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Sport Management Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/smr

Managing impact: Leveraging sacred spaces and community celebration to maximize social capital at a sport-for-development event

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 2 July 2013

Received in revised form 30 April 2014

Accepted 5 May 2014

Available online 19 July 2014

Keywords:

Sport-for-development

Social leverage

Social capital

Sport events

Social utility

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this investigation was to understand how a sport-for-development event can be leveraged socially, and if event organizers created the best possible experiences for homeless participants through the creation of *communitas* and thus, social capital. We also examined the mechanisms through which liminality is cultivated and *communitas* can emerge, along with the means for leveraging liminality. It was found that liminality was cultivated and *communitas* materialized at this SFD event, as event organizers employed various processes to foster a liminoid space and develop community. Additional tactics were employed to leverage liminality and associated *communitas* for social capital development. We contribute to the research literature on event leveraging and also make important contributions to theory development. Implications are drawn forth for theory, practice, and future research.

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1. Introduction

With the involvement of key stakeholders such as media companies and corporate sponsors, large-scale sport events continue to serve as money-making vehicles in the forms of advertising revenue – for media companies – and opportunities for branding and the sale of products – for corporate sponsors. Tourism stakeholders also use large-scale sport events for destination marketing purposes. Live events that feature professional sports such as soccer, football (National Football League), basketball, hockey, and baseball and the collegiate contests of basketball and American football continue to command large broadcast fees from competing media companies willing to sign long-term contracts. City and community stakeholders campaign for large-scale “mega” events, such as the Federation Internationale de Football Association World Cup and the Olympic Games, to be held in their regions, citing the economic impact these events can have in jobs created,

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taxes collected, and protracted spending in the region by businesses and individuals who are associated with managing the events. Rapid growth of sport events worldwide has been fueled by the belief in these economic incentives (Crompton, 1999; Mules & Faulkner, 1996).

The staging of a large-scale event is thought to be lucrative and capable of raising the economic profile of a geographic region. But, sporting environments – largely composed of events – are also considered places where communities are formed given the common interest in competing in a sport (Schimmel, 2003). Thus, O'Brien and Chalip (2007) argued sport events could not only benefit communities economically but also make an impact on individual and collective social agendas. Research has shown that sport events can improve efficacy, create social capital and, where poverty is implicated, promote social and economic justice and well-being (Nicholson & Hoye, 2008; Skinner, Zakus, & Cowell, 2008). Sport events allow participants to develop contacts, friendships, and networks (O'Brien, 2007; Schulenkorf, 2010) and serve as boosters for social inclusion and social identity (Kidd, 2008).

More focus in the research literature has been devoted to issues surrounding the social impacts sport events can bring to individuals (participants, volunteers, and attendees) and communities (Chalip, 2006; Filo, Funk, & O'Brien, 2009; Higgins & Lauzon, 2003; O'Brien & Chalip, 2007) along with how benefits can be derived for host communities during the planning stages of an event (Chalip, 2004, 2006; Schulenkorf & Edwards, 2012). This strategic planning by event stakeholders that seeks to maximize benefits for host communities is known as “leverage.” Leverage refers to “activities which need to be undertaken around the event itself . . . which seek to maximize the long-term benefits from events” (Chalip, 2004, p. 228). This leveraging perspective represents a more analytical approach to event management. Instead of simply evaluating the effectiveness of an event “after the fact,” a leveraging approach views the desired outcomes for host communities before an event occurs, and how these host communities can derive sustainable benefits from sport events, whether from enhanced tourism, business, or social aspects (O'Brien & Chalip, 2007). Given the scant amount of literature on social benefits of events, particularly with underrepresented or marginalized groups, this paper focuses on social benefits planned for and derived from a sport-for-development (SFD) event staged for homeless athletes. In doing so, we seek to answer Chalip's (2004, 2006) call for a more analytical approach to assessing how events are conceived, strategically planned, and managed to maximize social impacts for participants and host communities.

2. Sport-for-development (SFD) events

SFD is the use of sport to exert a positive influence on public health, the socialization of children, youth and adults, the social inclusion of the disadvantaged, the economic development of regions and states, and on fostering intercultural exchange and peace (Schwery, 2003). In the early 2000s, the United Nations (UN) declared that sport could be utilized at the individual, community, national, and global levels as a mechanism to achieve solutions to social problems, such as gender inequality, poverty, lack of access to education, and battling epidemic diseases (Beutler, 2008). Once this declaration was made and the UN incorporated SFD as part of its Millennium Development Goals, more encouragement was given to creating SFD programs and special events and, a decade later, these SFD initiatives can be seen worldwide. Peace One Day, an international campaign that seeks a global truce every year on September 21, recently partnered with the Sports and Leadership Training (SALT) Academy to create a soccer festival. The event brought together about 100 street children from different poor communities in Battambang, Cambodia. Not only did children from different communities play soccer together to create a feeling of togetherness, but the event was also used as a platform to teach the children – many of whom lived in communities marked by gang violence – about conflict resolution (Bagel, 2012). SFD initiatives also celebrate the inclusion of teenage females, a group that is marginalized in many parts of the world. For instance, Boxgirls International, which operates in Berlin, Cape Town, South Africa, and Nairobi, Kenya, uses boxing to serve as a tool for building girls' strength and resilience (Bignell, 2012). SFD events seek to engage communities through linking sport with social problems that have marginalized groups in society. Similarly, Street Soccer USA (SSUSA) attempts to use sport to mitigate the effects of homelessness.

3. Street Soccer USA (SSUSA) Cup

SSUSA, founded in 2005, forms partnerships with other community social service providers to help affect positive life changes among its homeless participants in 20 U.S. cities. Homeless individuals, both men and women, play on soccer teams coached by volunteers and participate in local soccer leagues in each city. SSUSA has three goals: (a) build community and trust through sports, transforming the context within which homeless individuals live from one of isolation, abuse, and marginalization, to one of community, purpose, and achievement; (b) require participants to set 3-, 6-, and 12-month life goals; and (c) empower individuals by marrying clinical services to sport programming and providing access to educational and employment opportunities (SSUSA, n.d.).

Like many SFD organizations, SSUSA takes advantage of current community structures to recruit athletes for its initiatives. The organization partners with local social service providers in each city to administer its programming. Similar to many non-profit organizations, volunteers are at the heart of the SSUSA workforce. SSUSA relies on a small staff of four full-time employees, with the remainder of administrative and coaching duties performed by volunteers. Volunteers perform a wide range of responsibilities, such as finding and encouraging players to participate so new teams can be started, coaching, fundraising, monitoring the goals of participants on and off the field, and traveling with the team to the annual SSUSA Cup.

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