



The social and cultural impacts of hosting major sporting events

Los impactos sociales y culturales de la acogida de grandes eventos deportivos

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Abstract

Introduction: Major sporting events have increasingly been associated with social and cultural outcomes beyond their economic contributions. Nevertheless, limited research has examined youth-oriented multi-sport events from the perspective of direct participants.

Objective: This study aimed to examine the perceived social and cultural impacts of hosting the 3rd Asian Youth Games (Bahrain 2025) from the perspective of direct participants involved in the event.

Methodology: A descriptive survey design was employed. Data were collected from 420 participants representing different ages, roles, and identity groups. Statistical analyses were conducted to examine perceived social and cultural impacts and to identify differences across demographic variables.

Results: The findings revealed high perceived social impacts related to social interaction, social cohesion, pride and belonging, volunteering, and social engagement. High perceived cultural impacts were also identified, particularly regarding cultural exchange, heritage visibility, intercultural interaction, and positive perceptions of place and destination image. No significant differences were found according to gender or participant groups. However, differences emerged across age and identity groups. Participants under the age of 25 reported higher perceived impacts, while non-Arab residents demonstrated stronger perceptions related to cultural exposure and intercultural interaction.

Discussion: The findings were consistent with previous studies emphasizing the importance of participatory engagement, cultural diversity, and social interaction in shaping event experiences and enhancing the social and cultural value of sporting events.

Conclusions: The study highlights the importance of youth sporting events in promoting social cohesion, intercultural understanding, and culturally sustainable event legacies.

Keywords

Asian youth games; cultural impacts; major sporting events; social impacts; sport event legacy.

Resumen

Introducción: Los grandes eventos deportivos han sido asociados con resultados sociales y culturales más allá de sus contribuciones económicas. Sin embargo, la investigación sobre eventos multideportivos juveniles desde la perspectiva de los participantes directos sigue siendo limitada.

Objetivo: Examinar los impactos sociales y culturales percibidos de la acogida de los 3.º Juegos Asiáticos de la Juventud (Baréin 2025) desde la perspectiva de los participantes involucrados en el evento.

Metodología: Se empleó un diseño descriptivo basado en encuesta. Los datos fueron recopilados de 420 participantes de diferentes edades, roles y grupos de identidad. Se realizaron análisis estadísticos para examinar los impactos percibidos y las diferencias demográficas.

Resultados: Los hallazgos revelaron altos impactos sociales percibidos relacionados con la interacción social, la cohesión social, el orgullo y sentido de pertenencia, el voluntariado y la participación social. También se identificaron altos impactos culturales, especialmente en el intercambio cultural, la visibilidad del patrimonio y la interacción intercultural. No se encontraron diferencias significativas según el género o los grupos de participantes. Sin embargo, los participantes menores de 25 años y los residentes no árabes reportaron percepciones más altas relacionadas con la exposición cultural y la interacción intercultural.

Discusión: Los resultados coincidieron con estudios previos que destacan la importancia de la participación activa, la diversidad cultural y la interacción social en las experiencias del evento.

Conclusiones: El estudio destaca la importancia de los eventos deportivos juveniles para promover la cohesión social, la comprensión intercultural y legados culturalmente sostenibles.

Palabras clave

Juegos de la juventud asiática; impactos culturales; grandes eventos deportivos; impactos sociales; legado de eventos deportivos.

Introduction

The hosting of major sporting events is increasingly viewed in contemporary policy as a multidimensional instrument for host cities and nations. These events can generate economic, tourism-related, social, cultural, and symbolic benefits, including enhanced international visibility, improved national image, strengthened global positioning, and the accumulation of prestige and soft power (Alshikhy et al., 2025; Lee Ludvigsen et al., 2022; Malchrowicz-Moško & Poczta, 2018). In addition, sporting events may influence destination image and participants' future behavioral intentions toward the host destination (Rahayu et al., 2024). These perceived benefits motivate states to actively pursue the hosting of such events, transforming them from purely athletic competitions into strategic platforms for international positioning and inter-state competition (Koenigstorfer et al., 2019; Thomson et al., 2019).

While economic growth and tourism stimulation remain prominent in policy and planning discourses, it is increasingly recognized that the most significant and enduring outcomes of hosting major sporting events extend beyond financial indicators. These outcomes are often embedded in social and cultural dimensions, including the reinforcement of collective identity, social cohesion, intercultural interaction, and improvements in residents' perceived quality of life (Knott et al., 2022; Preuss, 2019). This shift has contributed to a move away from narrowly framed economic impact assessments toward more holistic approaches that foreground the social and cultural transformations associated with hosting major sporting events.

