

The Intangible Impacts of Mass Running Events on Communities—Evidence from Thailand

Parichat Jantori and Kannapa Pongponrat, Thammasat University, Thailand

Date Received: 16 December 2021 Revised: 16 February 2022 Accepted: 21 February 2022

Abstract

The increase of mass running events and numbers of running participants confirms the arrival of a running boom in many countries around the world, including Thailand. Despite the increasing popularity in recreational running and running events, research related to running events as small-scale events and their impacts remain scarce. Thus, in this study the aim was to examine the impacts of mass running events on the community with special attention on intangible impacts. A qualitative research approach and qualitative content analysis were applied. Based on in-depth interviews, this study concluded that besides tangible economic and tourism related impacts, mass running events generate diverse intangible benefits including creating community pride and unity. This creates a trickle-down effect and forms a new sports culture, develops and enhances public spaces and infrastructure, affords opportunities for knowledge sharing and business start-ups. The limitation of this study was its generalizability and comparability of findings, as the findings are derived primarily from key informants closely associated with the organization of mass running events. Future research should explore other research approaches that might better account for the impacts of mass running events.

Keywords: *Intangible impacts, mass running events, running boom*

Introduction

Mass running events, as a kind of mass participation sport, have become popular and frequent. The numbers of mass running events as well as the number of marathon finishers rise on a yearly basis since the emergence of a running boom. Participating in mass running events has become a trend for leisure activities and a healthy lifestyle, in which people combine travel and sports interests. This has also driven sports tourism as a fast-growing segment of the tourism industry. On top of the tangible impacts, mass running events may also create intangible impacts. Previous research has focused mainly on the economic impacts of mega sporting events, while the other aspects have received less attention. Thus, the objective of this study was to examine the impact of mass running events, with a special focus on the intangible impacts by using a qualitative research approach.

Literature Review

Mass Running Event

Mass participation sporting events are commonly associated with large participation numbers (Murphy & Bauman, 2007). The traditional mass participation sporting events include marathon running, triathlons, duathlons, or just cycling and swimming events. The newer formats that are becoming more well-known are the obstacle races, themed events, and trail running. Driven by many reasons, such as rising incomes and the emergence of a bigger middle class, the pursuit of a healthy lifestyle, the use of social media, and also intrinsic motives, mass participation sporting participation events have experienced substantial growth worldwide.

Among mass participation sporting events, mass running events have become outstanding in terms of popularity and number since the first wave of the running boom emerged in the 1970s in the United States of America, which then spread to other countries in Europe and around the world (Van Bottenberg et al., 2010). For example, in India, the growth in popularity in marathon running during 2008–2018 was reported as 229.86%, Portugal 177.76%, and Ireland 130.05%. And the worldwide growth was 49.43% (Runrepeat, 2021). In Thailand, there were 700 mass running events held over varying distances from a mini to a full marathon in 2017 and this expanded to 1,305 in 2018. Up to

over 2,000 mass running events are expected in the following years. And from 16 million leisure runners in Thailand, which account for one-fourth of the population in the country, roughly 10 % participate regularly in mass running events. The growth of mass running events also can be seen in its monetary value, which stands at approximately 1,700 million Baht. It is no surprise that the number of mass running events owners and organizers has increased to more than 100 to serve this increasing demand (Thaihealthreport, 2020).

Tangible and Intangible Event Impacts

The growth of mass running events clearly indicates its impact in various facets of society, especially in the economic sector. Impact is conceptualized as the longer-term effect of an outcome (Harding, 2014). With regards to events, impacts may differ based on duration. Short-term impacts are those that take place during the event, prior and immediately after the event, while long-term impacts may be referred to as after-use. For long-term effects, Spilling (2000) recommended four categories, namely, enhancing international awareness, increasing economic activity, enhancing facilities and infrastructure, and increasing social and cultural opportunities. A different approach was proposed by Allen et al. (2002) where four different aspects of impact were considered, namely, social and cultural, physical and environmental, tourism, and economic and political. Furthermore, some such as Carlsen et al. (2000) and Dwyer et al. (2000) distinguished impacts as being tangible and intangible.

