

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Opportunities and Challenges of Holding Sports Events for the Host Community, Case Study: Hosting of University of Isfahan in the 16th Cultural and Sports Olympiad for Male Students of Iran

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT**Introduction**

Hosting sports events offers host communities a range of potential cultural, economic, and infrastructural benefits. In contemporary sport management literature, the hosting of non-mega events—particularly national university sport Olympiads—have gained importance due to their capacity to generate meaningful legacies without the financial burdens associated with mega-events. Scholars such as Greenwell et al. (2024); Bazzanella et al. (2023 & Chalip et al. (2016) emphasize that sports events, even at the national level, serve as catalysts for enhancing the destination branding, stimulating tourism flows, fostering social cohesion, and expanding the managerial capabilities of local institutions. These impacts are heightened when events involve youth populations, such as students, who represent a highly influential Demographic in shaping social and cultural structures. In Iran, student sports Olympiads occupy a prominent position because they bring together thousands of athletes, coaches, officials, and volunteers from universities nationwide. The Student Cultural-Sport Olympiad, first launched in 1993, has since evolved into one of the most significant national student sport events. It provides a unique opportunity for universities to demonstrate their infrastructural readiness, organizational competencies, and cultural assets. The hosting universities benefit not only from infrastructural upgrades and organizational learning but also from increased national visibility and enhanced prestige within the academic and sporting communities.

The 16th Cultural and Sport Olympiad for male university students, hosted by the University of Isfahan in 2023, was one of the largest ever held. Given the large number of participants, diverse sport disciplines, extensive logistical requirements and a multi-layered organizational structure, this Olympiad represented a critical case for analyzing opportunities and challenges experienced by the host university. Despite increasing scholarly attention on sports events, limited research within Iran has examined such events from the perspective of the host community, particularly through qualitative approaches that capture the perceptions of key stakeholders, including managers, committee heads, volunteers, and sports experts.

Although international studies have highlighted the potential economic, social, cultural, and psychological benefits of sport events, researchers such as Duan et al. (2020), McGillivray et al. (2021), and Cuskelly et al. (2021) emphasize that host

communities often face significant challenges, including financial pressures, organizational complexities, cultural conflicts, and human resource limitations. These challenges must be systematically evaluated to enhance the sustainability and success of future events.

Given this knowledge gap and the lack of domestic qualitative research for investigating university sport Olympiads in Iran, the present study sought to identify the primary opportunities and challenges encountered by the University of Isfahan while hosting the 16th Cultural and Sport Olympiad for male university students.

Through an in-depth thematic analysis, this study contributes to both theoretical and practical knowledge by offering insights that can guide future hosts in planning, managing, and leveraging similar events.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design using thematic analysis to explore stakeholder perspectives on the opportunities and challenges of hosting the Olympiad. This approach was selected for its suitability in identifying patterns and meanings embedded within participants' experiences. The research was applied in nature and sought to produce actionable insights for practitioners and policy-makers in the field of sport management. Participants consisted of 19 individuals selected through purposive sampling. This group included senior managers of the organizing committee (n=5), heads, and members of key operational committees such as facilities, transportation, and cultural affairs (n=9), faculty members specializing in sport management (n=2), and event volunteers actively involved in the execution of the Olympiad (n=3). Sampling continued until informational saturation was reached, and no new significant themes emerged during data collection.

Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews lasting 20–30 minutes each. Interview questions were designed to capture participants' insights regarding infrastructural impacts, organizational experiences, cultural dynamics, logistical processes, and managerial challenges. Experienced qualitative researchers conducted the interviews to ensure depth, clarity, and sensitivity to participants' viewpoints. All participants were assured of confidentiality, and ethical considerations were strictly observed.

Thematic analysis followed the six-step approach advocated by Corbin & Strauss (2015): familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and producing the final report. Throughout this process, several strategies were employed to ensure the trustworthiness of the study.

Thick description and transparent documentation enhanced credibility. Peer debriefing and critical friend evaluations ensured multiple perspectives were incorporated into the coding process. Triangulation was achieved through the diversity of participants' roles and through independent coding by two researchers. Ethical protocols and data audit trails were maintained to reinforce reliability and validity.

Findings

Analysis of the interviews revealed seven major opportunity themes and eight major challenge themes associated with hosting the Olympiad. Each main theme included several subthemes reflecting specific dimensions of the participants' experiences.

Opportunities

Infrastructure Development

Participants emphasized significant improvements to physical spaces and facilities, including the renovation and modernization of sports halls, installation of new equipment such as scoreboards and spectator platforms, upgrades to transportation infrastructure, creation of new green spaces on campus, and enhancement of

accommodations and dining services. These renovations provided long-term benefits beyond the event itself.

Marketing and Branding

Hosting the Olympiad increased the national visibility and prestige of the University of Isfahan. Participants noted improved perceptions of the university's capabilities, increased media coverage, and enhanced attractiveness for prospective students. The event strengthened the university's reputation as a capable organizer of large-scale sport events.

