A Qualitative Assessment of Social Impact of a Charity Sport Event in Cambodia

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The hosting of sport events constitutes an important investment for community development. Public investment in sport events is often justified based on their potential to provide economic benefits for the local economy (Santo, 2007), but research has failed to find strong evidence for this justification (Baade, Baumann, & Matheson, 2011). In response, the assessment of social impact has increasingly been used as an alternative way to evaluate community benefits from sponsoring sport events and programs (Balduck, Maes, & Buelens, 2011; Inoue & Havard, 2014; Lee, Cornwell, & Babiak, 2013). Social impact represents the only type of event benefits that internally focuses on local residents (Crompton, 2004), and has been recognized “as a core source of potential event value” (Chalip, 2006, p. 109). Despite increasing research efforts, the current understanding of social impact is limited in two ways. First, research has evaluated the social impact of large-scale sport events, such as the Sydney Olympics (Waitt, 2003) and the Super Bowl (Kim & Walker, 2012); however, the extent to which smaller-scale sport events may generate social impact for the host community is little understood (Taks, Green, Misener, & Chalip, 2014). This is despite the claim that the community benefits of local sport events may outweigh those of large-scale sport events that are often associated with large financial burdens, environmental impacts, and resident displacement (Gibson, Kaplanidou, & Kang, 2012). Second, scholars have conceptualized social impact primarily based on the analysis of how sport is valued in Western culture (Crompton, 2004; Kim & Walker, 2012; Lee et al., 2013). Because the priority given to certain social values differs across cultures (Knafo, Roccas, & Sagiv, 2011), cross-cultural validation is essential to advance the present knowledge on social impact. This study thus sought to understand the social impact of a smaller-scale sport event held in a non-western society.

To this end, the Angkor Wat International Half Marathon, an annual sport event held in the city of Siem Reap, Cambodia, was examined using a qualitative approach. Initiated in 1996, this event represents one of the first organized international sport events in the country; this unique status likely allows for identifying distinct social impact the event has made to the local community. This context is also significant because of the event’s operation as a charity sport event (Filo, Funk, & O’Brien, 2009; Woolf, Heere, & Walker, 2013). Since its inception, the Angkor Wat International Half Marathon has raised funds for local charities and non-profit organizations supporting Cambodian victims of antipersonnel mines and other locally important causes, such as HIV/AIDS prevention and education. Because charity sport events are designed to raise funds and awareness for the affiliated cause (Filo et al., 2009; Woolf et al., 2013), social impact assessment should consider how the cause support may lead to greater intangible benefits for local residents. Indeed, the alignment of sport events with a charity has been suggested as an effective means for enhancing their social impact (O’Brien & Chalip, 2008). The effect of the charity affiliation on the nature and extent of social impact, however, has not been adequately assessed in the sport event literature, making the examination of a charity sport event central to further understanding the social impact of sport events.

Lee et al.’s (2013) framework for the social impact of sport guided the current investigation. This framework classifies social impact into five dimensions: social capital, collective identities, health literacy, well-being, and human capital. To confirm the applicability of these dimensions to the Angkor Wat International Half Marathon and further identify dimensions of social impact unique to its charity affiliation, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 37 local residents in the city of Siem Reap. Maximum variation sampling was used to gain perspectives from residents with diverse characteristics (Parpton, 2002). Specifically, the variation of the study sample was ensured based on occupations, residential areas, gender, age, and past event participation. During interviews, participants were asked to provide their perspectives about different types of benefits the Angkor Wat International Half Marathon has brought to the community. Specific questions were directed at whether they were aware of charity support by the event and, if they were aware, how such support had provided benefits to the community. All interviews were conducted by the first author in Khmer (the native language of Cambodia) through a professional interpreter, and were later translated into English and transcribed. Two investigators independently coded the interview transcripts.
using Nvivo 10. In this coding process, initial codes were deductively developed based on Lee et al.’s (2013) social impact framework. Subsequently, the investigators modified some codes to align with interview data, and further created new codes inductively if the data did not fit with the initial codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). After coding all interviews, the two investigators assessed intercoder reliability using Cohen’s kappa coefficient, confirming that all final codes achieved a kappa coefficient of at least .70 for sufficient intercoder agreement (Mayring, 2000). The validity of the interview findings was established through member checking by interview participants and peer debriefing (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Analysis revealed seven major themes that represent different aspects of the social impact of the Angkor Wat International Half Marathon. Of them, three themes were identified deductively based on Lee et al.’s (2013) social impact framework: social capital; collective identity and pride; and sport, health and well-being. To develop these themes, initial codes were combined and modified as means of reconciling the differing interpretations of the two investigators. For example, the theme “sport, health and well-being” was developed by combining the dimensions of health literacy and well-being (Lee et al., 2013) and was further modified to reflect the data indicating that the promotion of sport through the event was central to improved health and well-being in the community. The remaining four themes were identified inductively: attitudinal change, informational support, social support, and mistrust and uncertainty. The four inductive codes were developed to assess how successful the charity affiliation of the Angkor Wat International Half Marathon is at impacting the local community. For example, attitudinal change focused on changes in attitudes and perceptions of local residents toward causes supported through the event (e.g., victims of antipersonnel mines), whereas social support focused on the provision of tangible (e.g., funding) or intangible (e.g., improved life quality) benefits to the causes.

Overall, this study extends the application of social impact demonstrated by Lee et al. (2013) and other work (Balduck et al., 2011; Inoue & Havard, 2014; Kim & Walker, 2012) to a smaller-scale charity sport event held in a non-western society. Building on the existing work, the findings indicated that this event helped local residents (a) establish social capital by promoting social relationships, (b) develop collective identity and pride through the enhanced collective self-esteem, and (c) promote health and well-being through the promotion of sport. The four unique dimensions of social impact inductively developed from the data further contribute to the literature on charity sport events (Filo et al., 2009; Woolf et al., 2013) by providing areas to assess the cause-related benefits of such events. These findings can serve as a basis for future research to evaluate a charity sport event’s ability to generate both tangible and intangible benefits and effect change for the target community.