

Residents' Perceptions of Small-scale Rural Events: A Dual Theory Approach

Xu Li

South Dakota State University

Correspondence: Xu.Li@sdstate.edu (X. Li)



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Abstract

Previous studies have focused on residents' perceived impacts on the host communities (perceived impacts at community level), and neglected residents' perceptions of event impacts on their personal lives (perceived impacts at individual level). Built upon social exchange theory and social representation theory, this study explored how local residents perceived the impacts of small-scale recurring events in a rural area. A total of 208 valid responses were obtained through a self-administrated online survey. Paired sample t-tests and independent samples t-tests were employed to test the hypotheses. The results showed that rural residents perceived greater economic, social and environmental impacts at the community level than the individual level. Residents' reliance on tourism influenced their perceptions of the event impacts. Finally, implications for local government and event organizers were discussed.

Keywords: Residents' Perceptions; Event Impacts; Rural Events; Social Exchange Theory; Social Representation Theory

Events play an important role in destination development and management. They are considered as image makers, man-made attractions, catalysts, and animators of static attractions, and thus highly valued by destination marketers (Getz, 2008). Events can bring visitors, expand tourist season, and boost destination economy. However, host communities may have to bear the burden of events. Local residents are expected to welcome visitors, face the additional pressure on infrastructure and resources, and pay for the costs. Events could disrupt their daily routines and affect their quality of life (Li et al., 2015; Ouyang et al., 2019). A healthy development of the event industry requires community leaders and planners to identify and examine various impacts brought by events. As the key stakeholders of the host communities, local residents' attitudes towards events matter and will affect community leaders' decision-making and the sustainability of events (Jurowski & Gursoy, 2004; Sharpley, 2014).

Event impact analysis has been one of the central themes in event studies (Getz & Page, 2016). Previous research has investigated the economic, social and environmental impacts of various events. Most studies have been undertaken in urban contexts, with domination of one-off, large-scale, sport-related events. Small scale community events in rural areas have received less attention (Getz & Page, 2016). Rural events are in general small, geared towards local and seemingly insignificant. However, many of them are held on a recurring basis and could generate substantive and long-lasting impacts on the host communities in the long run (Alves et al., 2010; Fyttopoulou et al., 2021).

Moreover, previous studies have concentrated on the impacts of a single event and overlooked the impacts of a set of events or the event sector in the community (Chen, 2011; Egresi & Kara, 2014). Further, it is suggested that local residents' views be considered and taken into account when assessing the impacts of events (Li et al., 2015; Panyik et al., 2011). In reviewing the literature, most studies were found to have examined one aspect of residents' perceived event impacts, the impacts on the host communities (i.e., perceived impacts at the community level). However, few studies have dealt with residents' perceptions of event impacts on their own lives

(i.e., perceived impacts at the individual/personal level).

Given the importance of understanding residents' perceptions of events and the lack of studies on recurring rural events, the current study attempts to assess residents' perceived impacts through an investigation into a number of recurring community events within rural areas. To be specific, the research aims to investigate: (1) rural residents' perceived event impacts at the individual level; (2) rural residents' perceived event impacts at the community level; (3) the differences in rural residents' perceived event impacts between the community and individual levels; (4) the effects of tourism reliance on residents' perception of event impacts.

Rural events

Approximately 97% of the United States' land is rural and around 19% of the population lives there, almost 60 million people (US Census Bureau, 2017). Rural economy heavily relies on resource-based activities, such as agriculture, forestry, mining, etc. (Cromartie et al., 2020). It is widely acknowledged that rural areas lag behind non-rural areas in many aspects of economic performance, ranging from poverty rates to employment opportunities (O'Dell, 2021). Rural areas often face disadvantages that urban areas do not, such as physical isolation, population decline, and limited professional services. As a result, many rural communities have turned to events and festivals as an option to diversify economies and attract temporary and permanent residents (Alves et al., 2010; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2017).

Events can bring tourists and outside investments to rural communities, which can lead to more employment and business opportunities, increased household income and tax revenue for local governments, improved infrastructure, restoration of heritage resources, and beautification of the rural landscape. Meanwhile, researchers have identified a number of concerns about rural events, such as overcrowding, traffic congestion, parking problems, increased crime, and cost of living, which all can disrupt rural residents' quality of life (Kaplanidou et al., 2013). Many scholars have suggested that an assessment of event impacts be critical to the success and sustainability of rural event development, and thus be adopted as a useful tool to measure and monitor event performance (Getz & Page, 2016; Panyik et al., 2011; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2017).

The impacts of events on rural communities

The impacts of events are diverse and can be roughly categorized into positive and negative, depending on the nature of the consequences events bring to a destination. According to Getz (2008), event impact studies has shifted its focus from the economic dimensions to a triple-bottom-line approach with consideration of economic, social, and environmental impacts. In other words, events may influence host communities economically, socially and environmentally. Economically, events can increase tax revenue, investment, employment opportunities, and household incomes. The negative economic impacts consist of a rise in the cost of living, price of goods and service, and property tax (Latkova & Vogt, 2012; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2017). Socially, improved infrastructure, better cultural and social understanding, increased community involvement and support, and enhanced community spirit and pride are examples of positive impacts. The negative social impacts of events include disruption of local life, changing of family value systems and relationships, increased crime and vandalism, and conflicts between locals and visitors (Alves et al., 2010; Reid, 2007). In addition, from an environmental perspective, events might result in more negative impacts than positive ones on the host community, such as damaged natural environment, air and water

pollution, and increased waste (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2017).

