

THE IMPACT OF A MEGA EVENT ON STRONG-TIE RELATIONSHIPS AND COLLABORATIVE CAPACITY WITHIN A REGIONAL TOURISM DESTINATION MARKETING ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

Aim

The study explores the impact of a mega event on strong-tie relationships and collaborative capacity within a regional tourism destination marketing environment. More specifically, it analyses the ability of the 2011 Rugby World Cup (RWC 2011) to enhance strong ties and the capacity to collaborate of Tourism Auckland (TA). A particular emphasis is set on the differences between TA's intra-regional and inter-regional relationships.

Tie strength underpins the first phase of the research. According to Granovetter (1973) the strength of a tie "is a (probably linear) combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie" (p. 1361). Collaborative capacity underpins the second phase. An organisation's collaborative capacity refers to the "ability of organizations to enter into, develop, and sustain inter-organizational systems in pursuit of collective outcomes" (Hocevar, Thomas & Jansen, 2006, p. 256) and is recognised as "a key source of competitive advantage" (Beyerlein, Freedman, McGee, & Moran, 2003, p. 17).

Literature review

Mega events have attracted the attention of researchers for several decades and studies have looked at economic impacts, increased visitation, employment effects, tourism and city development, and image and awareness. However, the impact of a mega event on relationships and collaboration remains a neglected area. O'Brien & Gardiner (2006) emphasise this gap in the events literature stating that "event outcomes should no longer be measured merely on their immediate economic impact but should also take into account the relational outcomes that provide resource-based opportunities for ongoing economic impact, such as improved opportunities for tourism, investment, and trade relations" (p. 45).

While the importance of stakeholder relations has received recent attention in the literature, no study has explicitly looked into how a mega event impacts on tie strength between organisations involved. In addition, studies on collaborative capacity have concentrated on the fields of public administration, public service and community research. Building on Foster-Fishman et al.'s (2001) four critical levels of collaborative capacity (member capacity, relational capacity, organisational capacity and programmatic capacity), there is a need to explore whether a mega event can foster the collaborative capacity of an organisation, as well as what these relevant conditions might encompass.

Methods

An exploratory, comparative, qualitative, case study approach is appropriate given the lack of previous research. RWC 2011 provides an ideal context to explore the impact of a mega event on tie strength and collaborative capacity within the tourism sector because it is a destination marketing project of long-term importance for both the tourism industry and New Zealand as a whole. Data were collected from two of TA's strong-tie networks. The inter-regional network (INTER) includes the ten RTOs that TA have had the strongest relationships with. The intra-regional network (INTRA) comprises ten entities within Auckland with which TA has had historically strong ties (e.g. Auckland Council, Auckland Transport). Semi-structured interviews with senior managers, a quantitative questionnaire and documentation is used to compare and cross-check the consistency of information and to obtain a diverse view of the phenomenon. To analyse the data thematic analysis is adopted, applying a deductive approach.

Results, discussion and implications/conclusions

The findings indicate that RWC 2011 has not impacted on TAs existing strong tie relations. Participants from both networks acknowledged the importance of strong ties to successfully prepare and organise RWC 2011, but they do not appear to acquire additional strength throughout the process. Participants highlighted the significant value of RWC 2011 in building new relationships with other sectors and industries, global sponsors, partners and sporting bodies.

The results also demonstrate that intra-regional relationships and collaboration (as opposed to inter-regional relationships and collaboration) is more significant for the successful organisation of the event. This appears to be a direct consequence of the way the RWC 2011 has been set up in New Zealand, which does not necessarily facilitate inter-regional exchange and collaboration but

encourages each region to individually deliver the event.

Finally, the findings indicate that despite tie strength not improving, RWC 2011 positively affected the collaborative capacity of the focal organisation. As such, the RWC 2011 assisted TA in enhancing all four critical levels of its collaborative capacity, in particular its member and relational capacity. TA's organisational capacity (while also being positively affected by the RWC 2011) still shows potential for improvement and strategies for further building this type of capacity are provided and discussed by the authors. Overall, enhanced collaborative capacity of TA through the mega event provides opportunities for ongoing economic impact and is likely to assist the organisation to foster its competitive advantage over the long-term.

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