The psycho-social impact of the Olympics as urban festival: a leisure perspective

Harry H. Hiller & Richard A. Wanner

To cite this article: Harry H. Hiller & Richard A. Wanner (2015) The psycho-social impact of the Olympics as urban festival: a leisure perspective, Leisure Studies, 34:6, 672-688, DOI: 10.1080/02614367.2014.986510

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2014.986510

Published online: 04 Dec 2014.
The psycho-social impact of the Olympics as urban festival: a leisure perspective

Harry H. Hiller* and Richard A. Wanner

Department of Sociology, University of Calgary, Calgary, Canada

(Received 17 June 2014; accepted 16 October 2014)

Typical impact assessments of mega-events such as the Olympics focus on economic and tourism indicators or urban regeneration efforts. This paper instead focuses on the perceptions and attitudes of local residents about the mega-event and how it impacts them. Using poll data gathered in relation to the 2010 Vancouver Winter Games and the 2012 London Summer Olympics, it is shown how attitudes shift over time and, above all, how the Games-time experience of living in a host city impacts resident’s attitudes towards the Games. It is argued that the Olympics creates both new leisure time and leisure spaces in the host city that produces psycho-social effects, whereby the event is viewed more positively and almost independent of perceptions of economic benefits. The creation of a festival atmosphere affects the public mood and surprisingly seems to at least somewhat overwhelm fiscal issues and other controversies.

Keywords: Olympic impacts; host city residents; mega-events and leisure; feel-good factor

Introduction

The most common means of evaluating the impact of the Olympic Games on host cities is through a focus on economic outcomes and hard legacies (Matheson, 2009; Preuss, 2007). New visible additions and improvements to the urban landscape such as structures with unique architecture, transport systems or area redevelopments are convincing proof of the impact of the Games. Furthermore, various forms of statistical evidence such as employment created, tourism increases, contributions to GDP or new inward investment are marshalled to highlight the benefits of hosting the Olympics. Economic indicators are presented to legitimate the Games as a worthwhile project. But what about the impact of the Olympics on host city residents? How do the Olympics impact local people? Counting the number of people who offer to serve as volunteers only assesses those mobilised for the Olympic project (Green & Chalip, 2004), but tells us nothing about more general attitudes and sentiments. A recent objective has been to utilise the Olympics to promote more physical activity among residents but again this type of impact measurement has a narrow focus (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2013). Occasionally, there are assertions that the Olympics helped to promote civic pride (Waitt, 2001), but there have been few systematic attempts to ascertain how local residents are impacted by hosting the Games (Kaplanidou, 2012).

*Corresponding author. Email: hiller@ucalgary.ca
In assessing the costs and benefits of hosting the Games, economists have sometimes come to the conclusion that although the economic returns are disproportionate to the costs, there are soft legacies that should be part of the evaluation. Spilling (1996), for example, concluded from his study of the Lillehammer Games that the mobilisation of the community and the sense of celebration may have been the most important benefit of having hosted the Games, since the economic assessment was not as positive as expected. Kavetsos and Szymanski (2010) have argued that economic benefits are usually exaggerated but that short-term positive life satisfaction seems to be a compelling legacy of having hosted an international sport event. There are frequent references in the literature to the fact that there are outcomes from hosting the Games that are less tangible or quantifiable than infrastructural improvements or economic balance sheets (Frew & McGillivray, 2008; Preuss, 2004; Wicker, Hallmann, Breuer, & Feiler, 2012). The presence of these factors often serve as fallback explanations when hard data revealing other positive outcomes are lacking. Such claims are also often viewed as self-serving justifications by organisers and politicians when the economic arguments are less convincing. What is needed is clear evidence to assess these conclusions.

**Host city residents: a games-time focus**

The problem is that the perceptions and feelings of host city residents are usually left out of the analysis of the impact of the Games. Interest in host city residents often stops with whether they support the Olympic bid and little attention is given to whether and how the Olympic Games as an event in itself influences city residents. Is there any difference in the attitude of local residents to hosting the Games before and after the Olympics are held? How does living in the host city affect residents during the Games? Is there something different about the host city during the Games that contrasts sharply with normal urban life that affects residents? Or, are the Olympics primarily for those who are sports-minded which minimises the interest of other residents?

