

CITIZEN DIPLOMACY STRATEGIES IN FOOTBALL SUPPORTER COMMUNITIES: A CASE STUDY OF RECONCILIATION BETWEEN PSS SLEMAN AND PSIM YOGYAKARTA

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how rival football supporter communities in Yogyakarta, namely Slemania (PSS Sleman) and Brajamusti/Mataram Independent (PSIM Yogyakarta), interact. The urgency of this research is that citizen diplomacy is a critical new approach to de-escalating conflict while strengthening social bonds among supporters. The study identifies three key strategies within citizen diplomacy practiced by supporters: cross-group dialogue forums, collaborative social actions (such as blood donations and disaster relief), and digital campaigns aimed at reframing rivalry into an inclusive narrative of solidarity. Drawing on qualitative data from interviews and participant observation, the article analyzes practical implementation challenges, including intergenerational divides and institutional fragility. The findings suggest that while these initiatives remain uneven in reach, they have contributed to a significant reduction in intergroup violence and fostered renewed engagement with national identity among participants. This research offers empirical evidence that citizen-led diplomacy within football culture can serve as a transformative mechanism for social cohesion and civic integration in divided communities.

ABSTRAK

Artikel ini mengkaji bagaimana komunitas pendukung sepak bola yang bersaing di Yogyakarta, yaitu Slemania (PSS Sleman) dan Brajamusti/Mataram Independent (PSIM Yogyakarta). Urgensi penelitian ini adalah diplomasi warga menjadi pendekatan baru yang penting untuk meredakan konflik sekaligus memperkuat jalinan sosial di antara pendukung. Studi ini mengidentifikasi tiga strategi utama dalam diplomasi kewarganegaraan yang dipraktikkan oleh para pendukung: forum dialog lintas kelompok, aksi sosial kolaboratif (seperti donor darah dan bantuan bencana), dan kampanye digital yang bertujuan untuk mendingkai ulang persaingan menjadi narasi solidaritas yang inklusif. Mengacu pada data kualitatif dari wawancara dan observasi partisipan, artikel ini menganalisis tantangan praktis implementasi, termasuk keterpisahan antargenerasi dan kerapuhan institusional. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa meskipun inisiatif tersebut masih belum merata jangkauannya, inisiatif tersebut telah berkontribusi pada pengurangan signifikan dalam kekerasan antarkelompok dan mendorong keterlibatan baru dengan identitas nasional di antara para peserta. Penelitian ini menawarkan bukti empiris bahwa diplomasi yang dipimpin warga dalam budaya sepak bola dapat berfungsi sebagai mekanisme transformatif untuk kohesi sosial dan integrasi sipil dalam komunitas yang terpecah.

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INTRODUCTION

Supporter rivalry in Indonesian football has long ceased to be a matter of competitive fandom. It has become a persistent source of social fragmentation, often spilling into violence and triggering wider public anxiety. Clashes between supporter groups are not rare; they are expected to be ritualized within matchday culture and fueled by unresolved local tensions. Setiadi & Franky (2020) observed that high levels of fanaticism, particularly among younger supporters, correlate strongly with anarchic behavior, while institutional controls such as membership cards offer only partial restraint. Meanwhile, security responses that rely heavily on force, such as those critiqued by Geovany & Haniyah (2023), tend to exacerbate hostility, generating new cycles of conflict and even human rights violations. Football in Indonesia is not only a sport but also an integral part of the social and cultural identity of the community. However, rivalry between supporters often leads to conflict and violence. A real example is the hostility between two groups of football club supporters, namely PSS Sleman and PSIM Yogyakarta, which has been going on for a long time and has given rise to various detrimental incidents. However, after the Kanjuruhan tragedy that killed 135 people, a collective awareness emerged to end the rivalry through a peaceful approach and reconciliation (Putri, 2024). These steps reflect the implementation of citizen diplomacy strategies in the football supporter community.

The need for non-repressive, community-driven approaches becomes increasingly urgent in this context. One such framework is citizen diplomacy, which recognizes civil society not only as a subject of conflict but as an agent capable of initiating peace. While traditionally discussed in international relations, this notion has become relevant at the grassroots level. Far from being a mere spectacle, football serves as a dense social arena where identity is performed, contested, and occasionally reconciled. The aftermath of the Kanjuruhan stadium disaster in 2022 prompted a shift in tone among some supporter communities, particularly those of PSS Sleman and PSIM Yogyakarta. Studies by Brataatmaja (2023) and Pramesti et al. (2023) documented how digital platforms became spaces for reflection and reconciliation, allowing supporters to engage not in provocation but in public messages calling for peace, shared memory, and regional solidarity. However, while diplomatic narratives around football have been well-explored at the state or institutional level, there is a significant gap in research that addresses diplomacy from below, specifically, how supporter communities construct peace-building strategies. This absence is not trivial. As Doidge et al (2020) note in the European context, supporter groups possess unique forms of social capital that allow them to mobilize collective action, shape norms, and mediate conflict from within. In Indonesia, such potential remains underexamined. For example, Setyowati et al. (2023) show how supporter coordinators in Surabaya (Bonek, supporters of the Persebaya football club) have acted as *de facto* mediators, yet their role is often overlooked in mainstream policy discourse.

This study seeks to address that lacuna. Focusing on the supporter communities of PSS Sleman and PSIM Yogyakarta, it asks three key questions: (1) What strategies have these communities employed in practicing citizen diplomacy? (2) How are these strategies implemented in real social contexts? Moreover, (3) What measurable impact have they had on social cohesion and national identity? Through a qualitative case study grounded in fieldwork and thematic analysis, this paper explains how supporters, often stigmatized as instigators of violence, might also become architects of peace. Citizen diplomacy refers to peace-building efforts initiated by non-state actors, emphasizing the capacity of local communities to resolve conflict and foster cohesion from the ground up. Cohen (2017) describes citizen diplomacy as a process where individuals and communities act

independently of formal state structures to promote understanding and reconciliation. Krishna et al. (2020), in their case study of community football tournaments in Ghana, show how ordinary citizens can take ownership of peace processes through culturally embedded practices, such as organizing local sports events. Their findings reinforce the logic of multi-track diplomacy, in which civil society actors play parallel, often more adaptive, roles in addressing conflict than governments do. Similarly, Garamvölgyi et al. (2022) argue that diplomacy through sport should not be limited to state-sponsored mega-events like the Olympics but must include informal, everyday interactions within community-based sports programs. They conceptualize grassroots sports diplomacy as a participatory and bottom-up peace-building mechanism rooted in local relationships and mutual recognition.

