



Events as community function of shopping centers: A case study of Hong Kong

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Events
Shopping centers
Community function
Community participation

ABSTRACT

Events are commonly used for raising people's interests in using urban space for social interaction. Although previous studies have paid much attention to mega events and civic events, events held by profit-making organizations such as shopping centers have not been examined yet. More importantly, at places with shortage in public spaces, the events being held in shopping centers may have the ability in helping community development. This study aims at categorizing and comparing the characteristics of different events in shopping centers of Hong Kong. Events data is collected from Facebook and manipulated under three criteria: duration, accessibility and community. The results show that events of shopping centers can realize community functions such as increased social interaction and strengthen social bonds to a certain degree. Also, they can benefit the community through different levels of community participation. Based on the findings, an extended POSPD scheme is considered to increase the public space in Hong Kong since shopping center is capable of accommodating civic events. Furthermore, the extended POSPD requires a cooperation of government, local community and shopping center developer, which will stimulate community development in the long run.

1. Introduction

Events have been a strategical instrument for stimulating public utilization of urban space. When spaces provide the containers for human activities, events trigger intensified social interactions over a certain period. Traditional festivals are the most common events for social activities in many culture systems, as they can arouse social identity and strengthen social bonds for local people (Falassi, 1987; Gotham, 2005). Modern festivals are also widely used for urban regenerations and urban image reconstruction (Eizenberg & Cohen, 2015). Such events cover art (Quinn, 2003, 2005), architecture and sports (de Oliveira, 2011; Jarvie, 2003; Maiello & Pasquinelli, 2015; Misener & Mason, 2006; Schulenkorf, 2012; Smith, 2014), etc. The ability of these mega-events to attract tourists can help the host cities to gain advantages in global competition (Richards & Palmer, 2010; Wu, Li, & Lin, 2016).

An increasing focus on events of smaller scale emphasizes the function of events in community development. Events such as “community festivals, public meetings, recreational activities and workshops” (Sampson, 2012, 180; Citroni, 2015) are believed to have the ability to enhance local residents' participation in the process of decision-making in a community (Citroni, 2015; Misener, 2015; Reid, 2007;

Rota & Salone, 2014; Schulenkorf, 2012). Community affairs such as place making and sport competitions bring together individuals and collective networks at local level, which is supportive of diverse communications during the ongoing events. Thus, local people are not only participants in a specific event, but also the decision makers of the events. The full participation gives the participants a sense of belonging, which confirms identity with the community.

Nevertheless, small-scale events mentioned above are mainly held by local residents or nonprofit organizations spontaneously (Citroni, 2015). The community's role in events held by profit-making organizations such as shopping centers is rarely recognized. Although perceptions of shopping centers differ in private and public sector, both tend to overlook events being held in shopping centers. The private sector – especially the developers – is more interested in issues that can improve shopping center performance (Borgers, Brouwer, Kunen, Jessurun, & Janssen, 2010; Chebat, Michon, Haj-Salem, & Oliveira, 2014), such as tenant mix and consumers' shopping behaviors. The public sector, which prioritizes social equity and other democratic issues, hardly accepts the idea that shopping centers can benefit the public. Some argue that places like shopping center privatize the public space and impede public utilization (Kohn, 2004; Low, 2006). Also, commercialization of space is eroding public sphere, resulting in

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2017.08.017>

Received 19 October 2016; Received in revised form 16 August 2017; Accepted 17 August 2017

Available online 30 August 2017

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weakened democracy (Irazábal, 2008; Voyce, 2006). These arguments are based on the fact that political activities such as protests are not allowed in such places. Thus, shopping centers cannot and should not take the place of streets and squares (Li, 2002). However, Chiodelli and Moroni (2015) argue that these problems should not be attributed to shopping centers since malls are created at places which were originally privately owned. Private space with open access to majority of people is defined as “quasi-public space” to avoid dualistic contradiction between public and private space in recent studies (Button, 2003; Li, 2002). Although they cannot serve a political purpose, shopping centers and other quasi-public spaces are favored by local residents as important social places (Vanderbeck & Johnson, 2000; Pyry, 2016; Mantey, 2017).

Even so, these debates have put major focus on space rather than events, without considering shopping center's own efforts in engaging in local people's community life. As Staeheli and Mitchell (2006) pointed out, shopping centers are intended to “create ‘community’ rather than ‘public’”, the “community” created by shopping center may be not attractive to local people at places with enough public place. However, at some places where public space are far less sufficient, the community characteristic of shopping center and the events it provides can be an positive option in community development.

