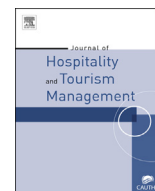




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Hosting mega events: Londoners' support of the 2012 Olympics



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ABSTRACT

Mega-event successes depend considerably on the host community's support, even if their planning and development allows little input from local residents. This study examines the use of a structural model to access key factors of residents' perceptions for the 2012 London Olympics. The findings reveal that community support is influenced by perceptions of positive and negative impacts, and of community participation. They also indicate the importance of the Olympics' perceived positive and negative impacts, whilst the willingness of support is directly and indirectly connected with the community's participation in decision making. Moreover, the study presents the effect of perceived impacts and community participation on local support through the use of a model. Finally, it discusses theoretical and managerial aspects for mega-event planning and development.

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1. Introduction

Mega events are one of the more perceptible contributors that influence tourism growth, whilst tourism is the leading growth sector in the international service trade (Fourie & Gallego, 2011). Recently, mega events (i.e., Olympic Games, World Expos) have been locomotives for tourism development in general, and collaborative tourism development in particular, within the hosting area (Lamberti, Noci, Guo, & Zhu, 2011; Lee, Kang, Long, & Reisinger, 2008). As Deccio and Baloglu (2002) suggest, large-scale events such as the Olympics have had an impact upon long-term tourism to the host country, and have improved the locals' quality of life. Still, mega-event decision making and planning involves a predominantly political planning approach, which allows little input from local residents (Roche, 1994), whilst the more democratic approach to mega-event planning is surely more difficult to implement. As a result, countries adopt it less frequently, or adopt it in name only (Haxton, 1999).

The body of literature includes several studies focussing on locals' perceptions of the impacts of mega events (Lorde, Greenidge, & Devonish, 2011; Ritchie, Shipway, & Cleeve, 2009) and residents' support according to perceived positive and negative impacts (Gursoy & Kendall, 2006; Zhou & Ap, 2009). Grant (2004) suggests that with a carefully crafted and reflexive process of tourism planning, stakeholders and residents can have a profound influence on

decision making. Still, the extent to which community participation can affect the overall support of mega events is limited. In addition, scholars view the Olympics as the world's largest peacetime event, with substantial economic, social, political and other benefits for the host nation, region and city (Toohey & Veal, 2000). Bearing in mind the scale of the Olympics in comparison with other mega events, in terms of their size, target markets, promotion, advertising in the mass media, and their overall impact on local communities (Getz, 2008), there is a need to further investigate the importance of the perceptions of locals in the decision making process.

This paper examines the extent to which community participation and perceived impacts affect the residents' support of mega events, and more specifically, of the Olympic Games. Through the creation of a structural model, it demonstrates the influential extent of community participation and the impact on community support in the London Olympics. Whilst several studies discuss local support for mega events and developments and their perceived positive and negative impacts (Gursoy & Kendall, 2006; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2011), this study's contribution is based on the correlation of community participation and impacts with the residents' support, whilst its main contribution relates to the inclusion of the community participation construct in the model. It further contributes to the literature through the investigation of residents' participation in decision making, focussing on the Olympics.

2. The proposed model

Many researchers (Gursoy, Chi, & Dyer, 2010; Lee, Kang, Long, & Reisinger, 2010; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2011) consider Social

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Exchange Theory (SET) to be one of the most widely used frameworks by researchers attempting to study community. SET is “a general sociological theory concerned with understanding the exchange of resources between individuals and groups in an interaction situation” (Ap, 1992, p. 668).

In mega events, with specific reference to the Olympics, SET has been used in several cases. Waitt (2003) has focussed on the Sydney Olympics and examined SET in order to construct an enthusiasm scale for locals. Zhou and Ap (2009), implementing SET in the Beijing Olympics, revealed a widespread sense that a negative perspective of locals for the event could be perceived as an unpatriotic act. Lately, SET has been used in order to examine the overall attitude of residents towards the relationship between perceived socio-cultural, economic, and environmental impacts for the 2012 London Olympics (Prayag, Hosany, Nuckoo, & Alders, 2013).

In tourism, SET implies that the support of locals is based on their evaluations of the costs and benefits resulting from the industry (Andereck, Valentine, Knopf, & Vogt, 2005). From a theoretical perspective, residents who view large-scale tourism projects as contributory support the process when they perceive that benefits/rewards exceed costs (Turner, 1986), but these perceptions of potential impacts depend on how people evaluate the exchange in which they are involved (Gursoy & Kendall, 2006).