There is a strong research emphasis on the inclusion of local residents in assessing event impacts (Hjalager & Kwiatkowski, 2018; Panyik et al., 2011). Local people get involved in events in various ways (e.g., volunteers, organizers, or participants). They are also considered as part of the event product, interacting with event attendees and other stakeholders, and creating the event atmosphere (Chen, 2011; Kaplanidou et al., 2013). Local people are not only affected by events but also witness community changes brought by events. Therefore, their understanding of event impacts is indispensable for the sustainability of events in rural settings and should be incorporated into event planning and development (Chen, 2011; Hjalager & Kwiatkowski, 2018).

Theoretical framework

A number of theoretical frameworks have been employed to explain how local residents perceive and react to the impacts of events. Social exchange theory (SET) and social representation theory (SRT) are two dominant theories. SET takes an economic approach and focuses on individual needs' fulfillment. According to SET, local resident attitudes toward events is an outcome of cost-reward evaluation in the event interaction process (Zhou & Ap, 2009). It is suggested that if residents perceive the positive outcomes brought by an event (i.e., rewards exceed costs), they are willing to engage in the exchange process and support the event. Likewise, if residents view the event costs outweigh the benefits, they will disengage themselves from any exchange and hold a negative attitude. In the current study, SET is adopted to explain the perceived impact of events at the individual level. In other words, the author used SET to understand how rural residents perceive themselves benefiting from community events.

SRT was introduced as an alternative theory to illuminate how local residents understand and respond collectively to event impacts within a community (Fredline & Faulkner, 2000; Li et al., 2015; Pearce et al., 1996). As defined by Moscovici (1982), social representations are mechanisms enabling people to construct and understand the meaning of their social world. According to SRT, when people encounter a new or unfamiliar event, they will refer to their prior knowledge from past experiences, social interaction or other sources (e.g., the media) to make collective meaning of the event. Social representations within a community can be identified through recognizing commonality or consensus of resident perceptions (Pearce et al., 1996). In the current study, the author used SRT to understand shared values and attitudes towards events within a community, that is, perceived event impacts at the community level.

SET and SRT are two distinctive theories. Each could be more useful in certain context. Previous research has applied and validated SET and SRT in understanding residents' perceived impacts of events. However, most of the studies focus on either SET or SRT and very few studies focus on both. Li et al. (2015) recognized a complementing relationship between SET and SRT and suggested incorporating both theories into a study. SRT is more useful in understanding impacts on the host community as a whole, whereas SET helps explain perceived impacts on one's own life. When combined, the two theories can be used to examine residents' perceived impacts at both the individual and community levels, through which a full picture of perceived event impacts can be drawn.

Accordingly, the following hypotheses were developed:

Hypothesis 1a: There is a significant difference in residents' perceived economic impacts of rural events between individual and community levels.

Hypothesis 1b: There is a significant difference in rural residents' perceived social impacts

of rural events between individual and community levels.

Hypothesis 1c: There is a significant difference in residents' perceived environmental impacts of rural events between individual and community levels.

The general tourism research has indicated that residents' attitudes towards tourism development are influenced by a number of factors, including geographical proximity to tourism zones, economic dependency on the tourism industry, knowledge about tourism, level of contact with tourist and demographics such as age, gender, education, income, etc. (Almeida et al., 2015; Nunkoo & Gursoy, 2012; Vargas et al., 2011). Few researchers have applied these factors to the event context. Among the limited studies, researchers have drawn mixed conclusions. For instance, residents' knowledge about events didn't influence their perceptions of impacts (Li et al., 2015). Similarly, Yao and Schwarz (2018) concluded that distance from the event location had little influence on the residents' attitudes. Drawing on the social exchange theory, Fredline and Faulkner (2000) has argued that residents whose occupation is related to events are more likely to have positive attitudes because the economic benefits they obtain can trade off costs. However, they didn't have empirical results to support their view. To fill the research gap, the author also investigated the relationship between residents' economic dependency on the event/tourism industry and their perceptions of events. A series of hypotheses were developed:

Hypothesis 2a: Residents' perceived economic impacts of rural events at the individual level differ significantly between those who are economically reliant on the tourism industry and those who are not.

Hypothesis 2b: Residents' perceived social impacts of rural events at the individual level differ significantly between those who are economically reliant on the tourism industry and those who are not.

Hypothesis 2c: Residents' perceived environmental impacts of rural events at the individual level differ significantly between those who are economically reliant on the tourism industry and those who are not.

Hypothesis 2d: Residents' perceived economic impacts of rural events at the community level differ significantly between those who are economically reliant on the tourism industry and those who are not.

