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## **An Analysis of the Potential of Philippine Sports as a Tool for Public Diplomacy**

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### **Abstract**

With the growing lapses of sports-based strategies in the Philippine setting, the gap between its theoretical foundation and its praxis has ballooned, predominantly attributed to the need for more academic work in this area. Correspondingly, this study provides implications for sports-related strategies for predicting a positive public image of the Philippines and harboring peaceful state cooperation through the merits of soft power. To achieve this, this paper has contrived the objectives, including (1) identifying the implications of hosting the SEA Games 2019 for the country by examining the management of the Philippine government, (2) determining the implications of the elite sporting success of Filipino athletes in sports tournaments, and, lastly, (3) identifying the potential of sports through the implementation of sports-related strategy by the Philippines. Moreover, this paper implements qualitative methods, including document review and key informant interviews, to gather pertinent testimonials from various sub-sectors in sports, including national elite athletes, professional coaches, and sports experts, to assess the state of Philippine sports and significantly determine its potential as a serious form of public diplomacy, particularly in achieving its intended outcomes. This study infers that Philippine sports have the capability to influence the country's stature with consideration of the global media as well as advance its foreign policy of international cooperation.

**Keywords:** Filipino athletes, Philippine soft power, Philippine sports, SEA Games 2019, sports diplomacy

## Introduction

A compelling reference point when injecting a colloquy of Filipino culture is its unfailing pride and exponential enthusiasm for local and international sports. Sports have unequivocally always been an integral part of Filipino culture. Since the framing of the 1987 Philippine Constitution, the functionality of sports is not solely grounded in its colonialist significance, as it has established a more specific legal mandate and gained statutory relevance embedded in the Constitution. With regard to the mandates of employing sports in the Philippines, its convenience has gone beyond the constitutional directives. Philippine diplomacy has constantly centered on "trade, investment, credit, and military" (Wurfel, 1990). Despite changes from different administrations, economic diplomacy remains a staple block of its foreign policy (Del Rosario & Amador, 2016). In 2016, the Department of Foreign Affairs launched the practice of cultural diplomacy, which aims "to help build inter-state relations and develop socio-cultural understanding among people all over the world" and "enhance the promotion of its national interests abroad" through soft power (Wong, 2016).

Indeed, the Philippines has a great pool of soft power resources, including its sports. Most scholars argue that sports possess cultural entitlement. Gems (2020) stipulated that integrating sports into the Filipino culture was successful, as many Filipino athletes qualified for global championships. Although initially conceived as an American colonialist practice, the Filipinos eventually adopted sport to their cultural advantage—to affirm their unique identity and foster national pride.

On top of its statutory relevance under the 1987 Philippine Constitution, its convenience to the government has exceeded the constitutional directives. The government has drawn on sports to actualize its plans, banking on the possible outcomes heralding public diplomacy. Even with its praxes, the space of literature leading to its explication is evidently capacious, which is attributable to the lack of certain cognizance of the theoretical foundations vis-à-vis its potential as an instrument for public diplomacy. Consequently, this also insinuates insufficient empirical evidence about the situation of Philippine sports, which determines the pledge of this study as both a beacon for Filipino elite athletes and a divulgence for the government to foster the capacities of its sports per se and as an instrument. With this, its potential remains a matter in question.

Embedded with its global popularity, governments deliberately perform soft power-generating activities such as hosting sports events and investing in their sports. While most cases of the implementation of sports diplomacy come from developed countries, the exhibition of such practices is scarce in progressing economies like the Philippines. The Philippines is an emerging economy (Wong, 2016).

Thus, the pronouncements of this paper are imperative to solidify the grounds on the efficiency of its implementation and, more so, diversify the discussion—both as an IR theory and its praxis. To realize this, it seeks to explicate what Abdi et al. (2019) identified as major soft power resources in sports diplomacy, including sports victories and staging sports leagues. Essentially, this study centers explicitly on (1) identifying the implications of hosting the SEA Games 2019 for the country by examining the management of the Philippine government, (2) determining the implications of the elite sporting success of Filipino athletes in sports tournaments and, lastly, (3) identifying the potential of sports through the implementation of sports-related strategy by the Philippines. Ultimately, this paper aims to introduce the Philippines' approach to sports diplomacy by providing an in-depth analysis—particularly of its potential diplomatic outcomes—while hypothesizing the enhancement of the country's profile and building interstate relations.

## New Public Diplomacy

According to Trunkos and Heere (2017), interstate relationships have long been understood through the prism of realism and neorealism, particularly in "states seeking power and wanting to dominate other states." Traditionally speaking, the leverage for power merely comes from the capabilities of a state to possess and exploit land, military forces, economic might, and other wealth assets at their disposal. Nye (1990) contended that the culmination of the Cold War had been the impetus for the gradual transformation of international relations, stating that while the risks of utilizing hard power resources such as military power have increased, the relevance of the role of other intangible assets of a state such as culture, ideology, and institutions has intensified. For most countries, using force threatens their economic objectives and ability to maintain international competitiveness (Grix et al., 2015). As a result, coercive force has become less tolerated in contemporary world politics, leading to the increased significance of soft power.

Although diplomacy has long been established as both a means of representation and a communication channel (Trunkos & Heere, 2017), it has significantly changed in the past decades. In a traditionalist sense, diplomacy merely involved and is exclusive to state-to-state interaction—the conduct of affairs to advance foreign policy objectives is typically held in private between official representatives of a government—whether headed by the state leaders themselves or professional diplomats representing their sovereign states (Lee & Ayhan, 2015).

The dynamics of mainstream diplomacy do not dwell on this concept—due to the emergence of other key players in the international system, particularly non-state actors who have begun to influence the political agenda of states and have been part of world governance (Shaltaev, 2019; Martino, 2020). Lee and Ayhan (2015) laid the foundation for two kinds of public diplomacy—traditional and modern. The new public diplomacy is construed as the "associations of states and some sub-state and non-state actors to understand cultures, attitudes, and behaviors; to build and manage relationships; and to influence thoughts and to influence thoughts and mobilize actions to advance their interests and values" (Lee & Ayhan, 2015). Moreover, the increasing growth of global actors has paved the way for diversifying diplomatic networks. As Szondi (2008) has argued, states are not solely the "official face" of modern-day diplomacy, as there is an increasing role for other actors in the multifaceted nature of public diplomacy. In this state-of-the-art diplomacy—though not state-centric—governments may still be involved in sponsorship, initiator, or source of communication (Szondi, 2008).