Reid, Mair, and George (2004, p. 624) suggest that “tourism-dominated communities should plan their evolution more systematically, thereby taking into account residents’ attitudes and perceptions about its growth at the outset”. Other authors such as Lewis (1998) and Latkova and Vogt (2012) suggest that communities can undertake planning participation in an effort to offset some of the more negative impacts, and important strides have been made towards understanding this process. Even if SET remains one of the most acceptable frameworks with which to study community support (Gursoy & Rutherford, 2004), some question its predictive power (Nunkoo & Gursoy, 2012). As Nunkoo and Ramkissoon (2011, p. 966) suggest, “tests of the SET, as well as its application by researchers investigating residents’ attitudes have been based on an incomplete specified set of ideas, leaving out important theoretical constructs relevant to the theory”, thus it requires adequate integration in research on community responses to tourism.

Fig. 1 presents this study’s test model, having its theoretical basis in SET and building on previous research. It suggests that mega events support (with special reference to the London Olympics) is influenced by the extent of community participation and the perceived positive and negative impacts. The model further indicates that the potential costs and benefits can operate as a moderator towards community participation and final support from the locals. The model discussion works in reverse beginning with the ultimate dependent variable and ends with the exogenous variables.

2.1. Mega events and residents’ support

When a destination hosts a mega event like the Olympic Games it requires considerable investment of human, financial and physical resources from host communities (Haxton, 1999). Considering that local community support for the development of such an event is an important factor for its overall success, “a lack of coordination and cohesion within the host community can turn the planning process into a highly charged political and social exercise” (Gursoy & Kendall, 2006, p. 605). Residents who consider tourism to be valuable and believe that the benefits exceed the costs will be inclined to enter the exchange and consequently support the developmental process (Ap, 1992).

Pimbert and Pretty (1997) describe the four possible forms of community participation for further development. These are: (i)

Minimal participation that consists of information or consultation. In this case, external agents define problems and solutions, without any obligations to modify them according to people’s responses; (ii) *Participation for incentives* in which people participate by providing resources such as labour or access, in return for incentives; (iii) *Interactive participation* where people participate in a joint analysis. This leads to action plans, an enhancement of social and institutional capacity and increased local control; and (iv) *Self-mobilisation* in which local people take initiatives independent of external institutions. According to Stenseke (2009) community participation cannot be regarded as a simple solution without having any complications, since it is time-consuming, costly, and can cause conflicts in the local community, with long-term effects upon relations and the local capacity to collaborate. Moreover, the engagement of locals cannot be used as a substitute for political and administrative organisation as far as it concerns comprehensive strategies for large-scale areas (Selman, 2004).

As mentioned above, studies using SET test the relationships towards positive/negative impacts and support (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2011). These studies suggest that “positive attitudes to tourism are usually accompanied by higher level of support for the industry, whilst negative attitudes lead to lower support” (Nunkoo & Gursoy, 2012, p. 246). As French and Disher (1997) indicate, even before submitting a bid for hosting an event, organisers and decision makers should solicit the support of several community groups and promote host community involvement. All stakeholder involvement and support is critical, irrespective of their previous attitudes (Gursoy & Kendall, 2006). This explains the necessity for investors and organisers to consider the locals’ perspectives and also involve them in decision making through community participation processes.

3. Community participation in the 2012 Olympics

The 2012 Olympics in London were considered by the DCMS (2011) to be a significant opportunity to promote community engagement and participation in community-based activities and decision making, whilst five sub-themes were developed. These were, (i) Volunteering and social action, (ii) Participation in culture, (iii) Engaging children and young people, (iv) Encouraging sustainable living, and (v) Influencing attitudes towards, and perceptions of, disabled people. In October 2004, the outline of a public engagement programme was submitted in order to include in community participation processes 60,000 community groups and 5000 social enterprises operating in London (London Civic Forum, 2005). This programme was run in accordance with the Olympic progression and Legacy masterplans (Davis & Thornley, 2010). In addition, two other programmes were formulated in order to encourage people to become involved in volunteering and community activity. According to the DCMS (2011), these were the ‘Inspire Programme’ which enabled non-commercial organisations across the UK to link their events and projects to the 2012 Games, and the ‘Games Maker Programme’, which aimed to recruit up to 70,000 volunteers for the Games. Still, a reasonably tight window of participation opportunities for the development of the London Olympics was given to the local community (Davis & Thornley, 2010). During the preparation for the Olympics, the locals faced significant difficulties in achieving fair participation in regeneration planning since the proposed economic development had to be balanced with sustainable social development of neighbourhoods (Barata, Brayford, Hong, Eze-John, & Montero, 2013). A series of financial aspects and considerations have marginalised the perspectives of residents and finally their overall engagement (Imrie, Lees, & Raco, 2009), whilst regardless of what the legislation regeneration plans were saying “about following a participatory,

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