Stakeholders’ Perceptions of Perceived Risk and Awareness of Event Safety and Venue Security: The Impact of the Boston Marathon Bombing

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As Kayyem (2013) noted, the Boston Marathon was not only a high profile event with a global audience, it was a spectator event without doors. Thus, it was no surprise the marathon was an attractive target for an individual (or group) with an agenda or no agenda at all. “Thousands of people working safety and security cannot stop one person or a few people [posing a threat] toward the crowded finish line” (Kayyem, 2013, p.2). Therefore, event organizers must protect against all-hazards and according to Cieslak (2011), there are nine categories of event risk: bomb threats, hooliganism, crowd disorder, natural disasters, medical emergencies, health hazards, alcohol control issues, cyber security incidents and an active shooter. As a result, Cieslak and Hall (2013) recommend event managers establish a continuous, cyclical process of risk management to include: 1) risk assessment, 2) strategic implementation, 3) training of personnel, 4) incident rehearsal, and 5) system auditing.

Traditionally, venue managers have been more reactive than proactive establishing and managing event risk. Crisis management is the reactive process of managing risk as it unfolds while risk management is the “proactive process that involves assessing all possible risks to the event and its stakeholders by strategically anticipating, preventing, minimizing, and planning responses to eliminate or mitigate those identified risks” (Leopkey & Parent, 2009, p.199). It has been recommended this process include perspectives of internal and external stakeholders; however, the role of the media and perceptions of participatory stakeholders (e.g., spectators, athletes and employees) has yet to be fully understood (Leopkey & Parent, 2009). Because large-scale sporting events are at-risk, due to their high-profile and extensive media coverage, incidents such as the Boston Marathon bombing could have a negative impact on stakeholders’ perceptions of the perceived risk and awareness of event safety and venue security.

The broad media coverage is a factor in the increased effectiveness of sport-related terrorism and awareness to dangers associated with sport participation (Toohey & Taylor, 2008). A total of 10 out of 13 stakeholder groups identified the media (e.g., Internet, broadcast and print) as a risk management issue that complicates venue security, spectator safety and event public relations (Leopkey & Parent, 2009). Thus, the media has an important role reporting on sport-related issues, especially stories that influence stakeholders’ perceptions of risk and level of awareness. Previous research has established the following: 1) spectators were less likely to attend a major sporting event based on the probability of sport-related terrorism occurring (Phillips, Cooper, Phillips & Cunningham, 2007); 2) female spectators reported negative perceptions of risk and higher levels of fear than male spectators (Taylor & Toohey, 2007); 3) event staff reported increased levels of stress, even absenteeism, related to perceived risk of sport-related terrorism (Appelbaum, Adeland & Harris, 2005); and 4) prior to the Boston Marathon bombing, stakeholders reported the type of media report significantly influenced their perceptions of risk and awareness of safety and security (Cieslak, Hall & Giardino, 2010). Therefore, the study hypotheses are:

H1: Type of media report (security related vs. non-security related) will influence stakeholders’ level of perceived risk and event safety and venue security awareness.

H2: There will be an interaction between the type of media report (security related vs. non-security related) and sex of the stakeholder (male vs. female) on the level of perceived risk and event safety and venue security awareness.

H3: There will be an interaction between the type of media report (security related vs. non-security related) and type of involvement (athlete vs. spectator vs. employee) on the level of perceived risk and event safety and venue security awareness.

H4: There will be a significant difference between pre- and post-Boston Marathon bombing stakeholders’ scores (perceived risk, event safety and venue security awareness).
To test these hypotheses, a quasi-experimental study is being conducted. To date, 119 participants have been randomly assigned to an experimental group (n=61) and control group (n=58). For this study, two Boston Globe newspaper articles served as the manipulated, independent variable. In specific, the article ‘A spectator event with no doors’ reported the initial facts about the Boston Marathon bombing. While the article ‘Fenway Park to host college hockey again’ reported details about the venue hosting four collegiate ice hockey matches. The design of the newspaper (e.g., text size, photographs, advertising) is similar for both articles; however, the content of the media report differs. In addition, there was an element of visual stimulus to enhance the content of the report to include two color photographs for the security related article and one color photograph for the non-security related article.

Data collection procedures involved randomly assigning participants a newspaper article. After receiving 10 minutes to read the article, participants were given 10 minutes to complete a 23-item questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of 7-items to rate spectators’ perceived risk of sport-related terrorism (PRT; Baker, Connaughton, Zhang, & Spengler, 2007) and 12 items to measure spectators’ awareness of event safety (ESA) and venue security (VSA; Hall, Marciani, Phillips, & Cunningham, 2009). An additional four items collected demographic data. To test the first hypothesis, a MANOVA was used to examine the effects of the media report (security related vs. non-security related) as the independent variable on participants’ perceptions of perceived risk and safety and security awareness as the dependent variables. To test the 2nd, 3rd and 4th hypotheses, additional analysis of variances were calculated to compare the interaction between the independent variables and dependent variables of interest.

The preliminary analyses indicate the type of media report does impact spectators’ perceived threat of sport-related terrorism and awareness of stadium safety and security measures. The mean scores were significantly higher for the experimental group (PRT = 8.90; ESA = 3.14; VSA = 8.62) than for the control group (PRT = 4.41; ESA = 0.48; VSA = 5.07). However, the preliminary analyses indicate no significant difference in perceived risk and safety and security awareness scores between: 1) male and female spectators, 2) spectators, athletes and employees, and 3) pre- and post-Boston Marathon bombing stakeholders. The final results of the study will be further discussed in addition to managerial and public relations strategies for sport managers and marketers, respectively.