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# The impact of a mega-event on inter-organisational relationships and tie strength: Perceptions from the 2011 Rugby World Cup



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## ABSTRACT

Few studies have investigated the impact of mega-events on existing, inter-organisational relationships within regional tourism networks and how the event may change these relationships. This research explores the perceived impact of the 2011 Rugby World Cup (RWC 2011) on relationships and tie strength between Tourism Auckland (as the focal organisation) and its partner organisations. The research utilises an exploratory, qualitative case study approach. Data were collected using semi-structured pre- and post-event interviews, a formal survey and a documentation review. Emphasis was placed on comparing the intra-regional versus the inter-regional destination environment. The findings demonstrate the significant opportunities of a mega-event to strengthen existing relationships among organisations involved, and to build a valuable portfolio of both strong and weak ties. RWC 2011 positively impacted on intra-regional relationships as opposed to inter-regional relationships. A model is developed illustrating these findings. The findings can help practitioners to strategically leverage relationships, both intra- and inter-regionally. This would not only assist in attracting and delivering successful events in the future but also in creating more competitive destinations.

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## 1. Introduction

Major and mega events are high profile components of the modern sport industry. These events are not produced solely by a sport organisation. Rather, they require the collaborative efforts of diverse stakeholders and industry sectors – tourism, security, customs, emergency services, immigration, and transportation, to name a few. Recent scholarly work reflects the importance of inter-organisational relationships for delivering mega-events (e.g., Gardiner & Chalip, 2006; Getz & Andersson,

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2010). The social, environmental and economic impact of these events is debatable (Collins, Jones, & Munday, 2009; Ohmann, Jones, & Wilkes, 2006; Preuß, 2005). Mega-event impact studies have concentrated largely on economic outcomes (Sallent, Palau, & Guia, 2011) and have rarely considered the impact on inter-organisational relationships within the host community. Chalip (2006, p. 122) noted, “we know very little about how relationships are forged or strengthened via events.”

In an era when the benefits of hosting mega-events are under increasing scrutiny, there is a need to better understand whether and how mega-events enhance inter-organisational relationships within the host community. In the absence of such an understanding, a potentially positive impact/legacy may at worst be ignored, or at best be undervalued or misunderstood. This research can potentially shift the mega-event economic debate from a focus on the direct expenditure of tourists to a longer term view of enhanced inter-organisational efficiencies.

The aim of the current study was to analyse the development of relationships; more specifically, strong and weak ties in a destination marketing and mega-event context. To do so, we investigated the 2011 Rugby World Cup (RWC 2011) and its perceived impact on relationships and tie strength between Tourism Auckland (as focal organisation) and other public and private sector organisations within two distinct networks. The intra-regional network (AKL network) consisted of organisations from the Auckland region (e.g., Auckland Council, Auckland Transport). The inter-regional network (RTO network) was comprised of regional tourism organisations (RTOs) throughout New Zealand (NZ). The underlying research question was: *What is the perceived impact of RWC 2011 on relationships and tie strength of organisations within the two networks?*

This study takes a relational approach from network theory (Pavlovich, 2003; Uzzi, 1997), and examines if and how weak and strong ties were impacted by RWC 2011. Few studies examine tie strength in the tourism and events context. March and Wilkinson (2009) suggested that “a comparative study of the impact of strong and weak interorganisational ties on the behaviour and performance of tourism firms in regional destinations would ... provide insights for the effective management of destinations” (p. 461).

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Inter-organisational relations

Studies on inter-organisational relations (IORs) have received significant scholarly attention (e.g., Misener & Doherty, 2013, 2014; Shaw & Allen, 2006; Ziakas & Costa, 2011). Babiak (2007) defined an IOR as “a voluntary, close, long term, planned strategic action between two or more organisations with the objective of serving mutually beneficial purposes in a problem domain” (p. 339). The study of IORs primarily focuses on how organisations interact with their environment (Dickson, Arnold, & Chalip, 2005). Due to the dynamic and uncertain nature of organisational environments, organisations establish IORs to minimise uncertainty, access new markets, share financial risk, or gain knowledge, skills, and expertise that are not available internally (Babiak, 2007). The literature on IOR formation is extensive, but typically utilises one of three levels of analysis: the organisational level, the inter-organisational dyad level, or the inter-organisational network level (Wang & Xiang, 2007). Organisational analysis examines attributes of organisations that might influence an organisation’s behaviour with other organisations, whereas inter-organisational approaches analyse the relationships between two organisations. The network level of analysis focuses on interdependencies amongst the many organisations within a network (Selin & Beason, 1991) and is used for the present research.

### 2.2. Social network analysis

Social network analysis investigates how organisations coordinate and integrate their activities with the emphasis on network structures and governance (Provan & Milward, 1995). The most distinctive feature of social network analysis is its focus on relationship patterns among social entities (Galaskiewicz & Wasserman, 1994). Researchers assume that actors are embedded in a web of relationships, and so analysis of their behaviour must consider the relational context. Hence, the network of linkages between organisations helps to explain how social structure can affect economic action (Granovetter, 1985). The value of social network analysis is well recognised in the tourism literature (e.g., Scott & Cooper, 2007; Timur & Getz, 2008). The tourism industry is a networked industry characterised by loose clusters of organisations within a destination that collaborate and compete in a dynamic environment (Scott, Baggio, & Cooper, 2008). Network analysis is a logical tool for researchers wanting to understand the governance of complex stakeholder relationships within the tourism industry (Scott & Cooper, 2007). It can provide insights into how a tourism destination network can become more efficient (e.g., by strengthening links, reducing barriers, encouraging information sharing), and hence more competitive (Pavlovich, 2003).

### 2.3. Tie strength and the value of strong and weak ties

The key social network constructs used in this research are: (strong and weak) ties, focal actor, and tie strength. A network consists of nodes, and each node represents an actor. An actor can be an individual, a work unit or an organisation (Brass, Galaskiewicz, Greve, & Tsai, 2004). The links or connections between the actors are called *ties*. The *focal actor* refers to a specific actor in the focus of all network activity (van den Bulte & Wuyts, 2007).

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