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Paper Number: 78
August 2008

National Identity and the Beijing Olympics: School Children's Responses in Mainland

China, Taiwan & Hong Kong

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**National Identity and the Beijing Olympics: School Children's Responses in
Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong**

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study is to examine the changes in national identity among children in mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan before, during and after the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games. It consists of three phases. The study reported herein belonged to Phase 1. Phases 2 and 3 will take place in mid-August and December 2008, respectively. The roles played by identification with sport and physical activity level in the formation of national identity among Chinese children from the three regions is also investigated. Group differences in this identity with regard to sex, age, place of birth/residence, identification with sport and physical activity level is examined. The participants are 480 boys and 447 girls aged 12 to 17 who attend junior-secondary and senior-secondary schools in mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. A set of validated questionnaires is administered to assess changes in national identity at three time points. Correlation analysis of the pre-Games questionnaire reveals that national identity and identification with sport and national identity and physical activity are weakly associated. Multiple regression analysis was employed to examine the contribution of different constructs to the children's national identity. Only place of birth/residence and identification with sport are found to be significant predictors of national identity. The results of an independent t-test indicate that junior-secondary students have significantly lower levels of national identity and identification with sport, but higher levels of physical activity, than the senior-secondary students. Although no significant differences in national identity are found between the sexes, the boys scored significantly higher than the girls in identification with sport and physical activity levels. One-way ANOVA demonstrates that the "China born-China resident" group has significantly higher levels of physical activity than the other three groups.

In summary, the Phase 1 cross-sectional data reveal that mainland Chinese children demonstrated the greatest level of national identity among the three regions before the Beijing Olympic Games 2008. This suggests that place of birth/residence makes the greatest contribution to the formation of national identity. The role of identification with sport and physical activity level had very limited predictive ability in the dependent variable. To further explore the associations between the constructs, repeated measures are imperative to track the changes in the variables during and after the Games.

Introduction

It has been suggested that the Olympic Games are short-term mega sporting events that generate enthusiasm and national pride, which has long-term consequences for the host cities and citizens of the country (Waitt, 2001; Roche, 1994). Although the Olympic Charter proclaims that the Games are not contests between countries, the national representation of athletes conflicts with this ideal, as they must be selected by individual countries. The athletes are also requested to wear their national uniforms and sing their national anthems when their national flags are hoisted during the prize presentation ceremony (International Olympic Committee, 2004). These regulations are part of the 2004 Olympic Charter, which seems to indicate that national identity is recognized by the International Olympics Committee and fostered and sustained by National Olympic Committees (Guttmann, 2002). The *Economist* (1996) actually stated that, after the Olympic Games were revived, nationalism was on the rise in Europe. Athletes compete for their countries with supreme patriotism. For example, during the 1996 Games in Atlanta, the *Economist* (1996) reported that Americans used the Games to express their patriotism. Thus, in this instance, the Olympics served a benign function – that of bringing a disparate nation together.

National identity involves social immersion in, identification and involvement with, and loyalty and patriotic commitment to a nation (Ikhioya, 1998). National identification is more than just positive feelings or the recognition of frequent social interactions. It involves imaging oneself to belong to a national community, having an emotional attachment to this national community, and understanding one's rights and duties as a citizen of it (Lee, Chan & So, 2004). As Thomas (2004) stated, national identity can create a sense of belongingness among members of a society, which is an important step in post-conflict reconstruction. It has also been noted that national identity changes dynamically in relation to social changes (Ikhioya, 1998), especially those that stem from a city/country hosting the modern Olympic Games. Therefore, the Olympics, as a mega event, can play a positive role in developing a sense of national identity and encouraging the growth of civil society. Similarly, Waitt (2001) pointed out that the Sydney 2000 Olympics served as an instrument to generate community and national pride.

Previous researchers have found a lot of evidence indicating that sport is associated with national identity and tradition. Brownell (2005), for example, compared sport in the US and China and discussed its relationship to nationalism over the past century. She found that in both countries, sport is closely related to the construction of national identity. Chinese people hope that the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games will mark China's emergence as a world power. Labriola and Negreiros (1998) suggested that soccer is not simply a competition, but rather a

stage on which to demonstrate Brazil's national power to its citizens.