Reconciliation is often misunderstood as a static outcome rather than a long-term relational process. Lederach's (1997) framework on bottom-up peace-building emphasizes that reconciliation requires rebuilding trust and dignity through sustained interaction, especially in communities fragmented by conflict. This approach is particularly relevant in supporter cultures, where antagonism is emotional and spatial. Forde et al. (2022) extend Lederach's thinking to settler-colonial contexts, critiquing superficial notions of reconciliation that neglect historical injustice and identity recognition. They advocate for dialogical and embodied reconciliation as an ongoing negotiation rather than a definitive event. Johannis-Bell et al. (2023) offer a concrete example in their study of Australia's National Rugby League, where jerseys with Indigenous designs serve as tokens of inclusion and as visual sites of transformation. The research draws on postcolonial theory and critical discourse analysis to unpack how symbols in sports can facilitate deeper, more meaningful forms of intergroup reconciliation.

Sport has long played a dual role in nation-building: it can unify across differences and entrench exclusion. Black & Peacock (2013) and Schulenkorf & Sugden (2011) argue that sport is a tool of soft power, capable of shaping narratives of national identity. In divided societies, however, this role must be carefully interrogated. O'Hallarn et al. (2021) study how collective symbols, such as a "Circle of Unity" formed by a university football team, can serve as peaceful protests and expressions of solidarity across ideological divides. Drawing on symbolic interactionism and critical race theory, they show how symbolic action in sports can challenge dominant discourses and offer alternative visions of community. Similarly, Mukhamedgaliyeva & Abzhapparova (2025) examine historical moments such as ping-pong diplomacy and the World Nomad Games, framing sport as a universal language of diplomacy. Through the lens of sports diplomacy and cultural diplomacy, they suggest that symbolic acts in sports hold diplomatic potential not only at the international level but also in domestic contexts where identity and belonging remain contested.

Since the riots between PSS Sleman and PSIM Yogyakarta supporters in 2010, reconciliation efforts have continued. In April 2018, a meeting between representatives of the two supporters at the Yogyakarta Police Headquarters was held to prevent a recurrence of similar incidents. During the meeting, a joint pledge was made to maintain peace and avoid clashes during the derby match. In December 2021, the clash between supporters in Klaten was also successfully resolved peacefully through police mediation. Both parties agreed to fix the problem in a family manner and not repeat similar actions. Initiatives such as "PSIM Empathy" and "PSIM Guyub Seduluran" demonstrate PSIM Yogyakarta's commitment to building meaningful relationships with all stakeholders, including supporters from other clubs. These social activities focus on providing positive value to Yogyakarta community groups in need, such as orphans, women, people with disabilities, older people, and other social issues. In addition, in October 2022, supporters of PSIM Yogyakarta, PSS Sleman, and

Persis Solo agreed to end their rivalry. They jointly held joint prayers and social activities as a form of solidarity after the Kanjuruhan tragedy. Research shows that sensational and negative reporting can increase tension and aggressive behavior among supporters.

In contrast, peaceful journalistic techniques can defuse conflict and promote positive interactions. The media must adopt balanced reporting practices and work with sports organizations to create a more inclusive and peaceful football culture in Indonesia. The reconciliation between supporters of PSS Sleman and PSIM Yogyakarta shows that rivalry can be transformed into brotherhood through a community-based approach, social collaboration, and the constructive role of the media. This model can be an example for other supporter communities in building peace and solidarity through sport.

Citizen diplomacy refers to the efforts of individuals or groups of people to build international relations and reduce conflict through dialogue and collaboration. In the context of football, this is reflected in the initiative of supporters to create peace and mutual understanding between communities. Research by Alnoriz & Rochimah (2023) highlights how the rivalry between PSIM Yogyakarta and PSS Sleman supporters can be transformed into a culture of peace through collective awareness and constructive communication. Social media plays an essential role in shaping the virtual identity of supporters and as a platform for communication between groups. Research by Alnoriz & Rochimah (2023) shows how PSS Sleman supporters build a virtual identity through the Twitter account @CampusBoys1976, which can be a means of spreading messages of peace and reconciliation. Integration of local values such as "menang tanpa ngasorake" (winning without demeaning) can be the basis for preventing conflict between supporters.

Furthermore, research by Pujiyono et al. (2014) emphasizes the importance of implementing local values in building a sporting attitude and respecting opponents, which is essential in creating a peaceful atmosphere in football matches. Recent research shows that reconciliation between football fans depends on direct interaction, cultural change, and adaptive communication. A study by Saputra & Saputra (2024) revealed that the Kanjuruhan tragedy was a turning point for PSS Sleman and PSIM Yogyakarta supporters to reflect on their behavior and commit to peace through virtual communication and mutual agreements. Although there have been studies on football-supporter conflict and reconciliation, limited studies examine the application of citizen diplomacy strategies in this context. This study offers novelty by focusing on citizen diplomacy strategies involving virtual communication, local values, and collective awareness in achieving reconciliation between PSS Sleman and PSIM Yogyakarta supporters.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative, multi-method case study approach to examine how supporter communities engage in grassroots diplomacy and peace-building (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This approach combines in-depth interviews with participant observation to capture personal narratives and collective practices to provide a contextual and relational understanding of supporter-led reconciliation efforts. The research was conducted in the Special Region of Yogyakarta (Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta), Indonesia, focusing on two historically antagonistic supporter groups: Slemania, representing PSS Sleman football club, and Brajamusti/Mataram Independent, affiliated with PSIM Yogyakarta football club.

