

Heritage sporting events: theoretical development and configurations in Switzerland

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Aim of contribution

Heritage sporting event (HSE) is an emerging concept that to date has been under-researched. This contribution offers a theoretical development of the concept, while observing its different configurations in the French-speaking part of Switzerland.

Theoretical background

In today's context of intense competition among destinations, cities, regions and countries have to find new strategies to promote their territory to tourists, companies, investors and residents. Event-led strategies – related to sports, culture or business – emerged as a tool to boost territorial development. When it comes to sports, these strategies are usually based on attracting exogenous resources (major international one-off events) to the territory. Although the benefits from hosting a sports event are difficult to measure and are sometimes overestimated (Taks, 2016), many public officials believe that sport, and sports events especially, can be a catalyst for local development. While some destinations were focusing on sports events, other regions were developing strategies based on endogenous resources (local heritage) to brand and promote their territory. By focusing on the local identity and the unique features of the territory, these "heritage-based" strategies are able to strengthen the economy and attract tourists, while having a positive impact on the quality of life and the territory attractiveness. However, synergies between these two types of strategies are rarely considered. Although, many sports events have some heritage component, local authorities usually underestimate their capacity to brand and promote the territory, while most of the academic research focused on major sports events.

For Ramshaw and Gammon (2015), it is possible to distinguish two types of HSE, whether they have competition or heritage as their primary focus. However, the allusions to the heritage dimension of a sports event remain rare and refer usually to some tangible aspects or to a nostalgic vision of sport in the academic literature. This can be partly explained by an inclination to associate the notion of heritage with conventional ideas about folklore and traditional culture (Leimgruber, 2010). Of course, many events within folkloric or traditional sports can be identified as HSE. Major tournaments in Sumo, such as the Hatsu Basho in Tokyo (the opening tournament in January), might be a good example. However, this contribution argues that contemporary sports events, which would generally have competition as their primary focus, are sometimes also perceived as HSE by the local population and might represent a competitive advantage for the territory.

Methodology

HSE is an emerging concept that to date has been under-researched in the academic literature. Therefore, this paper first introduces the concept of HSE. A multidisciplinary literature

review is conducted to identify HSE's characteristics and the process which leads from an initial resource (a sports event) to a territorial resource (a HSE). A systematic inventory of sports events with HSE's characteristics (as identified in the literature) is led in the French-speaking part of Switzerland. This led to the creation of an online questionnaire meant to understand the perception of those events by the local population. Finally, a qualitative-comparative analysis (QCA) is conducted to observe the different configurations of HSE in Switzerland. QCA is a very appropriate method for middle-range sample size (as it is the case in this study with twenty-four events). It helps to systematize the analyses, while you might have too few cases to do it quantitatively.

Research findings and implications

One of the first difficulties in a research on HSE is to identify sports events that could be classified under this concept. The constituent elements that sustain the event in the host destination – namely the recurrence, the location, the local governance and the longevity – can be used to identify sporting events with a heritage dimension. However, they should not be seen as definitive characteristics, but rather as a way to observe the different configurations in which HSE might exist. The local context and the perception of the event by the population need to be considered. The constituent elements shape and sustain the event, but it is only the differentiation process (that highlights the uniqueness of the event) that enables the event to be perceived as authentic by the public and the participants. By being strongly linked to the territory, HSE have the capacity to initiate an endogenous development based on the local identity. In conclusion, local authorities engaged in sports events hosting strategies are invited to consider HSE for the branding and promotion of their territory, while further researches are needed to understand the impacts of HSE on the territory and their configurations outside of Switzerland.

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