This article studies the characteristics of events being held in shopping centers of Hong Kong. Two major questions need to be addressed in this context:

1. Whether events are being used as a strategy to realize community function by shopping centers? In the context of this study, community function refers to non-retail functions.
2. How can shopping centers benefit the community by providing a variety of events?

2. Events, community and community participation

Community, usually in the neighborhood sense, is an important geographical unit in urban areas (Gusfield, 1975). It includes a variety of functions, either tangible or intangible. The tangible functions are services which are spatially occupied, such as post office, government services and public libraries. The intangible functions are at least improved social interactions in the community and the accumulation of social capital. As a result, community is not only a place for residing people but also an assembly of social and cultural bonds of the neighborhood (Bender, 1982; Hunter, 1975; McShane, 2006).

The human relationship embedded in social networks of community is the important social capital of local residents (Newton, 1997; Putnam, 1995; Rostila, 2010). To achieve the intangible community function of increasing social capital, the idea of community development emerged as both the goal and the strategy in community-related studies (Kilpatrick, Field, & Falk, 2003; McClenaghan, 2000). As the ultimate goal, community development addresses smaller goals such as improvement of economic and social solidarity, and also the improvement of life quality of local people (Bhattacharyya, 2004). The strategy of community development plays the role of an agency in achieving the above-mentioned goals.

Community participation is part of community development strategy (Onyx & Leonard, 2010; Schulenkorf, 2012). Through intensive participation in community affairs, the community-based social network of the participants can be strengthened. Also, different affairs give opportunities to meet different people, which enlarges participants social network as well. As Lawson (2005) has mentioned, community participation can improve the wellbeing of individuals and groups from different aspects, such as better understanding of themselves and the environment, formation of community identity and social equity, etc.

Community participation in events includes different levels of participation. For instance, tourism management treats community participation as involvement of different stakeholders in decision-making

process (Lamberti, Noci, Guo, & Zhu, 2011; Schulenkorf, 2012; Ziakas, 2016). Thus, the economic, social and cultural benefits can be shared by host city and the local community (Misener & Mason, 2006). Especially in mega-events such as Olympics and Expo, the “top-down” planning procedure disturbs host communities in a wide range of ways and over a long period of time (Clark, Kearns, & Cleland, 2016; Smith, 2014). Only proactive involvement of local residents in negotiation can prevent the community from disintegration.

Smaller events organized by non-government organizations such as community-based organizations, membership organizations (Townsend, 1999) also involve community participation in decision making. Especially events organized by community-based organizations mainly rely on resources of the local community. As a result, local residents have to join face-to-face decision-making process for allocating resources or getting trained in volunteer programs (Citroni, 2015; Taks, Green, Misener, & Chalip, 2014).

A narrower sense of community participation exists in some circumstances where local residents do not necessarily take part in the decision-making process at pre-events stage, but they do participate in the event. For instance, some small-medium scale sports events are designed to attract the community to participate in sports (Misener, 2015; Taks et al., 2014). The focus of such events is to attract usual participants such as disabled people to engage in the community life by providing appropriate events. Thus, the accessibility of events for local residents can be improved.

As discussed above, events is a practical instrument for realizing the intangible functions of community. There is no doubt that events can stimulate social interactions of different scales and increase social capital within the community. Furthermore, a well-designed strategic framework of event process is a necessity for maximizing its function in creating social networks and transferring short term social outcomes into long term social capital (Misener & Mason, 2006; Schulenkorf, 2012; Ziakas, 2016). Thus, the goal of community development can be achieved during the ongoing events.

Also, two keywords are found to be important when investigating the characteristics of events in shopping centers: community and participation. Community refers to people, those who are participating in the events. Participation is in its narrower sense, meaning accessibility. It is because participants are less likely to be involved in the decision-making process in shopping center organized events. Thus, it is more important to consider how many people participate in the events rather than how many are involved in decision-making.

In the following, the paper first introduces the background of the study and the methodology, and then the criteria for assessing events of shopping center are discussed. Based on the criteria, the events are divided into eight different categories for further analysis. The fifth section presents the analysis results with discussion, with the proposed research questions being addressed. The last section gives the conclusion and policy implications.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Backgrounds of study area

This study bases on the situation in Hong Kong. The backgrounds of Hong Kong are discussed in this session. The first is the land grand policy in Hong Kong. From this part, we try to discuss the effort and the difficulty of Hong Kong government in providing sufficient public place for local residents. The second is how shopping centers use events as an effective way in attracting consumers.

3.1.1. Land grand policy and public place provision

Hong Kong is a city with high population density.¹ This is not only

¹ According to the data from Census and Statistical Department of Hong Kong, the total

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