From the point of view of host city residents, the preparation period for the Olympics is usually a time fraught with controversies and anxieties about the many decisions that have to be made and the issues that need to be resolved (Armstrong, Hobbs, & Lindsay, 2011). Debates become heated over venue location choices, timelines of preparation, costs, leadership squabbles with political implications, ticket strategies and issues of control. It is also the time when groups opposed to hosting the Olympics are likely to be the most vocal (Giulianotti, Armstrong, Hales, & Hobbs, in press). Olympic Organising Committees (OCO’s) are often tangling with government and media as well as local leaders and the general public in their quest to make efficient decisions within a short-time frame. The mobilising of resources and people means that OCO’s are goal-directed which frequently leaves local residents on the sidelines or merely as objects of persuasion. City residents perceive the Olympics as controlling the urban agenda as the requirements of the Olympics seem to pre-empt everything else. It would not be unusual then for those who were opposed to hosting the Olympics in the first instance to speak out, while others tire of the constant debate of issues raised by preparing for and hosting the Games. The preparation period then can be a time of uneasiness and controversy. For example, in London, there were issues of creating a park out of an industrial site with its related problems of pollution, expropriation, eviction and displacement, and
regeneration through gentri

cation. There were brand controversies of unauthorised
local people using the Olympic rings in relatively innocent ways. There were secu-

rity issues heightened by the riots of 2011, then the security guard shortages debacle,
the missile defence sites controversy on apartment buildings, and ticketing contro-
versies in which some residents obtained multiple tickets and others received none.
Conflict over post-Games usage of the Olympic stadium became a public charade
and local residents were troubled by proclaimed economic benefits that they person-
ally did not know how to evaluate. All of these issues put the Olympics at the centre
of urban debate and controversy. But what happens once the Games start? All the
forces of apathy and indifference, opposition and support for the Games collide but
with what result?

The focus on local citizens in the host city has primarily been related to support
for the bid. Bid committees are required to demonstrate the extent of public support
in hosting the Games in their bid books. Furthermore, the IOC Evaluation Com-
missions also initiate their own survey to measure the extent of public support in host-
ing the Games during the bid phase. Once a decision is made in selecting the host
city, ‘official’ interest in measuring local attitudes and public support virtually
ceases. Occasionally, some further polling is done by others either before or some-
times after the Games, but it is not done in such a way to understand the personal
impact the Games had on local residents (Guala, 2009; Mihalik, 2003; Ritchie &
Lyons, 1990). However, increasingly, OCO’s have come to see the value of provid-
ing opportunities for local residents to participate in the Games indirectly through
the provision of a wide range of non-sporting activities such as the Cultural Olym-
piad, live sites (McGillivray, 2011), pavilions, school programmes and other activi-
ties in the public realm. While some would see these initiatives as mechanisms for
coopting public support (Boykoff, 2014), they do provide activities that make the
Olympics more accessible to local residents. In contrast to those who experience the
Olympics as a mediated audience via television or other electronic platforms, host
city residents are physically present and these activities allow them to experience the
Games in a more personal way. All Olympic organisers want the Games to be
viewed as successful in a technical and international marketing sense. However, it
has been unclear how the Games have impacted local residents as people.
References have often been made to a ‘feel-good factor’ as the result of anecdotal
experiences or through sweeping generalisations made by politicians who laud the
success of the event, but there are few discussions of this phenomenon with hard
data (Kavetsos & Szymanski, 2010; Maennig & Porsche, 2008).

One useful way to understand the feelings and perceptions of local residents is
through survey data. Some surveys have been done in Olympic host cities in the
pre-Olympic period and occasionally a post-Games survey but they have not
explicitly measured how the Games have personally impacted local inhabitants
(Kaplanidou, 2012; Muller, 2012; Ritchie, Shipway, & Chien, 2010; Ritchie,
Shipway, & Cleeve, 2009; Waitt, 2001). Furthermore, until recently, no surveys have
been conducted during the Games in order to measure shifts in opinion. What is
even more important is that there has been no attempt to explore the psycho-social
dimensions of experiencing the Games as a local resident (Frew & McGillivray,
2008). The goal of this paper is to use survey data to address this lacunae in the
literature in order to identify how local residents interact with the Games, and then
to develop an explanation for that response. Survey data from the London 2012
Olympics will be presented with some comparisons to Vancouver 2010 through a
focus on people’s perceptions and feelings about the event as a Games-time experience. All of the polls included in this review were conducted by polling companies in London that utilised representative and weighted sampling procedures. The purpose of this review is not to analyse their data in depth, but to search through their findings to look for trends that help to answer the question of how residents encountered the Games. As part of a larger project, a more sophisticated analysis will be done of Games-time data collected by the polling company Vision Critical with whom we have a working relationship. An explanation for the results will be developed by showing how the Olympics create a festival atmosphere in the host city which impacts resident’s perceptions of the Games.