Communication and Interaction

Participants highlighted opportunities for social bonding, teamwork, and the development of new interpersonal and inter-university relationships. The event facilitated interactions between students, staff, officials, and volunteers, fostering a spirit of cooperation, unity, and collective identity across diverse groups.

Cultural and Social Opportunities

The Olympiad showcased the cultural heritage of both the city of Isfahan and the university. Participants observed increased tourism activity, strengthened cultural exchange among students from different regions, and greater emphasis on indigenous values such as sportsmanship, respect, and ethical conduct.

Sport Development

The event encouraged increased participation in sports activities and fostered the identification of new athletic talents. It also contributed to the development of competitive sport programs within the university and enhanced the university's status in student sport rankings.

Experiential and Organizational Learning

Participants reported substantial learning regarding event planning, management, and inter departmental coordination. Students, volunteers, and staff acquired practical skills in leadership, teamwork, logistics management, and problem-solving. The Olympiad also provided a platform for identifying strengths and weaknesses within the university's administrative and operational systems.

Motivational and Psychological Benefits

Hosting the Olympiad created an energetic and positive atmosphere across campus. Participants described enhanced morale, pride, and emotional engagement among staff, students, and organizers. The sense of achievement and identity reinforcement contributed to long-lasting motivational effects.

Challenges

Financial Challenges

Significant budgetary constraints, unexpected expenses, difficulties in financial oversight, and the high cost of equipment procurement created substantial stress for organizers. Some facilities deteriorated due to heavy use during the event.

Logistical and Organizational Challenges

Participants reported issues related to inter-committee coordination, inaccurate participant data during early stages, inadequate accommodation standards for some guests, and shortages of specialized staff in operational roles.

Security and Safety Challenges

Security incidents, crowd management difficulties, and the complexity of maintaining gender-sensitive spaces contributed to stress and operational risks.

Cultural and Social Challenges

Cultural differences among participants from various regions occasionally led to misunderstandings or tension. Some participants displayed behaviors inconsistent with local values, creating concerns among organizers.

Managerial Challenges

Bureaucratic obstacles, conflicting managerial perspectives, disruptions to regular university operations, insufficient long-term planning, and legal or regulatory complexities were among the key managerial problems reported.

Communication and Coordination Challenges

Delayed communication, lack of integrated information systems, and inconsistencies in inter-organizational coordination (especially with provincial entities such as electricity and transportation agencies) created operational inefficiencies.

Facility and Equipment Challenges

Several sport facilities lacked standardization or required major improvements. Delays in equipment procurement and limited availability of specialized venues also hindered preparation.

Human Resource Challenges

Participants noted disparities in skill levels, insufficient training for volunteers, disproportionate workload distribution, and occasional lack of commitment among staff members.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings reveal that hosting the 16th Cultural and Sport Olympiad produced substantial, multidimensional benefits for the University of Isfahan while simultaneously introducing complex managerial and operational challenges.

Infrastructure enhancement emerged as one of the most significant legacies, aligning with previous studies indicating that sports events stimulate long-term facility improvements (Andam et al., 2014). Additionally, marketing and branding advantages correspond with global observations that sports events enhance destination image and institutional credibility (Knott, 2024; Chalip et al., 2016).

The event also played a pivotal role in promoting social cohesion, cultural exchange, and psychological well-being among participants—outcomes noted in the works of Duan et al. (2020) and Thomson et al. (2020). Organizational learning generated during the Olympiad stands out as a critical intangible legacy, particularly relevant to academic environments where capacity building and skill development are essential long-term goals.

However, challenges were equally substantial. Financial barriers echoed global concerns about the costliness of event hosting (Oshimi & Yamaguchi, 2023). Logistical and managerial complexities underscored the need for more robust planning frameworks, better data management systems, and coordinated teamwork. Cultural tensions and human resource issues further highlighted the necessity of pre-event training, cultural preparation programs, and structured volunteer management systems. Based on these insights, several recommendations emerge:

- Establishing a dedicated financial sponsorship committee to attract governmental and private sector partnerships.
- Integrating advanced event management technologies, including mobile applications and digital coordination platforms.
- Implementing comprehensive training programs for staff, volunteers, and managers.
- Conducting post-event evaluations to gather feedback and refine future strategies.
- Strengthening inter-organizational coordination mechanisms with municipal and provincial entities.

In conclusion, the Olympiad functioned as both a transformative opportunity and

a complex managerial challenge for the University of Isfahan. The insights gained from this qualitative analysis offer a valuable framework for universities and sports organizations aiming to host similar large-scale events in the future. Through strategic planning, innovation, and collaborative management, such events can continue to serve as powerful tools for institutional development and societal advancement.

KEY WORDS

University Sport, Student Olympiad, Event Management, Event Organization, Student Sport.

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