Within this broader framework, social impacts are among the most frequently reported outcomes of hosting major sporting events. These include enhanced community pride, social cohesion, volunteerism, youth engagement, increased participation in sport, and improvements in perceived quality of life (Kim et al., 2015; Kinoshita et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2025). Hosting such events can strengthen social networks, foster a sense of collective identity, and create shared experiences that contribute to social capital and community well-being. At the same time, research also documents potential negative social impacts, including congestion, disruption of daily life, rising living costs, social exclusion, and the unequal distribution of benefits and burdens among different social groups (Oshimi, 2016; Taks et al., 2020). These findings highlight that social impacts are neither uniformly positive nor evenly experienced, underscoring the need to examine how different segments of society perceive and interpret these changes.

Closely related to social impacts are the cultural impacts of hosting major sporting events. Such events can promote cultural exchange, intercultural understanding, national and local identity formation, and the global visibility of host cultures (Al-Marri et al., 2025; Amara & Bouandel, 2023). They can also stimulate interest in cultural heritage, urban regeneration, and the symbolic representation of national values through ceremonies, media narratives, and public discourse (Shubbar et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2025). However, scholars caution that cultural impacts may also include the commodification of culture, the homogenization of local identities, or tensions between global event formats and local cultural norms (Lee Ludvigsen et al., 2022). Understanding cultural impacts therefore requires careful attention to context, power relations, and local interpretations.

In the Gulf context, countries such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates have actively used major sporting events as tools of nation branding, social development, and soft power (Nassif, 2022). Empirical studies focusing on Qatar's hosting of the 2006 Asian Games and the 2022 FIFA World Cup report perceived gains in national pride, social cohesion, youth engagement, and cultural openness, alongside concerns related to social disruption, rising costs, and ethical challenges (Al-Emadi et al., 2024; Al-Emadi et al., 2022; Ishac & Swart, 2022). Nevertheless, regional research remains limited in scope and heavily concentrated on Qatar, with comparatively little empirical evidence from other Gulf host countries (Taylor et al., 2023).

Within this regional context, Bahrain has also positioned itself as an emerging host of international sporting events, most notably through the annual Formula One Grand Prix and its participation in hosting and bidding for regional and international competitions (Sowaid et al., 2025). Cultural and urban initiatives, such as heritage-based tourism and urban regeneration projects in Manama, further reflect Bahrain's interest in leveraging sport and culture as drivers of social and cultural development (Shubbar et al., 2025). Despite this growing engagement, there remains a notable lack of empirical research examining how major sporting events hosted in Bahrain are perceived in terms of their social and cultural

impacts, particularly from the perspective of those who directly participate in and engage with these events.

Accordingly, although sporting events generate important social and cultural impacts that represent some of their most sustainable long-term outcomes, academic attention has remained largely dominated by economic and tourism-related perspectives, while social and cultural dimensions have received comparatively less systematic consideration (Knott et al., 2022; Preuss, 2019). At the same time, the existing literature on social and cultural impacts has been heavily concentrated on a limited number of mega sporting events, most notably the FIFA World Cup and the Olympic Games, with far fewer studies examining other international multi-sport events or youth-oriented competitions (Koenigstorfer et al., 2019). Youth-oriented sporting events may hold particular social and cultural significance because they create opportunities for intercultural interaction, youth engagement, identity formation, and long-term social exchange among participants from different cultural backgrounds. Unlike many elite adult sporting events that are often evaluated primarily through economic, media, and branding outcomes, youth events tend to emphasize participation, interaction, and developmental experiences, making their social and cultural impacts especially relevant within the context of sustainable sport development.

In the Kingdom of Bahrain, the scale and diversity of hosted sporting events have increased substantially in recent years, reflecting a strategic orientation toward sport as a platform for development and international positioning. Sowaid et al. (2025) indicated that Bahrain has increasingly supported and hosted a wide range of sporting events, including youth, regional, international, and disability sport events, reflecting a broader institutional orientation toward diversified sport event hosting and development, and recommended the adoption of future research examining the sustainable social and cultural impacts associated with hosting these diverse sporting events rather than limiting assessment to economic dimensions alone. This situation has created a clear need for studies that move beyond economic indicators to examine the social and cultural impacts of hosting sporting events. Accordingly, this study examines the perceived social and cultural impacts of hosting the 3rd Asian Youth Games (Bahrain 2025) in order to contribute context-specific evidence that can inform socially and culturally sustainable event and legacy planning. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the perceived level of the social and cultural impacts of hosting the 3rd Asian Youth Games (Bahrain 2025)?
2. Are there statistically significant differences in the perceived social and cultural impacts according to gender, role in the event, age, and identity?