Evidence from the Vancouver 2010 games
The Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics provided the first opportunity to examine the question of how the Games itself incrementally impacted local residents (Hiller & Wanner, 2011). Changes in public opinion were monitored as the Games progressed by surveying city residents every few days in six waves. When respondents were asked if they were following the Games very closely, the percentage of metropolitan residents jumped from 23% at the beginning of the Games to 59% by the end of the Games. And when those who followed the Games ‘moderately closely’ are added, fully 85% of residents were following the Games with considerable interest by the time the Games ended. These results provided the first concrete evidence of how the Olympics increasingly captured public interest among local residents as the Games progressed. Furthermore, as the Games evolved, people became more ‘excited’ about the Olympics (60%), were more likely to see the impact of the Games as positive (84%), and increasingly led residents to see the Games as ‘worth it’ (64%). This is not to ignore the approximately 30% who thought the Games were not worth it or were just unsure, but the evidence overall was clear that as the Games developed, public support for hosting the Games increased. This finding was important because Vancouver had been a particularly conflicted community with regard to hosting the Olympics as opposition had crystallised around a referendum that had passed (64% Yes, 36% No) in 2003 but which created a bloc of opposition and scepticism during the preparation period that tended to increase rather than decrease (Hiller, 2012; Shaw, 2008). Further analysis of the data revealed that the ability of the public to participate in free events such as live sites and pedestrian malls played a major role in evaluating the hosting of the Olympics more positively. Qualitative and observational data also clearly showed that these forms of public participation (particularly if they did not require tickets) were significant in leading to positive assessments of the Games. In other words, there was something about experiencing the Games context more directly that had an effect on local resident’s attitudes (Chalip, 2006).

Evidence from London pre-Olympic surveys
The Vancouver data allowed us to look for evidence of a similar shift in attitudes in London. There was perhaps more polling done in London than in any previous Olympic Games. In comparison with Vancouver where one standard battery of questions was asked by one polling organisation, in London there were several polling organisations, no standardised questions or standardised survey dates, and different methodologies (telephone, face-to-face and online) and sample sizes utilised by
different polling organisations. Questions at one point in time were not necessarily followed by the same question at a later point in time. And sometimes surveys were only conducted in London and at other times they yielded a national data-set. In spite of these inconsistencies, there is value in examining the results of these polls. All available data have been searched and relevant data will be presented here. Data before the actual Games will be discussed first to provide an appropriate background to perceptions which developed during the Games themselves.

Ipsos MORI (Ipsos MORI Research Archives) found that support for hosting the Games remained remarkably steady from 2003 to 2011 at around 70% in spite of the issues that emerged in the city (Table 1). This did not mean that people did not have financial concerns for even in 2003, more tended to agree that the bid team had not been honest and open about the costs than those that disagreed with that idea. In fact, 65% agreed that additional costs would be borne by the London taxpayer. Yet, 62% said they still supported hosting the Games even though the government admitted that costs would be higher than previous estimates. The dilemma was clear from the beginning that support for the Games and financial concerns were at least somewhat different issues. It was no surprise that in 2010, only 39% said hosting the Olympics was good value for money while 45% disagreed. One year later in 2011, respondents were evenly split about whether the Olympics were good value for money. On the other hand, one year away from hosting the Games (2011), 65% said they were ‘very excited’ or ‘somewhat excited’ about hosting the Olympics while 34% said they were ‘not very excited’ or ‘not excited at all’. The Olympics, then, seemed to carry some kind of anticipation factor that was somewhat more dominant even though there was a definite undercurrent of reluctance and concern about costs. There was also some antagonism about the fairness of ticket sales in 2011 (57%) which made some people more negative about the Olympics (38%). So building up to the Olympics in London, it could be argued from these data that there was generally a positive feeling about hosting the Olympics at the same time that there was a significant segment of the population who were concerned about costs.

Polling done by the ComRes organisation found that one year away from the Olympics (ComRes, 2011), only 44% were excited about hosting the Games. 49% of Londoners thought that London 2012 was not worth the public money spent on it and 59% thought the ticketing system was unfair with 40% saying the ticketing system made them more negative about the Games. Respondents often did not know

Table 1. Percentage responses to the question: ‘Do You Support or Oppose London Hosting the 2012 Games?’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2003 (%)</th>
<th>2006 (%)</th>
<th>2010 (%)</th>
<th>2011 (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly support</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tend to support</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither support or oppose</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tend to oppose</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly oppose</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not know</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly/tend to support</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly/tend to oppose</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

how to evaluate the economics of the event leading to large numbers of people answering ‘don’t know’ to questions of economic value. But more people tended to think that hosting the Games was not worth the public money put into it than the reverse, whatever economic benefits there were did not outweigh the costs, and that taxpayers would see little benefits. On the eve of the Olympics in July 2012, 59% said taxpayers paid too much to host the Games but, conversely, 55% thought hosting the Games would not be wasted money and would be good value for the country as a whole revealing considerable mixed feelings about costs and value again (ComRes, 2012). Being excited about the Olympics also increased as the Olympics came closer on the horizon. A hint that hosting the Olympics was interpreted by citizens as more than of economic value was reflected in the fact that more agreed that the Olympics were ‘great for the UK in these difficult economic times’ than disagreed. Again, these results indicate that economic value is difficult for residents to assess, but it is clear that costs are of considerable concern – at the same time that support for hosting the Games might exist for other reasons.