Contrary to the state-centric features of traditional public diplomacy, the new public diplomacy also acknowledges the increasing influence of public opinion. According to Lee and Ayhan (2015), in the modern world, "public attitudes and public opinion matter"; thus, "states could no more overlook the importance of the public in order to directly or indirectly influence foreign policy decisions of other countries." Its neoteric interpretations and state-of-the-art approaches are not circumscribed by merely focusing on the governments of other countries as targets of influence nor relying on state-based interactions. In fact, it broadens the scope of interaction by further including the perception of the public—building a more fluid global environment to achieve foreign policy goals and promote national interests (Szondi, 2008). Governments mobilize their cultural resources, values, and policies "to communicate with and attract the public of other countries" rather than solely state-driven (Szondi, 2008; Lekakis, 2019). Also, governments mobilize their soft power resources, as Nye (2004) identified, specifically culture, political values, and policies, mainly aimed at attracting

foreign publics and their governments (Lekakis, 2019). In this regard, as several scholars argue, sports can be classified as having a cultural prerogative. This implies that sports are an essential part of a nation's culture and can be utilized as a soft power asset of a state to generate influence. States and non-state actors have vital roles in a fluid international environment posed with issues and contexts situated in the domain of contemporary world politics (Mortazavi et al., 2018; Shaltaev, 2019; Martino, 2020).

### **Sports for Image Building**

Abdi et al. (2019) and Özsarı (2018) suggested that there are different resources for sports diplomacy, including hosting major sports tournaments and designating professional elite athletes as ambassadors. This study has hypothesized that hosting sports events and achieving elite sporting success can enhance the country's profile, depending on the strategy and its success. Grix and Houlihan (2014) argued that "some tangible data" can suffice for this lack of standardized measurement, mainly to gauge its success. Sports events are embedded with "universal popularity" and serve as a common ground for interaction, particularly in cultural exchanges (Trunkos & Heere, 2017). It is also a form of mass entertainment that captures the interests of global audiences (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2014; Shaltaev, 2019). Nye (2004) stipulated that "popular sports" can represent a nation's values given its global popularity and its emphasis on culture and peaceful values. It blurs "political differences," which opens up more channels of communication and "counterbalances" the unfavorable public opinion of countries (Wong, 2016).

Germany invested in sports soft power, especially to rebrand its images deeply associated with World War II. According to Grix and Lacroix (2006, in Grix & Houlihan, 2014), the legacy and brutality of the Third Reich left permanent marks on the German psyche and that of their international neighbors. Thus, hosting the World Cup 2006 was taken as an advantage to strengthen the efforts toward remarketing the nation as a friendly, accommodating, and investment-rich country. The government has initiated several national and global campaigns to achieve this as part of its broader "World Cup Hosting Strategy." This facilitated the promotion of Germany's foreign public opinion—bringing together key players from various sectors. According to Grix and Houlihan (2014), banking on Germany's rich and varied historical and cultural heritage "probably" contributed to the high number of attendees throughout the event period. The German Tourist Board (2007, in Grix & Houlihan, 2014) stated that over 2 million international visitors came to the country to witness the football tournament in 2006—many stayed and visited tourist attractions. It recorded the most significant increase in visitors from Britain, where the negative public perception of Germany is deeply influenced. It grew by 5% from 2005 to 2007, reaching 4.4 million overnight stays. Correspondingly, Germany swiftly went from the 17th spot in 2004 to the top in 2007, remaining in second place four years later (Anholt-GfK Roper, 2011, in Grix & Houlihan, 2014).

The UK, an advanced capitalist state, has already built up a reputation. However, the Foreign Commonwealth Office (FCO) saw public perception of the country's international profile as "arrogant, stuffy, old-fashioned, and cold." The FCO sought to project a more welcoming, diverse, and tolerant image of Britain. Thus, the London Olympic Games were adopted as a critical opportunity to promote the refinement of its image.

According to Grix et al. (2015), the turning point of the UK's exploitation of soft power strategies commenced with assessing the country's global image as ordered by the FCO in 2005. However, the results generated a "mixed picture." The first two blueprints aim to enhance the UK's image and reposition the country's profile as a "vibrant, open, and modern

society, a global hub in a networked world." The FCO instigated ways to promote the UK's culture nationwide and overseas through the 2012 Olympics. It turned out to be potent as the country obtained a "positive international image" as per the Anholt-GfK Roper Index, which the UK ranked fourth in both 2009 and 2010, respectively. Moreover, the international media have published "almost uniformly" affirmative opinions of the London Olympics 2012 (Grix et al., 2015). Grix et al. (2015) have further stipulated that the UK was seen as "a good place to do business"—invoking the component of the Anholt-GfK Roper Index, which appraises explicitly the investment appeal of which the country secured the third spot in both 2012 and 2013 after Germany, Canada, and the USA.

The UK's case is distinct in its purpose to improve its domestic and global security through investing in Olympic legacy projects, particularly in several Middle Eastern states. On top of these is recruiting "Olympic ambassadors" from renowned Olympians and Paralympians, including Sir Steve Redgrave, Lady Tanni Grey Thompson, and Chris Holmes. These ambassadors have visited selected countries, including Israel, Jordan, and Palestine, to solidify these legacy initiatives granted by their global popularity (Grix et al., 2015). Correspondingly, sports diplomacy is carried out by the new world diplomats who have the capability to represent the country on behalf of and with the consent of the state (Abdi et al., 2019). This type of diplomacy uses the capabilities of athletes, sports officials, and sports competitions to create an attractive image of their country to the foreign public (Shaltaev, 2019; Abdi et al., 2019; Bokserov, 2023).

In a sports-based setting, a traditional diplomatic approach would mean using the government, diplomats, sports officials, and other official state representatives to exercise state-to-state relationship building. Meanwhile, in the modern era, the development and advancement of policies extend to non-state actors, subnational organizations, non-governmental organizations, and even private entities (Shaltaev, 2019). In this regard, athletes can serve as non-traditional diplomats—players of team and individual sports, especially celebrity players—and become ambassadors for their respective countries. However, if sportspeople want the world to recognize them as professionals, they cannot be amateurs in world affairs (DeLay, 1999). The efforts of Muhammad Ali during the First Gulf War stand as an epitome. Ali, in his retirement, dedicated himself to charitable causes and peacebuilding. In 1990, he was sent on a diplomatic mission by the US government to negotiate the release of 15 American hostages by Saddam Hussein (Wenn, 1999). After exactly ten days of negotiations with Iraqi officials, the hostages were released and sent home. However, Grix et al. (2015) contend that the difficulty of assessing the diplomatic value of sport as a soft power resource remains.