Method

Study method

A descriptive survey design was employed due to its suitability for the study context and its effectiveness in achieving the study objectives.

Population and Sample

The population of the study comprised all participants involved in the 3rd Asian Youth Games (Bahrain 2025), including athletes, coaches, administrators, volunteers, and event organizers. According to official data released by the Organizing Committee, the total population was approximately 10,374 individuals.

The minimum required sample size was determined based on the practical guidelines proposed by Serdar et al. (2021), which emphasize the importance of adequate sample size in ensuring sufficient statistical power, representativeness, and reliability of quantitative findings. Assuming a population size of approximately 10,374 individuals, a confidence level of 95%, and a margin of error of $\pm 5\%$, the minimum recommended sample size was estimated at 371 respondents. To account for potential non-response and incomplete questionnaires, a larger sample was targeted. A total of 420 valid questionnaires were ultimately collected and analyzed.



Due to the practical nature of data collection during the event, a non-probability convenience sampling approach was employed. The questionnaire was distributed in person during the championship, particularly during its final days, as this period was considered appropriate for assessing the social and cultural aspects experienced during the event. In addition, the questionnaire continued to be distributed electronically after the conclusion of the championship and was shared with participating delegations in order to reach a larger sample and obtain more comprehensive participant evaluations. Table 1 presents the distribution of the study sample.

Table 1. Distribution of the Study Sample (N = 420)

Variable	Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	291	69.3
	Female	129	30.7
	Total	420	100
Role in the Event	Athlete	130	31.0
	Coach	73	17.4
	Administrator	75	17.9
	Volunteer	142	33.8
	Total	420	100
Age	Less than 25 years	211	50.2
	From 25 to 35 years	92	21.9
	From 36 to 45 years	54	12.9
	More than 45 years	63	15.0
	Total	420	100
Identity	Bahraini	185	44.0
	Arab Resident	125	29.8
	Non-Arab Resident	110	26.2
	Total	420	100

Study Instrument and Content Validity

A structured questionnaire was employed as the primary quantitative instrument to collect data on participants' perceptions of the social and cultural impacts of hosting major sporting events. The questionnaire was developed based on an extensive review of the relevant literature and previous empirical studies on sport event impacts, event management, and sustainability, ensuring that the instrument reflected the key constructs of interest and was aligned with established theoretical and conceptual frameworks. To establish content validity, the initial version of the questionnaire was reviewed by a panel of eight experts in sports management and event studies, who evaluated the relevance of the dimensions as well as the clarity and appropriateness of the items. Based on their feedback, minor wording revisions were made to improve precision and clarity. The experts' evaluations indicated a high level of agreement regarding the suitability of the questionnaire, with acceptance rates ranging from 87.5% to 100%, thereby confirming the adequacy of the instrument for achieving the study objectives.

Construct validity

It was assessed using Pearson's correlation coefficients between each item and its corresponding dimension (Table 2). The results showed that all item-dimension correlations were positive and statistically significant ($p < .01$). For the social impacts dimension, the coefficients ranged from .707 to .920, while for the cultural impacts dimension they ranged from .763 to .836. These values indicate strong and acceptable relationships between the items and their intended constructs, supporting the construct-related validity of the scale.

Table 2. Pearson Correlation Coefficients Between Each Item and Its Corresponding Scale

Social impacts		Cultural impacts	
Phrase number	Correlation coefficient	Phrase number	Correlation coefficient
1	.707**	1	.836**
2	.823**	2	.807**
3	.777**	3	.763**
4	.920**	4	.763**
5	.777**	5	.836**
6	.823**	6	.836**
7	.785**	7	.796**
8	.836**	8	.798**

The reliability of the study instrument was assessed using both test–retest reliability and internal consistency measures. A test–retest procedure was applied to a pilot sample of 27 participants drawn from outside the main study sample, whereby the questionnaire was administered twice to the same participants with a two-week interval between applications. In addition, Cronbach’s alpha coefficients were calculated to examine the internal consistency of the instrument. The overall Cronbach’s alpha coefficient reached .946, indicating a high level of internal consistency for the measurement instrument. The test–retest results presented in Table 3 were calculated using the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) and the Kappa coefficient, and all values exceeded .80, indicating strong agreement and stability between the two administrations of the instrument. Furthermore, the internal consistency analysis (Table 4) showed that all Cronbach’s alpha coefficients for the individual dimensions exceeded the commonly accepted threshold of .70, confirming the reliability of the measurement tool.