While the different polling organisations identified here have asked different questions and in different time sequences so that it is difficult to compare their results, the data from these surveys suggest that two countervailing themes were present in the public mind. One theme is that there was something inherently of public interest about the idea of hosting the Olympics that conceivably captivated at least some people although slowly. On the other hand, there were many issues particularly relating to finances that cause hesitation if not opposition. Reconciling these two ideas presented a real dilemma for citizens in advance of the Games.

**London 2012: before and after surveys**

The analysis of the Vancouver Games had shown that there was considerable antagonism to the Olympics in that city during the preparation period but that attitudes shifted markedly as the Games took place. Is there any evidence that anything similar happened in London and if so, why? Remember the argument for Vancouver was that experiencing the Olympics within the host city transformed people’s attitudes about the Games. While it appears that there was less opposition to the Games in London in the first place, it is significant to understand why people concluded that the Games were good for the city by comparing responses at the beginning of the Games with responses at the end.

An outcome that is often hinted at in the literature is that the Olympics promote a celebratory mood in the host city. Ipsos MORI asked a question pertaining to mood both just before the Games began and then as the Games ended (Table 2). On the eve of the Games, there was an expectation that they would have a positive effect on the mood of the British public but what is noteworthy is that by the end of the Games, the impact of the Olympics on the mood of the people increased considerably with 53% saying that the impact was ‘very positive’ (compared to 29% before the Games) and an additional 33% saying at least ‘slightly positive’ for a total of 86% claiming that the Olympics created a positive mood. Sixty-seven percent were surprised by how much the Olympics had brought people together and 83% of Londoners said the Olympics had a positive effect on their views of their fellow citizens – two very striking sociological outcomes. Only 22% thought that the Olympics had been a distraction from the real issues facing the country. Overall, then, there seems to be clear evidence that there were perceived psycho-social or
non-monetary benefits that resulted from experiencing the Games. A collective mood shift and an improved sense of community seemed to be an important recognised outcome.

The polling organisation YouGov (Dalgreen, 2013) also found a significant difference in responses as the Games were beginning and as the Games were ending (Table 3). Remarkable increases in all categories showed that as the result of experiencing the Games, more people were glad that London had bid, more thought the Olympics were good for them personally as well as good for London in general, their interest in the Olympics had increased, and 81% agreed that the Games had a significant effect on the public mood. Obviously much of this was also related to the fact that 83% also thought the London Games were a success.

A Guardian/ICM poll (Clark, 2012) found that four months after the Olympics, 78% said that the Olympics ‘cheered up the country during hard times … and were well worth the cost’ – a significant increase from the 55% who agreed with that statement during the Olympics. Interestingly, the percentage who thought that the Games ‘were a costly and dangerous distraction from the serious economic problems …’ dropped from 35% during the Games to 20% four months later. All of

Table 2. Percentage responses to the question: ‘What Effect Do You Think the London Olympics will have/had on the Mood of the British Public?’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Beginning of the games July 14–16, 2012 (%)</th>
<th>End of games August 10–13, 2012 (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very positive</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slightly positive</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No effect either way</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slightly negative</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very negative</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not know</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mostly positive</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mostly negative</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 3. Survey responses to key questions about the London 2012 Olympics for the UK, 2011 and 2012.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>July 2011 (%)</th>
<th>July 2012 (%)</th>
<th>August 2012 (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Games will be/were good for people like me</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am/was very interested/fairly interested in the London Olympics</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am glad that London bid to host the 2012 Olympics</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Olympic Games will be/were good for London generally</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think the 2012 Olympics in London will be/were a success</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Olympics had a positive effect on the overall mood of the general public</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Will Dahlgren, ‘Olympics One Year On: The Sceptics are Won Over’ YouGov, 25 July 2013.
these snapshots indicate that the Games had an impact on people that may be independent of economic factors.