### **Sports for Interstate Cooperation**

Sports diplomacy is remarkably recognized by Murray (2020) as "a panacea, a neglected yet powerful diplomatic tool that can reduce estrangement, conflict, and poverty and promote greater development and dialogue," which, in modern political realities, is commended by governments.

A quintessence of this principle is South Korea staging the PyeongChang Olympics 2018. Its cardinal rationale is to open the diplomatic channel for communication with North Korea by bringing the latter "back to the negotiating table" with the US in ways that sports can afford (Grix et al., 2021). In this regard, North Korea had snubbed its neighboring country several times through political boycotts of SMEs. Interestingly, what transpired during the 2018 Olympics was an unprecedented occurrence when both Koreas concurred to represent themselves under solitary flag, specifically during the opening rites, and have an integrated

team for women's ice hockey games. In fact, prior to the 2018 Olympics, Kim Jong-un expressed that he was prepared to start talks with South Korea and send a team to the Winter Olympics, which former South Korean President Moon Jae-in received positively—stimulated the First Korean talks in two years (Grix et al., 2021). According to the Director of Budget and Marketing of the Korean Sport and Olympic Committee, "The diplomatic channel of communication between both Koreas, which started through the participation of North Korea in the PyeongChang Games, was restored again and that became the starting point of the inter-Korean summit." It tackled "a declaration of the end of civil war and a solution to the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula." Moreover, he contended that the hosting of the 2018 Winter Olympics was "a pivotal opportunity to improve inter-Korean relations and the IOC's role was important from the central government's perspective." Correspondingly, South Korean state officials argued that through the league "the inter-Korean summit was held three times, and the US-North Korea summit was a success." And that it "served as an opportunity to show the international community the easing of tensions originally caused by the security issues on the Korean peninsula." Albeit this relationship may have gradually changed in the years that have passed, it evidently illustrates the positive outcomes of sports diplomacy with merits to the event—setting in motion peaceful relations. Some scholars argue that the interstate cooperation between North Korea and the US would not have happened otherwise if the Olympics had not occurred.

Scholars can trace the early practice of sports diplomacy to the Cold War in the 1970s. One of its far-famed cases was "Ping-Pong diplomacy." Kobierecki (2016) asserted that it was believed to have thawed the tensions between Sino-American relations. However, in the post-war era, with fewer countries at war or hostile to each other, sports-based interstate relations can still be fostered, as in the case of Cuba. It actively sought collaboration and diplomacy to pursue progressive international development. Cuban sports-based internationalism prioritizes the facilitation of Global South cooperation through elite sports training in other Global South countries, establishing community-level sports for development by investing in capacity-building projects, and engagement in sports exchange on a for-profit basis.

Firstly, Cuba centered on South-South cooperation, wherein interstate relationships "contribute towards a shared goal" of sports victory (Huish et al., 2013). For instance, Cuba's Ministry of Sport exported professional sports coaches to Guatemala to train its athletes—for between two and six years. In this case, Cuba provides the expertise, while Guatemala dispenses the facilities, equipment, and a "modest" remuneration to the Cuban coaches. This resulted in a practical outcome—five out of the seven Guatemalan gold medalists from the 2011 Pan American Games were trained by Cuban professional sports coaches. The 15 medals, including the seven gold medals, have kept pace with the number won since 1951.

For this reason, Guatemala largely owes to its athletes' enhanced performances. Subsequently, the presence of Cuban coaches has been "highly praised" by the Guatemalan national authorities (Prensa Latina, 2011, in Huish et al., 2013). Meanwhile, this collaboration for elite sporting success implies that Cuban sport challenges the domineering disposition of sports in global affairs—wherein success in elite sporting success continues to indicate a benchmark for the "global identity, competence, and competitiveness" of a nation (Houlihan, 2011, in Huish et al., 2013).

Amidst the ongoing economic crisis after the collapse of European state socialism in the early 1990s, Cuba increased its commitment to sports both at home and abroad. Cuba's ability to foster cooperation through sports continued. In Venezuela, a program was devised to "address issues of underdevelopment, including access to community-based sport," due to the "lack of

capacity" of the Venezuelan government to address concerns about their social development through sport (Huish et al., 2013). Thus, former President Hugo Chavez called upon Cuban technical experts—including 16 sports professionals—to enforce the program. By 2004, over 7 million Venezuelans had taken part in these activities, according to Cuba's Ministry of Sport officials. The President commended the sports professionals for the improved health outcomes in the country (Huish et al., 2013).

Part of Cuba's sports-based internationalism was turning sports into a lucrative enterprise within the global market. Aside from commodifying Cuban sports, it cultivated and developed economic relationships with other states, especially sporting bodies, to acquire economic benefits. It exported its highly educated, trained, and skilled sports professionals for contractual employment from countries like Japan (baseball), Australia (athletics), India (boxing), South Africa (track), and Italy (baseball) while abandoning sporting goods exportation and taking part in several agreements with far-famed sporting goods firms—the Japanese-owned companies Mizuno and Yaohan, the Spanish company Lazio, and the German manufacturer Adidas—to cover the cost of their national teams participating in global sporting events (Huish et al., 2013). These sports programs operate self-sufficiently through hard currency earnings from labor exports and joint venture sponsorships (Huish et al., 2013).

Cuba presents a profound significance on the precedence for sports-based cooperation and development, which offer essential opportunities for achieving political and economic aspirations and defining the country's policy priorities. Cuban sport is an iota of a much broader approach to reframing development in partner countries by adopting sports-based strategies, which would further its global efforts to cooperate (Huish et al., 2013).