Mewett (1999) realized that in Australia, sport can be used for national glorification. Moreover, he stated that expressions of a sense of belonging to the nation are played out on specific occasions, such as the Olympics. In North America, ice hockey is recognized as crucial to the maintenance of Canadian identity (Bairner, 2001). Garland (2004) believed that English success on the football field might be able to bring about a rebirth of English patriotism during the 2002 World Cup. These studies have confirmed that there is an association between national identity and the Olympics, or sport in general, in different countries. Within the Olympic sporting arena, international competition is presented as a form of ritualized war in which sport serves as a powerful source for the construction and representation of national identity (Elias, 1996).

Hong Kong and Taiwan are detached from mainland China because of historical treaties and civil war. Thus, they have experienced very different social, political and economical changes over the past century. Although people in Hong Kong may have identified themselves more as members of the international community than as members of the Chinese nation during the colonial period, the region has undergone a transition in national identity since 1997. Hong Kong's government has tried to replace the colonial period's ideology of localism, capitalism, internationalism, cosmopolitanism, managerialism and Hongkongism by launching various civil education projects. For example, the Committee on the Promotion of Civic Education (2007) has initiated a number of schemes, such as the Basic Law Drama Contest, Our Home Our Country III-Chinese Heritage and encouraging primary and secondary schools to raise the national flag (Law, 1998; Ma, 1999). These developments are converging in the direction of re-Sinicization. According to the Hok Yau Society (2004), the outstanding sporting achievements of elite athletes from China and Hong Kong, including Li Ching, Ko Lai Chak and Teyana, have inspired cohesion between the two. In Taiwan, because of its unique history since 1949 and political conflict between the native Taiwanese and those who migrated from the mainland (Lin, 2003), there is much discussion of nationality from both the historical and cultural perspective. The core theme of this discussion has centered on citizens' identification as Chinese, Taiwanese or both (Chu & Lin, 1998). Little research has been conducted to investigate the association between the Olympics and national identity in Chinese populations, including China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Given the findings of previous studies on the association between national identity and the Olympics or other mega sporting events, it is thus meaningful to investigate the impact of the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing on changes in the national identity, if any, among the citizens of mainland China, Hong

Kong and Taiwan.

Aside from the Olympic Games, sport in general can be an instrument that contributes to national unity and consolidates cultural nationalism and national consciousness (Keech, Fox & Bramham, 2001). Gill (2005) suggested that national identity can be considered as a performance and that sport is the context in which this performance takes place. Therefore, the present study also examines whether identification with sport or physical activity contribute to national identity. If so, then they can be considered as significant instruments in the development and formation of Chinese national identity within civil education and may shed light on future government policy with regard to sport education.

In summary, the study (Phase 1) reported herein aimed to: (a) examine the differences in national identity among secondary school students in mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan before the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games; (b) investigate the contribution of an identification with sport and physical activity level on the national identity of secondary school students; and (c) examine the group differences of sex, age, place of birth/residence, identification with sport, and physical activity level on national identity. It is believed that the findings of this study will be useful to help the government to formulate civil education policies that can rekindle national identity.

METHOD

Participants

Nine hundred and twenty-seven students from six secondary schools in mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan participated in the study. Their age ranged from 12 to 17 years. Four hundred and eighty were male (51.8 %) and 447 (48.2 %) female. Prior to the study, the participants were asked to sign consent letters that explained the research aims and procedures. They were also reminded that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without penalty.

Instrument and Procedures

A set of questionnaires was administered. National identity was measured by the National Identity Scale (Lau & Lam, 2007), an instrument that was developed based on the study of Ikhioya (1998) and the Enthusiasm multi-item scale of the multi-dimensional attitudinal scale (Waite, 2001). The questionnaire consists of ten items. One factor was extracted following principal axis factoring analysis, and all of the items were above the factor loading standard of .40. The sample questions include: "I think the 2008 Beijing Olympics will have a positive impact on national

identity”; “My awareness of the motherland, China, is aroused by knowing that Beijing will host the 2008 Olympic Games”; and “I felt proud to be Chinese when I learned that Beijing would host the 2008 Olympic Games”.

The Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) (Brewer et al., 1993) was employed to assess children’s identification with sport. This scale measures the degree to which an individual identifies him or herself as a “sportsperson”. The AIMS is designed to measure both the exclusivity and strength of this identification. The reliability alpha of the AIMS is between .87 and .93, according to two studies (Brewer, 1993; Brewer et al., 1993). It consists of ten items, each of which is a simple declarative statement that can be answered on a 5-point Likert scale. Sample items include “I consider myself to be an athlete” and “I spend more time thinking about sport than anything else”.

The Physical Activity Questionnaire for Children (PAQ-C) was designed to measure school-aged children’s general levels of participation in physical activity. It is a self-administered recall measure that is easy for children to understand (Lau, Yu, Lee, So, & Sung, 2004b). The PAQ-C includes nine questions about the level of involvement in sport during the past seven days. Significant and satisfactory convergent validity has been obtained through correlations with the moderate to vigorous sport activities measure (Simons-Morton et al., 1990) and an electronic motion sensor (Caltrac). The items ask children about the type and frequency of their involvement in sport at school, during lunch, in the evening, and during their spare time. Sample items include “Have you taken part in any of the following sporting activities during your spare time in the past seven days (last week)?” and “Mark down how often you played sport (such as ball games, dancing, swimming, etc.) on each day of last week”.

The translation back-translation method was employed to clarify the wording and linguistics of the English-version of the questionnaire. A Chinese version was then developed and proofread by school teachers and primary school students to ensure the accuracy of the translation.

Written consent from all of the participants in mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan was obtained in advance. On the day of data collection, physical education teachers in each school and/or the research assistant helped to distribute the questionnaires to the students. They were administered to the children in a group setting after school hours. The students took approximately 25 minutes to complete the questionnaires, and none of them refused to take part. Although the researchers were available to respond to any questions, no difficulties were encountered.

Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistics for all of the key variables were calculated. Pearson product moment correlations were used to examine the associations between the students' national identity, identification with sport and level of physical activity. Independent sample t-tests and one-way ANOVA were conducted to compare the differences in sex, age, place of birth/residence, identification with sport and physical activity level on national identity. Multiple regression analyses were carried out to investigate the roles played by identification with sport and physical activity level on the formation of national identity among Chinese secondary-school students.

RESULT

The reliabilities of the three scales were all satisfactory (National Identity: $\alpha = 0.96$; AIMS: $\alpha = 0.91$; PAQ-C: $\alpha = 0.84$). Descriptive statistics for the entire sample and for subgroups of the sample are presented in Table 1, and the correlation results are presented in Table 2.

Because the sample sizes of the different birthplace/residence groups were unequal and the heterogeneity of variance was observed among the groups in the three key variables, the Brown-Forsythe one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used (Brown & Forsythe, 1974). The results reveal that the place of birth/residence has a significant main effect on all of the key variables – national identity, $F(3, 592) = 315.3, p < .001$; identification with sport, $F(3, 479) = 6.16, p < .001$; and physical activity level, $F(3, 524) = 12.95, p < .001$. These results are consistent with those found by standard one-way ANOVA (assuming equal group sizes and the homogeneity of variance). Post hoc comparisons of national identity among the four subgroups, using the Games and Howell procedures (Games and Howell, 1976) to adjust for the unequal group sizes and the heterogeneity of variance, revealed that all were significant. That is, the “China-China” (C-C) group had significantly greater national identity than did the other three groups; the “China-Hong Kong” (C-HK) group had significantly greater national identity than the other two groups; and the “Hong Kong-Hong Kong” (HK-HK) group had significantly greater national identity than the “Taiwan-Taiwan” (TW-TW) group. Post hoc comparisons of identification with sport between the four subgroups revealed that only the C-C group had greater levels of identification with sport than the other three. None of the other comparisons was significant. Finally, post hoc comparisons of physical activity level revealed that the C-C group had a significantly higher level of physical activity than the other three. The HK-HK group did not differ significantly from the TW-TW group, and both of these groups had significantly higher levels of physical activity than the C-HK group.