**Surveys during the London games**

Rather than just examine before and after data, it was also possible to measure public sentiment in several waves during the Olympics to see if and how people’s attitudes in London changed during the event. The authors had a working relationship with Angus Reid/Vision Critical from whom microdata were obtained at two intervals prior to the London Games, then at six points during the Games (including August 14), and seven intervals just after the Games with the entire survey span being a two-month period from July 13 to September 12. One key question focused specifically on attitude and emotion rather than calculated assessment: ‘How happy are you that the Olympics are being/were held in the UK?’ What is most striking from Figure 1 is that those who are happy are the largest group and that the upward rise in this group is the most dramatic as the Games progressed from 48.81% to 65.60%. Those who were unhappy are the smallest group and their proportion continued to erode during the time period under review from 19.01% on July 13 to 8.37% on September 13. When those who are ‘very happy’ are distinguished from those who are just ‘happy’ (data not shown), those who are ‘very happy’ are the largest group with the strongest growth from 19.55% on July 13 to 40.23% on September 12. In other words, the Olympics did not just stir positive emotion but stirred very strong positive emotion while those who were both ‘unhappy’ and ‘very unhappy’ declined. Those who were ‘neither happy nor unhappy’ (apathetic? unmoved? uncertain?) declined during the Games as well implying that many of them must have become caught up in the celebratory atmosphere. While those who were in the ‘neither’ group were very close to the ‘happy’ group at the beginning of the survey period, they soon went in different directions as it became clear that the Olympics created a ‘happy’ mood as the Games evolved. This is not to ignore the

![Figure 1. How happy are you that the Olympics are being/were held in the UK? by Survey Date, London 2012.](image-url)
approximately one-third of respondents who were either uncertain or unhappy but it is clear that to the extent that this question measures the emotional impact of hosting the Olympics, the Games incrementally changed the mood of the city as indicated by two-thirds of its residents.

The happiness variable is certainly open to many interpretations as it does not specify what exactly people are happy about. But there are two things that are important about this evidence. One is that it is consistent with the survey data presented earlier that the Games indeed do have an impact on urban mood and that it was sustained for at least one month after the Games were over. The second thing is that feeling the emotional high of hosting the Games does not necessarily carry over to other issues such as costs or economic benefits. In the same survey but in data not presented here, respondents were asked whether the Olympics brought economic benefits and there was virtually no movement from the 50% range of those who agreed over the course of the survey period. In other words, having positive emotions about the Games did not necessarily translate into stronger beliefs about the Game’s economic value. In fact, more people claimed to be uncertain of its economic value after the Games were over than before the Games began (from the low 20% range to the upper 20% range).

**An analysis of the happiness variable**

The data reviewed thus far shows the upward trend in happiness with the London Olympics, but does not take account of variations within the population. As well, Figure 1 does not incorporate any statistical tests for the difference over time between the happy, unhappy and neutral. We extend the analysis by means of multivariate logistic regression to answer both of these questions. Three models are reported in Table 4: one contrasting those who said they were happy to host the Olympics (coded 1) to those who were unhappy; one contrasting the unhappy (coded 1) to the happy; and one contrasting those who were neutral (coded 1) to those who provided a positive or negative response. The ‘happy’ and ‘unhappy’ models provide essentially the same information, since the coefficients in the ‘unhappy’ model are the inverse of those in the ‘happy’ model.

The set of demographic variables provided in the surveys are used as predictors in each model. Of particular interest is the trend in these attitudes over time, captured by a variable representing the number of days that have elapsed since the first survey. Gender is indicated by a dummy variable coded 1 if a respondent is female, 0 otherwise. Number of children in respondent’s household is a continuous variable ranging from 0 to 13. Regions of the UK are identified by a set of dummy variables indicating residence in Scotland, the south outside London, the Midlands and Wales, and the north. The reference category is residence in London. Age is a continuous variable ranging from 18 to 97. The measure of employment status used by Angus Reid/Vision Critical was not entirely unidimensional, since it included values tapping several forms of employment, unemployment and several forms of being out of the labour force. A set of dummy variables for working full time, part time 8–29 h per week, part time less than 8 h per week, full-time student status, retired and unemployed were contrasted with respondents not working or in the ‘other’ category as the reference. Finally, three household-income categories were represented by dummy variables: £20–39,999; £40–59,999; and greater than £60,000, with less than £20,000 providing the reference category.
Because some 4000 respondents who answered the happiness question did not provide household income data, we used multiple imputation methods to provide income values for those cases. The logistic regressions were weighted with a probability weight provided with the data to more closely approximate population values for the variables. All coefficients are exponentiated and reported as odds ratios, which are multiplicative and indicate the factor by which the likelihood of scoring 1 on a dependent variable increases or decreases with an increase in a predictor variable. Thus, a value of 1 indicates no effect, a value greater than 1 indicates a positive effect, and a value less than 1 indicates a negative effect, controlling for all the other variables in the model.

