Cheers and Queers: Leveraging Sport Events for LGBTQ Communities

Kyle Rich, Western University
Laura Misener (Advisor), Western University

Socio-cultural Saturday, June 4, 2016 Abstract 2016-311 2:20 PM 20-minute oral presentation (including questions) (Forum West 1)

Background

There is a growing notion that sport events and their subsidiary activities offer the opportunity to tap into spaces of liminality for social change (Chalip, 2006). Liminality, or the feeling of extraordinary or sacredness generated from an event, is said to have the ability to temporarily suspend social hierarchies, thus presenting opportunities for political, cultural, or social change (Horvath, Thomassen, & Wydra, 2009). As such, when communitas, or the feeling of communal social comraderie is fostered in these liminal spaces, a safe, if cordial, space for the consideration of social issues can be strategically created (O’Brien & Chalip, 2007). This is particularly important when planning for a large-scale sport event, where local groups’ interests are not always recognized, and can even further marginalize disparaged communities (Spaaij & Schulenkorf, 2014). Leveraging strategies can be categorized as event-themed, whereby initiatives run parallel to the event, but are not officially sanctioned, or event-led, where initiatives are driven by and affiliated with the event (Smith & Fox, 2007). While the dominant discourse of managing large-scale sport events focuses on the organizing committee, their partners, and internal processes, limited research exists to capture non-host organizations’ social leveraging processes and strategies. Subsequently, our understanding of the ways in which marginalized communities/groups can utilize liminal spaces created by major sport events remains underdeveloped, and thus the potential for sport events to engender social change remains poorly theorized.

Context

In Canada, the rights of LGBTQ-identified persons remains a prominent socio-political issue. As topics such as marriage equality (legalized in 2005) and requirements for changing sex designations on citizenship certificates (amended in 2015) continuously garner media attention, community level initiatives are also becoming prominent as tools for engendering social change. Within this socio-political context, the PridehouseTO initiative “is a comprehensive, province-wide engagement and activation strategy for the lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer (LGBTQ) communities in Ontario during and leading up to the Toronto 2015 Pan Am/Parapan Am Games” (PridehouseTO, 2015a, para. 1.). Effectively, this initiative is an attempt to leverage the Games for broader social change driven by the agenda of the LGBTQ community.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is twofold. Firstly, we provide an in depth exploration of the leveraging strategies utilized by PridehouseTO to engender social change in and through sport for LGBTQ communities in Ontario. Based on these explorations, we will also identify critical points of interest that should be interrogated to further our understanding of how large-scale sport events can be leveraged for social change in various contexts.

Method

In this paper, we utilize a case study methodology to explore the event leveraging strategies employed by PridehouseTO. Data were collected through content analysis of websites, policy documents, and resources generated from the initiative, as well as participant observation of PridehouseTO trainings, educational sessions, and celebratory spaces. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify higher order themes that emerged from the multiple data sources.

Results

The PridehouseTO strategic approach included five “projects” identified as; Pridehouse Pavillion, Education, Arts & Culture, Ambassadors, and PridehouseTO Celebrates! (PridehouseTO, 2015b). Based on the activities undertaken, we identified the themes of Ally-ship and Queering Sport Spaces. These themes are identified using “queer” language
to better reflect the community they serve. Further, these strategies should not be considered in a vacuum but rather as fluid themes that intersect and work together.

Ally-ship (Partnerships). The very structure of PridehouseTO is an extensive partnership initiative between ally organizations directly involved in the LGBTQ community. These partnerships are characterized by exchanges of resources and access across labour, education, social services, sport, business, and government organizations. For example, the Pridehouse That Kids Built is an educational resource developed with and circulated through the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario. The physical outcomes of the tool kit were then collected and displayed in Toronto during the Games as an art installation.

Queering Sport Spaces (Liminality). PridehouseTO projects generated many initiatives to strategically remove barriers and increase the visibility of LGBTQ communities, particularly in sport contexts. Leading up to the Games, workshops, events, and art work were used to generate discussions and educate participants. During the Games, the pavilion provided a space to visit, watch sports, find information, and engage in meaningful discussions. Further, safer spaces to try a variety of sports and connect with community organizations were provided as part of a celebration zone with live viewings on big screens, family friendly play areas, and nightly performances by musicians, dancers, DJs, and drag queens from across the Americas.

Discussion and Future Directions

The PridehouseTO initiative was a strategic endeavour intended to capitalize on the liminal space created by the event to engender social change. These strategies engaged partners from a variety of sectors in the task of advancing the agenda of LGBTQ inclusion in sport, which was apparently successful in fostering discussions, engaging community organizations, increasing visibility, and building capacity within Toronto and across the province. However, as a new, event-led entity, officially recognized on the TO2015 cultural program but self-governing and not politically bound to the organizing committee, PridehouseTO theoretically troubles the event-themed-event-led dichotomy (Smith & Fox, 2007). Indeed, the approach of the PridehouseTO initiative, with many elements characteristic of both categories, suggests that perhaps manipulation and creation of new forms of leveraging strategies that lie along a continuum of connection and disconnection to the games, aligned with the assets and context of the community may also be effective.

While our investigation of this initiative begins to explore the use of liminal spaces, more systematic empirical investigation is needed. Like many Games-related initiatives, the PridehouseTO organization was dissolved quickly following the Games. Therefore, noticeably absent from the initiative is a strategic evaluation or tracking of outcomes and/or continued leveraging post-event. Additionally, the implications of power in liminal spaces of diverse social, political, historical, and economic contexts should also be considered. Indeed, the cultural context of Toronto (including thriving LGBTQ communities), provides an ideal context for this sort of initiative to flourish and be supported.