participation in traditional sport.

Table 2: Participation by Awareness

Awareness	Not Participated(%)	Participated (%)
No	33.3	66.7
Yes	26.1	73.9

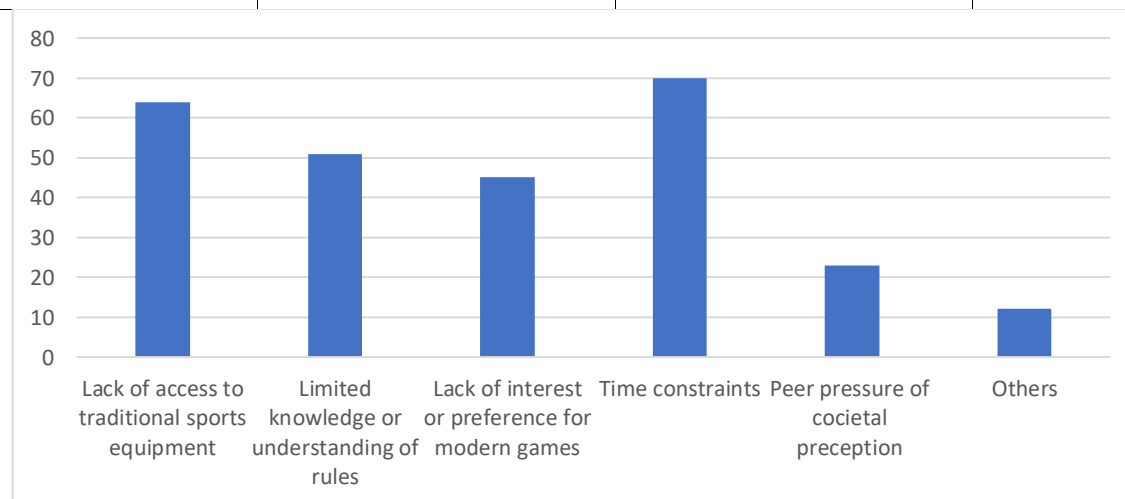


Figure 3: Barrier to Participating in Traditional Sports

Table 3 compares willingness to participate in traditional sports based on students' interest levels and awareness. Among students with high interest, 65.6% expressed willingness to participate, while only 2.1% were unwilling. In contrast, students with low interest had a low willingness rate (50%) and a higher rate of unwillingness (33%). Those with moderate interest showed mixed responses, with 34.1% willing and 53.7% selecting "maybe". Regarding awareness, 66.7% of students who were aware of traditional sports indicated willingness to participate, compared to 55.5% of those who were not aware. Notably, none of the aware students reported outright unwillingness, while 6.5% of unaware students did. These results indicate that both higher interest and awareness are associated with greater willingness to participate in traditional sports.

Table 3: Comparison of Willingness to Participate Based on Interest and Awareness of Traditional Sports

Group	Level	Maybe (%)	Not (%)	Yes (%)
Interest	Low	16.7	33	50
	Moderate	53.7	12.2	34.1
	High	32.3	2.1	65.6
Awareness	Yes	33.3	0	66.7
	No	38	6.5	55.5

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study investigated the role of traditional sports in promoting unity among high school students in the Klang Valley, Selangor. The finding highlights that awareness and participation in traditional sports are generally high, particularly among young students, with minimal gender differences. The data also indicate that students with greater awareness and interest were more likely to participate in traditional sports, suggesting a strong association between exposure and engagement. However, several challenges hinder widespread participation, including limited access to facilities, a lack of understanding of game rules, and competing interests on modern digital entertainment platforms. These barriers represent both practical and motivational obstacles that reduce opportunities for meaningful involvement in traditional sports activities (Kamaruddin et al., 2021; Susanto & Satria, 2024).

Despite these challenges, the study emphasises the substantial potential of traditional sports to promote not only physical activity but also intercultural dialogue, social inclusion, and character development. Traditional sports foster values such as cooperation, respect, and teamwork, all of which are essential for building cohesive student communities in multicultural settings (Hou, 2023; Zhang & Shajinbat, 2024). To maximise their unifying potential, several strategies are recommended. Firstly, traditional sports should be integrated into school curricula and extracurricular programs to ensure systematic exposure and sustained engagement from an early age. This approach has been shown to enhance students' appreciation for cultural heritage and social interaction (Hananingsih et al., 2024; Jasmin & Bakar, 2024). Secondly, both schools and local communities must improve accessibility by investing in sports facilities and materials, thereby addressing a key logistical barrier to participation (Nofrizal et al., 2024). Thirdly, awareness campaigns, school-based workshops, and cultural events should be organised to increase familiarity with traditional sports among students, particularly younger age groups who demonstrate lower awareness (Hasim et al., 2024; Capinding & Salazr, 2023). Additionally, utilising digital platforms and social media to promote traditional sports can attract the interest of modern youth and bridge generational gaps (Liu, 2024; Zhang & Shajinbat, 2024).

Thus, traditional sports hold immense potential to foster unity among high school students by promoting cultural awareness, inclusiveness, and personal development. When supported by thoughtful educational and community strategies, these sports can become practical tools for fostering social cohesion and building national identity. Further research should investigate the longitudinal effects of such interventions and assess their scalability across diverse educational and cultural contexts (Hou, 2023; Syamsuddin et al., 2024).

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