As the world becomes more globalized and thus interdependent, several states have initiated and implemented distinct approaches to further and strengthen their influence and relationships with the other actors in the international system through the merits of soft power. Accordingly, this paves the way for new forms of diplomacy to acquire their foreign policy objectives through state-of-the-art approaches, such as by implementing sports-based strategies to achieve diplomatic outcomes. Unequivocally, a wide range of states from developed and emerging economies have shown their affirmative view of sporting prowess. While the preceding studies, as discussed above, showcase the successful implementation side of sports diplomacy, they also have shortcomings. Nevertheless, the illustrative cases have demonstrated and established the potential of sports in other countries, particularly in establishing linkages with other nations, building a state's national image, and obtaining recognition and prestige from the international community—governments and foreign publics alike—with both commitment and strategic rule at hand.

## Material and Method

The exploratory research design is implemented in the study. Given that the practice of sports diplomacy is a new-fangled approach to Philippine diplomacy in particular—incorporates the dynamic roles of both traditional and non-traditional diplomats—it has limited paradigms in the country. Therefore, this study investigates the potential of sports as a tool for public diplomacy in the Philippines—through the perspectives of sportspeople, sports events, and national sports organizations. Additionally, the literature on sports diplomacy in the Philippine setting is obscure, if not ambiguous—it is, therefore, fitting for this paper to pursue an exploratory design to provide a clearly defined analysis of this area in a distinct context.

### *Instruments*

This study conducts two qualitative-based instruments to gather the pertinent data—mainly a document review for secondary sources of data and a key informant interview as the primary source—to gain an in-depth understanding of and obtain auxiliary explanations on the phenomenon of the political instrumentation of sports for diplomacy to achieve the objectives of the study. Subsequently, to establish the confirmability of the study's findings and avoid biased results, it applies the triangulation of data sources. In this regard, the data gathered from the KII and the document review were correlated with the literature review as well as the theoretical framework of the study.

A research ethics committee diligently probed both instruments to certify the aptness of their imposition and their undertaking from data collection for the study to their management—in conformity with all the set guidelines.

### *Respondent Selection*

This paper imposes its eligibility conditions—each respondent must qualify in order to be included in their participation. Due to unresponsiveness and time constraints, this study has scouted three of the maximum six participants. All of the participants in this study were mandated to take a pre-assessment test consisting of background quizzing and fundamental questions on the objectives to ensure that the respondents possess sufficient cognizance of the interview questions and, overall, are qualified to participate in this research. There are at least three classifications of participants for the KII, namely sports athletes, sports officials, and experts. Various data sources make this study more objective by looking at distinct paradigms of experiences and insights of sports athletes, sports officials, and experts on sports as a soft power in the Philippines.

Therefore, utilizing the KII as one of the data collection tools—with a multifaceted dimension to the topic of the instrumentation of sports for diplomacy—is opportune for this project since it enables this paper to ground its analysis on the different views of various stakeholders.

## **Findings**

### *Hosting Sports Events as an Instrument for Image Building*

#### **I. Showcasing Infrastructural Developments in the SEA Games 2019**

One of the objectives of this study is to probe the management of the SEA Games 2019 to uncover the potential of sports as a tool for public diplomacy in the Philippine setting. Notably, at the time of this paper, the 30th Games was the most recent one hosted in the country. Additionally, it transpired under the former administration; thus, the trajectory of this part was centralized during the time for purposes of data accuracy and relevance.

As part of the policy priorities throughout the Duterte presidency, the "Build, Build, Build" program was strongly enacted—undeniably stimulating aggressive infrastructure developments nationwide. Considering the growing progress in the implementation of a nationwide boost in infrastructure investment during his term—the government saw an occasion of hosting the upcoming 30th Games—the Presidential Communications Office (2017) of the administration asserted in an officially published article that the event was "an opportunity to show to the rest of the world the advancements made during the 'Golden Age of Infrastructure' under the Duterte administration." It added that the country is "bound to gain more in terms of tourism" and "prove to the world that the Philippines is a safe place to visit and a secure country to hold international events."

The statement from the PCO suggested that, even with the progressing infrastructure program of the government, sports—as explicitly stated—managed to obtain a unique sort of



significance, particularly in conveying a captivating development narrative of the Philippines. This is categorically defined by showcasing the infrastructural developments in the country. The feasibility of which Philippine soft power can be actualized in its capacity to grant the external exposure induced by hosting the sports league—as an advantage of the host state—as well as its contribution to positive impacts on the profile of the Philippines vis-à-vis its established standing. At this point, the government is cognizant of the publicity it can amass concomitant with the Games.

Improved tourism is one of the indicators propounded by scholars to gauge the success of exploiting sports soft power through sports leagues, predominantly attributed to the favorable image ascribed to the triumphant implementation of sports-based strategies. However, the compartmentalization of tourists—their country of departure and the public opinion of those in that country—and the burden of attributing the increase in tourism to hosting the event remains an intricate aspect in this area.

Moreover, boosted infrastructure developments are expected to host states provided with a vast number of participants and spectators for the tournament (Huish et al., 2013; Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2014; Grix & Houlihan, 2014; Grix et al., 2015; Grix et al., 2021). Given this, one Respondent—a former elite athlete and currently a professor of Sport Management concurred with this view, stipulating that "there was infrastructure development," including—"the national training center, the athletics track, and the beautiful swimming venue that was designed by very famous Filipino designers." Additionally, within Clark City, some were developed "for probably business and residential and other venues."

Verily, the Games was well recognized as an occasion to enhance the image of the Philippines by government officials, mainly through the extravagant investment in different facilities that cater to the participants and spectators of the event—even spurring profitable strategic business agendas within the locale. In this regard, it is worth reiterating Nye's (2004) conceptualization of soft power, specifically its element of "attraction" directed toward the "foreign public." Meanwhile, an alteration of "public opinion" is crucial in the practice of public diplomacy (Szondi, 2008). For the Philippines specifically, this could mean enticing the foreign public—participants, spectators, and perhaps even the international media—by providing and flaunting "world-class facilities" through the exposure of the Games, which carries the evident maximum potential of increasing tourism as well. In fact, according to Joey Roi Bondoc, Colliers International Philippines research manager, the Games does not only "gauge our preparedness for future events and determine if we have sufficient and world-class facilities," but this will eventually "help us improve our profile as a global MICE destinations and attract more tourists." He added that hosting the tournament will "help raise hotel occupancy and foreign tourist spending in major MICE destinations such as Metro Manila, Clark, Cebu and Iloilo." Under the nation's national tourism development strategy, MICE—meetings, incentives, conventions, and exhibitions concentrating on attracting more tourists—is one of the ten tourism products. Former Department of Tourism Secretary Bernadette Romulo-Puyat underlined that a location may become increasingly competitive through the tourism industry while simultaneously being more sustainable and inclusive (The Philippine Star, 2019). Although divulging this data further is beyond this study's goals, cases from other countries would prove otherwise.

