The Temporal Impact of Olympic Games Hosting on Residents’ Health Related Behaviors: The Cases of Atlanta, Sydney, Athens, and Beijing

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The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has acknowledged the importance of long term legacy planning and thus changes in the lives of local residents to achieve a better quality of life (International Olympic Committee, 2003, 2007). If the Olympic Games have impacted economic, socio-cultural and environmental “structures” (Preuss, 2007), it is not evident in the literature whether behavioral outcomes related to these legacy program objectives change among host residents over time. More recently, the focus of the catalytic nature of mega events such as the Olympic Games is on intangible impacts such as social or health related outcomes (Carey, Mason, & Misener, 2011; Smith & Fox, 2007; VanWynsbergh, Kwan, & Van Luijk, 2011; Zhou & Ap, 2009). Our approach here is exploratory in the sense that we are looking for a pattern of behaviors to emerge from the data, in order to see whether more proximal past events create significant changes in behaviors than distant past events, a proposition based on Temporal Construal Theory (Trope & Liberman, 2003). Thus the hypothesis is that Beijing, having recently hosted the Olympic Games, will have significantly higher mean scores in behaviors among residents than more distant past host cities, namely Athens, Sydney, and Atlanta.

To test the hypothesis of this study, data were collected from convenience samples of residents from four Olympic Games host cities: Atlanta, Sydney, Athens and Beijing. Convenience samples of approximately 200 people from each city were chosen due to budget limitations. Three companies were employed by the researchers to collect data from the residents of the four host cities. For Atlanta and Sydney, web surveys were used and sent to respondents that were part of the company’s research panel. For Athens and Beijing, phone interviews from a random sample and random mall intercepts were used respectively. All respondents answered questions on statements about seven behavioural outcomes that were anchored on a five point scale with 1=totally disagree and 5=totally agree [e.g., As a result of my city having hosted the Olympic Games…. a) Now I support healthy living practices, b) I now exercise more, c) Now I eat healthier, d) Now I support sport development for youth, e) I have changed my overall lifestyle toward a healthier lifestyle, f) I actively participate in more sport events as an athlete (amateur or professional)]. MANCOVA was used to test the hypothesis of this study utilizing a covariate of age to control for any influence of age on health behaviours as suggested in the physical activity literature (Caspersen, Pereira, & Curran, 2000). Pairwise comparisons were requested to estimate the differences among the four cities if the multivariate statistics were significant at p<.05.

The results revealed that the covariate of age was significant at p<.05 for those variables that asked respondents their eating habits and active physical involvement (items b, c, e, f). The significant differences found between the four cities supported the hypothesis of temporal influence and proximity of the event having a higher impact on behaviours. More specifically, and controlling for age, Beijing residents had significantly higher mean scores in all behavioural outcomes than the other three cities. Atlanta residents had significantly higher mean scores in variable e from the Athens residents, but lower mean score compared to the Beijing residents. Sydney residents had significantly higher mean scores than Athens in all variables except for d, and f. Athens residents had significantly lower mean scores compared to Sydney and Beijing in items a and b, and had significantly lower mean scores from all cities in items c and e. Beijing residents had significantly higher mean scores from each host city in all variables.

The data support that although there seems to be some lasting health behaviour change impacts, the best time to harvest the results, especially the exercise and healthy living behavioural changes from the Games, is approximately two years after the event. Health related legacies in a host community due to mega event ‘interventions’ has been found to benefit the community overall (Smith & Fox, 2007). Given the interest of the IOC for long term sustainability of the Games’ legacies, it seems that more efforts and planning has to be focused on the longer term application and promotion of legacy programs. Such approach can sustain positive health behavioural outcomes created from the short-term hype of the event with the aim to expand their adoption long term.
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