Tangible gains of sporting events have been widely studied in previous research. Specifically monetary gain and loss from hosting sporting events have been quantified through various methods. Some studies used more simplified methods to assess the economic impact of sporting events, such as by calculating additional expenditures made by sports tourists and organizers in the host economies, as these represented the first-round of direct economic impacts.

Nevertheless, there is a rising interest among academic scholars to examine the intangible impacts of these mass events (Gratton & Preuss, 2008; Olberding & Olberding, 2004; Dwyer et al., 2000; Carlsen, et al., 2000). Intangible impacts can be defined as effects that accrue to the well-being of households but do not have a market price. As intangible impacts are not represented by monetary gain they can be difficult to quantify (Dwyer et al., 2000). Examples of intangible impacts reported in previous studies include civic pride, enhanced community engagement, community revival, improved image and reputation, sport inspiration, and social capital (Misener & Mason 2006; Gratton & Preuss 2008; Skinner et al., 2008; Minnaert 2012; Misener et al., 2015).

Previous Research on the Impacts of Mass Running Events

Previous researchers focused primarily on marathon running events in terms of motivation, satisfaction and experiences of the participants, the expenditure and profile of sports tourists, as well as the tangible impacts of mass running events, especially the economic impacts. For instance, Coleman (2004) studied the economic impact of the London Marathon 2000 through survey questionnaires that sought to identify the spending pattern of various groups linked to the event, including the event account and budget representing amount spent by organizers. Key findings indicated that the London Marathon contributed a net increase of 25 million UK pounds to the London economy. Similarly, in a study on the Chicago Marathon by the Regional Economics Applications Laboratory, it was found that the marathon made a significant contribution to the greater Chicago economy with an impact estimated at 143 million US dollars. The image of the city as a tourist destination was also improved by hosting the event. Also, the study of Agrusa et al. (2006) on runners participating in the Honolulu Marathon found that most of the event participants came from outside and around 20,000 participants came from Japan. These runners contributed 53 million US dollars of direct expenditure and nearly 87 million US dollars of overall impact, including induced expenditure during the event. Positive economic impacts also have been found in smaller-scale mass running events; for example, the Bristol Half Marathon, Dublin Marathon, Edinburgh Marathon, and Copenhagen Marathon (Coleman, 2004; Coleman, 2010).

Social impacts also have been studied by some academic scholars. For example, Olberding and Olberding (2004) investigated the soft social impacts of the Cincinnati Flying Pig Marathon through a participants' perceptions and opinions survey. Results showed that the marathon has created a better image of the city among local and non-local participants. It also increased a sense of local pride and created opportunities for social interactions among more than 30,000 runners and walkers, 4,000 volunteers, and 150,000 spectators. Furthermore, it was revealed in the study that the cost or investment in marathon running event can be relatively low, but the impacts on both social and economic assets can be huge. The benefits may also outweigh the possible losses. For example Maenning (2003), whose study examined the displacement effects caused by the Berlin Marathon, found that the displacement effects, such as tourist avoidance of the city because of the marathon, were minimal compared to benefits gained from the event. Specifically, Maenning (2003) reported that while hotel business and associate activity was displaced by 2 and sightseeing bus companies experienced a 13 % loss in sales because of road closures these only accounted for 0.07 % of the estimated additional expenditure generated by the marathon.

Methodology

The objective of the study was to examine the impacts of mass participation of sporting events on the community, with a strong focus on intangible impacts. A qualitative research approach was applied. Specifically, a post-event in-depth interview was used as a tool to collect qualitative data. Key informants were selected purposefully. The criteria for selection were based on the role and responsibility related to mass running events, as well as the ability and willingness to provide information. Key informants were primarily stakeholders of mass running events, which included event owners/organizers, local government and authority, local businesses, and residents residing in Sansuk Municipality (Chonburi Province), Buriram Province and Chom Beung District (Ratchaburi Province), and running participants of the Bangsean 42 Chonburi Marathon, Buriram Marathon, and Chom Beung Marathon. The saturation concept, which refers to the point when no new information is discovered, was applied when analysing the data (Glaser & Struss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009). For this study, 15 key informants were interviewed (Table 1) with interview questions consisting of general questions about mass running events, the interviewees' role and involvement and their perception towards the impacts of mass running events.

