

Enhancing Civic Pride through a Government-Led Community Sport Event: A Case Study

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Aim

Sport events have been highlighted as an important mechanism for strengthening cross-community ties and building civic pride (Schulenkorf & Edwards, 2012). However, much of this work has focused on programs and initiatives delivered by non-governmental sport-for-development (SFD) organizations. Although many nonprofit SFD programs receive funding from local, regional, and national governments, there has been less attention to initiatives delivered *directly* by governmental agencies. The purpose of this study is to direct future research and practice by assessing and interpreting experiences of participants in the Philadelphia International Unity Cup, a citywide soccer tournament jointly delivered by the Department of Parks and Recreation and Office of Immigrant Affairs.

Literature Review and Theoretical Background

Previous studies on sport events have drawn largely on social exchange theory (SET) to analyze social impacts. According to SET, the social impact of sport events is contingent upon the perceived benefits associated with event-related “exchanges”. In the organization behavior literature, SET has been applied to understand how various types of organizational support are “reciprocated” by employees through enhanced commitment and performance (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). A key element of this process is the *perception* of organizational support, which allows employees to assess the “quality” of social exchanges provided by their employer (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Following this line of thought and using SET, SFD events delivered directly by local governments may be more effective at promoting civic pride than outsourced events (e.g., those put on by nonprofits), as residents are likely to attribute the perceived benefits of the event to their local government and thus “reciprocate” through enhanced civic pride and engagement.

The purpose of this study is to analyze this process through a single case study of the Philadelphia International Unity Cup, a citywide soccer tournament that involves teams representing 48 nations.

Methodology and Data Analysis

Focus groups were conducted to assess participants’ experiences with the Philadelphia Unity Cup. One member from each team was recruited to participate in one of seven focus groups. Given the diverse cultural backgrounds and languages spoken of tournament participants, tournament directors assisted researchers in securing participants who were fluent in English. The focus group guide was based on theoretical concepts related to participant perceptions and civic pride, and inductive thematic analysis was utilized to identify key themes.

Results

Participant Perceptions

Unifying communities: Results indicated the event contributed immensely to a strengthened sense of cultural identity within immigrant communities. In particular, data indicated that the event helped link disconnected communities. For example, Respondent 3 stated, “the Unity

Cup has brought my community together, and brought unity too because we [were] kind of divided.”

Strengthening community ties: Data indicated the event helped raise awareness of immigrant communities across the city. For example, Respondent 5 stated, “In a community like this, a striving community where there’s a lot of challenges...it brings us together.” Respondent 4 also commented on the positive influence of the Unity Cup, stating, “it’s just like it brings a sense of pride because you see your community coming together.”

Raising awareness: Respondents also expressed how the event helped raise awareness about their community. For example, Respondent 15 added, “because of the Unity Cup, you come in [and] who knows who you might meet [and] get connected to. I think it obviously created opportunities.

Civic Pride

Appreciation and pride: Respondents expressed an appreciation toward the city for organizing the event and actively engaging with immigrant communities. Respondent 1 illustrated this by saying, “for us I’m just so thankful to be here, appreciative of everybody’s attitudes.” Respondent 2 echoed these feelings, stating, “when you look at the government agencies, Philadelphia [is] really shining in my eyes that they do this.”

Sense of connection: Data indicated the Unity Cup helped build a sense of connectedness and identity with the city, as respondents often spoke about how the event made them feel like they “belonged” in Philadelphia, and further enhanced their civic pride. Respondent 9 illustrated this by saying,

When I came into this country, like every other immigrant you are kind of searching for an identity to try a place where you can fit in. For me, soccer was always that avenue...I think that connects us to the city to give us that

Discussion and Conclusion

Results indicate that respondents had positive perceptions of the event, particularly related to the impact on cross-community ties and awareness. In addition, participants noted a strong sense of civic pride that was developed through the event. The connection described by respondents was particularly interesting, as they specifically mentioned how the city’s involvement with the event made them feel “valued.” This sentiment was often juxtaposed with their perception of the larger national context, and highlighted the importance of having the city, and its public officials, endorse and support the event.

References

- Cropanzano, R., & Mitchell, M. S. (2005). Social exchange theory: An interdisciplinary review. *Journal of Management*, 31(6), 874-900.
- Schulenkorf, N., & Edwards, D. (2012). Maximizing positive social impacts: Strategies for sustaining and leveraging the benefits of inter-community sport events in divided societies. *Journal of Sport Management*, 26 (5), 379-390.