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Abstract submission

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Exploring the effect of 'hallmark' sporting events on place image: A case study of Ironman Wales

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AIM

Located within the critical realist paradigm, and underpinned by social representation theory, this research is informed by the following research question: "*How do 'hallmark' sports events impact upon the images of their hosts, and vice-versa?*" In doing so, the aim here is to evaluate the image impact of *Ironman Wales* on its host, the Welsh town of Tenby.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Considered to be one of the most difficult one-day sporting events in the world, *Ironman* is a long-distance triathlon competition organised by the World Triathlon Corporation. Starting in 1978, the competition has grown in scale and popularity such that numerous qualification events are now held around the world, culminating in the annual *Ironman World Championship* hosted in its founding location: Hawaii. One of these qualification events, *Ironman Wales*, takes place in Tenby (pop. approx. 4700); a seaside resort and harbour town located in Welsh county of Pembrokeshire. Beginning in 2011 when it attracted just over 1400 athletes, the most recent Ironman Wales event in 2018 attracted almost 2400 athletes (Ironman, 2018), demonstrating that aforementioned growth in scale and popularity. Although events such as these Ironman qualification races (and others of similar size) do not possess the scale nor reach of the world's largest sporting events, such as the Olympic Games or Mens' FIFA World Cup, they can maintain significant appeal for residents and other interested populations, require considerable investment, infrastructure, and resources, and consequently, can significantly impact the locations in which they are staged, in both positive and negative respects. In fact, for some places, whole local economies can be significantly reliant on the various revenues generated by such events while being opposed to by the local population due to the disruption they can bring (e.g., Fredline & Faulkner, 2002; Ma et al., 2013).

Broadly contributing toward raising such attractive revenues for hosts (in the form of tourism, business investment, and exports), and much like their "mega" counterparts, events of this size (referred to in the literature as 'hallmark' events [e.g., Hall, 1992]) can also serve as part of the host's branding strategy (Bodet & Lacassagne, 2012); that is, these events can be leveraged as a component, or selling point, in the brands of the places hosting them. Yet the research in this area is lacking and there is tendency in the literature to focus on larger scale mega-events, such as the Olympic Games, such that the impact of smaller scale events can often be overlooked, despite their importance to their host locations. A secondary objective of this research, therefore, is to contribute toward this literature in this regard.

METHODS AND ANALYSIS

Exponential non-discriminative snowball sampling was used to recruit participants (UK citizens, n=197) who completed an online mixed-methods survey comprised of two free word-association tasks using 'Ironman Wales' and 'Tenby' as inductor terms. The survey also contained questions measuring personal characteristics, demographic information, sport participation, level of engagement in the Ironman Wales event, and the opportunity to offer any relevant (but spontaneous) qualitative remarks the participants thought pertinent given the pre-survey Participant Information they were supplied with.

Drawing on previous work (e.g., Bodet & Lacassagne, 2012; Kenyon & Bodet, 2018), analysis of the data (currently being conducted and will be completed for EASM 2019), will involve collating the responses of the free word-association tasks into semantic clusters representing themes. Subsequently, themes cited by >15% of participants will be used to construct the images of Ironman Wales and Tenby. Hierarchal cluster analysis, utilising a modified similarity matrix (x-1), will then aim to determine the internal structures of social representations; that is, the strength of the connections (or psychological distance) between the themes contained therein. Subsequent analysis will compare these images to determine whether any co-branding can be identified, and to explore whether the generated images and co-branding processes vary according to participant characteristics (between host residents and non-residents, for example).

RESULTS

The results of this research will provide specific knowledge on how Ironman Wales and its host, Tenby, are perceived by participants in the UK in the form of brand images. It will determine the extent to which these brand images overlap, and

explore whether their construction is impacted by the characteristics of various segments of the research sample (e.g., residents versus non-residents).

CONCLUSION

Beyond the Ironman organisation, Tenby's local authority, and other wider national interested parties (e.g., VisitWales), it is expected that the results of this study, as well as contributing toward relevant literatures, will inform other smaller scale event organisers and potential hosts how such events might be received by residents and potential spectators. Additionally, policy-makers and marketers at local and national levels will gain insight with respect to how these events might be leveraged to bring about improvements in their own respective images, thus attracting increased tourism and secondary business investment.

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