Table 1 Profiles of Key Informants

No.	Key Informant	Role
1	A	Mass Running Event Organizer
2	B	Mass Running Event Organizer
3	C	Mass Running Event Organizer
4	D	Mass Running Event Organizer
5	E	Mass Running Event Organizer
6	F	Mass Running Event Organizer
7	G	Mass Running Event Organizer
8	H	Pioneer runners & Active Committee of Thai Health Foundation
9	I	Pioneer Runners & Founder of Online Running Community
10	J	Local Governor & Resident
11	K	Running Participant & Resident
12	L	Local Resident
13	M	Paid Staff
14	N	Local Resident
15	O	Local Business

The semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted in the Thai language. This allowed respondents to express their viewpoints easily (Flick et al., 2004). Extensive notes and audio-recordings were taken during the interviews and were later transcribed. Qualitative content analysis

was applied as the analytical method, as it is a common method used for analysing verbal data collected through interviews or focus groups (Schreier, 2012). Interview excerpts with similar interpretations and meanings were summarized and categorized. This study was conducted based on the ethical guidelines and standard sand approved by the ethic committee of the researchers' university.

Findings

The results indicated that mass running events create diverse impacts to the community, ranging from short to long term, varying from positive to negative, and tangible to intangible impacts. Tangible impacts, especially the economic and tourism related impacts of the mass running events are obvious. Key informants admitted that mass running events boost local businesses and tourism, since the events attract large numbers of active and passive sports tourists to visit. These could be hotels and accommodation that are fully booked in advance and an uptick in restaurants and transportation operations. In short, the local economy is stimulated by the participants' consumption and spending. In the long run, mass running events can build a positive destination image. This may result in participants returning as repeat-tourists, especially if the community and town, as well as the locals, leave a good impression. Aside from the aforementioned tangible impacts, key informants also revealed many intangible impacts, which were thematized under a number of headings.

Community Pride and Unity

Pride is an intangible social impact experienced by the community hosting the event. Respondents from three areas, namely Sansuk Municipality in Chonburi Province, Buriram Province and Chom Beung District in Ratchaburi Province, expressed community pride in the interviews in many ways.

Key Informant J said:

Chonburi and Sansuk people are proud that we are leading sports city and sports tourism city in Thailand. We are proud that our city can motivate and encourage other city to develop in the same direction. We are proud that as small city, we are the pioneer of the world-class standard mass running event. Our city stands along with a few cities in the world that have three Label Road Races from World Athletics. And it is the one and only in Thailand.

Also, in Chom Bueng, Key Informant H revealed that the community is very proud and looking forward to the mass running events. Chom Bueng Mararthon is a reunion event, in which Chom Beung people who live in Bangkok or elsewhere return to welcome or provide lodging for their friends and colleagues. Even though Chom Beung is a very small district in a small province, the reputation of Chom Bueng Marathon is great. This creates community pride.

Key Informant G, the organizer of the Buriram Marathon said that people were against the Buriram Marathon at first, when they knew that the event was going to be held and the roads were going to be closed. However, after the event, the city gained a reputation for being a nice host and a perfect sports city. This changed the attitudes of the locals so it became more positive. Buriram people are proud and they are now more willing to participate as runners or as supporters in their marathon.

Creating Trickle-Down Effects and Forming a New Sports Culture

Trickle-down effects refer to the case where the success in elite sports or sporting events affects amateur participation (Weed et al., 2009). The interview results show that mass running events had some effects on increasing physical activity and sports participation, as reflected by Key Informant J, who stated:

Mass running event encourages people to do more sports. Since people are proud of the event as it is world-marathon destination, they want to participate and they practice. I see more and more people running in Bangsean running T-shirts or Finisher T-shirt. And the city tries to facilitate them by creating more running tracks and increase security along the routes. And all these get back to serve the purpose of healthy city.

The same phenomenon emerged in Buriram and Chom Bueng as Key Informant G revealed that,

although the city is well-established as sports city, but we talk about football or motor sport, which are suitable for specific group and gender. Football is rather for young men. But since we host Buriram Marathon, the event helps establish new sports culture. Sports is for everyone and everywhere. Nowadays we see more people running or jogging. Some started running for fun run and now become a marathon finisher.

