

**SCALING HIGHER GROUND
STAYING RELEVANT WHILE SERVING THE COMMUNITY**

TOPIC OF PRESENTATION : MAKING OE MORE APPEALING TO THE MINORITY

By GEMS – Muzdalifah Anuar and Nuraifa Ahmad

INTRODUCTION

As a passionate outdoor educator we believe that OE is for everyone, regardless of race, religion, gender, age, background and ability. As we carry on our activities over the years in Singapore, we realised that a big chunk of the population is missing in action. We realised that these minorities that we have somehow “forgotten”, can play a very important role in the OE industry and that their active participation in OE can be beneficial to the nation as a whole. It is therefore important to include them in OE. However there are many challenges to include these minorities. Obstacles such as faith, culture, ability and social acceptance is a few reasons why they are not included in the first place. But we believe that through more effort in understanding their needs, further planning and creativity, we can create a path for them to be a part of the OE community.

Who are the minorities?

In Singapore, the Malays (15%), Indians (7.4%) and Eurasians (1.4%) represent the minorities (It was mentioned that the minorities may differ in different countries). In terms of religion, Singapore has a relatively equal distribution with Buddhism dominating the nation¹.

Buddhist 33.9%, Muslim 14.3%, Taoist 11.3%, Catholic 7.1%, Hindu 5.2%, other Christian 11%, other 0.7%, none 16.4% (2010 est.) Jan 20, 2018

We can also identify other groups of minorities to include, such as the ageing population, the special needs groups, those in recovery from substance addiction, ex-offenders, etc. Depending on the organisation’s focus, niche or area of expertise, mission and passion, one can choose to focus on one or more minority group to work on. GEMS have particularly chosen to focus on female, Malay/ Muslims aged between 25 – 75 years old, married and/or are mothers.

Why this group?

We presented photos of a few groups of ladies and asked the audience to describe them.

Responses:

These were what the audience perceived from the photos:

Malays – due to the skin colour

Muslims – they were wearing hijabs

Housewives – from the way they are dressed

Between late 30s to 70s

Probably married with kids – from the perceived age

¹ Singapore Demographics Profile 2018

We then asked them, if they are having an OE program, would they have approached these ladies? Why?

Responses: NO

- Not appropriate activity for them
- Would have wasted the effort and marketing collaterals
- Don't think they would be interested
- Not their cup of tea

We then revealed that the ladies in the photos are marathoners, ardent swimmers, triathletes, who have summited many mountains around the globe, completed Spartan races, reached Everest Base Camp. They are rock climbers, outdoor enthusiasts who are passionate about active living. Why are they deemed not appropriate? Why are they not included? Why is OE not made available to them? Is motherhood a barrier to OE? It is the way they are dressed? Is there a need to change the perception of our educators?

We posted some questions to the audience. As a child, who makes decisions in your life? Who decides where you go to school, what subjects to take? Who chooses and buy your daily wear? Who cooks or buy the food you eat? Who decides the things you have at home, the sofa, curtains, furniture, etc.? Who controls the finances at home? The answer is unanimous. *Parents*. Imagine a situation where all parents understand and believe in the benefits of OE, this industry would not be in a state of predicament as it is. Imagine if all parents loves the outdoors, they would definitely make the outdoor a part of their family life. We asked, would they now try to sell their program to them? Of course! Parents play a vital role amongst our youths, if not, the most important role.

Unfortunately, the role of parenthood has taken a toll on many adults. The time consumed to care for our young, the added responsibilities, the pressure to educate and cultivate them into responsible adults takes away time for some parents to indulge in their own activities and passion. Some even had to sacrifice their careers and dreams for their children. These are commons responses we received from the interviews we conducted. Mothers especially, left their jobs to care for their children. They sacrifice time for themselves to meet the endless needs of their young. Many told us about how they used to be very active, how they loved spending time outdoors and their achievements in sports but their added responsibilities upon marriage and parenthood somehow took away those opportunities. This may sound like a lame excuse to some but the struggle is real for many. Parents, especially those with younger children are facing these challenges. How can we help?

As parents, we deeply understand the struggles as we are experiencing it ourselves. We are fortunate that our chosen career path in OE allows us to continue doing what we love. We made effort to include our children in our activities since young as we recognised the benefits and value of OE for all of us.

Why target the Malays?