Additionally, the PHISGOC chairman, former Senator Alan Cayetano—who was appointed by the President to oversee the overall management of the Games—also explicitly assented and gave an official acknowledgment of the aptitude of the Games to the government's strategy and process of "rebranding or a reintroduction of the Philippines" image. He added

that this implementation is geared explicitly towards altering the negative typecasts associated with the country by the international community, such as "poverty, gridlock, and corruption" (ASEAN Post, 2019). These statements insinuate that one of the Philippines' agendas in hosting the Games is to exude its soft power with its capabilities and, simultaneously, obtain cognizance of these capabilities to generate soft power—influencing public opinion, especially on the global stage.

On the other hand, the rejoinders of the other two Respondents deviated from the above-discussed potential of staging the Games by underscoring and tapping on the gains of "exposure" of Filipino athletes during the event. However, this slant of sports diplomacy is further discussed in the last section.

## II. Media Perceptions Offer a Different Perspective on the Games

The vast media coverage of the Games, including—local and international news sources alike—somehow offered an opposite trajectory of the image of the Philippines, contrary to the overall goal of exhibiting a favorable profile internationally. Hosting the SEA Games 2019 undeniably accumulated lousy publicity in the media due to various predicaments. On most news article reports, the circulating issues superseded any favorable experiences of athletes and spectators or buoyant aspects of the event. Firstly, the accommodation of the national and foreign participants of the Games. According to a report from *The Guardian* (2019)—a US-based news source—the chef de mission for Singapore lamented the lack of halal meals for his team's athletes and poor transportation. Respondent 1 indirectly insinuated these occurrences by declaring a "risk involved there [in hosting]." Furthermore, he added a more direct statement by pointing at the inconveniences that may be experienced by "foreign participants," such as "the facilities, the setup or even the food in the hotel."

Notably, in terms of the relevance of soft power in this regard, Nye (2004) and Lekakis (2019) suggested that it must also be maneuvered to the liking of the "foreign public," which supplants the state-centric approach to public diplomacy. On the other hand, the nuisances above-discussed were encountered by participants from other countries, which contradicts the goal and perhaps debases the purpose and effectiveness of the strategy of "rebranding" the Philippines—though this area demands further research. Respondent 2 also concurred with these episodes by stating that, in some instances, "I can categorically say it was a lost opportunity and we did not know. We actually don't understand what the games actually were, except for the nice venues and nice athletes' hostels." This rejoinder further implies that there is a need to plan and implement these sports-based strategies diligently. The case of Germany wherein it produced a "World Cup Hosting Strategy" to organize and coordinate efforts with the different sectors mobilizing their roles in the successful image building of the country (Grix & Houlihan, 2014). Additionally, Respondent 3, an elite athlete, shared his personal experience on this matter, highlighting the "mismanagement" as the prime issue.

Secondly, the rushed completion of some venues which led to a few disadvantages for sports athletes—both foreign and local. For instance, according to a report from *The Guardian* (2019), "Days before the games formally opened, construction workers were still rushing to finish the venues. The first football match between Myanmar and Malaysia – the football competition starts early—at the renovated Rizal Memorial Stadium proceeded without a scoreboard." Additionally, there were reportedly six venues that needed to be finished in time for the Games (ABS-CBN News, 2019). Respondent 3 had a personal encounter with the consequences of these delays "...everything was so rushed. Even the tennis courts. They finished the courts like two days before the tournament. So, we couldn't even benefit [from it]."

[Like] Practicing at the courts, like weeks or months before because they haven't done it. It was supposed to be a home court advantage."

Interestingly, Respondent 1 has contended that this was "a very ambitious plan" pertaining to the total of 56 sports of which it was the highest edition "a record for the Southeast Asian Games." Meanwhile, Respondent 2 offered a different perspective concerning the infrastructure boost within New Clark City, where the athletics stadium with 20,000 seating capacity accentuated the "controversy behind the development," wherein she further stated that "they might have had displaced Aeta communities." According to a news article from Al Jazeera (2019), the first phase of this project including "aquatics center, stadium and an athletes' village" had reportedly displaced the Aetas Indigenous communities.

The prevalence of negative publicity during the Games caught the attention of some government officials, including the PHISGOC chairman. He expressed his concern in a media interview by stipulating, "The problem is, even in the media, fake news is being reported. Especially online, you have to report immediately, but [still] that does not take out the responsibility to check if what is being reported is factual or not." He further pointed out in the interview that inconveniences should have been reported directly to the PHISGOC rather than expressed via social media (ABS-CBN News, 2019). Meanwhile, this propounds implications that are relevant in the discussion of media perceptions of sporting events overall and its prospect of influencing state image. Also, the intensity of the media perception, particularly on the fiascos, is high.

#### *Philippine Representation in International Sporting Events*

##### I. Elite Sporting Success of Filipino Athletes as a Soft Power Resource

The representation of athletes on the world stage is an equally important factor in sports soft power. In a press briefing on hosting the SEA Games 2019, former Senator Alan Cayetano stated, "It's our athletes that bring out the best in the Filipino eh. But whether they win or lose, people fall in love with Philippine athletes. What we want to showcase in 2019, is the Filipino, through our athletes." He reiterates that the representation of athletes of their country of origin is at the heart of sports. However, Abdi et al. (2019) argued that these athletes need to prove further that they can perform well abroad to effectively convey the values of their country and eventually improve its image. In this regard, the Respondents have concurred in concert with the implications of Philippine representation—that good performance abroad generates a favorable image of the country. Respondent 1 stipulated, "I think it helps a lot that we have competitive athletes and competitive teams going abroad because it enhances, it improves our image."

Meanwhile, Respondent 2 claimed something similar about Filipino sporting victories, underscoring its domestic impact, referring to it as "psychic income," which means to "feel good." She added an emphasis on this "feel-good factor" whenever "they are good" or, in other words, medalists. Respondent 3, on the other hand, pitched in the element of the exposure of athletes through "media coverage" on the realization of these sporting victories.