Similarly, Key Informant O also reported that:

The boom of running and marathon running events are the turning point for many people to start doing sports and take care of themselves. And to run a marathon, it is not a one-day event that people can just join and run. It requires regularly training. This turns into self-discipline and habit change. And at the same time, this inspires other people too.

Key Informant H talked about the increasing sports inspiration in Chom Bueng area in the following terms:

People become more aware about sports and health issues. We have the legend of Pu Peng (Grandfather Peng (who was inspired by Chom Bueng Marathon and started running 10 km at the age of 79 years-old. He finished the first marathon when he was 85 years old. Pu Peng becomes the sports inspiration for many people, not only in Chom Bueng, but country wide.

Developing and Enhancing Public Spaces and Infrastructures

Mass running events can bring benefits to the community in terms of public spaces and infrastructures development. These benefits are visible, especially in the case of the Buriram Marathon and the Bangsean42 Chonburi Marathon. These two running events are highly successful and are recognized as Road Races by World Athletics, which acknowledges races operating at a high standard.

Key Informant J shared interesting information in the interview as follows:

To host a high-level standard running events, the city must upheave its own standard too. Thus, the city must improve road lighting, road smoothness, race course or the security along the route etc. and make them comply with the standard defined by World Athletic.

He also added that it is the task of the city and not the event organizer to develop appropriate infrastructure for hosting mass running events or other mass participation sporting events. Event organizers may provide guidance on what to do, but the execution is the sole responsibility of the city or the local authority. Moreover, to make the race a memorable showcase of the city, the city must develop its public spaces and tourist attractions. New lodging and transportation networks must be developed to accommodate the growing numbers of events and tourists. Existing lodging and facilities must also be enhanced and improved to serve the sport tourists.

Additionally, the Bangsean or Sansuk Municipality and Buriram Province are gearing themselves towards becoming leading sports city. Sport facilities, such as indoor and outdoor gym and swimming pools, public bike lanes, and more running tracks, are being built and existing public facilities are also being improved and extended. More road lighting and CCTV are being installed to enhance security. Public spaces that are improved can be utilized not only for the sport tourists but also by the local residents.

Opportunities for Knowledge Sharing

Although event owners or organizers are taking full responsibility for the management of mass running events with little community involvement, the interview results showed that mass running events can create opportunities for knowledge sharing in many ways.

Key Informant E talked about knowledge sharing in the Chom Bueng Marathon, where the organization of the marathon is embedded within the mission of Muban Chom Bueng Rajabhat University. Indeed, in 2019 the university has established the Marathon Center. The primary purpose

of the Center is to share and develop academic knowledge in the area of sports management, sports tourism, and physical education related to marathon running. Marathon study courses are developed for students as compulsory or elective courses. The Marathon Center also cooperates with universities overseas. Another purpose of the Marathon Center is to disseminate knowledge about marathon running to a wider range of people in order to improve their condition of health and fitness. The Center works together with local hospitals and health organizations such as the Thai Health Promotion Foundation.

Knowledge sharing also occurred among organizers. Key Informant A, a prominent mass running event organizer, revealed in the interview that there was an attempt to develop an association of mass sporting event organizers in Thailand, or TMPSA. The members of TMPSA are mass participation sporting event/mass running event organizers. The purpose of TMPSA is to share knowledge and resources relating to the organization of mass participation sporting events and running events with the ultimate goal to promote the event business and set new standards for mass participation sporting events in Thailand.

Key Informant F, a small-size event organizer, also reported the case of knowledge sharing from organizer to community. She said:

We were contacted by local authority who wanted to stage a small-size mass running event. Along the planning and working process, we have a chance to train local authority and local staffs on how to manage the event from the planning process on. We also provided the manual and event checklists that they can use for the future events. In the following years, they organize the mass running event on their own.

