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Heritage to harmony: The social impact and health benefits of traditional sports

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Abstract

Objective: This research explores how traditional sports influence health and social connections. It also highlights the challenges these sports face and discusses the ways to revitalize them.

Methods: The study included 300 participants, comprising players, trainers, and event coordinators, from six traditional sports of Manipur: Thang-Ta, Sagol Kangjei, Yubi Lakpi, Mukna, Kang, and Hiyang Tanaba. Participants, aged 18 to 45 years, were selected from six districts using snowball and purposive sampling. Data were collected through a 55-item questionnaire and structured interviews and analyzed using descriptive statistics and ANOVA techniques.

Results: Sagol Kangjei consistently achieved the highest scores in health and wellness (average: 61.42), and social integration (average: 64.54). Traditional sports proved effective in strengthening social relationships and maintaining health & wellness. ANOVA findings showed significant disparities in health & wellness, and social integration ($p < 0.001$).

Conclusion: Traditional sports significantly contribute to improving health & wellness, and influence society as well. Sagol Kangjei serves as an exemplary case for utilizing traditional sports for community progress.

Keywords: Traditional sports, health and wellness, social interaction, Sagol Kangjei, Manipur, community development

Introduction

Traditional sports are closely tied-up to cultural traditions, representing the values, history, and identity of various communities around the globe (Akbar *et al.*, 2020) ^[1]. These activities go beyond simple leisure pursuits, having long served as tools for promoting unity, physical health, and cultural continuity (Dehkordi, 2017, Hananingsih *et al.*, 2024) ^[4, 8]. They symbolize the collective identity of societies, nurturing pride and a sense of belongingness while connecting different generations (Faridah *et al.*, 2024) ^[6]. Often rooted in local customs and societal practices, traditional sports also play a vital role in teaching moral values and essential life skills, significantly contributing to both individual growth and community development (Anastasovski *et al.*, 2016, Bin & Lanjuan, 2019) ^[2, 3].

In places like Manipur, indigenous sports such as Sagol Kangjei (an early form of polo), Thang-Ta (a form of martial arts), and Mukna (a type of wrestling) play a crucial role in preserving cultural identity (Devi, 2008 ^[5], UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.). These activities, frequently associated with festivals and social gatherings, provide opportunities to enhance physical fitness, mental strength, and cooperation (Gelisli & Yazici, 2015, Hartanto *et al.*, 2021) ^[7, 9]. For example, Sagol Kangjei demonstrates the harmonious connection between athletic ability and cultural heritage, while Thang-Ta highlights the combination of martial expertise and spiritual practices. These sports not only enrich the cultural fabric of the region but also serve as platforms for fostering social unity and overall well-being (Lestarinigrum, 2018) ^[11].

The significance of traditional sports goes beyond safeguarding cultural heritage. They encourage physical activity, boost mental health, and unite people from diverse backgrounds, promoting inclusivity and breaking down social barriers (Maulana *et al.*, 2021) ^[14]. By instilling discipline, teamwork, and mutual respect, these sports also serve as valuable educational tools (Marlina & Pransiska, 2018) ^[13].

Additionally, their ability to attract tourists and support economic growth underscores their importance at a societal level (Luchoro-Parrilla *et al.*, 2021) [12].

However, the survival of traditional sports is under threat due to urbanization, globalisation, and the increasing appeal of modern sports (Nur *et al.*, 2020) [16]. This decline poses a risk to cultural diversity and heritage. Nevertheless, efforts by organizations like UNESCO (UNESCO World Heritage Centre) and local initiatives are focusing on reviving and promoting traditional sports (Oboeuf *et al.*, 2020) [17]. Such efforts highlight the potential of these activities to strengthen social ties, foster cultural exchange, and contribute to sustainable development.

This study emphasizes the role of traditional sports in improving community health and social connections, demonstrating their relevance in today’s world. It advocates for preserving these cultural treasures as essential tools for enhancing societal well-being and building a more inclusive and united community. Through their unique combination of physical activity, cultural significance, and social interaction, traditional sports continue to play a vital role in creating healthier, more harmonious societies.