Sequential multiple regression analysis was conducted to test the significant contributions of the different variables. Demographic variables, including age, sex and place of birth/residence were entered into the first step. As the place of birth/residence variable was a categorical variable (containing four subgroups), three dummy variables were created for the regression analysis, and the C-C subgroup was adopted as the reference group. Only place of birth/residence was found to be a significant predictor of national identity ($F(5, 776) = 135.3; p < .001$; adjusted $R^2 = 46.2\%$). Identification with sport and physical activity level were entered into the model in the second step. Only the former was found to be a significant predictor of national identity ($F(7, 774) = 107.3; p < .001$; adjusted $R^2 = 48.8\%$; refer to Table 3 for details).

Additional sequential multiple regression analysis was conducted using only the students from Hong Kong (the HK-HK group) as the sample. Similarly, age and sex were entered into the first step. Only the former was found to be a significant predictor of national identity ($F(2, 316) = 3.20; p < .05$; adjusted $R^2 = 1.4\%$) in this step. Identification with sport and physical activity level were entered into the model in the second step. Consistent with the results of the entire sample, only the former was found to be a significant predictor of national identity ($F(4, 314) = 6.13; p < .001$; adjusted $R^2 = 6.1\%$). That is, about 4.7% of the unique variance was accounted for by identification with sport.

Independent sample t-tests were conducted to compare the differences between the age and sex subgroups. The results indicate that the participants in Age Group 1 (the junior-secondary students) had significantly lower levels of national identity and identification with sport, but higher levels of physical activity than Age Group 2 (senior-secondary students), with $t(925) = -5.70, p < .01$; $t(925) = -2.21, p < .05$ and $t(780) = 3.19, p < .01$, respectively. In contrast, no significant difference was found in national identity between the sexes ($t(925) = -0.45, p > .05$). Significant differences were found only in identification with sport and physical activity level ($t(925) = 5.97, p < .01$ and $t(780) = 7.38, p < .01$), with boys having higher levels of both.

Discussion

National identity among the three regions

According to the ANOVA results, the C-C group has the greatest degree of national identity, followed by the C-HK, HK-HK and TW-TW groups in descending order. These differences in Chinese national identity among the secondary school students from mainland China ($M = 4.5$), Hong Kong ($M = 3.57$) and Taiwan ($M = 2.8$) before the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games were distinct, according to their mean

values. In previous studies of the relationship between the Olympic Games and national identity (Gill, 2005; Gordon, 2001), the Games have been recognized as an instrument of hegemonic power in generating patriotic feelings and national pride, especially for the residents of the host country. Thus, the mainland Chinese students naturally demonstrated stronger national identity than their counterparts in Hong Kong and Taiwan when Beijing was granted the right to host the XXIX Olympics. A similar phenomenon occurred during the 1990 Asian Games, when positive emotions and popular nationalism were evoked among the public (Brownell, 1995). Li and Su (2004) also stated that, in the process of new nation building, the link between sport and nationalism persists to this day. This notion is further supported by the results of our regression analysis, which found that place of birth/residence contributes most to the development of national identity.

As no previous study has investigated and compared the three regions with regard to Chinese national identity, this finding may serve as baseline data for repeated measures during and after the Beijing Games. Although there is no earlier reference for comparison, the Hok Yau Club (2005) and the Youth Online Association (2006) conducted surveys of Chinese identity among Hong Kong adolescents after China resumed sovereignty of Hong Kong in 1997. The Hok Yau Club's results indicated that these adolescents demonstrated greater Chinese national identity (75%) and a stronger degree of patriotism for China (60%) compared to a survey two years previously. The Youth Online Association found that 52% of the respondents described themselves as Chinese rather than Hongkongese, and 82% agreed that "as Chinese, they are proud to contribute to the Beijing Olympic Games." These figures can serve as a reference and as evidence of the increase in Chinese national identity among Hong Kong adolescents after 1997. Both surveys also suggested that if China realized mega sporting event victories (80%) and hosted the Olympic Games (65%), then the Chinese identity of these adolescents would be significantly enhanced. Likewise, Fung (2004) deemed that a new and unique dual Hong Kong-China national identity had emerged after 1997, with no conflict between the two, and that this trend would continue to develop.