Additionally, some key informants revealed that their companies had signed an MOU with the local universities to share knowledge in the form of seminars, courses, or by providing internships or volunteer opportunities for students. Knowledge about event management and physical activities are also indirectly shared to communities or people who are involved in the management of mass running event. As Key Informant M, a paid-staff for Bangsean42 who also works as freelance event organizer, said in the interview:

Being part of this mass running event, I have learnt many things. I saw the process from upstream to downstream. I have learnt how the professional organizer works. And on the event day, I can observe the behaviours of running participants. All the knowledge gained can be used in my working life as freelance organizers in order to improve the quality of the event and working process.

New Business Opportunities and Start-ups

As the demand for running events increases, the number of new event organizers is increasing. Some have shifted their business domain or extend the scope of their businesses to leverage on this opportunity.

Key Informant A said that their company was active in the Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions industry. However, the organization of a mass running event was based on his own passion for running, as he wants to deliver good running events. Nowadays, the business portfolio of the company has shifted from a tech-event or participating in the Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions industry to organizing mass running events. Furthermore, organizing mass running events has helped the company become even more well-known internationally and nationally.

Key Informants B and G also extended their business scope and utilized their existing capabilities and experiences in mass gathering events or other kinds of sports events. They organized successful mass running events that are internationally recognized. Moreover Key Informant F used the experience gained as a runner to start an event organizer business during the peak of the running boom.

Many platforms are also created to promote mass running events with some serving as registration platforms. Thai.Run is a good example of a tech-startup that emerged during the running boom. Thai.Run has developed a number of event technologies, such as a registration platform, Face X, AI, and big data technology for running events that enhance the runners' experiences and at the

same time elevate the standard and security of mass running events. Thai.Run plans to export these technologies to other countries and to other mass gathering event categories such as concerts.

Mass running events have also created new opportunities for related businesses such as sports shoes and apparel, energy foods and drinks, running gadgets, and sports and fitness. It is also reported that local residents have started peer-to-peer based activities providing accommodation or transportation to serve higher-end sport tourists during the event.

Other intangible benefits of the mass running events also include opportunities for volunteers and community empowerment. The events also have created a festive atmosphere in the city and, in some areas, they have become a tradition embedded into the city's event calendar. The community's quality of life also has been improved through economic diversification, increased awareness of healthy lifestyle, and the improvement of infrastructure and facilities. Nevertheless, mass running events have also created some negative impacts. Key informants mentioned inconvenience from road closures, traffic jams, crowds, and litter and waste accumulation as major drawbacks associated with the events. Nonetheless, the residents at the hosting venues or areas tolerate these problems, since the events are short-term.

Conclusion and Implications

This study provided insights regarding intangible impacts as a result of mass running events, such as community unity and pride, sports inspirational effects, development of public spaces and infrastructure, knowledge sharing, and new business opportunities. Contrasting to the characteristics of mass running events that are often held in a short period of time and require less investments for the organization compared to mega or large-scale events, the impacts of mass running events may be felt over short to longer periods of time. In many cases, these mass events provide benefits that outweigh the costs. They can bring about changes in behaviour and ways of living and may have long-lasting impacts such as promoting a healthy lifestyle, providing better knowledge, improved the quality of living, creating a novel community tradition, or generating new careers and business opportunities. It is important to note that unlike tangible impacts, especially the economic and tourism related returns, intangible impacts which cannot be quantified, should not be neglected. As seen in the interview responses, mass running events have the potential to introduce new concepts that will affect the culture and lifestyle of the host community. Thus, organization of mass running events should be supported not just by the community, but by local government agencies and authorities, in order to increase the numbers and improve the standards of these events. Mass running events require less resources to stage than many other public events, since they utilize existing roads for road races or the natural terrain for trail running. However, the generated benefits can be multifaceted and enormous. Nevertheless, some balances are essential, since the staging of mass running events and other mass participation sporting events can lead to the disruption of residents' routine lives, as revealed by the key informants.

The major limitation of this study is the generalizability and the comparability of the findings, due to its qualitative nature. Moreover, the information is derived mainly through key informants who had close ties with the organization of mass running events. Thus, it is recommended that future research should apply different research approaches, i.e., research with key informants from diverse backgrounds or even develop a quantitative research strategy with a greater number of participants.