Since 2010, the health conditions of the Malay/Muslim community in Singapore is becoming worse (Refer to Annex A). In lieu of the increasing numbers of obesity and obesity-related illness and the recent increase in kidney failure patients within the community, we decided to play our part to help the community and focus on them to address the national concern.

Why Women?

We hope to empower women to take charge of their health and fitness to secure a brighter future for themselves and their family. A healthy and positive home starts from us (women).

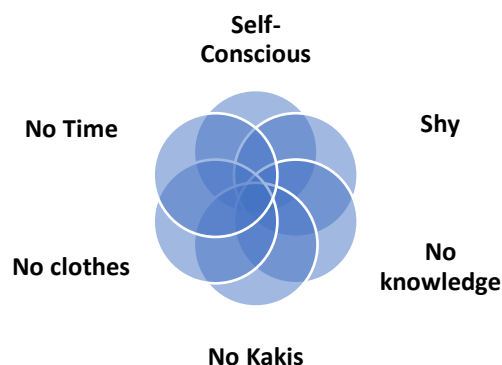
“In addition, we should focus a lot more on the women as they are the ones that plan and cook for the family” – Madam Halimah Yaacob

[Malays & Obesity: Big Trouble Special Report, The Straits Times \(Saturday, 13 March 2010\)](#)

A Brief History

YEAR	OUR JOURNEY
2000	Active in OE and sports. We noticed that there were very poor participation rate of this group in outdoor activities and we wondered why.
2004 - 2009	As we got married and have children we realised that time is very limited for us, as mothers to indulge in extra activities.
2010	<p>When we started wearing the hijab², things got a bit more complicated as we were unable to find appropriate clothes to wear for our activities. By now, we started to understand the low participation rate of our community in OE.</p> <p>We conducted a small survey (1500 women over 3 years) to ascertain the reasons why. We focused our survey on the target group initially but expanded the survey to others to understand better. The participants consisted of 50% Malay Muslim, 10% Non-Malay Muslims, 20% Chinese, 10% Indian and 10% Others. All of these were mothers who are not active (regardless weight) and/or overweight. Other than the fixed questions, we also randomly interview them to know them more personally and to understand their situation in-depth.</p> <p>Questions asked:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How often do you exercise? 2. Why? 3. What would motivate you to exercise?

Research Findings



² One of the Islamic requirement for a Muslim women is modesty. When in public or in the presence of non-related men and non-muslim women, she is to cover her whole body except her hands and face. The hijab is a covering or apparel she wears to cover her head, neck and chest. The concept of modesty/hijab actually covers more than just her clothing.

Top 6 reasons are consistent across races and religion

1. Self-Conscious. Women who think like they do not fit into the societal standards of “beautiful” have low self-esteem, they feel conscious about exercising in public. They feel like people will stare and laugh at them. Some prefer not to exercise in a mixed environment (mixed genders).
2. No Knowledge. They do not know what to do or where they can participate in activities they prefer e.g. rock climbing, kayaking, trekking, etc. They want to run but because they have no proper guidance, they applied the wrong techniques of running and got injured instead. They eventually lose hope and gave up. They are also unaware of the variety of activities available for them.
3. Too Shy. They feel shy or awkward to exercise in public either because they are conscious about themselves, of how they look or because they do not want to look stupid in front of others. e.g. They want to work out at the gym but do not know how to use the machines and too shy to ask for help.
4. No Kakis (Friends). They want to participate but do not have friends who wants to do the same and they don't have the courage to do it by themselves.
5. No Proper Clothing. Believe it or not, this is one of the biggest reason and apparently very important for women. Ten years ago, it is difficult to get affordable and fashionable plus size workout attire and those suitable for Muslim women.
6. No Time. Parenthood takes a lot of time away from their passion. Fear of commitment due to unpredictable circumstances as parents.

Creating a Safe Environment

We truly believe the importance of including this target market. Thus with the information garnered from the survey and having understood the situation, we worked out how we could address their concerns and meet their needs. We needed to create a safe environment in order to make active living and OE more appealing to them. Their participation would not only help to increase better health rate amongst the Malays, it will also harbour a positive chain effect towards their children and allow them to age well.

Addressing their concerns and meeting their needs

- Female-only activities led by female coaches/facilitators
- Private spaces or quiet public places
- Group activities
- Variety of planned activities
- Flexible timing/ participation
- Affordable, comfortable and modest active wear

Our planning revolves around the above-mentioned. We believe that if we are able to achieve these criteria, OE will be more appealing to them.

