Perceived Financial, Recreational and Political Benefits of the 2017 Summer Universiade Games

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Introduction

After losing its seat at the United Nations General Assembly in 1971, the government of Chinese Taipei (Taiwan) has tried various methods to connect with foreign allies and increase its international identity to offset China's intentional political attempts at isolating and delegitimizing Taiwan as an independent sovereignty. Hosting mega sport events has been viewed as an effective method to provide the host city and nation publicity, recognition, pride, and even economic benefits (Kim, Gursoy, & Lee, 2006; Kim, & Petrick, 2005; Jeong & Faulkner, 1996; Ritchie,, Shipway, & Cleeve, 2009; Madden, 2002). After five previous failed attempts, Taiwan was awarded the opportunity to host the 2017 summer Universiade Games. The Universiade (a combination of the words "University" and "Olympiad") Games is an international sporting and cultural festival organized by the International University Sport Federation (FISU). The Summer Universiade consists of 11 compulsory sports with up to as many as three more optional sports chosen by the host country. More than 10,000 collegiate athletes from over 140 countries participated in the 12-day 2013 and 2015 summer Universiade Games (Gawanju2015, 2015). The events were broadcasted by more than 100 TV channels. The City of Taipei is expected to have a record-high number of participatory countries and student-athletes in 2017. The event is expected to catapult Taiwan into the international spotlight and showcase its modernization, wealth, and friendly hospitality to the world.

Despite past experience for hosting 2009 World Games and Summer Deafllympics, Taiwan has not attempted to host an Olympic-level international sport event. Taiwanese literature related to mega sport events often focused on themes such as management of facilities, enhancement of participatory athletes' performance, and use of volunteers (Chen & Chen, 2013; Cheng & Chang, 2009; Chiu et al., 2014; Peng, 2012; Tseng et al., 2012). This study is one of the pioneer studies to investigate the perceptions of Taiwanese residents on the social and financial benefits related to 2017 Summer Universiade Games. In addition, the researchers collected numerous news articles and report directly after the event to verify and justify the predictions and significance of the study.

Method: A field survey was conducted from February to April of 2017 collected 1,021 participants’ responses (males: 53.5%; females: 45.3%). A high majority of participants were 24 years-old or younger (84.8%). Respondents were solicited and invited to participate in the survey in numerous public places, such as college campus, parks, transportation stations, and department stores. About 62.2% were not residents of the hosting city of the event (Taipei). The research framework and survey contents were based on the studies of Baker (2015), Candrea & Ispas (2005), Hsu (2007), Ritchie, Shipway, and Cleeve (2009), Smith (2010), and Swan (2012). The questionnaire consisted of two sections: (a) a series of 21 seven-point Likert Scale (ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree) items rating the level of agreement on perceptual statements concerning benefits and issues related to hosting the Summer Universiade Games, and (b) demographic items on gender, age and residency. Factor analysis of Likert Scale items identified four constructs: (1) national spirit and hospitality (five items), (2) economic and recreational factor (six items), (3) negative consequences (five items), and (4) game attending interest (three items).

Results and Conclusions: Over 61.5% of the participants showed interest in physically attending the games. On average 2.61 friends or family members would accompany these respondents. Male respondents showed a greater interest in attending the games than females (p < .05). This finding drastically differed from the previous informal survey done by the city council that found less than 33% of people willing to attend the games. The report of record-setting attendance contradicted the pessimistic thoughts and worries about the low turnout of the event. The results of the study also reflected a moderately strong rating of the “economic and recreational benefits” (M = 5.38 on a 7-point scale). The ratings of positive perceived benefits tended to outweigh the negative consequences. Thus, we concluded that the participants reflected their approval and support toward the Universiade Games based
on the survey responses and news reports afterward. Overall, older respondents (age 45 and above) showed a lower rating in economic and recreational benefits and game attending interest (p < .01). Furthermore, participants perceived that the games would generate a sense of national pride and spirit for offering hospitality. In fact, the willingness of game attendance was best predicted by the participants’ rating of “national pride and spirit of hospitality.” However, contrary to our hypothesis, the benefits of creating a sense of national pride and enhancing international exposure did not outweigh any perceived economic benefits.

Although the notion of sports as a great tool for unifying everyone and bringing peace, the participants did not optimistically believe the event would help ease the political tension between Chinese and Taiwanese government. Evidently, the passive boycott from certain Chinese representatives and protests of retired police and soldiers in Taipei clearly demonstrated that people used the sport events as a means to launch political causes. Finally, this study offers recommendations for planning and hosting future international sporting events. Those strategies include: targeting young individuals with age of 30 and less, promoting the potential growth of tourism and recreational benefits, and launching social media campaigns massively.