Social Leveraging of a Mega Sport Event: Initial Intentions among Stakeholders of a Newly Formed IOR

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The effects of mega sporting events on their host area have been highly debated. While some of these effects might represent positive momentum change in the region, scholars have uniformly argued against the meaningful translation of these effects into macro-economic impact (Crompton, 1995; Heere, Van der Manden, & Van Hemert, 2015; Matheson, 2006), and instead, argued that impacts most likely occur in the social structure of communities (Andersson, Rustad, & Solberg, 2004). However, since social effects largely develop after the event’s conclusion, the knowledge gained through such an investigation may not always transfer to organizers of future events because of the differing outcomes desired and context present. As such, Chalip (2006) argued that scholars should shift their focus from social impact to social leverage, which is the contemplation of maximizing the mega-events’ social benefits through strategic planning leading up to events. Yet, social leveraging of sporting events is a complex process, and the involvement of multiple sectors (i.e., government, private, or nonprofit organizations) is essential. Thus, in order to utilize social leverage as the catalyst for social development, inter-organizational relationships (IORs) have been argued to be a key component of social leverage (Gray, 1985; Lee, 2001; Selsky & Parker, 2005). Unfortunately, little is known about how IORs support the social leveraging process. The few articles within sport management on IORs (Babiak, 2007; Babiak & Thibault, 2009; Meiklejohn, Dickson, & Ferkins, 2016; Shaw & Allen, 2006) have a post-facto focus on existing IORs, but this approach by nature limits our understanding of how the initial intentions to leverage social benefits of mega-events was developed in the formative stage of a partnership. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to understand what intentions stakeholders of the newly formed IOR have towards social leverage initiatives, and whether they coordinate such efforts with other stakeholders leading up to the event, all of which are critical social leverage elements.

Literature Review

Social leverage refers to the way in which event organizers optimize the event’s social benefits through strategic planning for valued societal impacts (Chalip, 2006) and coordination among stakeholders (Chalip & Heere, 2013). In one sense, the strategic planning often involves the building of social capital or alleviation of social problems (O’Brien & Chalip, 2007; Waitt, 2003), obtaining new network and relationships (Kellett, Hede, & Chalip, 2008), devotion to international development (Levermore, 2008), and substantializing the fruitful social benefits of Sport for Development programs for disparate interests communities (Schulenkorf & Edwards, 2012). But social leverage also involves the manner in which event stakeholders coordinate (Chalip & Heere, 2013), which ultimately affects the direction of the distribution of the necessary materials, policies, personnel to conduct social leverage. Social leverage has been showing its inherent advantage to help event organizers and its stakeholders reach common social objectives.

Austin (2010) argues “…the growing magnitude and complexity of a multitude of societal problems transcend the capacity of individual organizations to solve them” (p.13). As such, Interorganizational Relationships (IORs) are vital to synergizing the stakeholders’ intentions of reaching their common social objectives. Addressing social issues through mega sporting events is complex and needs mutual efforts from different organizations working with an event (Chalip & Heere, 2013; Lindsey, 2016; O’Brien & Chalip, 2007; Serban, 2011). Yet, in the previous studies, the theoretical evidence to support how IORs can affect social leverage within mega-events remains unknown. Stakeholder theory helps explain how and why there is engagement in a IOR within a mega-event. Savage, Bunn, Gray, Xiao, Wang, Wilson, and Williams (2010) highlighted the importance of stakeholder theory to explain interorganizational collaboration among different identified and legitimized stakeholders in order to collectively wrestle
with intractable social and environmental issues. Besides the identification and classification of an organization and its stakeholders engaged in an IOR, the process of partnership is also an imperative element to understand IORs and its interaction with social leverage. Yet, we know little of how these IORs come into existence within the sport enough, and how this formation process affects social leverage. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore what intentions key stakeholders of the 2019 FIBA World Cup (i.e., the governing body of China basketball, local basketball association, and local sports bureaus) have towards social leverage initiatives, and how these intentions affect their participation in the IOR that was formed to organize the FIBA World Cup.

Methods
The authors implemented a phenomenological approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews to record the perceptions of the stakeholders. Archival document analysis was used to triangulate the data. The nine interviewees are leading figures within the stakeholder groups for the World Cup and were approached through the network of the first author. The interviewees were chosen for their knowledge of the IOR and social goals (Kumar, Stern, & Anderson, 1993; Yin, 2013). The interview data were collected in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Nanjing in January 2017, and the raw audio data consisted of 450 minutes of data. The interview data were transcribed and translated, and then manually coded to generate and organize themes. The authors then read the interview transcripts line-by-line and paragraph-by-paragraph, to allow the authors to continually compare incidents or themes in the data from each text (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and subsequently substantiate the findings through refinement and relationship exploration.

Results & Discussion
It appeared that social leverage tactics so far are missing because of the following themes. First, stakeholders/organizations in China have little knowledge of social leverage. While they might have intentions to initiate social strategies related to the event, the dearth of the knowledge of social leverage constrained the key stakeholders to further substantialize the social leverage tactics and allocate the necessary resources. The different stakeholders each had different social goals and they often simply assumed these goals would be obtained regardless of social leverage initiatives. Second, most respondents were not able to separate sport for development from sport development strategies, which further confounded the issue of social leverage. In this regard, media served as an amplifier. It would share the false assumptions of the stakeholders with the public, which made it hard for those stakeholders who did understand the differences to disagree. As such, the key stakeholders are very risk averse, and the media’s involvement further increases the stakeholders’ pressure to prioritize the event itself over any other social strategies that might take resources away from the organization of the event. Finally, cultural characteristics of the Chinese nation make it even harder to challenge some of the false assumptions. Therefore, even if the key stakeholders have intentions to conduct social leverage and are building IORs to that end, these social leverage tactics are likely to be less successful than desired. Combined, these results signal challenges that stakeholders face when trying to initiate social leverage strategies and could provide some indication of why social leverage has not succeeded in the past (O’Brien & Chalip, 2007).