Table 3. Test–Retest Reliability Coefficients

The axis	Stability coefficient ICC	Significance level at 95%		Factor KAPPA	Significance level
Social impacts	.957	.883	.984	.908	0.00 very functional
Cultural impacts	.768	.684	.915	.833	0.00 very functional
The tool as a whole	.910	.758	.967	.917	0.00 very functional

Table 4. Cronbach’s Alpha Reliability Coefficients for Each Scale

The axis	Number of paragraphs	Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient
Social impacts	8	.928
Cultural impacts	8	.936
The tool as a whole	16	.946

Table 5. Statistical Criteria for Interpreting Mean Scores of Perceived Social and Cultural Impacts

Degree	Arithmetic mean
Very low	1.00 - 1.80
Low	1.81 - 2.60
Medium	2.61 - 3.40
High	3.41 - 4.20
Very high	4.21 - 5.00

Statistical Analysis

Prior to conducting the statistical analyses, the data were tested for normality using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test. The results indicated that the data followed a normal distribution, supporting the use of parametric statistical tests. Accordingly, descriptive statistics, independent samples t-tests, one-way ANOVA, and Bonferroni post hoc comparisons were employed in accordance with the study objectives and research variables.

Results

What is the perceived level of the social and cultural impacts of hosting the 3rd Asian Youth Games (Bahrain 2025)?

Table 6. Means and Standard Deviations of the Perceived Social and Cultural Impacts of Hosting the 3rd Asian Youth Games (N = 420)

Number	Paragraph	MEAN	SD	Rank	Degree
	Social impacts	4.01	.722	(2)	High
1	The event enhances my interaction with the local community during the activities.	4.02	.891	6	High
2	The event contributes to enhancing cooperation between participants and organizers.	4.07	.956	5	High
3	The event encourages me to build new social relationships with different groups.	3.67	.579	7	High
4	The event provides an opportunity to interact with decision-makers and officials in the sports field.	4.19	.950	1	High

5	The event enhances my sense of pride, belonging, and safety at the venues.	4.18	.932	2	High
6	The event encourages me to participate in other sports activities and events in the future.	3.64	.541	8	High
7	The event contributes to bringing different segments of the community closer together and increasing its cohesion.	4.16	.930	3	High
8	The event enhances the spirit of volunteering and sustainable community participation after it ends.	4.15	.948	4	High
	Cultural impacts	4.09	.795	(1)	High
9	The event provides an opportunity to meet new people from different cultures.	3.69	.535	8	High
10	The event enhances cultural diversity among the countries participating in Bahrain.	4.15	.929	4	High
11	The event contributes to familiarizing participants with Bahraini heritage, customs, and traditions.	4.17	.986	3	High
12	The event provides delegations with an opportunity to explore tourist landmarks in the Kingdom of Bahrain.	4.10	.988	7	High
13	The event provides an opportunity to discover new and innovative sports.	4.18	.968	2	High
14	The event enhances the preservation of Bahraini culture and introduces it to the delegations.	4.14	.998	5	High
15	The event presents a positive image of Bahrain as a leading center for hosting major sports events.	4.12	.964	6	High
16	The event contributes to building a positive international image of Bahrain.	4.19	.960	1	High
	Overall Average	4.05	.742		High

The analysis of perceived impacts of hosting the 3rd Asian Youth Games revealed that both social and cultural dimensions were rated at a high degree. Within the social dimension, the highest-ranked item was the opportunity to interact with decision-makers and officials in the sports field, followed closely by pride, belonging, and community cohesion. In the cultural dimension, the highest-ranked item was the contribution to building a positive international image of Bahrain, alongside opportunities to discover innovative sports and to appreciate Bahraini heritage. Overall, the findings indicate that respondents perceived the social and cultural impacts of the Games to be highly positive, with particular emphasis on the items that ranked highest.

What are the differences in the perceived social and cultural impacts of hosting the 3rd Asian Youth Games (Bahrain 2025) according to gender, role in the event, age, and identity?

Differences by Gender

Table 7. Descriptive Statistics and Independent Samples t-Test for Gender Differences (N = 420)

The axis	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-value	df	Sig.	Cohen's d
Social impacts	Male	291	4.03	0.731	0.953	418	0.647	.100
	Female	129	3.96	0.701				
Cultural impacts	Male	291	4.12	0.797	1.293	418	0.282	.130
	Female	129	4.02	0.789				
The tool as a whole	Male	291	4.08	0.749	1.156	418	0.359	.120
	Female	129	3.99	0.727				

Table 7 presents the results of the independent samples *t*-test examining gender differences in participants' perceptions of the social and cultural impacts of hosting the Games. The findings showed no statistically significant differences between male and female participants across any of the examined dimensions. Gender did not significantly influence perceptions of social impacts ($t = .953, p = .647$), cultural impacts ($t = 1.293, p = .282$), or the overall scale ($t = 1.156, p = .359$).