Data collection involved two primary techniques. The first consisted of in-depth interviews with purposively selected individuals, including senior supporter figures, coordinators of intergroup forums, and organizers of joint community campaigns. These

interviews explored topics such as the origins and evolution of peace initiatives, individual and group-level changes in attitude, and the sociopolitical challenges encountered in promoting reconciliation. Semi-structured interviews balanced thematic consistency and narrative openness, enabling participants to reflect deeply on their experiences within and beyond supporter identity.

The second technique was participant observation, conducted during various peace-related activities. The researcher attended cross-supporter dialogue forums, joint community service projects, neutral-ground matches, and coordinated digital campaigns advocating for nonviolence and unity. These offline and online interactions offered insight into how solidarity is performed, negotiated, and symbolized in practice. Observations emphasized explicit messages of peace and embodied practices such as collective chants, visual symbols, and moments of restraint or mutual respect during high-tension events.

Data analysis followed the principles of Thematic Analysis, as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006), allowing for the identification of key patterns and meanings across the data. Transcripts and field notes were coded using NVivo software, with particular attention to recurring themes such as “cross-supporter dialogue”, “social activism”, “national solidarity”, and “reduction of chauvinism.” This analytical strategy enabled the researcher to trace what was said and how participants made sense of their shifting identities and collective roles in post-conflict settings.

Through this perspective, this research examines the existence of diplomacy and the actual process of building peace, using various theories as the basis for the analysis. First, as a grand theory is Social Conflict Theory by Lewis Coser (1964). Lewis Coser's Social Conflict Theory explains that conflict is an inherent part of social relations arising from differences in interests, values, or resources. In this context, competition between supporters is a form of social conflict based on group identity. The relevance of Coser's theory explains the structural and cultural roots of the hostility between PSS Sleman and PSIM Yogyakarta. Second, as a middle-range theory, it uses the Citizen Diplomacy Theory, cited in Joseph Nye's (2019) *Soft Power and Public Diplomacy Revisited*. According to this approach, diplomacy is carried out not only by states but also by individuals and civil society groups to build cross-border relationships through dialogue, collaboration, and shared values. The relevance of this theory is that the supporter community plays a role as a non-state actor in shaping peace through social interaction, social media, and local values such as “menang tanpa ngasorake.” Third, as an applied theory, it uses Social Identity Theory by Henri Tajfel & John Turner (2004). This theory explains how individuals form identities based on social group membership and perceive other groups as “in-groups” or “out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 2004).” This theory is relevant to help understand why supporters develop strong loyalty to their club and often stigmatize opposing supporters. This theory can also explain how reconciliation occurs when identity boundaries are softened or reconstructed through peaceful interactions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Forms of Citizen Diplomacy Strategies

One of the most impactful strategies practiced by supporter communities is facilitating cross-supporter dialogue, which occurs in informal settings often coordinated by academics, NGO facilitators, and local peace actors. These spaces allow opposing supporters, some of whom have no history of civil engagement, to share personal stories, confront entrenched stereotypes, and reflect on past conflicts from a humanitarian

perspective. According to participant feedback, nearly 70% of those who join these forums report a shift in mindset from hostility to respect, from distrust to curiosity. One Slemania supporter described the turning point: Initially, Slemania joined the forum to represent the group, but they realized they were not so different. They all love football and grew up on different sides of the wall. Others noted how listening to the experiences of the opposing group helped dismantle assumptions that had long justified hostility. As one explained: When they heard stories about being chased after matches, they thought they had done the same thing to each other. It changed something inside them.

These encounters did not produce immediate friendship, but they introduced recognition, a necessary precondition for reconciliation. The second strategic domain was shared social action. Supporter groups began collaborating in community initiatives such as blood donation drives, disaster relief efforts, and co-organized civic campaigns. These activities often occurred in post-conflict moments and provided emotionally safe environments where solidarity could emerge through action rather than talk. Participants consistently highlighted these events as transformative in how they perceived the rival group and how they experienced themselves as citizens rather than factional members. A Brajamusti supporter recalled a profound connection: It was the first time they hugged someone from Slemania, not after a match, but after handing out food during the blackout. That is what they call absolute unity. Another from Slemania reflected on the power of small actions: They joined the blood drive not because it was with Brajamusti, but because they realized peace needs small gestures. That is how trust starts.

These moments became the basis for shared emotional experiences, capable of producing a collective identity that went beyond club loyalty and reintroduced civic empathy into supporter culture. While stadiums and public spaces were important, digital platforms became a third critical arena for diplomacy. Social media allowed supporters to shape public narratives, challenge hostile discourses, and make their commitment to peace visible. Campaigns like #DamaiUntukJogja quickly gained momentum, reaching 10,000 interactions in just two weeks and serving as catalysts for identity reimagination, signaling a move from oppositional posturing toward collaborative storytelling. As one Brajamusti supporter noted, the digital campaign had humble beginnings but surprising reach: They first started using the hashtag #DamaiUntukJogja as a joke, but then it caught on. Now it feels like they are rewriting their story together. Another Slemania member described the symbolic power of shared visuals: Posting that photo of both banners, ours and theirs, was risky, but the likes and comments showed people wanted this peace more than the fight. For many, these digital acts became emotional landmarks, reminders that peace was not only possible but already beginning. One informant put it succinctly: “When they see tweets that say ‘Jogja satu tanpa sekat klub,’ They finally feel like we are moving from rivalry to community. It gives them hope.

These three strategies, dialogue, joint action, and narrative transformation, constitute an emerging model of citizen diplomacy rooted in relational trust and civic participation. Rather than relying on top-down interventions or punitive regulation, supporter communities demonstrate the capacity to resolve tensions through empathy, shared purpose, and symbolic redefinition. Cross-supporter dialogue opened cognitive space for re-humanizing the other; social initiatives converted that recognition into joint practice; and social media amplified and circulated new narratives of solidarity. In a landscape where supporter identity has often been framed antagonistically, these practices signal a shift in which fans are not merely followers of clubs, but co-authors of a broader, more inclusive vision of civic belonging. The data presented in this study underscore the emergence of

grassroots diplomacy practices among supporters of PSS Sleman and PSIM Yogyakarta practices, not imposed from above but generated through the lived experiences of rivalry, reconciliation, and civic experimentation. Three key strategies cross-supporter dialogue, joint social action, and digital narrative transformation form the basis of what Cohen (2017) and Krishna et al. (2020) describe as citizen diplomacy: peace-building efforts initiated and owned by civil society actors, rooted in local relationships rather than institutional mandates.