The results, reported in Table 1, confirm our impression about the increase in happiness over time shown in Figure 1. For each day that elapsed between July 18 and
and September 12, the odds that a respondent is happy with hosting the Olympics increases by a factor of 1.024, which is statistically significant at $F < 0.001$. In other words, happiness with hosting the Olympics increases by over 2% per day. This result is net of all the controls listed above, indicating that this change in attitude is quite robust.

While the results show a high level of happiness overall, those who were the happiest about hosting the London Olympics were women; those with children in their household; residents of the south outside London, the Midlands and Wales, and the North; those working full time or part-time 8–29 h per week; full-time students, the retired and the unemployed; and those with household incomes of £40–59,999. To the extent that there were people who were unhappy, they were to be found among older people (with the odds of being unhappy increasing by about 2% per year of age), those living in London, and those in the lowest income category. People living in London with limited resources were perhaps most starkly confronted with the negative effects of Olympic expenditures, though overall happiness rose among Londoners at the same rate as in other parts of the UK. Among those giving a neutral response, women, people residing in Scotland, the Midlands and Wales and the north, and those with household incomes of less than £20,000 were more likely to make this choice. In sum, there was substantial variation across these demographic variables in how happy respondents to these surveys were about hosting the Olympics. But despite this diversity, the overall trend in happiness was upward over the period covered by the surveys.

**Explanations for this psycho-social outcome**

*The concept of leisure*

The survey data presented above establish that there are clearly some psycho-social outcomes from hosting the Olympics that affects many residents. If the Olympics are a mood-changer in a host city, then the question is why this outcome occurs. It could be argued that merely being selected to host a high-profile international event as the Olympics carries with it its own sense of worth and privilege that becomes elevated during the Games. The ‘eyes of the world’ argument, the media scrutiny and the mobilisation of the entire city for this event has its own cumulative effect. But this ignores the fact that varying degrees of reticence, apathy, opposition and superficial support exist in a host city, and, above all, that there is considerable uncertainty over the fiscal implications of hosting the Games. It is also possible that as the Games commence, all the problems and controversies which often overshadow the preparation period are set aside as the idea of ‘hosting the world’ becomes a reality and attitudes become more positive. But there is another possibility which focuses on action which occurs within the city in response to the Games through a variety of forms of public participation. One clue comes from observations about how street life in some Olympic cities changed the whole atmosphere of the Games. MacAloon (1995), for example, noted that street life in Montreal and Barcelona enhanced the Olympic experience in those cities by transforming the Olympics from a sporting event to an urban event. The Montjuic in Barcelona demonstrated a collective atmosphere that was very compelling to visitors and residents alike. Grix (2012) also noted a similar sense of celebration in both fan zones and ‘unofficial’ side streets that fostered an unexpected sense of sociability.
and urban camaraderie at another mega-sport event, the World Cup in Germany in 2006. In other words, to the extent that the Olympics enhanced the public realm with a celebratory spirit not typical of daily life, this was one example of how the Games could have an emotional impact on local inhabitants. If such a mood shift occurs in Olympic cities, how can it be explained?

The changed urban context which the Olympics supports is rooted in the concept of leisure because the Olympics opens up leisure spaces and leisure time that transforms the normal rhythms of daily urban life. In the first instance, during the Olympics, the public realm is considerably altered i.e. new leisure spaces are created. For example, some streets are closed to traffic and transformed into pedestrian corridors which quickly become clogged with people while special lanes for Olympic traffic on other streets reduce the normal traffic flows. Vendors of various types quickly populate pedestrian corridors and buskers (usually from all over the world) entertain whoever will listen. Tents and other temporary structures are erected for everything from pin trading to merchandise marketing to displays/exhibits. The creation of live sites, often referred to as the third spaces of mega-events, where people can watch Olympic events on a large screen surrounded by thousands of others as well as to be entertained by various well-known musical groups without entry fees creates a very different atmosphere in the centre of the city in spaces usually reserved for other purposes. The city is also ‘dressed up’ in new ways such as with decorative flags, signage in store windows, welcome signage and billboards are taken over by Olympic sponsors with Olympic themes (Edizel, Evans, & Dong, 2014). All of these initiatives help to create a different mood in the city and transform the city away from its usual orderly business-like routines. In that sense, the context of the city is changed thereby fostering a more leisurely view of urban spaces and heightening the importance of the public realm. The addition of many Olympic visitors who suddenly descend upon the city and begin to occupy those spaces with their own leisurely style reinforces the locals own leisurely occupation of those same spaces. However, in contrast to the emphasis on all of this activity as planned and leveraged for tourists, (Chalip and McGuirty (2004) refer to this as ‘bundling’ while Green (2001) uses the term ‘augmentation’), there is also much that is spontaneous and energised by the actions of local residents who find their own ways to participate thereby transforming their own urban spaces for their own enjoyment.