Differences by Role in the Event

Table 8. ANOVA Results for Athlete, Coach, Administrator, and Volunteer Groups (N = 420)

The axis		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Social impacts	Between Groups	.455	3	.152	.289	.833	.002
	Within Groups	217.903	416	.524			
	Total	218.358	419				
Cultural impacts	Between Groups	.886	3	.295	.465	.707	.003



	Within Groups	263.919	416	.634			
	Total	264.805	419				
The tool as a whole	Between Groups	.585	3	.195	.352	.788	.003
	Within Groups	230.377	416	.554			
	Total	230.961	419				

Table 8 presents the results of the one-way ANOVA examining differences across participants' roles in the event (Athlete, Coach, Administrator, and Volunteer). The analysis showed no statistically significant differences among the groups across any of the examined dimensions, as all significance values exceeded the 0.05 threshold. Participants' roles in the event therefore did not have a statistically significant effect on their perceptions of the social and cultural impacts of the event. The corresponding effect sizes were also very small, indicating minimal practical differences among the participant groups.

Differences by Age Group

Table 9. ANOVA Results by Age Group (N = 420)

The axis		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Social impacts	Between Groups	17.514	3	5.838	12.092	.000	.080
	Within Groups	200.844	416	.483			
	Total	218.358	419				
Cultural impacts	Between Groups	21.888	3	7.296	12.495	.000	.083
	Within Groups	242.916	416	.584			
	Total	264.805	419				
The tool as a whole	Between Groups	19.616	3	6.539	12.870	.000	.085
	Within Groups	211.345	416	.508			
	Total	230.961	419				

Table 9 presents the results of the one-way ANOVA examining differences across age groups (Less than 25 years, 25–35 years, 36–45 years, and More than 45 years). The analysis revealed statistically significant differences across all dimensions: social impacts ($F = 12.092, p < .001$), cultural impacts ($F = 12.495, p < .001$), and the overall scale ($F = 12.870, p < .001$), indicating that age had a statistically significant effect on participants' evaluations. The corresponding effect sizes were moderate across all dimensions. To identify the direction of these differences, Bonferroni post hoc comparisons were conducted (Table 10).

Table 10. Bonferroni Post Hoc Comparisons of Age Groups Across Study Dimensions (N = 420)

Dependent Variable	(I) Age Group	(J) Age Group	Mean Difference	Std. Error	Sig.
Social impacts	Less than 25 yrs	25–35 yrs	.352*	.084	.001
	Less than 25 yrs	36–45 yrs	.707*	.148	.000
	More than 45 yrs	36–45 yrs	.699*	.186	.003
Cultural impacts	Less than 25 yrs	25–35 yrs	.414*	.092	.000
	Less than 25 yrs	36–45 yrs	.766*	.163	.000
	More than 45 yrs	36–45 yrs	.711*	.205	.008
Tool as a whole	Less than 25 yrs	25–35 yrs	.383*	.086	.000
	Less than 25 yrs	36–45 yrs	.736*	.152	.000
	More than 45 yrs	36–45 yrs	.705*	.191	.004

The results presented in Table 10 indicate that the "Less than 25 years" age group consistently reported significantly higher mean scores than both the 25–35 years and 36–45 years groups across all dimensions. These findings suggest that younger participants perceived Bahrain's hosting of the event more positively and were generally more receptive to the social and cultural dimensions of the event. Older participant groups, by contrast, may have adopted a more evaluative perspective shaped by greater prior exposure to sporting events and broader experiential expectations when assessing the event environment.

Differences by Identity



Table 11. ANOVA Results by Identity Group (N = 420)

The axis		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Social impacts	Between Groups	22.120	2	11.060	23.503	.000	.101
	Within Groups	196.238	417	.471			
	Total	218.358	419				
Cultural impacts	Between Groups	28.017	2	14.008	24.670	.000	.106
	Within Groups	236.788	417	.568			
	Total	264.805	419				
The tool as a whole	Between Groups	24.932	2	12.466	25.231	.000	.108
	Within Groups	206.029	417	.494			
	Total	230.961	419				

Table 11 presents the results of the one-way ANOVA examining differences across identity groups (Bahraini, Arab Resident, and Non-Arab Resident). The analysis revealed statistically significant differences across all dimensions: social impacts ($F = 23.503, p < .001$), cultural impacts ($F = 24.670, p < .001$), and the overall scale ($F = 25.231, p < .001$), indicating that identity group had a statistically significant effect on participants' perceptions of the social and cultural impacts of the event. The corresponding effect sizes were moderate across all examined dimensions.