- Female Only and Private/ Quiet public places. An all ladies activity led by female coaches/ instructors/ facilitators will allow them to feel more comfortable. Muslims are not encouraged to participate in activities where there are mixed interactions of both genders, especially in an active activity. A private place or session or quiet public places enables the participants will move freely and to be themselves without fear and without being conscious or shy.

- Group Activities. Social relationships play an important role in our quality of life and our emotional health. Group activities provides the avenue for social integration where we can deliver the much needed social support amongst fellow participants. Group activities are more consistent and last longer as they motivate each other to come for the next activity. It promotes commitment and brings more joy and fun into the activities even though it can be tiring and difficult.

- Planned activities and Flexibility. We understand the struggle parents face to juggle their busy schedules It is helpful to have all activities pre-planned for the year (or up to 3-6 months). This allows parents to plan out their vacation and other appointments. We also understand their tight daily schedules therefore we allow flexibility in terms of timing and participation. They may come late or leave early to send/fetch their kids to school or for others tasks. They may bring forward the paid activity to another time and they may bring their children along or include them as well. We provide child minding services or take turns to care for the kids. It is also helpful to plan and make arrangement for prayers (if activities runs through prayer times³). It will definitely encourage more participants to join if they know that the organisers have gone out of their way to provide such services making the activity/programme more appealing. While these arrangements can be challenging, it has proven to be effective with the increasing number of participants we have.

- Modest Active Wear. Being an active hijabi ourselves helps us to understand the need for comfortable modest apparels. We want to be able to do most things while still being covered and modest to meet the requirement of Islamic Law⁴. A decade ago, it was very difficult to find such apparels. The first few sports hijab was “Capster” from Europe and the first modest swimwear was “Burqini” from Australia. While we rejoice, the products were not so affordable by the time they reached Singapore. Over the years, more companies have recognised the need and started to produce sports hijabs and modest active wear, even NIKE and ADDIDAS. Currently we are fortunate to have Malaysian and Indonesian brands namely, NASHATA, RAQTIVE and NOORE SPORTS to supply us with good quality, comfortable and modest range of active apparel. The availability of these more affordable range have encouraged more women to be active and to try out more activities like swimming, trekking and rock climbing. NASHATA for example provides apparels for all kinds of sports and activities which caters to women of all sizes and body shapes from tops to bottoms, sports hijabs, swim wear, cycling accessories, running belts and many more.

³ Muslims are required to establish prayer 5 times daily – before dawn, mid-day, late evening, at dusk and night Time.

⁴ There is no laws in Islam that prohibits women to exercise or be involved in outdoor activities. Islam encourages all to be healthy and to live an active lifestyle. Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) participated in swimming, archery, horseback riding and runs with his wife. He also encourages parents to allow their children to be involved in these sports. While there are no prohibition of participation, there are clear guidelines for Muslims to adhere while participating in sports.

What have we done?

The first ever Muslimah Running event

We decided to start off this initiative in a big way. It was very difficult because no one believed that we could pull this off. No company wanted to support or sponsor us because they could not fathom “aunties” (middle-age women) running a race. So, we did it all by ourselves.

YEAR	ACTIVITIES
2014	<p>The first WOW RUN⁵ was organised in Feb 2014 at Marina Barrage. The run garnered 800 runners from all walks of life. It was a wonderful sight to see Marina Barrage filled with aunties trying their best. For most of them, it was their first time ever completing 5km and we were awfully proud of every one of them.</p> <p>We continued to offer weekly and monthly activities for the participants to keep them on their toes and continue what they have started. Activities includes swimming, pilates, aquarobics, running clinics, group runs, trekking and high elements.</p>
2015	<p>WOW RUN 2015, over 1200 runners registered for the run. However the run was cancelled due to the haze in October 2015. About 80% of the participants were Malays. Others include Chinese, Indians, Arabs, French, Americans and Filipinos. Since then, the number of Malays participating in fitness and running events has steadily increased.</p>
2017	<p>WOW RUN 2017 was held at Punggol Waterway</p>
2018	<p>Established GEMS Movements to offer more challenging activities for the ladies.</p> <p><u>What is GEMS: Grundy + POPWOW Empower ME Series?</u></p> <p>GEMS is a series of fun and easy challenges across different elements, especially tailored to simulate life’s obstacles. GEMS hopes to EMPOWER participants with essential parallel life skills, help to identify and remove any mental obstacles, bring clarity and complete with renewed confidence in themselves and their ability to make decisions and conquer life’s challenges. Participants will learn to enhance their spiritual practice, develop a heightened self-awareness and expand their comfort zone. All they have to do is participate in the activities and collect as many Gems as possible. The more Gems they collect, the more skills they will attain and more confidence garnered. All activities will be conducted as a group to foster social support with command opportunities to develop leadership skills.</p>