Second, new leisure time is created. Work schedules are frequently adjusted to reduce commuter traffic as well as to give local residents the opportunity to participate in the Olympic public realm. Some employers encourage work from home so as not to put additional pressure on the public transportation system while others give employees time off. In some host cities, schools are closed for the duration of the Olympics which also releases people from their normal daily schedule. It is not unusual to see families strolling down pedestrian corridors in the middle of the day and many strollers are dressed in costumes that express patriotic allegiances (Dyck, 2012). Host cities often comment that with the thousands of visitors in the city combined with the local people joining the public realm, it is not unusual at all for residents to view the opening of the Olympics as a transformation of their own city which, of course, is transmitted by the media to city residents living elsewhere in the city. Word of mouth encourages others to take time to join the activity in these leisure spaces. Television sets are sometimes placed on sidewalks or adjacent areas by retailers and people stop to watch Olympic events when normally they would be rushing from one place to another on city streets. But in addition to what occurs at
the centre of the city, gatherings also happen in local communities, often to watch Olympic events in a social atmosphere. Thus, the creation of more and new leisure spaces in the host city and the apparent introduction of a new interval of leisure time support a different view of the Olympics at the grassroots away from high-performance athletes, ticket controversies and problems in preparation.

The concept of festival

From the host city’s perspective, then, the Olympics has shifted over time from being purely a hosted sporting event to increasingly feeling like an urban festival. Obviously, the nature of that festival varies from city to city and the concept of leisure celebration in the public realm has a different cultural character in different locations (e.g. compare Beijing with London). Historically, the festival atmosphere during the Games was not necessarily planned but was something that emerged from the local culture to the extent that it existed. However, in recent years, and particularly since Sydney, local organisers more intentionally have seen the value of reaching out to non-sporting publics by planning to create urban ‘experiences’ during the Games (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). By attempting to be more inclusive of all city residents in order to generate broader support and to justify the significant expenditures, the festival idea provides a mechanism in which all residents participate.

The transformation of the Olympics from purely a high-performance elitist event to an urban festival by local residents was first clearly articulated in an analysis of the 1988 Winter Olympics in Calgary (Hiller, 1990). In fact, it was demonstrated that with the help of local organisers, residents reinterpreted the event through their own actions as a community festival. Normal interaction barriers were broken down as thousands of people were milling in the streets attracted by buskers, vendors, pin traders, various forms of entertainment, and the evening laser light show and presentation of medals at the newly built Olympic Plaza. Residents adopted new heroes of the Olympics in competition losers – Eddy the Eagle and the Jamaica Bobsled Team (a movie about the Jamaica Bobsled Team called ‘Cool Running’ was the only movie ever made featuring an Olympic competitor who finished last). Later work on the 2010 Vancouver Olympics (Hiller & Wanner, 2011) came to a similar conclusion that local participation in the public realm played a major role in local residents viewing the Olympics much more positively in spite of the fact that the Games had generated considerable conflict in the city about the Olympics as an appropriate financial priority.

Festivals are unique leisure experiences that play a major role in facilitating both community pride and a sense of place (Getz, 1997). Olympic education programmes have played a significant preparatory role in socialising children to anticipate the Olympics and programmes such as the Cultural Olympiad are also a way of reaching out to a non-sporting audience. For example, the Cultural Olympiad in London aimed to provide an opportunity for everyone to celebrate London 2012 through ‘dance, music, theatre, the visual arts, film, and digital innovation to leave a lasting legacy for the arts in the UK’. In short, various art forms in combination with educational programmes, media saturation coverage and commercialisation through Olympic sponsors work together to make the Olympics an all-pervasive phenomenon in a host city. While some might call this the democratisation of the Olympics beyond its implied elitism, and others might emphasise city residents as being held captive to commercial interests (Boykoff, 2014), it can easily be seen that the
build-up to the Olympic Games and the opportunities for different forms of participation lead the Olympics as an event itself to take on the character of a festival. Festivals provide an important sense of co-presence and vibrancy or animation for urban residents and facilitate coming together, tolerance and exchange, and a sense of community and collective memory (Richards & Palmer, 2010, p. 25). The point is that consonant with the general shift in cities from production to creativity and leisure consumption, the Olympics has been reinterpreted as not just a sporting event but as a festival in which the host city is the stage for a diversity of experiences. What is remarkable is that local residents do not usually think of hosting the Games in that way because the Olympics are defined as sport. Once the Olympics comes to be experienced as a festival (whether formally or informally produced), it should not be surprising that the Games produce a heightened state of emotion that is unexpected.