Table 12. Bonferroni Post Hoc Comparisons of Identity Groups Across Study Dimensions (N = 420)

Dependent Variable	(I) Identity	(J) Identity	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
Social impacts	Bahraini	Arab Resident	.350*	.079	.000
	Bahraini	Non-Arab Resident	.258*	.083	.008
	Arab Resident	Non-Arab Resident	.609*	.090	.000
Cultural impacts	Bahraini	Arab Resident	.434*	.087	.000
	Bahraini	Non-Arab Resident	.239*	.091	.032
	Arab Resident	Non-Arab Resident	.674*	.099	.000
Tool as a whole	Bahraini	Arab Resident	.392*	.081	.000
	Bahraini	Non-Arab Resident	.249*	.085	.014
	Arab Resident	Non-Arab Resident	.641*	.092	.000

Bonferroni post hoc comparisons (Table 12) indicated that these differences were consistently in favor of Non-Arab Residents, who reported significantly higher mean scores than both Bahraini and Arab Resident participants across all dimensions. These findings suggest that Non-Arab Residents perceived the event more positively in relation to its social and cultural experiences, particularly those associated with intercultural interaction, cultural exposure, and the overall event environment.

Discussion

The findings of the present study indicate that direct participants perceived high levels of both social and cultural impacts associated with hosting the 3rd Asian Youth Games in Bahrain, reflecting a generally positive evaluation of the event among athletes, coaches, administrators, and volunteers. This reinforces the growing consensus that the legacies of major sporting events may extend beyond economic outcomes and include important social and cultural dimensions (Knott et al., 2022; Koenigstorfer et al., 2019; Preuss, 2019). In contrast, Espinal-Ruiz et al. (2025), in their study of the Junior Pan American Games, found that certain socioeconomic and sport-related legacies of international youth multi-sport events may also be associated with negative perceptions within host settings, suggesting that positive and negative event legacies can coexist simultaneously. However, the present findings reflected predominantly positive perceptions among direct participants, which may be attributed to the Asian context of the championship, the diversity of participants representing more than 45 countries, and the broad social and cultural interactions facilitated by the event environment.

Participants reported particularly strong social effects in terms of interaction with officials, enhanced feelings of pride and belonging, increased perceptions of social cohesion, and support for volunteering, which is consistent with previous research linking sport events to social interaction, collective identity, and participant well-being (González-García et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2015; Parra-Camacho et al., 2020).

The prominence of pride, safety, and belonging may reflect the role of such events in strengthening participants' emotional connection to the event experience and host environment (Kinoshita et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2025), while the positive evaluation of volunteering suggests the potential of the event to encourage continued civic and volunteer engagement among participants (Knott et al., 2022; Preuss, 2019). In this sense, the event functioned not merely as a sporting competition, but as a socially and culturally meaningful platform through which interaction, identity formation, and symbolic representation were experienced by direct participants involved in the championship. This interpretation is also supported by Leal Londoño et al. (2021) who emphasized that sport events and sport tourism can contribute to strengthening the social and territorial value of host destinations through interaction, visibility, and community engagement.

Similarly, the high perceived level of cultural impacts highlights how participants viewed the event as an important platform for cultural exchange, heritage promotion, and international representation. Participants strongly endorsed the event's role in presenting Bahrain positively to international delegations and in introducing Bahraini heritage, customs, and traditions to participants from different cultural backgrounds. These findings align with research conceptualizing major sporting events as instruments of cultural diplomacy and soft power (Al-Marri et al., 2025; Alshikhy et al., 2025; Nassif, 2022). The present findings further suggest that large-scale youth multi-sport events may also function as meaningful platforms for cultural representation and international visibility, particularly for smaller states seeking symbolic presence within the international sport landscape.

The convergence of these findings with recent regional evidence further supports this interpretation. For example, Saleh (2025) reported similar social and cultural perceptions in the context of the Arabian Gulf Cup in Iraq. These similarities may suggest that sporting events in different regional contexts can generate comparable social and cultural experiences among participants. In Bahrain's case, such perceptions may also be influenced by the country's relatively small size, dense social networks, and long-standing exposure to international sport and tourism, which may facilitate interpersonal interaction and cultural exchange during sporting events.