References

- Agrusa, J., Tanner, J., & Lema, D. (2006). Japanese runners in the Honolulu Marathon and their economic benefits to Hawaii. *Tourism Review International*, 9(3), 261–270.
- Allen, J., O'Toole, W., McDonnell, I., & Harris, R. (2002). *Festival and special event management*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Carlsen, J., Getz, D., & Soutar, G. (2000). Event evaluation research. *Event Management: An International Journal*, 6(3), 247–257.
- Coleman, R. J. (2004). Flora London Marathon 2000: The economic legacy. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, 10, 51–57.

- Coleman, R. J. (2010). The hidden benefits of non-elite mass participation sports events: An economic perspective. *International Journal of Sports Marketing & Sponsorship*, 12(1), 24–36. <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/id/eprint/5117>
- Dwyer, L., Mellor, R., Mistilis, N., & Mules, T. (2000). A framework for assessing “tangible” and “intangible” impacts of events and conventions. *Event Management: An International Journal*, 6(3), 175–189.
- Flick, U., Kardorff, E. V., & Steinke, I. (Eds.) (2004). *A companion to qualitative research*. Sage.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. Aldine.
- Gratton, C., & Preuss, H. (2008). Maximizing Olympic impacts by building up legacy. *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 25(14), 1922–1938.
- Harding, A. (2014, October 27). What is the difference between an impact and an outcome? Impact is the longer term effect of an outcome. *Impact of Social Sciences Blog*. LSE. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2014/10/27/impact-vs-outcome-harding/>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage.
- Maening, W. (2003). Zur regionalwirtschaftlichen Bedeutung der SCC Läufe unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des real BERLIN-MARATHON [The economic meaning of the SCC running events, with special focus on the real Berlin-Marathon]. BMW Berlin Marathon. Begutachtungen, Universität Hamburg, Germany. <https://www.bmw-berlin-marathon.com/news-center/newsarchiv/detail/zur-regionalwirtschaftlichen-bedeutung-der-scc-laefue/>
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. Jossey-Bass.
- Minnaert, L. (2012). An Olympic legacy for all? The non-infrastructure outcomes of the Olympic Games for socially excluded groups (Atlanta 1996–Beijing 2008). *Tourism Management*, 33(2), 361–370.
- Misener, L., & Mason, D. S. (2006). Creating community networks: Can sporting events offer meaningful sources of social capital? *Managing Leisure*, 11(1), 39–56.
- Misener, L., Taks, M., Chalip, L., & Green, B. C. (2015). The elusive “trickle-down effect” of sport events: Assumptions and missed opportunities. *Managing Sport and Leisure*, 20(2), 135–156.
- Murphy, N. M., & Bauman, A. (2007). Mass sporting and physical activity events: Are they “Bread and circuses” or public health interventions to increase population levels of physical activity? *Journal of Physical Activity and Health*, 4, 193–202.
- Olberding, J. C., & Olberding, D. J. (2014). The social impacts of a special event on the host city: A conceptual framework and a case study of the Cincinnati Flying Pig Marathon. *International Journal of Hospitality and Event Management*, 1(1), 44–60.
- RunRepeat. (2021, August 6). *Marathon statistics 2019 worldwide*. <https://runrepeat.com/research-marathon-performance-across-nations>.
- Schreier, M. (2012). *Qualitative content analysis in practice*. Sage.
- Skinner, J., Zakus, D. S., & Cowell, J. (2008). Development through sport: Building social capital in disadvantaged communities. *Sport Management Review*, 11(3), 253–275.
- Spilling, O. R. (1998). Beyond intermezzo? On the long-term industrial impacts of mega-events: The case of Lillehammer 1994. *Festival Management and Event Tourism*, 5(3), 101–122. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233677228_Beyond_Intermezzo_On_the_Long-Term_Industrial_Impacts_of_Mega-Events_The_Case_of_Lillehammer_1994
- Thaihealthreport. (2020). *Running boom and the boom of sport business*. <https://www.thaihealthreport.com/event256309>.
- Van Bottenberg, M., Hover, P., & Scheerder, J. (2010). *Don't miss the next boat: Changes and challenges of the second wave of running for European Athletics' member federations*. Utrecht School of Governance, Utrecht University, Netherlands.