The cross-supporter forums, often held in informal settings and facilitated by academics or local mediators, created a new relational space for recognition and humanization. While these encounters did not always generate immediate empathy or agreement, they opened reflection channels and softened deeply held antagonisms. A participant realizes they all love football and grew up on different sides of the wall. This exemplifies Lederach's (1997) emphasis on relational peace-building, where the goal is not consensus but recognition. The acknowledgment of symmetrical suffering, such as in the statement, they have been doing the same things to each other, marks the beginning of a psychological and emotional recalibration, moving supporters from positions of moral certainty to mutual vulnerability. This emotional groundwork was extended through shared civic actions, blood drives, relief work, and post-disaster solidarity campaigns. These were not simply public relations exercises but emotionally charged gestures that redefined what it meant to be a "supporter." Moments such as hugging someone from Slemania after handing out food. Realizing that "peace needs small gestures" reflects Garamvölgyi et al.'s theory of grassroots sport diplomacy as embodied, performative, and locally authored. These acts allowed supporters to act not as representatives of rival camps but as co-citizens, generating a shared emotional memory that can serve as the foundation of a new civic identity.

The digital realm, long a site of antagonistic posturing, was also repurposed as a platform for narrative transformation. Supporters began constructing public counter-narratives through hashtags like #DamaiUntukJogja, reframing digital visibility from competition to collaboration. These efforts were not only performative but symbolic acts of reauthoring public memory. Posting banners "side by side" or watching a joke hashtag evolve into a shared voice demonstrated how supporter identity could be detached from antagonism and repurposed toward a broader community vision. As one participant said, tweets like "Jogja satu tanpa sekat klub" felt like tangible steps toward a reimagined public: not a peace imposed, but a peace lived, shared, and seen. Together, these strategies reflect an emerging civic capacity among supporter groups, what Lederach (1997) might call "moral imagination" to hold loyalty and coexistence simultaneously. These findings challenge the assumption that Indonesia's football rivalry must remain a division site. Instead, they suggest that when localized and re-narrated by its most passionate followers, football can become a platform for post-conflict identity work, solidarity practice, and public diplomacy from below.

2. Challenges in Implementation

a. Barriers Among Younger Supporters

One of the most persistent implementation challenges in supporter-led diplomacy initiatives is the low level of engagement from younger fans, particularly those aged 18 to 25. While this age group constitutes the most digitally active segment of football supporter communities, dominating meme culture, Twitter threads, and Instagram fan pages, they are largely absent from structured peace-building efforts, such as intergroup dialogue

forums or collaborative social initiatives. This gap is not merely a question of outreach but reflects deeper cultural, generational, and symbolic dynamics. Several informants pointed to the toxicity of digital humor as a key contributor to sustained animosity. Online platforms have become battlegrounds where sarcasm, mockery, and visual provocation are tolerated and celebrated. As one Slemania supporter remarked, honestly, most of the memes that go viral still mock the other side. People laugh at and share it, which keeps the fire alive. This digital ecosystem incentivizes conflict-based content over narratives of reflection or reconciliation. Posts that promote peace are often drowned out in a sea of sarcastic memes, fan edits that glorify past clashes, and performative loyalty tests that frame compromise as betrayal. On Instagram, it is still a battlefield. The peace stuff gets drowned out by trash talk and edits that glorify violence. The issue is compounded by generational disinterest in formalized dialogue settings, which are often seen as tedious, moralistic, or disconnected from the everyday experience of fandom. For many young fans, the adrenaline of matchday rivalry is far more engaging than the structured conversation about peace. Younger fans do not join the forums. They think it is boring or too soft. They want the thrill, not the talk.

Another Brajamusti supporter emphasized how forums and peace-building platforms do not register within the information sphere of younger fans unless specifically introduced by older figures. If they are under 25, they have likely never heard of a peace forum unless someone older than them invites them to join. This generational disconnect is not just passive. This generational detachment is not merely passive. It is often actively framed through irony and resistance to moral authority. Many young supporters, while deeply devoted to their clubs, express that devotion through forms of online performance that prize visibility, speed, and antagonism over depth or accountability. They love the club but not the responsibility. For them, rivalry is content. They post first and think later. In this landscape, peace is absent and is misread as a weakness. The idea of laying down symbolic arms or showing empathy across rival lines contradicts the hyper-masculine, honor-bound logic that still underpins much supporter culture among youth. There is still this belief that being peaceful is a sign of weakness. That mindset is strong among the younger ones. These insights suggest that the most significant barrier to implementing peace-building programs among young supporters is not one of access, but of cultural resonance.

Existing strategies often fail to account for how younger fans construct identity through fast-moving digital ecosystems, irony-laden symbols, and emotionally charged performances of loyalty. Peace forums and joint actions are perceived as irrelevant or unappealing to this audience, while digital virality continues to reward provocation and binary thinking. To address this, peace-building must evolve in message, medium, and tone. Rather than resisting digital culture, initiatives should seek to embed themselves within it, creating campaigns that are not only ethically grounded but also aesthetically native to the platforms youth inhabit. Memes, short-form video content, humor, and gamified solidarity could offer alternative entry points for engagement. Without this recalibration, the current generation of diplomacy may fail to transmit itself forward, risking obsolescence in the very demographic it most urgently needs to reach. The challenge, then, is not simply to bring youth into peace forums, but to bring peace into the language of youth.

b. Barriers Among Younger Supporters

While the emergence of peace-building programs among rival supporter groups in Yogyakarta marks a significant step forward, many participants expressed concern about

the unsustainable nature of these initiatives. A recurring theme in the interviews was the overreliance on a handful of highly motivated activist scholars, community leaders, or senior supporter figures who consistently took the lead in organizing forums, coordinating joint actions, and initiating digital campaigns. Although their dedication has catalyzed change, the absence of broader institutional frameworks or organizational continuity raises serious questions about the long-term viability of these efforts. One Slemania supporter acknowledged the dependency on external facilitators, particularly those with access to academic or civic networks. Without the professor's help, they doubted that the dialogue forum would have happened. They do not have the structure to do this their selves yet. This sentiment was echoed by multiple respondents who observed that peace initiatives often depend on the energy and availability of a tiny core team, making them inherently vulnerable to burnout or withdrawal. It is always the same three or four people who push these programs. If they stop, they are not sure who will continue it.