Victory is not everything in sports however. Another valuable resource in the conduct of image building in the new public diplomacy are the athletes themselves. Abdi et. al (2019), stated that athletes are the most essential resource of sports diplomacy for states—even more important than hosting or participating in sporting events. Athletes are essential pillars in the conduct of sports diplomacy. Their status as non-traditional diplomats is further solidified by way of their successes—representing their country of origin on the global stage. Additionally, athletes have varying degrees of influence—of which an exemplar of this is Manny Pacquiao.

In a press conference on the hosting of the SEA Games 2019, former Senator Cayetano concurred on this view that when Pacquiao had tournaments, "everyone stops, that's why we have zero crime rate." Although this may carry an exaggerated connotation of his boxing fights, the former Senator added a global paradigm for his influence by affirming "From the start, the Mexicans didn't like Pacquiao cause he was always beating them but now the Mexicans love him." In this regard, the potential to yield influence—especially one that is external—through the channel of sporting victories that is constant and thus legitimized.

The respondents, in this case, had various interpretations with regard to the influence of Filipino elite athletes. For instance, Respondent 1 expressed that the modern Filipino elite athletes "give us a very positive image." However, he added "it's a work in progress" while implying skepticism on the lack of capacity for these sorts of athletes to be non-traditional diplomats mainly due to their neophyte status despite being "caliber in sports." Respondent 2 also shared the same perception: "I am not sure how athletes can create that impact unless you're big like Manny Pacquiao." Meanwhile, Respondent 3 cited the people-to-people channel of public diplomacy grounded on his personal experiences as a tennis player and with the community of Filipino tennis players, in particular. "For me, everywhere I go, if there are Filipino tennis players, they would know me. And they would take me out to dinner, lunch. We get to represent and be ambassadors everywhere around the world." In this case, there are no insinuations on obtaining influence from sporting victories, in which the case remains circumscribed.

On the other hand, Respondents are uncertain on the capability of neophyte athletes particularly to create a profound cultural or political impact—unless they acquire as much popularity as Manny Pacquiao. More so, the profile of Pacquiao also remains his strongest appeal or, collectively referred to as—the "Pacquiao Effect."

It underlines the importance of having enough influence in order to become attractive towards the foreign public and or governments. It requires the performative aspect to be recognized by the target audience—otherwise, it will not be taken seriously (Lekakis, 2019). Although the country has several successful elite athletes—Hidilyn Diaz, EJ Obiena, Margielyn Didal, etc—the data above propounds that modern-day athletes lack the influence required to attract foreign publics, and their abilities as non-traditional sports diplomats are underappreciated—compared to Pacquiao. Consequently, Philippine sports necessitates further development—including investment in elite sporting success—as a prerequisite to transforming this into an effective public diplomacy strategy.

#### *Philippine Sports As a Tool for Inter-state Cooperation*

An illustrative case of sports-based diplomacy aimed at advancing collaborative endeavors through external alliances to ensure peace and security was brought into play in the Philippines. The term "fellowship golf" in 2019 referred to a gathering of the officials from the Department of National Defense (DND) and Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), ambassadors, charge d'affaires, and members of the Foreign Armed Forces Attaché (FAFA)—from Australia, Brunei, Canada, Germany, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand, the United States, and Vietnam. The encounter was directed towards efforts for peace and security through strengthening interstate cooperation among stakeholders. The Philippines had made a solicitation to the international diplomatic community for sustenance in "addressing the foreign activities of communist terrorist groups (CTGs) through International Solidarity Works (ISW)" (Philippine News Agency, 2019). In view of this, former Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana has affirmed the importance of "playing sports" as it enables the state officials "to know people with similar interests, making

friends and expanding our networks outside the confines of our respective workplaces [which is a] wonderful way of spreading goodwill, promoting trust and building confidence, which is imperative in order to carry out our duty of ensuring the peace, security, and stability." Unequivocally, this occurrence has demonstrated that sports can be employed as a means to obtain and even bolster linkages with states that advance common interests.

Seemingly, the Philippine Consulate General in New York City has orchestrated sports as an instrument of its efforts to engage with the Filipino-American community in the US Northeast Region through a basketball tournament. "Both teams played their hearts out during the course of the competition and managed to win one game apiece and, more importantly, gained the respect and friendship of the teams they played against" (Department of Foreign Affairs, 2018). This occurrence signifies that sports can serve as a platform, particularly for cultural education—through social exchanges of individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Remarkably, Murray (2020) argued that sport is "a powerful diplomatic tool" that can be instrumentalized to "reduce estrangement, conflict, and poverty and promote greater development and dialogue"—which, in the modern political realities, is commended by governments.

Meanwhile, despite the fact that there are already praxes of sports being utilized as an instrument to forge security agreements and advance cultural exchanges in particular, Respondent 1 saw the state-to-state channel to be ambiguous, saying that "it is not apparent today." He added that "there are opportunities there" while insinuating the prospect of inter-agency coordination, "something that, I believe, Philippines Sports Commission and DFA might meet and see. How they can help each other in that regard."

Respondent 2, on the other hand, asserted that inter-state cooperation through sports is plausible citing an illustration that fellow ASEAN neighbors can co-host an SME or through a private-public relationship, stating that whenever the country hosts the Olympics, it can "gather our South East Asian neighbors" and "encourage multiple countries [to co-host]." Moreover, she added that cooperation can be realized given that "it's such a huge financial burden [if there's one host country]," paving the way for state-centric and people-to-people channels of diplomacy—producing mutually beneficial relationships and outcomes.

In sum, the data above implies that even though demonstrations of sports are being utilized as a diplomatic tool to advance cooperation in the Philippines, more is needed so that we can fully manifest that cooperation is plausible through sports alone. Sports as an instrument for international relations still has to be developed and needs further collaboration and discussion for both the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Philippines Sports Commission, including athletes as non-traditional ambassadors.