The lowest degree of Chinese national identity was demonstrated by the Taiwanese students, which can possibly be explained by the recent development of a local Taiwanese identity. In Hong Kong, local identity (Hongkongese) and national identity (Chinese) may not be in conflict (Fung, 2004), but such a dual identity may be problematic in Taiwan due to the recent political development of indigenization. Within Taiwanese identity, there is already a strong sense of contrast with Chinese identity, particularly since the 2000 regime change from the Kuomintang to the Democratic Progressive Party, which seeks independence from China (Xu, 2006).

Xu (2006) believed that the Beijing Olympics could play a constructive role in forming a Chinese identity across the Taiwan Strait. A good example is South and North Korea competing as one nation in the 2006 Asian Games in Doha. The co-hosting of the equestrian events by Hong Kong during the 2008 Games may also further promote Chinese national identity.

Contributors to national identity

The correlation results demonstrated significant relationships between national identity and identification with sport and physical activity level in all of the students. This suggests that the higher the level of identification with sport and physical activity, the greater the level of national identity. In the regression analysis, place of birth/residence was found to be the most significant predictor of national identity, with identification with sport only contributing weakly. This finding is not congruent with previous studies in which sport has served as an important arena for the development of national identity (Bairner, 2003; Jarvie, 2007; Tuck, 2003). To explain this result, it is necessary to understand more about identification with sport, which is defined as the degree of strength and exclusivity to which an individual identifies with the athlete's role (Brewer, Van Raalte & Linder, 1993). The relationship between identification with sport and sport intention, involvement and commitment has been demonstrated by Theodorakis (1994), Anderson and Cychosz (1995), and Lau, Fox and Cheung (2006). Based on these previous positive associations, the researchers of the present study expected that a stronger identification with sport would lead to greater levels of sport participation and commitment. According to this logic, stronger national identity would also result from greater identification with sport. Obviously, this was not the case. A possible explanation could be that "sport" in general is a vague concept and thus was unable to specifically and clearly have a positive impact on national identity. Research on the political features of sport (Xu, 2006), sporting victories (Windhausen & Tsytkina, 1995), the role of the host country (Hok Yau Society, 2004; Youth Online Association, 2006), the sport media (Crolley, Hand & Jeutter, 2000; Kosebalaban, 2004; Tervo, 2002), sport as a symbolic form of war (Elias, 1996) and, finally, the difference between the Olympic Games and sport in general may all provide answers with regard to our finding and thus are worthy of further investigation. The Olympic Games may be a specific or even extreme form of sport that has only taken on a political connotation since the revival of the modern Games in the 19th century. Therefore, without considering the specific context of the modern Olympics, our results are too ambiguous to hypothesize that sport in general or an identification with sport could strengthen national identity.

Group differences among constructs

Overall, the senior students were found to have significantly higher levels of national identity than the junior students. This is inconsistent with the findings of previous studies conducted in Hong Kong. In studies by the Hok Yao Club (2005) and Lau and Lam (2007), younger children demonstrated stronger national identity than their senior counterparts due to their lower critical thinking abilities and weaker political sensitivity towards China. In the present study, the age group mixed Chinese and Taiwanese students whose perceptions of and sensitivity towards Chinese national identity could be very different. In particular, Taiwanese identity and indigenization have developed rapidly since 2000 under the governance of the Democratic Progressive Party. It is recommended that the age groups be separated by region for deeper analysis.

With regard to differences between the sexes, our finding that boys and girls are equal in their degree of national identity is consistent with previous studies. This may be because national identity is a fairly gender-neutral concept. It is also possible that the greater awareness of women's rights in the past few decades in Hong Kong, Taiwan and China may have led to more equality between the sexes with regard to different ideas, including national identity. This has been the case in Japan (Harden, 1994) and the Netherlands (Verkuyten, 1997), where studies have found that Japanese and Dutch identity is similar among male and female respondents.

Conclusions

To conclude, the students from China demonstrated the strongest national identity among the three regions before the start of the Beijing Olympiad, and the "place of birth/residence" variable contributed most to national identity. Identification with sport was found to contribute weakly, and physical activity level to make no contribution, to national identity.