The absence of statistically significant gender differences suggests that male and female participants experienced the social and cultural impacts of the Asian Youth Games in broadly similar ways. This may be explained by the participatory and inclusive nature of the event, the diversity of sports competitions and accompanying activities, and the availability of cultural and tourism-related programs for both genders. In addition, the event emphasized shared interaction and engagement among participants throughout the championship. In this context, participants' perceptions appear to have been shaped more by direct involvement and lived experience than by gender-based differences. This pattern contrasts with the findings reported by Al Gheithi et al. (2024), who identified significant gender differences in favor of male respondents in the context of the 2022 FIFA World Cup, a highly mediatized and spectator-oriented mega-event based primarily on audience perceptions. Such perceptions may be more strongly influenced by media framing, crowd dynamics, and prevailing social norms. The difference in findings may therefore also be attributed to differences in sample composition, as participants who are directly involved in an event may experience and interpret its impacts differently from spectators or the general public.

Similarly, the absence of differences across participant roles suggests that athletes, coaches, administrators, and volunteers experienced the social and cultural impacts of the event in broadly similar ways, reflecting the shared and interactive nature of participation in a large-scale multi-sport event. This pattern is consistent with theoretical perspectives emphasizing the immersive and relational character of event experiences, in which collective participation and shared meaning may outweigh institutional or organizational distinctions (Koenigstorfer et al., 2019; Taks et al., 2020; Thomson et al., 2019). The findings may also indicate that participation in multi-sport events can create shared social and cultural experiences among different participant groups involved in the championship.

Age-based differences, with younger participants reporting higher perceived impacts, may reflect generational differences in emotional engagement, openness to social interaction, and responsiveness to symbolic meaning. Younger individuals may be more likely to experience sporting events as spaces for identity construction, belonging, cultural exploration, and social interaction. In contrast, older participants, having greater prior exposure to sporting events and organizational environments, may adopt a more evaluative perspective that places greater emphasis on organizational quality, event efficiency,



and functional aspects of the championship experience rather than the symbolic and social dimensions of participation. This interpretation is consistent with prior research showing that younger cohorts exhibit stronger emotional engagement and perceived benefits from event participation (Ishac et al., 2024; Kinoshita et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2025).

Differences across identity groups highlight the relational nature of social and cultural impacts. The higher evaluations reported by non-Arab residents may suggest that cultural novelty and intercultural distance increased the salience of the event experience, while shared language, cultural proximity, and familiarity with similar social environments among Bahraini and Arab participants may have rendered some aspects of the event less distinctive, despite their generally positive evaluations. For non-Arab residents, participation in the event may have facilitated intercultural exchange, cultural learning, and broader social interaction through direct engagement with participants from multiple countries, contributing to stronger perceptions related to openness, cultural exposure, and destination image.

This pattern differs from findings reported in studies focusing primarily on residents and spectators in highly mediatized mega-events, where host populations often report stronger positive perceptions related to emotional attachment and audience-centered engagement with the event (Al-Emadi et al., 2022; Al Gheithi et al., 2024; Kinoshita et al., 2024). In contrast, the present study focused on direct participants involved in the championship, whose experiences were shaped more by interpersonal interaction, participation, and intercultural engagement throughout the event environment. In this sense, the participatory nature of the Asian Youth Games may have shifted the experiential emphasis toward everyday interaction and cultural exchange rather than audience-oriented spectacle, aligning with research examining participatory sporting events and sport as a platform for cultural diplomacy (Alshikhy et al., 2025; Nassif, 2022; Parra-Camacho et al., 2020).

Overall, the findings indicate a generally positive orientation among participants toward the social and cultural impacts of hosting the Asian Youth Games in Bahrain, reinforcing the significance of the event and its potential contribution to the sustainability of future sporting events. This interpretation is further supported by evidence of strong institutional support within Bahrain's sports sector, where employees and professionals report positive attitudes and motivations toward hosting sporting events due to their perceived economic, social, cultural, and legacy-related benefits (Sowaid et al., 2025). At the same time, these impacts should be understood as shaped by the specific context of the event, the characteristics of participants, and the way the event was experienced, and they may not be equally distributed among all groups or sustained in the same way over time (Knott et al., 2022; Koenigstorfer et al., 2019; Preuss, 2019), as sporting events do not produce fixed or universal legacies but rather create spaces in which meanings, identities, and relationships are negotiated (Taks et al., 2020; Thomson et al., 2019).