## Discussion

### *Hosting Sports Leagues and the Media: An Image Building of the State*

More often than not, sporting events have afforded host states an opportunity to spawn and even amplify their soft power and further their agendas by amalgamating the political instrumentation of sports into their prime business politics, making it lucrative—by both tangible and intangible means. Most of the data presented above coincides with the hypotheses of this paper. It implies that one of the potentials of sports soft power is to contribute to the overarching intention of governments in advancing sports events—with cognizance of its favorable repercussions to the image of a state by affecting the opinion of the foreign public, at least. It has been comprehensively uncovered and, most significantly, confirmed above—that sporting events can be instrumentalized to exhibit the alluring aspects

of a country, such as—in the Philippine context—the infrastructural advancements, particularly of the Duterte administration, providing top-level facilities, increasing tourism—eventually spur the economy specifically within locale venues and to improve the image overall. As with the case of Germany in its 2006 World Cup, the German Tourist Board recorded the most significant increase in visitors from the UK—where the negative perception of the foreign public is ingrained as linked to the hostility of the Second World War (Grix & Houlihan, 2013). The SEA Games 2019, for instance, are integrated into the entire plan to seize the momentum of showcasing these Philippine attractions to the world.

The relevance of soft power has increased in the theory of international relations for one reason—the democratization of information, making it conveniently accessible and available across the globe with the aid of the IT revolution (Özsarı, 2018; Martino, 2020). In the new public diplomacy, Szondi (2008) and Abdi et al. (2019) both conceptualized the media as forming part of the "public opinion" from foreign countries that, in this case, imprints a profound impact on the image of the host country—depending on the narrative that the media portrays it to be. Most sports diplomacy scholars would affirm that media perceptions—apart from the potential of obtaining influence from their audiences—are also essential to the image-building of the state. As with the case of the 2012 London Olympics, Grix et al. (2015) observed that media perceptions mainly were affirmative of the staging of the event. This implies that media exposure can affect the process of enhancing one's prestige as it may serve a contrasting narrative to the host country—overlapping the captivating ones. In this regard, obtaining awareness of the exposure of hosting tournaments does not necessarily guarantee the generation of soft power, considering the lack of cognizance of their potential to influence, particularly those reputable and credible media outlets.

To some, if not all, staging sports events can also pose a burden to the host states. Based on the cases presented in the literature review, one of those dominating causes includes—the responsibilities embedded after a state has won the bidding—as with the case of Brazil and its double hosting of SMEs—overwhelming demands from both FIFA and the Olympic Committee and its domestic politics. Although a state should be fully aware of its hosting chores, the actualization of these with the realities on the ground might be divergent, given one's capabilities. As in other states, it is a prerequisite that the government has the full panoply of resources to invest extensively in hosting sports tournaments, though this may vary according to the criteria and demands of the league's board members. On top of that, host states must also show commitment to these responsibilities, as it does not solely leave an impression on the public in terms of being accountable but more so an opportunity for governments to generate positive experiences that can be lucrative to them in several ways—political, social, or economic benefits. Additionally, Brannagan and Guilianotti (2014) contended that host states must exude "professionalism and responsibility" for the entirety of the event, which could also mean dealing with any fiascos accordingly—apart from the hosting chores per se.

The insight from Brannagan and Guilianotti (2014) in the case of Qatar and the 2022 World Cup is worthy of reiteration—that adverse experiences in staging sports leagues may result in "soft disempowerment." Although this is not entirely the case, it further advances the argument of Freeman (2012) that hosting a sports tournament also engages media attention—even after the actual event. Furthermore, it exposes the audience to the host country's geography, demographics, history, and culture (Freeman, 2012). Therefore, it can be assumed that the media has glaring repercussions on the exposure the host state attains and is continuously associated with, amongst all other things linked to the event. Hence, the deliverer of information about the activities of the government to the public (Özsarı, 2018).

Oxford Business Group (2019) also concurred with the potential of media coverage in image-building, as—in the SEA Games 2019—it "provide[s] the country with an international platform to portray its strength as an attractive tourism destination and capable tournament host."

### *Sporting Victories and Representation through Athletes*

The Philippines' successes were far and wide, particularly during the recent sports leagues. These sporting victories are essential in building the reputation of the country and its athletes, especially in global sports. In the SEA Games 2019, the country have become the overall champions for the first time since reigning supreme as host in 2005—signifying that Philippine athletes' performances have undeniably improved over the years. Another milestone to consider for Filipino athletes in terms of performance is the Tokyo Olympics in 2021. The Tokyo Olympics—a significant event in Philippine history—were the first time the country gained four medals from different sports, especially its pioneering gold medal.

Recently, the influence of Filipino athletes has been felt, most especially through Hidilyn Diaz—her victory in the Tokyo Olympics 2021 is mainly a major flashpoint since she is the pioneering Olympic gold medalist in Philippine history. Throughout the anticipated major events, Filipino elite athletes have been making history with their sporting victories, which undeniably shows that the Philippines can adopt this kind of sports-related strategy.

The data shows that Filipino athletes are globally competitive—hence the augmentation of their overall performance over the past few years. The achievement of elite sporting success in recent tournaments indicates that Filipino athletes are expected to become serious global competitors, given their profile. However—for elite athletes, in particular—to become effective agents of state soft power, they must perform at the highest levels, receive support from their home state, and be cognizant of global sports affairs (DeLay, 1999; Black, 2010). The successes and professionalism of Filipino athletes in sporting events and their status as non-traditional diplomats—according to the ideals of new public diplomacy—generate soft power per se and are a subject of exposure in the international arena. Apart from its potential to attract the foreign public, it can also be a source of motivation for the local sports population.

It is worth noting that sports diplomacy is within the bounds of soft power—influence plays a vital role in generating a favorable profile for the country (Abdi et al., 2019). In this regard, the cardinal purpose of influence is to show the country's culture and political values through sports athletes (Özsarı, 2018; Abdi et al., 2019). This induces sports as an obvious choice for the propagation of soft power as it mainly centers on international exposure as well as influence through cultural and peaceful values (Nye, 2004; Trunkos & Heere, 2017; Abdi et al., 2019).

Ultimately, respondents had mixed responses regarding the implications and importance of Philippine representation on the world stage. The respondents expressed uncertainty regarding the ability of contemporary athletes to exert significant cultural or political influence unless they are comparable to Pacquiao. His reputation continues to be the most potent asset, consistently referenced by the respondents as the source of the "Pacquiao Effect." Likewise, in discussions about global influence or the impact of Filipino athletes, all respondents invariably brought up Manny Pacquiao. This underscores the imperative of establishing influence within a modern framework of public diplomacy (Trunkos & Heere, 2017).