Conclusion

While most festivals emerge from local culture and may be repositioned through urban entrepreneurialism as a way of marketing the city, the Olympics as festival is very different. In the first place, it is a one-time event for a city rather than a recurring event that is repeated on a regular basis. Second, the symbolic meaning of the Olympics does not emerge from local culture or local history but from an external organisation (the IOC) with its own set of demands on the host city. The Olympics as festival does not emerge from a historical continuity with local or national culture but to a global sense of belonging, its consumer products and its traditions such as expressed in the torch relay. In that sense, to the extent that the festival reinforces cultural identity, it does so by linking local to the global context.

But there is another side to the Olympics as festival which Getz (2012, p. 54) calls the corrupted side or the profane aspect of festival in that it involves revelry, costuming and social licence. This is the notion of the Olympics as a ‘big party’ which is liberating, but also in which it is symbolic of power and control (Debord, 1983; Kellner, 2003). The festival motif clearly altered the mood of citizens in spite of the economic issues which suggests that urban residents either crave joyful collective experiences because such experiences are lacking in post-modern cities or that euphoric experiences are instruments of hegemonic power (Armstrong et al., 2011; Waitt, 2001) that overwhelm other issues. As noted earlier, almost a quarter (22%) of survey respondents in London felt that the Olympics were a distraction from the real issues. The critique of the Olympics as a ‘big party’ or ‘circus’ certainly follows the latter interpretation (Eisinger, 2000; Lenskyj, 2008; Shaw, 2008; Whitson & Macintosh, 1996).

There is no question that the measures of psycho-social outcomes utilised here come from two cities (London and Vancouver) where athletes from the UK and Canada fared very well in the competitions. This undoubtedly also contributed to the sense of happiness or celebration and the perception that the Olympics had been successful. On the other hand, Canada did not do particularly well at the 1988 Calgary Olympics (the first time a host country did not even win one gold medal) and yet the festival atmosphere was pervasive. Similar studies need to be undertaken in cities where the norms of action in the public realm (e.g. Beijing) are very different.

The central contribution of this paper, however, is that it provides data to support the notion that there are psycho-social outcomes for residents of host cities. This is a
different unit of analysis than Kavestos and Szymanski (2010) who use nation-states as their unit of analysis and who speak of national well-being. It also provides more explicit measures of psycho-social outcomes than Kavestos and Szymanski who deduce happiness or a feel-good factor resulting from the sporting event from indirect questions about life satisfaction. It does not resolve the issue of whether such euphoria is only short term or whether this feel-good factor merely serves to blur the fiscal costs attached to the Games (Brady, 2009). But it does suggest that these psycho-social outcomes do play a role in citizen’s evaluations of the Games. While the urban contexts of London and Vancouver are very different (e.g. the downtown celebration zone in Vancouver was much more compact and identifiable), a sense of the Olympics as an urban festival helps to focus our attention on impacts and legacies other than the built environment and economic benefits. To what extent this festival is contrived, planned or spontaneous is a matter of debate just as whether such a festival is an important interlude in the humdrum of daily urban life or merely a manipulation of human emotions— all depends on your point of view. What is clear, however, is that the Olympics are far more than a sporting event for a host city and impacts its residents in a significant way.

Notes on contributors
Harry H. Hiller is the director of the Cities and the Olympics Project, and faculty professor of Urban Sociology at the University of Calgary in Canada. He has been doing research and writing about the Olympics since the Winter Olympics were held in Calgary in 1988. A frequent speaker at conferences and academic forums around the world and especially in bid cities and cities awarded the Games. He has also been a participant in the meetings of the World Union of Olympic Cities. As an urban sociologist, his specialisation is on how cities and their residents are impacted by the Olympics. Among his many publications is his book Host Cities and the Olympics: An Interactionist Perspective (Routledge, 2012).

Richard A. Wanner is a faculty professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Calgary and Academic Director of the Prairie Regional Research Data Centre. In addition to his work on the Cities and the Olympics project, his current research focuses on the effects of immigration on the Canadian economy, internal migration among immigrants to Canada and trends in social stratification and mobility in Canada. His work has appeared in many scholarly journals, including the International Migration Review, Comparative Sociology, Social Forces, Demography, Canadian Journal of Sociology, Sociology, and the Canadian Review of Sociology.

References


Ipsos MORI. Research Archives. London 2012 Olympics.


