

Unevenness Revealed in Early Resident Support for Beijing Olympics

Beijing residents were mainly positive about the 2008 Olympics during the preparation stage, shows the SHTM's Dr John Ap in a recently published co-authored research paper. Yet there were also minor but noteworthy reservations about some of the expected social-life impacts. Given the growing significance of such mega-events, the researchers suggest that public relations efforts and future preparation strategies be honed to ensure the informed and sustainable support of all stakeholders.

Understanding Mega-Events

With the growing significance of event tourism around the world, major sporting contests are becoming more alluring to host countries and cities. A good deal of attention has been paid to how such mega-events are marketed and managed, and to their economic effects, but little has been paid to their "social, cultural and environmental impacts".

Not everyone experiences a major event in the same way, with differences in levels of economic development, socio-cultural factors and political systems as possible points of divergence between countries. The researchers suggest that developing countries such as China have major competitive disadvantages to overcome – such as the lack of sufficient infrastructure – which weigh heavily on perceptions of any events they host.

To combat this bias, the researchers take a "social representations" approach, accepting that mega-events occur "within a dynamic process of interaction and communication". They focus on the "thinking society" in which individuals shape and are shaped by experience with similar events, the media and social interaction, whereby convention and memory can be more important than reason.

The preparations for the 2008 Beijing Olympics provided an ideal testing ground for this approach, because the Games were viewed domestically "as a landmark that provides a means for narrowing the cultural distance between China and the outside world". The researchers set out to identify residents' attitudes and opinions towards the Games around two years before they were held, with the aim of providing organisers with insight into public concerns about the planning and preparation stages.

Beijing Residents Surveyed

Following a pilot study that confirmed the feasibility of their approach, the researchers engaged a professional survey company to contact Beijing residents by telephone. With 1,165 residents agreeing to be interviewed, they obtained a rich cross-section of descriptive information on perceptions of the Olympic Games in general and of the possible impacts on Beijing in particular.

Encouraging initial findings were that 92% of the interviewees "believed the Olympic Games would bring more positive than negative impacts" and that 96% indicated their overall support for the event. The latter finding echoes the 94% level of support for the Games expressed by Beijing residents in a survey conducted during 2001 by the Beijing Olympic Games Organising Committee.

Yet the researchers note that "similar impacts from other tourist development projects would normally evoke a more concerted negative reaction from the host community". They suggest that a certain level of conformity may have been at work, with more positive answers chosen to "please the interviewers". There is also a possibility that the Confucian tendency towards seeking consensus played a role in the responses.

Regardless of such motives, it remains likely that there was a genuinely “high level of enthusiasm and support for the Olympic Games”. The researchers identified four main perceived impacts on Beijing. Social-psychological factors covered such concerns as bringing the community close together. Social life factors included worries about noise and damage to the natural environment. Urban development factors encompassed possible changes in the built environment, such as an improved city appearance. Economic factors took in increased business and employment opportunities.

Embracers and Tolerators

Within the general enthusiasm for the Games, the researchers detected an interesting split, with 88% of interviewees considered “embracers” and 12% considered “tolerators”. The embracers expressed “a high degree of favourable perceptions towards the Games”, and included both “optimistic embracers” and “embracers with reservations” who were slightly more concerned about social impacts and “valued the economic impacts less”. The tolerators, in contrast, were much more concerned about changes in social life “such as the Games’ disruption of residents’ tranquillity and the potential increase in crime”.

Other differences between the embracers and tolerators were their “satisfaction with government performance, their attitudes on tourists visiting Beijing, and work experience in the tourism industry”. Curiously, the tolerators were more likely than the embracers to have work experience in the tourism industry but were “less willing to see more tourists in Beijing”.

Better Aligned Perceptions Crucial

Given the generally positive perceptions of the Games and their impacts, the researchers suggest that Beijing residents could have “perceived that the Olympics would only affect their everyday lives to a limited degree”. Yet the small group of tolerators were clearly worried about exactly the same thing. Both of these reactions are likely to have been a result of too little public information being available during the planning and preparation stages of the Games, a point that future mega-event organisers should consider.

The researchers point out that widespread awareness of the extent to which a mega-event will affect the host society is a crucial consideration for event planners, because the success of their efforts is based to a certain extent on “every stake-holders’ active support and involvement”. Crucial to gaining that support would be specific messages targeted at both embracers and tolerators, encouraging the former to maintain enthusiasm and the latter to be more supportive.

From this perspective, a combination of “top-down and bottom-up development planning approaches” could better align residents behind mega-events. At the most basic level, this would involve “public seminars and consultations” to “involve residents in the planning process”.

The researchers conclude that differences in perceptions are always “worth bearing in mind”. So, too, are changes in perceptions over time. They are currently analysing the results of a follow-up study conducted one year after the event to determine just how lasting were the positive perceptions of the Olympics amongst Beijing’s residents.

Points to Note

- Residents’ perceptions of mega-events are rarely considered.
- Beijing residents overwhelmingly supported the Olympic Games.
- However, that support came from both ‘embracers’ and ‘tolerators’.
- Combining top-down and bottom up development approaches would help to remove such distinctions.

Zhou, Yong and Ap, John (2009). Residents’ perceptions towards the impacts of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games. *Journal of Travel Research*, Vol. 48, No. 1, pp. 78-91.