

HEALTH BENEFITS FROM LEVERAGING SPECTATOR AND PARTICIPATORY SPORT EVENTS: A CASE STUDY OF THE TOUR OF FLANDERS

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Aim of the paper

This study examines the health benefits that result from leveraging a major spectator and participatory event through an in-depth case study of the Tour of Flanders. Major spectator events are increasingly linked to the achievement of health benefits among host residents, in part to justify the spending of scarce public money (Bloyce & Smith, 2010). In order to make a positive contribution to health, these events should be part of a long-term leveraging strategy in which the event is only one element (Coalter, 2004; Weed et al., 2009). Major participatory events can also make a positive contribution to health as these events encourage already active or inactive individuals to remain or become physically active (Dickson et al., 2009; Funk et al., 2011; Lane et al., 2008).

Theoretical background

Social leveraging is the process that strategically uses sport events as an instrument to tackle specific social issue(s) and achieve social change in the host community (Chalip, 2006; O'Brien & Chalip, 2007; 2008). This study presents the "leveragers" and "leveragees" in relation to the Tour of Flanders (i.e., those who conduct the leverage and those who respond to leverage), together with the "levers", "leveraging activities" and "leveraged outcomes" (Tian & Johnston, 2008). In order to connect social leveraging to health, social-ecological theory is applied to the context of sport events (Bartholomew et al., 2011; Green & Kreuter, 1999; McLeroy et al., 1988). Social-ecological theory describes how health is not only influenced by individual characteristics but also by the social and physical environment in which those individuals live (Stokols, 1996). Health promotion interventions are effective when they address multiple levels of the social-ecological model, for instance by providing access to facilities, social support and information to enable people to live a healthier life (Stokols et al., as cited in Wharf Higgins et al., 2006). Research has shown that interventions to leverage the Tour de France Grand Depart resulted in changes at the physical environment, social environment and individual levels, creating positive health benefits for host residents (Berridge, 2012; van Bedaf, 2012). The leveraging activities and leveraged outcomes in relation to the Tour of Flanders are examined based on the social-ecological model.

Context: the tour of flanders

The Tour of Flanders is Belgium's most popular annual spectator and participatory cycling event. The spectator event has been organized since 1913 in and around the same cities. Elite cyclists participate in a 258 km race with 600,000 to 800,000 people watching along the route (Lagae & Vanclooster, 2011). A total of 16,000 amateur cyclists take part in the participatory event which is organized since 1992. This year marks the 100th anniversary of the Tour. The Flemish government has capitalized on this anniversary by creating an incentive policy of €3 million to subsidize cycling infrastructure and participatory events across the region.

Methodology, research design and data analysis

Data collection includes in-depth interviews with key informants of from public sector organisations, non-profit organisations and commercial organisations involved with organising the Tour of Flanders. A semi-structured interview guide based on social leveraging was developed. A total of 15 face-to-face interviews were conducted with 17 key informants between November 2012 and March 2013. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. ATLAS.ti version 7 was used to analyse the data.

Results (preliminary)

Event leveraging of the Tour of Flanders has evolved significantly since 1913. Starting as a means to promote the newspaper *Sportwereld*, the Tour of Flanders was leveraged in the 1980s through the inclusion of music, humor and fashion, which made cycling and the Tour of Flanders popular among young people and women. This popularity resulted in spontaneous communities which was leveraged solely by commercial organisations prior to the 2000s. Public sector organisations and non-profit organisations initiated event leveraging in 2003 with the opening of the Tour of Flanders Visitor Centre and the construction of the Tour of Flanders Cycling Routes. The levers are not only the event itself or the liminality created through the event, but also Flanders' cycling culture and heritage and the historical connection to the event. Anno 2013, different leveraging activities are organised, in part accelerated by the incentive policy of the Flemish government. The results will be discussed in terms of the process of social leveraging and in terms of social-ecological outcomes.

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