Sport has long been recognized as an actor in the formation, development and maintenance of identity (Lau et al. 2006; Weiss, 2001). As one of the world's largest international sporting events, the Olympic Games can have a great impact on national identity (Tomlinson, 2006), a notion that is not disputed in the literature. However, the way in which sport influences national identity remains unclear as the concept of "sport" is vague. Therefore, the difference between sport in general and the Olympic Games in particular, as well as the different symbolic forms of sport, should both be further explored for an understanding of the mechanism between sport and national identity.

Finally, there are three stages of preparation for the Olympic Games (Ikhioya, 1998): the pre-situation, situation and post-situation stages. According to Ikhioya, at the pre-situation stage, a seasonal festival, strong national consciousness, a sense of belonging and an expectation of national success are expected, whereas the second and third stages involve very different socio-psychological patterns of national identity development among different people. To better understand the national identity changes, if any, before, during and after the Beijing Olympic Games, it is imperative that the pre-situation measures be repeated during and after the Games.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics of the key variables in whole sample and different subgroups.

	Total (N=927)	Age		Gender		Birth & Residential Place [#]			
		Group 1 (12-14) (N=589)	Group 2 (15-17) (N=338)	Male (N=480)	Female (N=447)	C-C (N=224)	HK-HK (N=370)	TW-TW (N=270)	C-HK (N=63)
National Identity	3.59 (0.90)	3.46 (0.90)	3.80** (0.85)	3.57 (0.97)	3.60 (0.82)	4.50** (0.50)	3.57 (0.66)	2.80 (0.77)	3.80 (0.54)
Sports Identity	2.93 (0.81)	2.88 (0.79)	3.00* (0.82)	3.08** (0.79)	2.77 (0.79)	3.11** (0.79)	2.85 (0.85)	2.91 (0.74)	2.78 (0.78)
Level of Physical Activity ⁺	2.34 (0.69)	2.40** (0.69)	2.24 (0.65)	2.52** (0.71)	2.16 (0.61)	2.55** (0.72)	2.26 (0.65)	2.36 (0.69)	2.03 (0.55)

Note: Means and Standard Deviations (in parentheses) were presented.

[#]TW-TW: born and live in Taiwan; HK-HK: born and live in Hong Kong; C-C: born and live in China;

C-HK: born in China and immigrate to and live in Hong Kong

⁺Due to missing data, the total sample size for the variable “level of physical activity” is 782.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Table 2 Correlations between the key variables

	NI	SI	PAQC
National Identity	1	.217**	.162**
Sports Identity		1	.580**
Level of Physical Activity ⁺			1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

TABLE 3. Hierarchical Regression Analysis Summary for National Identity

Model, Step, and Predictor Variable	B	SE B	95% CI	β
<u>Step 1</u>				
Constant*	4.372	.259	3.864,4.880	---
Age	.008	.017	-.025,.042	.014
Gender	-.010	.046	-.100,.081	-.005
Birth-residential group				
C-C	---	---	---	---
HK-HK*	-.894	.059	-1.010,-.777	-.500
TW-TW*	-1.650	.065	-1.777,-1.523	-.839
C-HK*	-.726	.101	-.924,-.527	-.208
<u>Step 2</u>				
Constant*	3.705	.291	3.133,4.277	---
Age	.006	.017	-.027,.039	.010
Gender	.061	.047	-.031,.153	-.034
Birth-residential group				
C-C	---	---	---	---
HK-HK*	-.851	.059	-.967,-.735	-.476
TW-TW*	-1.618	.064	-1.743,-1.493	-.823
C-HK*	-.659	.100	-.855,-.462	-.188
Sports Identity*	.172	.035	.103,.240	.157
Level of Physical Activity	.026	.042	-.057,.109	.020

For the step 1 model, $R^2 = 46.2$, $F(5, 776) = 135.3$, $p < .001$;

For the step 2 model, $R^2 = 48.8$, $F(7, 774) = 107.3$, $p < .001$;

Note. CI = confidence interval. ; * $p < .0001$

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