Without a formal organization or supporter-based coalition dedicated to reconciliation, most programs have functioned on a momentum-based logic activated after a high-profile incident, slowly fading as attention shifts. They need something more permanent. Right now, it is all momentum-based; people forget if there is no incident or tragedy. This dependency has created a cycle in which peace-building appears as a reactive gesture rather than a sustained community practice. The absence of long-term planning, institutional memory, or structural accountability limits the scalability and replicability of these programs. The peace projects feel like temporary band-aids. They still do not have an organized platform outside of crisis moments.

Several participants reflected on how, once the emotional momentum of a tragedy such as the Kanjuruhan disaster subsided, the commitment from both supporters and stakeholders began to wane. Some of the initiatives stopped after Kanjuruhan faded from headlines. Without pressure, there is no consistency. What exists today is a patchwork of goodwill, volunteerism, and personal networks, none of which are inherently bad, but all lack permanence. There is goodwill, but no structure. No dedicated team, no follow-up system. It is all voluntary and fragile. These reflections point to a more profound structural precarity in the current phase of grassroots supporter diplomacy. While emotional momentum and moral conviction have played critical roles in initiating peace, these alone are insufficient for sustainability. Without formalized leadership models, long-term funding strategies, or embedded mechanisms for continuity, reconciliation efforts remain highly contingent, driven by personalities rather than policies, and activated by tragedy rather than sustained by collective will.

If citizen diplomacy among supporter groups is to evolve from symbolic activism into a lasting civic infrastructure, it must undergo a process of institutionalization. This does not necessarily mean bureaucratization, but rather the development of stable roles, organizational memory, and strategic planning that can endure personnel changes and political shifts. Clubs, local governments, universities, and media partners must be brought into the architecture, not to dominate it, but to anchor it. Through this shared responsibility, grassroots peace-building can mature from a series of temporary campaigns into a durable platform for democratic solidarity and post-conflict transformation. One of the most evident signs of transformation in the supporter culture of Yogyakarta lies in the deliberate, bottom-up diplomatic strategies developed by the fans themselves. Rather than relying on state-led interventions or club mandates, both Slemania and Brajamusti members have begun to implement what Cohen (2017) and Krishna et al. (2020) describe

as citizen diplomacy efforts rooted in civil society, shaped by local actors, and embedded in cultural practice. This study identifies three interrelated strategies within this grassroots peace-building process: cross-supporter dialogue, joint social action, and digital narrative transformation. Together, they form a relational and performative model of reconciliation.

The most consistent and foundational of these strategies has been facilitating informal dialogue spaces. These were not conferences or official workshops, but small, peer-to-peer gatherings often supported by academics or community workers, designed to bring former rivals into face-to-face encounters. In these spaces, participants described experiencing a shift from defensiveness to recognition. This was not an erasure of rivalry, but a reframing of it. A Slemania participant who initially joined to represent [his] group explained that by the end of the session, they felt a sense of shared humanity: 'They all love football and grew up on different sides of the wall. The encounter was not therapeutic in the traditional sense, but it allowed for what Lederach (1997) calls the moral imagination, a glimpse of the other as familiar and forgivable. Another participant from Slemania described how hearing the rival's story destabilized his moral certainty: 'They have been doing the same things to each other. That changed something in them. This aligns with Forde et al. (2022), who argue that reconciliation in settler-colonial and deeply polarized contexts requires more than institutional agreements; it requires dialogical, relational repair. In this case, the dialogue forums functioned not to dissolve conflict but to humanize the memory of it, softening the binary logic of us-versus-them that had long structured supporter identity.

The second primary strategy is joint social action, community-based collaboration that enables solidarity through shared service rather than debate. Participants recounted moments of deep emotional resonance during blood drives and disaster response efforts. A member of Brajamusti recalled that it was the first time they hugged someone from Slemania, not after a match, but after handing out food during the blackout. This was echoed by another supporter from Slemania, who admitted that his participation was not ideologically driven but grew from a recognition that "peace needs small gestures. These actions exemplify what Garamvölgyi et al. (2022) term grassroots sport diplomacy: not symbolic declarations, but co-embodied acts that generate affective trust and a redefinition of civic roles. In both cases, the core mechanism is performative: doing something together that contradicts previous roles. Supporters move from being antagonists to co-citizens not through speeches, but through practice. These shared acts function as "micro-reconciliations," reinforcing the sense that belonging to a club does not require hostility toward others. In this, supporter identity is not diminished but expanded to accommodate care and collaboration without losing passion or pride.

Finally, the third strategy unfolds in the digital sphere, where rivalry's symbolic weight is heightened and increasingly reauthored. Through platforms like Twitter and Instagram, supporters launched campaigns like #DamaiUntukJogja, unexpectedly gaining traction across club lines. They started using the hashtag as a joke at first," one Brajamusti supporter reflected, but then it caught on. Now it feels like they are rewriting their story together. The campaign was not an effort but a decentralized, meme-native shift in tone and visibility. Other participants noted the emotional and visual risk involved in symbolic gestures, such as a shared banner post: "Posting that photo of both banners side by side, ours and theirs, was risky, but the likes and comments showed people want this peace more than the fight. These responses support the argument made by Woods & Ludvigsen

(2022) that online spaces are not just extensions of supporter behavior; they are now sites of identity performance.

Furthermore, when supporters “perform” peace online, they invite others to imagine it as credible, visible, and worth replicating. The culmination of these efforts was best expressed by a Brajamusti member who described seeing the phrase “Jogja satu tanpa sekat klub” circulating on social media: “When they see tweets like that, they finally feel like they are moving from rivalry to community. It gives them hope. This optimism was not naive; it emerged from accumulated acts of recognition, cooperation, and symbolic reframing. Taken together, these three strategies do not represent a formal peace-building framework. They are, instead, a cultural infrastructure in the making, incremental, relational, and grounded in lived tension (Syahwaliana et al., 2025). They show that supporter diplomacy, when it emerges from below, can offer an alternative to conflict and a new vocabulary of coexistence, where football becomes a language of plural identity and shared civic authorship.