The findings also suggest that the social and cultural impacts of sporting events may be influenced by the nature of the event, the organizational environment, and the quality of participants' experiences throughout the championship. In the context of the 3rd Asian Youth Games, the overall atmosphere of the event, the quality of organization, and the interaction among participants, volunteers, and officials may have contributed to the highly positive perceptions observed across different participant groups. At the same time, social and cultural experiences associated with sporting events may differ across event types and sporting contexts, particularly in regional and international events characterized by varying organizational structures and cultural environments. These findings therefore highlight the importance of considering contextual and experiential factors when examining the broader social and cultural value associated with hosting sporting events.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings. First, the findings were based exclusively on the perceptions of direct participants involved in the 3rd Asian Youth Games in Bahrain. Although this focus was intentional due to the limited research examining direct participants in youth-oriented multi-sport events, participants' evaluations may nevertheless have been influenced by the overall atmosphere of the championship, the quality of organization and hosting, and the social and intercultural interactions experienced throughout the event environment. In addition, the study adopted a cross-sectional design, which limits the ability to determine causal relationships between hosting the event and the perceived social and cultural impacts. Furthermore, because the



study focused specifically on direct participants involved in a single sporting event context in Bahrain, the findings may be context-specific and not fully generalizable to other sporting events, host countries, or participant populations characterized by different organizational and cultural environments. Accordingly, future research is encouraged to include broader population groups, such as local residents, spectators, and non-participants, as well as to adopt longitudinal and comparative approaches across different sporting event settings in order to provide a deeper understanding of how social and cultural experiences may evolve and differ over time.

Conclusions

This study examined the perceived social and cultural impacts of hosting the 3rd Asian Youth Games in Bahrain from the perspective of direct participants involved in the event. The findings indicate that participants reported high levels of perceived social and cultural benefits, including enhanced social interaction, perceptions related to social cohesion, intercultural contact, cultural visibility, and positive perceptions of place and destination image. Participants experienced the event not only as a competitive platform, but also as a socially and culturally inclusive environment that facilitated interaction, exchange, and mutual understanding. Notably, no significant differences were found by gender or participant role, which may reflect Bahrain's efforts to design the event and its accompanying activities in a way that was inclusive of both male and female participants and responsive to the needs of athletes, officials, and volunteers alike. This suggests that the organizational environment of the event played an important role in shaping positive participant experiences across different groups.

At the same time, differences were observed across age and identity groups, and these differences can be understood in light of participants' experiential positioning and cultural proximity to the host context. Younger participants tended to report stronger social and cultural impacts, likely reflecting their greater interest in social exploration, cultural discovery, and intercultural interaction, whereas older participants, having greater prior experience with sporting events, may have been more attentive to organizational quality, efficiency, and functional aspects of the event. Similarly, non-Arab residents reported stronger perceived impacts, particularly in relation to cultural exposure and destination image, reflecting the greater novelty and cultural learning associated with participation in a culturally distinct environment. In contrast, the relative similarity between Bahraini participants and Arab residents can be understood in terms of shared language, cultural norms, and social practices, which may have rendered the event's cultural dimension more familiar and less distinctive.

Together, these findings highlight that sporting events do not generate uniform social and cultural experiences, but rather produce perceptions that are shaped by the interaction between event design, participant characteristics, and the sociocultural context of the host environment. More broadly, the findings highlight Bahrain's growing role in using sport events as platforms for social interaction, cultural representation, and international visibility. By integrating inclusive participation, cultural programming, and organizational quality into event planning, host countries may enhance the social and cultural value associated with sporting events, strengthen place image and cultural diplomacy, and support the sustainable development of the sport and event sectors. In this way, sporting events may be strategically leveraged not merely as temporary spectacles, but also as platforms that contribute to social interaction, cultural exchange, and sustainable place-based development.

Recommendations

1. Event organizers and host countries should design sporting events as socially and culturally inclusive platforms, as this may enhance positive participant experiences, intercultural interaction, and engagement among different participant groups.
2. Host countries should integrate cultural heritage, local traditions, and the distinctive characteristics of the host destination into event programming and communication, as this may strengthen cultural visibility, destination image, and participants' perceptions of the host environment.



3. Event managers and sport authorities should systematically assess social and cultural impacts across different participant groups involved in sporting events in order to support evidence-based planning and improve the quality of participant experiences.
4. Future research should examine and compare the social and cultural impacts of sporting events across different population groups, including direct participants, spectators, local residents, and non-participants, in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how such impacts may vary across different social and cultural contexts.
5. Future studies are also encouraged to adopt longitudinal and comparative approaches across different sporting event settings to better understand how participants' social and cultural experiences may evolve over time.

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