Methodology

Participant selection

The research involved 300 individuals actively associated with traditional sports in Manipur, including athletes, coaches, event organizers, and local leaders. A purposive sampling technique was used to ensure the sample represented diverse demographics. The inclusion criteria were as follows:

- **Age:** Between 18 and 45 years
- **Gender:** Inclusive of both males and females
- **Residence:** Participants were from six districts in Manipur-Thoubal, Imphal East, Imphal West, Kakching, Bishnupur, and Jiribam

Analysis of data and results

Table 1: Showing the descriptive statistics of the selected variables among the players of different traditional sports

		N	Mean	Std. deviation	95% confidence interval for mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower bound	Upper bound		
HW	Thang-ta	50	58.1200	6.40676	56.2992	59.9408	35.00	70.00
	Sagol Kangjei	50	61.4200	4.99833	59.9995	62.8405	50.00	70.00
	Mukna	50	56.8800	4.64951	55.5586	58.2014	48.00	66.00
	Yubi Lakpi	50	58.8400	5.81469	57.1875	60.4925	40.00	69.00
	Kang	50	55.2800	7.38460	53.1813	57.3787	41.00	70.00
	Hiyang Tanaba	50	54.6600	6.25841	52.8814	56.4386	43.00	70.00
	Total	300	57.5333	6.35848	56.8109	58.2558	35.00	70.00
SI	Thang-ta	50	63.0600	5.30079	61.5535	64.5665	47.00	75.00
	Sagol Kangjei	50	64.5400	5.65400	62.9332	66.1469	47.00	74.00
	Mukna	50	62.1000	4.53670	60.8107	63.3893	48.00	75.00
	Yubi Lakpi	50	63.9000	6.61245	62.0208	65.7792	43.00	74.00
	Kang	50	61.5000	5.91177	59.8199	63.1801	50.00	75.00
	Hiyang Tanaba	50	60.1600	5.89486	58.4847	61.8353	47.00	75.00
	Total	300	62.5433	5.82993	61.8809	63.2057	43.00	75.00

The research assessed six traditional sports-Thang-ta, Sagol Kangjei, Mukna, Yubi Lakpi, Kang, and Hiyang Tanaba-using four main criteria: Health & Wellness (HW), and Social Interaction (SI). The analysis in Table 1 considered descriptive statistics such as averages, standard deviations,

- The sample included participants involved in traditional sports such as:
 - Thang-Ta (Martial Art Form)
 - Sagol Kangjei (Polo Game)
 - Yubi Lakpi (Coconut Snatching)
 - Mukna (Wrestling)
 - Kang (Target-based Game)
 - Hiyang Tanaba (Boat Racing)
- Participants varied in skill levels and cultural perspectives, allowing the study to explore the health and social impacts of these traditional sports.

Selection of variables

The study focused on examining the influence of traditional sports on the following aspects:

- Health & Wellness (HW).
- Social Interaction (SI).

Criterion measure

The research utilized multiple tools to gather detailed information. These included a custom-designed questionnaire containing 55 items, and a structured open-ended interview. The questionnaire was specifically created to meet the aims of the study, with its reliability and accuracy confirmed through standard psychological methods. The interviews offered rich qualitative data. A specialist in physical education supervised the creation of these tools to ensure they met both academic and practical requirements.

Data analysis

- Descriptive statistics summarized demographic details and survey responses.
- ANOVA tests evaluated relationships between participation in traditional sports and associated benefits.

confidence intervals, and observed ranges. The findings are summarized below:

Health and Wellness (HW)

This aspect focused on the contribution of traditional sports to physical and social well-being.

- **Highest mean score:** Sagol Kangjei (61.42) had the greatest positive effect on health.
- **Lowest mean score:** Hiyang Tanaba (54.66) showed a comparatively moderate impact.

Consistency

- Kang (SD=7.38) had the most variation in health-related benefits.
- Mukna (SD=4.65) displayed the least variation, indicating stable outcomes.
- Overall Average: The mean score of 57.53 indicated that traditional sports had a moderate overall influence on health and wellness.

Social Interaction (SI)

This criterion examined the role of sports in fostering social bonds and a sense of community

- **Highest mean score:** Sagol Kangjei (64.54) was most effective in promoting social interactions.
- **Lowest mean score:** Hiyang Tanaba (60.16) showed substantial, though slightly lower, benefits.

Consistency

- Yubi Lakpi (SD=6.61) exhibited the greatest variability.
- Mukna (SD=4.54) demonstrated consistent results.
- Overall Average: A high mean score of 62.54 indicated that traditional sports significantly strengthened social ties.

Key findings

- **Sagol Kangjei’s excellence:** This sport consistently ranked the highest in all dimensions, showcasing its significant role in promoting health, social interaction, community unity, and economic growth.
- **Well-rounded benefits:** Most traditional sports performed well in HW, SI, and IC, demonstrating their importance in community development.
- **Economic challenges:** The EI scores were the lowest overall, suggesting potential for improvement in leveraging these sports for financial gains.
- **Variability among sports:** Certain sports, like Kang and Hiyang Tanaba, showed high variability, indicating differing participant experiences or external influences.

