

The youth Olympic Games: the best of the Olympics or a poor copy? A stakeholder approach

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The Youth Olympic Games (YOG) were hosted for the first time in Singapore in 2010 (summer games) and then Innsbruck, Austria in 2012 (winter), after being approved by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 2007. The IOC main objectives for the YOG are to use the event as an arena for a unique and powerful introduction to Olympism, educate the youth on the Olympic values, and have the youth share and celebrate the different worldwide cultures (IOC, 2011). Due to the lack of insight on youth events, we use the "real" Olympic Games (OG) as a basis for comparison when stating the paper's exploratory research question, which is: 1) What are the similarities and differences between YOG and the Olympic Games from the different stakeholders' perspectives?

Theoretical framework

Following Parent (2008), we use stakeholder theory to obtain the various stakeholders' perspective of the YOGs versus the OGs. The stakeholders involved in an OG include the organizing committee staff and volunteers, host governments, the media, the sponsors, international delegations, the community, sport organizations (e.g., federations, other events) and other stakeholders such as regulatory bodies (e.g., WADA) and the United Nations (Chappelet & Kübler-Mabbott, 2008). The network of stakeholders allows for resource exchange and knowledge transfer/learning (cf. Ibarra, 1993). The OG stakeholder relationships have been well defined for the OG (cf. Chappelet & Kübler-Mabbott, 2008); however, they are not so for the YOG, a gap we seek to fill.

Methodology

We used a qualitative approach in this investigation of the first Winter YOG in Innsbruck, Austria (January 13-22, 2012). Observations (all authors were at the YOG), text analyses and interviews with nine athletes, five coaches, 20 volunteers and one IOC representatives. Data were compared through content analysis, a process for systematically analyzing all types of messages, and specifically pattern matching was used.

Results, discussion and conclusion

Much of what characterizes the OG is implemented in the youth festival, for example the opening and closing ceremonies, and the medal ceremonies. Regarding the latter, it was a surprise for the authors that the medallists were celebrated with national hymn and huge attention

because the race for gold medals is not supposed to be an issue of the YOG. Other aspects of the OG, such as security and accreditation systems, were implemented – albeit in modified versions or modified service levels.

The stakeholders involved with the YOG include first of all the IOC who is strongly pushing for the YOGs and monitors the preparations and hosting closely. The IF's were responsible for the competitive program for their respective sports, and the degree of new event formats depended upon them. That resulted in new formats, such as mixed disciplines, mixed-gender and mixed-NOCs. The NOCs as a stakeholder were responsible for sending the athletes in the given age categories. The athletes and their team leaders stayed in an Olympic Village as usual and were transported to the different venues. The athletes enjoyed their Olympic experience, the international flavor and appreciated the Cultural Educational Program (CEP) activities arranged by the host city. But most important for the athletes were still the competitions.

The host governments who have a very significant role to play in funding the event as the TOP sponsors do not provide additional funds for the YOGs, with the sponsors also being limited in number as compared to the OC. The media did not seem convinced either of the event, with only 800 media representatives accredited (compared to over 10,000 for the OG), and it is unlikely that many of these actually showed up. Hence, the IOC provided pictures and broadcast footage to the media in order to promote the event. A final difference was the young age and more inexperienced level of the organizing committee staff and volunteers. One unexpected stakeholder for the YOG is the presence of parents which is far more obvious here than in the OG: They are the main spectators. Activities and information to parents in their own language was requested and needs to be considered for future YOG host cities.

This first winter YOG was met with a "weak" response by media, sponsors, NOCs and IFs, the main drivers of the OG. However, this modified youth event may help smaller cities to become "Olympic cities", which is a positive aspect for the Olympic legacy from the IOC's perspective. The YOG are in their infancy, but it may be a fresh opportunity to become an important learning/development arena for athletes and coaches/team officials with Olympic goals and values in mind.

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