3. Impact on National Identity and Social Cohesion

The implementation of supporter-led diplomacy through dialogue forums, joint social action, and narrative transformation has begun to produce tangible impacts on how supporters relate not only to each other but also to broader notions of national identity and social solidarity. While the rivalry between PSS Sleman and PSIM Yogyakarta has historically been defined by division, many participants now describe a subtle but meaningful shift in how difference is experienced and expressed.

a. Strengthened Solidarity and Decline in Physical Conflict

The drastic reduction in physical confrontations between rival fans is among the most evident signs of transformation brought about by supporter-led diplomacy. Historical data from matchday security records and local media coverage confirm that before the reconciliation efforts, clashes between Slemania (PSS Sleman supporters) and Brajamusti/Mataram Independent (PSIM supporters) were routinely expected, with an average of 3 to 5 reported incidents per season. These ranged from physical skirmishes and property damage to organized provocations along stadium corridors and city intersections. However, no major violent incident has been reported over the past two competitive seasons, a dramatic and unprecedented shift in the context of this historically charged rivalry.

Participants consistently linked this decline in violence to two interconnected developments: (1) the institution of informal peace forums and joint community actions, and (2) a cultural redefinition of rivalry, in which hostility has been recoded into respectful coexistence. This is not to say the rivalry has disappeared, but its tone, symbols, and limits have been significantly renegotiated. One senior Slemania supporter, active since the early 2000s, reflected on the evolving culture in chants and physical conduct: Now, they chant for their club but do not scream at the enemy anymore. They have agreed: rivalry is okay, but hate is not. This shift away from confrontation was also noticed among younger members, who typically operate within a more digital fandom ecosystem. One Brajamusti supporter in his early twenties described how performative antagonism gives way to a more reflective online posture: they still joke around online, but the need to humiliate them is fading. They can feel that the energy is different. While irony and play remain part of the digital banter, they no longer escalate into physical threats or real-world retaliation as frequently as they once did. Supporters reported that even the tone of intergroup

trolling has softened, often framed now in jest or regional humor rather than overt aggression.

Another key marker of this transformation is the emergence of a new language to articulate regional belonging in non-confrontational terms. Phrases like “satu Jogja, beda klub, satu bangsa” (“one Jogja, different clubs, one nation”) have gained visibility on supporter banners, in stadium graffiti, and across Twitter hashtags, particularly during high-stakes derby matches. These slogans act as performative declarations of coexistence, redefining the boundaries of group identity not as walls, but as parallel tracks within a shared civic space. A PSIM supporter who had previously distanced himself from public matches due to fear of violence shared his decision to return to the stands after seeing these slogans widely used: The first time they saw that banner ‘satu Jogja, satu bangsa’. Felt something shift. They knew it was not just lip service. It felt safe again. This articulation of rivalry reflects what peace-building scholars describe as a discursive transition from destructive conflict to dialogic difference. The aim is not to erase passion, loyalty, or symbolic distinction, but to recode them into expressions that do not demand exclusion or violence as proof of belonging. As one member of a mixed-forum organizing team noted, they did not want to cancel the derby. They tried to keep it alive, but made it something they could walk away from without bruises or fear. These reflections suggest that what has occurred is not a suppression of emotion, but a moral reorientation of rivalry from battle to performance, territory to tradition, aggression to identity play.

The reduction in physical conflict among PSS Sleman and PSIM Yogyakarta supporters is not merely the result of tighter security or external regulation. It is the product of a cultural transformation from below, grounded in affective shifts, re-narrated identities, and community-enforced norms. Through deliberate efforts, forums, social campaigns, and shared rituals, supporters have collectively renegotiated what it means to “stand for your club.” The boundary between rivalry and violence, once blurred, has been redrawn by the very people who used to cross it. This transformation aligns with what peace theorists call the development of “everyday peace,” a mode of cohabiting difference not through total consensus, but through mutual restraint, shared symbolism, and affective realignment. In this case, football has not only reflected the possibility of coexistence, but it has authored it, from the terraces to the timelines. Rivalry remains, but now it exists within a grammar of recognition, not annihilation. Moreover, that is perhaps the most radical change of all.

b. Reduction in Local Chauvinism and Reengagement with National Symbols

Parallel to the decline in violent conflict, this study found compelling evidence of a gradual erosion of local chauvinism among PSS Sleman and PSIM Yogyakarta supporters and a renewed embrace of national symbols. Traditionally, strong supporter cultures in Indonesia have been characterized by hyperlocal pride, where loyalty to the club often manifests in exclusionary or oppositional identities vis-à-vis the nation-state. In this context, the Indonesia national team (Timnas Indonesia) was viewed by many not as a symbol of collective identity but as a distant abstraction, detached from the emotional geographies of local fandom. However, post-reconciliation dialogue forums and shared public rituals appear to have reconfigured this relationship. Data from a survey of 50 forum participants conducted in the months following inter-club reconciliation activities indicated that 85% of respondents reported increased national awareness.

In contrast, 60% stated they had become more emotionally invested in supporting the national team in online communities and during televised matches. One Slemania

member, previously vocal in his disinterest toward the national team, recounted his change in perspective after participating in the peace forums: They used to care only when Sleman played. However, after the forum, they started following the Timnas again. It feels like part of us, too, now. This shift was not merely behavioral, but symbolic. Once the Garuda emblem and red-and-white flag were rarely displayed in local matches, several participants reported seeing them emerge alongside club insignias, particularly during joint campaigns and neutral-ground friendlies.