This underscores the significance of attaining a sufficient level of influence to appeal to foreign audiences and governments. Achieving this requires that the target audience

acknowledge the performative aspect; otherwise, it may not be taken seriously or will fail to yield soft power (Lekakis, 2019). Despite several influential athletes in the country, such as Hidilyn Diaz, EJ Obiena, Margielyn Didal, and others, the respondents have concluded that current athletes still need to possess the requisite influence to attract the foreign public. Their potential as non-traditional sports diplomats remains less apparent when compared to Pacquiao himself. It is evident that Philippine sports still require further development in terms of athlete performance and their ability to contribute to an effective sports-based diplomacy strategy.

#### *Advancing Inter-state Cooperation through Sports*

In probing the praxes of the Philippines in cultivating and forging cooperation with other governments through its sports-based initiatives, there are two implications vis-à-vis its potential. There is the promotion of security alliances with several countries through golf and moments of cultural exchange in a basketball tournament. It is worth noting that the diplomatic channels for these events are state-centric. In other words, the approach is traditional diplomacy, inclusive of state actors (Lee & Ayhan, 2015).

There are multiple manifestations of the results of sports as a tool for interstate cooperation. South Korea, for instance, hosted the PyeongChang Winter Games 2018 as part of the promotion of peace on the Korean peninsula (Grix et al., 2021). The PyeongChang Olympics is of cardinal value, geared toward the opening of diplomatic channels with North Korea—bringing the latter “back to the negotiating table” together with the US, which was perceived as one of the ways that sports can afford (Grix et al., 2021). As a result of the constant interaction, the communication channels of both Koreas were restored, which led to a series of inter-Korean summits, even including those with the US.

Meanwhile, contrary to the state-level cognizance of sports diplomacy, the respondents have banked on the critical assumptions of the new public diplomacy with regard to the capability of sports for cooperation among states. It is perceived to be possible through inter-agency cooperation—the DFA and the sports ministry—or through public-private partnerships. Overall, these suggest that sports, through the framework of new public diplomacy, can be anticipated in the future, as the actors mainly involved in the implementation are from the state. Given this, Szondi (2008) asserts that modern-day diplomacy challenges the status of the government as the exclusive “official face” with the growing population of non-state actors; however, its role can still be as imperative as initiating communication channels with other governments, thereby providing expediency to non-state actors in this case as well as sponsorship.

A state-centered approach is a good starting point for the instrumentalization of sports to promote cooperation. In the case of Cuba, the government supported sports for development. They optimized their professional coaches to aid Venezuela in their concerns about a lack of social development by devising sports-based programs. The Venezuelan President commended the sports professionals by linking their undertakings with improved health outcomes in the country (Huish et al., 2013). On the other hand, the Cuban government has established a profit-maximizing entity called Cubadeportes to commodify Cuba's sports and develop economic relationships with other states and sporting bodies. The organization exports skilled sports professionals to countries including Japan, Australia, India, South Africa, and Italy and contracts with sporting goods firms to cover national teams' costs. Cubadeportes operates self-sufficiently through labor exports and joint venture sponsorships.



## Conclusion

We came up with three significant sports diplomacy resources in our study: hosting sporting events, athlete representation through elite sporting success, and sports for inter-state relations. Firstly, the experience in the management of the SEA Games 2019 is an opportune event that the Philippines can actually exploit to improve its stature—in fact, with its explicit and galvanized intention to build an image through the merits of soft power. Unequivocally, the government may have acknowledged and well perceived the influence it can harbor—including debunking the stereotypical identity of the country from abroad—but the matter in question hereon is ensuring its actualization and, more broadly, that the influence through soft power has been generated and concretized by public diplomacy outcomes. Exploiting the sporting event as an initiative to brand a favorable image of the country implies that the element of state interest in implementing sports-related strategies—those that are beneficial to the country—is crystal clear. In terms of attracting the foreign public, however—based on the SEA Games 2019 management fiascos—a methodical process and an orderly execution of the strategies are prerequisites to further the likelihood of achieving the intended outcomes as well as to lessen any prospect of soft disempowerment, primarily through the influence of global media.

Secondly, modern Filipino athletes have undoubtedly exhibited their sporting prowess and success through their recent representation in sporting competitions. This means they can be considered serious competitors recognized by participants from other countries. Sporting victories, in particular, have the potential to contribute to the amelioration of the image of the country—a profile of globally competitive athletes. The capability of a Filipino elite athlete with regards to being a public diplomat—to embody and execute such a state-driven responsibility—is presently bleak, engendered by their lack of essential qualities as identified by most scholars—such as significant knowledge in international affairs. On top of that, current Filipino elite athletes also do not possess a sort of solidified influence to conduct sports diplomacy effectively unless they obtain an equal level of influence as Manny Pacquiao.

Thirdly, the sports-related diplomatic approach is close to realization. The Philippines was able to conduct international cooperation both in the field of security—a hard power-related agenda—and in the field of cultural exchange and education for community integration—focusing more on the soft power outcomes. The stringent fact of the variations of these praxes traces back to traditional public diplomacy, wherein state officials are the main actors on the platform, and the new public diplomacy, the people-centered approach. It should be reiterated that one of the theoretical grounds of this paper is the assumption of the new public diplomacy—increased concentration on people-to-people interaction or state-to-people. The discourse on peace and security, in particular, is and should be a profound concern of the government to protect the welfare of its people, given that they obtain the fundamental means to further this cause.

Moreover, the question of whether sports can be used as a tool for diplomacy in the Philippine setting is less of a priority to the Philippine government. However, further study can be advanced in this area. Philippine sports may start making a meaningful contribution as a practical approach to public diplomacy; however, it demands tedious efforts for its development at the grassroots level. Moreover, the Philippines obtains its sports diplomacy resources to assist them in their pursuit of soft power influence—it must take the necessary considerations and rectify its flawed credentials in these fundamental aspects.

*What's Next*

Future studies may look into the so-called "*Pacquiao Effect*" and explore its impact or influence on a cultural and political level—interrogating the soft power of GOAT (Greatest of All Time) Filipino athletes at the domestic and international levels. Furthermore, it may also address the gaps in Philippine sports governance as a soft power resource for public diplomacy. Meanwhile, the objectives of this paper factored out examining the benefits gained from sports-related strategies to assess and produce an analysis of their effectiveness in generating intended diplomatic outcomes.

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