Table 2: showing the analysis of variance of the selected variables among the players of different traditional sports

		Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Sig.
HW	Between groups	1545.907	5	309.181	8.622	.000
	Within groups	10542.76	294	35.860		
	Total	12088.66	299			
SI	Between groups	652.977	5	130.595	4.038	.001
	Within groups	9509.460	294	32.345		
	Total	10162.43	299			

Table 2 showing the analysis of variance, described how traditional sports contributed to community health, integration, and development. Below is a simplified summary of the findings:

Health and Wellness (HW)

The analysis revealed a high F-Value (8.622) and a significant p-value ($p < 0.001$), indicating notable differences in how health and wellness were influenced across different

groups. This suggested that traditional sports had a strong positive effect on health outcomes, with variations based on demographic or contextual factors.

Social Interaction (SI)

The data showed an F-value of 4.038 and a significant p-value ($P = 0.001$), demonstrating that traditional sports encouraged different levels of social interaction among groups. This highlighted their role in promoting communication and strengthening social ties, with variations depending on group characteristics.

Interpretation

The findings demonstrated significant differences in all four areas (HW, SI, IC, and EI), emphasizing the broad advantages of traditional sports:

- **Health and wellness:** Traditional sports were key in improving physical and mental health.
- **Social interaction:** They helped build social connections and foster collaboration.

Traditional sports were identified as effective tools for promoting health & wellness, and fostering social cohesion.

Discussion

The study highlighted the significant contributions of traditional sports to community development, emphasizing their role in enhancing health and strengthening social bonds. It examined six traditional sports from Manipur—Thang-Ta, Sagol Kangjei, Yubi Lakpi, Mukna, Kang, and Hiyang Tanaba—evaluating their influence on well-being and social engagement, thus offering a comprehensive perspective on their contemporary relevance.

Health and well-Being

The findings revealed that traditional sports had a positive impact on both physical and mental health, with Sagol Kangjei achieving the highest score (61.42). This result suggested that the sport’s demanding physical and strategic requirements significantly contributed to overall wellness. Similar conclusions have been drawn in prior studies, linking traditional sports to enhanced cardiovascular fitness, improved muscular strength, and greater mental resilience (Chepyator-Thomson & Ariyo, 2016) ^[19]. Additionally, culturally grounded physical activities have been shown to reduce stress and enhance mental health, as they often incorporate meditative and communal elements (Jennings *et al.*, 2010) ^[21].

Hiyang Tanaba, however, scored the lowest (54.66), indicating a more limited impact on health, likely due to its seasonal nature or its association with specific cultural occasions. This aligns with studies that suggest irregularly practiced traditional sports may deliver fewer health benefits compared to those played more consistently (Becerril-García *et al.*, 2022) ^[18].

The variability in outcomes was most noticeable in Kang, which showed the highest standard deviation (7.38). This suggested uneven health benefits, possibly due to differences in training intensity or participation levels. Previous research has noted similar trends, with disparities in access to training and resources influencing health outcomes in traditional sports (Kossakowski, 2019) ^[23]. The overall average score (57.53) demonstrated that traditional

sports generally contributed positively to health, though the extent of these benefits varied depending on the sport.

Social integration

Traditional sports were also found to be effective in fostering social unity, with Sagol Kangjei again ranking the highest (Mean Score: 64.54). Its team-based structure likely enhanced communication and cooperation among players, thus strengthening community bonds. This supports earlier studies that highlighted the role of team-oriented sports in bridging cultural divides and promoting inclusivity (Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011) ^[20].

In contrast, Hiyang Tanaba had the lowest score (60.16), which may be attributed to its restricted accessibility and limited participation by specific groups. Limited access has been recognized as a challenge to the wider adoption of traditional sports for community building (Spaaij, 2009) ^[24]. Yubi Lakpi exhibited the most variability in social outcomes (SD=6.61), likely reflecting differences in cultural backgrounds or levels of community involvement among participants. Research by Kidd (2013) ^[22] underscores the importance of cultural inclusivity and diverse engagement to maximize the social benefits of traditional sports. The overall mean score (62.54) underscored the significant role of traditional sports in fostering social connections and building a sense of belonging, reinforcing their importance within cultural and social structures.

Conclusion

Traditional sports play a vital role in promoting health, encouraging social cohesion, preserving cultural heritage, and contributing to local economies. This research, which examines six traditional sports of Manipur, highlights their significant impact in four main areas:

- **Health and Wellness (HW):** Traditional sports greatly enhance both physical and mental well-being, with Sagol Kangjei showing the most notable benefits. These findings emphasize their potential as powerful tools for holistic health promotion.
- **Social Interaction (SI):** These activities strengthen social connections, teamwork, and community engagement. High scores in this aspect reflect their effectiveness in fostering interpersonal relationships and a shared sense of belonging.

Hence, traditional sports are essential for fostering health & wellness and enhancing social integration. Policymakers, educators, and local leaders must work together to protect and advance traditional sports, ensuring their relevance and benefits in today's world.

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Conflict statement

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