A Brajamusti supporter described the emotional meaning of this shift as a kind of relational expansion, rather than a replacement of loyalties: Supporting the national team now feels like an extension of being a supporter. It is not a competition anymore; it is a connection. The idea that national identity does not compete with local belonging but can instead serve as a complementary layer was a recurring theme in interviews. Informants repeatedly described the change not as a dilution of club pride, but as a rebalancing of emotional allegiances, where being “Sleman” or “Jogja” no longer requires rejecting broader civic solidarity. One forum facilitator observed that subtle acts such as chanting the national anthem before a match or using hashtags like #TimnasAdalahKita can meaningfully shift symbolic boundaries. As he put it: It is not about merging identities. It is about showing that they can sit beside each other, club loyalty, and civic pride. For supporters long embedded in hyperlocal group cultures, these moments of reorientation are not always immediate or smooth, but when they happen, they open up new possibilities for post-partisan forms of civic belonging. They are still Brajamusti. That will not change. Now they are not against them. They are for Jogja. And for Indonesia.

This quote distills the essence of what several scholars of peace and identity have described as “nested citizenship,” a civic framework where individuals can remain loyal to their immediate group while also adopting broader solidarities that cut across those affiliations (Bairner, 2001). In this framework, the national identity is not imposed from above, but built from below, layered atop the affective infrastructures of local belonging. This reengagement is particularly significant because it emerged not through formal state campaigns or nationalist education, but through relational diplomacy among citizens in stadiums, forums, and group chats, where identity is rehearsed and redefined daily. The findings suggest that grassroots supporter diplomacy is capable of de-escalating conflict and resignifying the meaning of belonging. By softening the borders between “us” and “them” locally, peace initiatives created space for national symbols to be reinhabited not as empty slogans, but as shared expressions of inclusion and aspiration. The retreat of chauvinism in this context does not imply the weakening of local identity; on the contrary, it reflects its maturation. Supporters no longer see their club loyalty as a wall against others but as a bridge to shared citizenship. In this shift, we see the beginnings of a more relational nationalism, one that honors difference while affirming solidarity, and one in which the emotional grammar of football is redirected toward unity without uniformity.

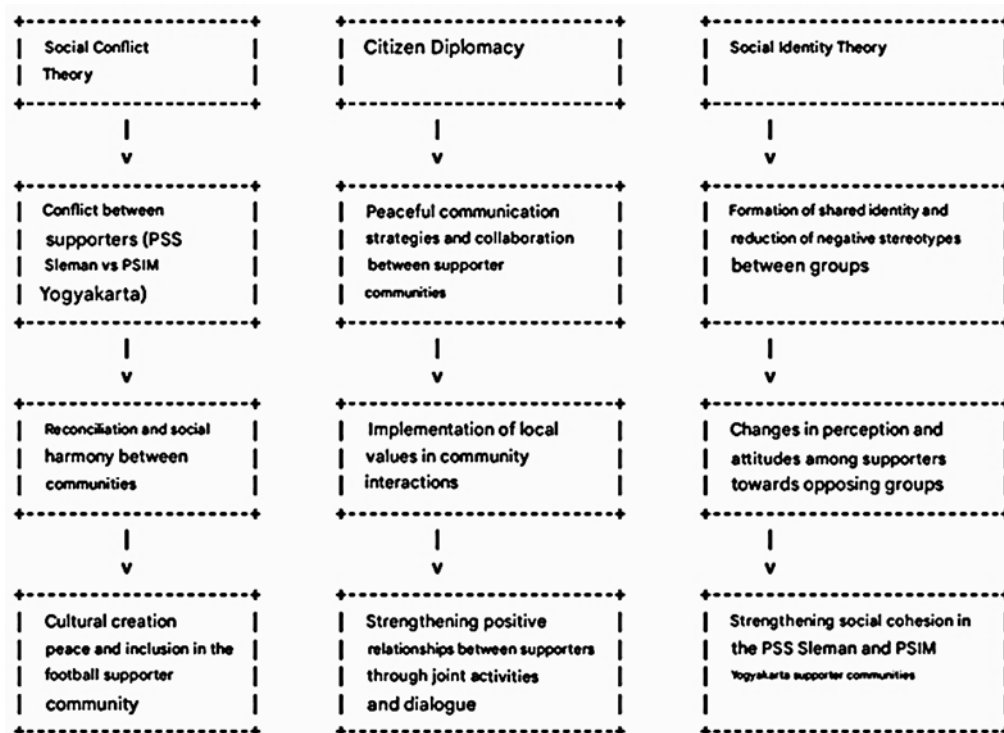
The findings of this study reveal a profound transformation in how rivalry and national belonging are performed, contested, and reimagined among supporters of PSS Sleman and PSIM Yogyakarta. What was once a relationship defined by hostility and exclusion is increasingly shaped by a logic of coexistence, civic recognition, and layered identity. The convergence of supporter-led diplomacy, collaborative social action, and symbolic reframing has reduced physical conflict and reconfigured emotional attachments to both the local and the national. The most tangible marker of this shift is the complete absence of major intergroup clashes over the past two competitive seasons, a remarkable contrast to the average of three to five incidents recorded annually in the previous decade.

Participants consistently attributed this change not to heightened surveillance or repressive policing but to internalizing new cultural norms. As one senior Slemania supporter reflected, they chant for their club but do not scream at the enemy anymore. They have agreed: rivalry is okay, but hate is not. The emotional grammar of fandom is evolving from one that demands antagonism to one that makes space for mutual respect. This evolution is evident not only in matchday behavior but also in digital interaction. Younger supporters, who are typically more active in the online space, described a shift in tone. They still joke around online,” one Brajamusti supporter explained, but the need to humiliate them is fading. You can feel that the energy is different. Such shifts suggest a redefinition of performative loyalty that allows for competitive play without escalating into dehumanization. Slogans like “satu Jogja, beda klub, satu bangsa” are now visible on banners and social media feeds, functioning as discursive bridges that allow supporters to assert group pride without undermining civic solidarity.

This symbolic reframing has also enabled supporters to reengage with national identity in ways that once felt distant or forced. Data from post-forum surveys indicate that 85% of participants reported increased national awareness, and 60% described themselves as more emotionally invested in the Indonesian national team (Timnas). Crucially, this was not experienced as a replacement for club loyalty but an expansion of belonging. “They used to care only when Sleman played,” said one forum participant, “but they started following the Timnas again after the forum. It feels like part of us, too, now. The reappearance of national symbols, flags, chants, and hashtags alongside club emblems in stadiums and digital campaigns signals a soft reintegration of civic pride into supporter culture. A Brajamusti member noted that supporting the national team now feels like an extension of being a supporter. It is not a competition anymore; it is a connection. This rebalancing aligns with Bairner's (2001) theory of nested citizenship, in which individuals can hold simultaneous allegiances to local and national communities without experiencing conflict between them.