⁵ Women of Wellness Run was first conceptualised by a group of active ladies who are passionate about fitness and women’s wellness in 2013. They were concerned about the state of health of Malay women in Singapore. Since 2010, there is an increased no. of obesity and obesity-related disease within the community. Findings from an independent study show that sedentary lifestyles, food culture and lack of awareness (of activities available) are amongst the most popular reasons for the cause of increase. Most women also express low self-esteem and feel shy to exercise in public even though they are keen and desperate to lead a more active lifestyle.

	<p><u>GEMS 1 Activities include:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Wall climbing @ Climb Central - Nature Walk 15km - Sea Expedition – Kayaking and Kelong Jump - Spartan Super 13km 20 Obstacles - Night Walk 35km - Heights Confidence Course – High elements, free fall and zip line - Land Expedition – Navigation and Treasure Hunt - Solo night walk - Summit Gunung Rinjani
2019	<p><u>GEMS 2 Activities include:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Wall climbing @ Climb Central - All-Girls Paintball Challenge - Spartan Sprint - Forest Force trail run 15/25km - Sea Expedition <p><u>Upcoming</u></p> <p>Jul Caving – Challenge Cubes Waterfall Abseiling – Gunung Muntahak</p> <p>Aug Spartan Super+Sprint Nature Night Walk – 25km</p> <p>Sep WOW RUN 2019</p> <p>Nov Heights Confidence</p> <p>Dec Kembara ATV- Kota Tinggi</p> <p>Ongoing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Swimming - Pilates - Kickboxing - Run Clinics - Aquarobics

CONCLUSION

OE is for everyone and everyone deserves to be included. It is important for us to identify the neglected minority groups and to understand their needs to be able to cater a suitable program for them so as to enable them to also reap the benefits from OE. We hope that through this sharing, we are able to change your perspective about the minority group that we have chosen to focus on and given you a better insight of our needs and challenges. We need more people who are willing to take up the challenge and provide more avenue for these minority groups to be included.

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From the news:

Current state of health, pose as a social issue that is detrimental to the future generation.

“The National Health Survey 2010[1] found that chronic conditions such as high blood pressure and high blood cholesterol are more prevalent in the Malay community. However, the screening rates for these chronic conditions and for cancer were lowest among the Malay ethnic group. In addition, lifestyle risk factors such as obesity and smoking were also most prevalent in the Malay community – about 1 in 4 Malays were found to be obese, and 1 in 4 were regular smokers. We can do more to adopt healthier lifestyle habits, and improve our health screening practices.”

Speech by Parliamentary Secretary for Health and Transport, Associate Professor Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim, at the launch of the “Pilot of the Malay Health Calendar” event on 22nd December 2013

Sadly, nothing much have changed since 2010.

“Malay population the most unhealthy group in Singapore Latest statistics show high incidence of kidney failure, stroke and heart Latest statistics from the national disease registry reveal that a disproportionate number of diabetics and patients with kidney failure, heart attacks and strokes come from this group. Although Malays account for 13.5 per cent of the population, they make up 24.4 per cent of people on dialysis. Once diagnosed with end-stage renal disease, patients need either a transplant or dialysis for the rest of their lives. The proportion of Malays who have had kidney transplants rose from 8.5 per cent in 2003 to 10.1 per cent last year.”

Straits Times, Dec 21, 2014

In the latest news, the Malays are now battling with an increased no of kidney failure patients. *Speaker of Parliament Halimah Yacob said Malay MPs have set up programmes to address this situation. “We need to focus more on the young, moulding healthy eating and lifestyle habits from young, rather than waiting until illness strikes before doing something,” she said.*

Straits Times, Feb 19, 2017

It was therefore pertinent to initiate an event which provided a safe environment for these women where they can feel secure and comfortable to encourage participation.