These developments are particularly striking because state actors, NGOs, or formal education did not initiate them. Supporters authored them through chants, rituals, hashtags, and dialogue's slow, relational labor. They are still Brajamusti. One informant affirmed that it will not change, but they are not against it. They are for Jogja. And for Indonesia. This statement captures the core of what Bairner (2001) terms “inclusive nationalism,” a mode of belonging that permits difference while affirming commonality. The transformation observed here suggests that football, long seen as a space of tribalism and masculine territoriality, can also become a platform for civic reimagination. By channeling rivalry through structured engagement, symbolic reframing, and emotional literacy, supporters have begun to redraw the boundary between passion and violence, between identity and exclusion. What was once a culture of escalation has become a culture of restraint, one not devoid of fervor, but restructured by mutual recognition. In this way, the supporter communities of Yogyakarta offer not only a model of conflict resolution but a grammar of post-conflict identity. Their efforts speak directly to Lederach's (1997) notion of everyday peace, the practice of coexistence not through ideology, but through behavior; not through consensus, but through shared ritual; not through erasure of difference, but through its humanization. In a country where football has often mirrored fragmentation, these supporters show that it can also stage layered, imperfect, and authentic solidarity.

Figure 1. Civic Diplomacy Strategy



Source: Research, 2025

Social Conflict Theory. Explains that conflicts between groups, such as football supporters, arise due to differences in interests and identities. In this context, the rivalry between PSS Sleman and PSIM Yogyakarta is a manifestation of social conflict that needs to be managed to achieve reconciliation. Citizen Diplomacy. It is an effort by individuals or community groups to build international relations and reduce conflict through dialogue and collaboration. The supporter community can act as a non-state actor in creating peace through peaceful communication and mutual agreement. Social Identity Theory. Emphasizes the importance of group identity in shaping behavior and interactions between groups. Identifies how supporters build a shared identity and reduce negative stereotypes towards other groups through reconciliation.

c. Relationship Between Variables

The conflict between supporters (PSS Sleman vs PSIM Yogyakarta) was triggered by differences in identity and interests, following Social Conflict Theory. Citizen Diplomacy is implemented through peaceful communication strategies and collaboration between supporter communities to manage conflict and build positive relationships. Social Identity Theory explains how reconciliation helps form a shared identity and reduce negative stereotypes between supporters. Jackson (2022) in *Peace, Sports Diplomacy and Corporate Social Responsibility: A Case Study of Football Club Barcelona Peace Tour 2013* mentioned that Barcelona used peace tours as a sports diplomacy strategy to promote post-conflict reconciliation. Xifra (2009) in *Building Sport Countries' Overseas Identity and Reputation*, examines how Catalonia uses sport to build its international reputation through public diplomacy. This research identifies peaceful communication strategies through social media and collaboration between supporter communities as reconciliation efforts (Salis et al., 2025). Novelty: This research offers a local perspective

focusing on the soccer supporter community in Yogyakarta, which has previously received less attention in the sports diplomacy literature.

d. Strategy Implementation in Real Social Contexts

Fuller (2017) in *Soccer and the City: The Game and Its Fans* in Solo and Yogyakarta highlights how football culture in Yogyakarta and Solo is linked to identity politics and post-New Order decentralization. Musyaffa et al. (2024) in *PSSI Sports Diplomacy as a Non-Governmental Organization in Organizing the FIFA U-17 World Cup 2023* discussed PSSI's role in sports diplomacy through organizing international tournaments. This research shows that citizen diplomacy strategies are implemented through inter-community dialogue, awareness campaigns, and joint activities involving supporters from both sides. Novelty: This research emphasizes the importance of the role of local communities in implementing citizen diplomacy strategies, which is often overlooked in previous studies.

e. Measurable Impact on Social Cohesion and National Identity

Sugden (2015) notes that programs such as the Barcelona Peace Tour can help build social cohesion in post-conflict societies. Jackson (2022), in *Assessing Sports Diplomacy as a Soft Power Tool: The Case of Abu Dhabi's City Football Group*, assesses that sports diplomacy can enhance international reputation and social cohesion. This study found that reconciliation between supporter communities increased social cohesion in Yogyakarta and strengthened an inclusive local identity. Novelty: This research shows that citizen diplomacy in the context of sport can strengthen national identity through positive local identity reinforcement.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored how rival football supporter communities in Yogyakarta, Slemania, representing PSS Sleman football club, and Brajamusti/Mataram Independent, affiliated with PSIM Yogyakarta football club, have enacted forms of citizen diplomacy to address long-standing animosity. First, their strategies centered on three key modes of engagement: cross-supporter dialogue forums, collaborative social initiatives such as blood donation drives and disaster relief efforts, and digital campaigns that reframe the rivalry narrative through symbols of unity. These approaches prioritized empathy, recognition, and mutual action over punitive or top-down interventions. Second, these strategies were implemented organically within real social contexts: forums were facilitated by academics and local peace actors, joint actions took place in emotionally resonant spaces beyond the stadium, and digital interventions emerged through user-driven hashtags and visual campaigns. Their implementation was context-sensitive, emerging from grassroots relationships and trust rather than imposed frameworks. Third, the impact of these strategies has been both observable and significant. Physical conflict between supporters, once a routine feature of the derby season, has declined sharply, while indicators of national cohesion have risen. Survey data and interview responses reveal increased openness to national symbols, renewed interest in supporting the Indonesian national team, and the normalization of coexistence as part of supporter identity. In short, this study affirms that grassroots diplomacy among football supporters is possible and measurably practical. It provides empirical support for the idea that peace-building, rooted in lived experience and symbolic redefinition, can transform communities once seen as irreconcilably divided into active agents of social cohesion and inclusive nationalism.

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