Hypothesis 2e: Residents' perceived social impacts of rural events at the community level differ significantly between those who are economically reliant on the tourism industry and those who are not.

Hypothesis 2f: Residents' perceived environmental impacts of rural events at the community level differ significantly between those who are economically reliant on the tourism industry and those who are not.

Methodology

Study Site

Brookings, located in southeast South Dakota, is the research site for this study. Brookings is home to South Dakota State University, the largest university in the state. The community has a variety of attractions ranging from museums, parks, shopping, dining to special events such as Downtown at Sundown, Summer Art Festival, etc. To bring more tourists into the local area to boost the local economy and promote the image of the city, the municipality of Brookings created an independent Convention & Visitors Bureau (CVB) in 2012, after 30 years of operation under the leadership of the Chamber of Commerce (Visit Brookings, n.d.)

The study includes five local and regional annual events hosted in Brookings: Summer Art festival, Downtown at Sundown, Fourth of July Celebration, Hobo Day, and Festival of Lights. These recurring events vary in terms of size, type, season and life cycle. Due to their local tradition and popularity, the researcher selected these events to represent the events held in the region.

Data Collection

To assess local residents' perceived impacts and support for the event industry, the author developed an online survey via QuestionPro.com. There were four sections in the questionnaire. Section One contained screening questions on participants' residence status. Only those who lived in Brookings, SD in the past 12 months and attended one of the five local events were qualified for the survey. Sections Two captured the perceptions of event impacts at both the individual and community levels. First, perceived impacts at the community level were measured. Participants were asked their level of agreement (5 = strongly agree, 1 = strongly disagree) with the event impact statements. The 5-point Likert scale was adopted from previous literature (e.g., Chen, 2011; Fredline & Faulkner, 2000; Li et al., 2015; Wang & Pfister, 2008; Zhou & Ap, 2009). Then perceived impacts at the individual level were measured. Respondents were asked to indicate how the perceived event impacts affected their individual life with 5-point Likert scale where 5 = extremely affected, 1 = not at all affected). Section Three examined residents' attitude and support for the event industry through a five-point Likert scale where 5 = strongly agree and 1 = strongly disagree. Section Four collected survey participants' demographic information, such as age, gender, education, occupation, source of income, etc. The survey instrument was pre-tested by several faculty, students, and three event industry professionals. They were asked to provide feedback regarding the wording, layout, and readability of the measurement items. The feedback was used to revise the questionnaire.

The self-administrated online survey was advertised in late summer, 2019, through several local media platforms (e.g., newspaper, social media of local organizations). To encourage participation, respondents had a chance to win a \$100 gift card through drawing. A total of 208 valid responses were obtained.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS Version 25.0). First, descriptive statistics was calculated to provide a profile of the survey respondents. Second, paired sample t-tests were conducted to examine the differences in residents' perceptions of event impacts between the individual and community levels (Hypothesis 1). To test the relationship between residents' economic dependency on the event/tourism industry and their perceptions of events (Hypothesis 2), independent samples t-tests were employed.

Results

As shown in Table 1, the gender distribution was 62.5% females and 37.5% males. The vast majority of respondents were aged between 22 and 65 (74.5%). Nearly two thirds of the respondents were Caucasians. About 32.7% of the respondents received graduate school education, 29.8% had Bachelor's degrees, 19.2% had some college education, and 10.1% completed high school. Close to half of the respondents held a full-time position. Results also indicated that 35.6% of the respondents were economically dependent on the tourism industry.

Table 1*Profiles of Respondents (N=208)*

Demographic variables	Frequency	%
Gender		
Female	130	62.5
Male	78	37.5
Age		
Younger than 22	22	10.6
22-35	63	30.3
36-50	55	26.4
51-65	37	17.8
65+	31	14.9
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	129	62.0
Hispanic	28	13.5
African-American	26	12.5
Asian	24	11.5
Other	1	0.48
Education		
Less than high school	17	8.2
High school	21	10.1
Some college/Associate's degree	40	19.2
Bachelor's degree	62	29.8
Master's degree	39	18.8
Doctorate degree	29	13.9
Occupation		
Student	27	13.0
Housework	15	7.2
Full-time employed	93	44.7
Part-time employed	20	9.6
Unemployed	17	8.2
Retired	34	16.3
Other	2	0.9
Income from tourism		
No	134	64.4
Yes	74	35.6

Hypotheses Testing

The findings of the research show that residents recognized both the positive and negative impacts of events on the community and their individual lives as well (Table 2). At the community level, respondents were most positive about the economic and social impacts. The highly ranked economic benefits of events were increased trade for local business ($M = 4.21$), improved local economy ($M = 4.15$), investment opportunities ($M = 3.70$), and employment opportunities ($M = 3.54$). Respondents also rated the social benefits of events high in the areas of enhanced city reputation and identity ($M = 3.61$), leisure opportunities for local residents ($M = 3.60$), sense of pride of local residents ($M = 3.42$), sense of belonging to the community ($M = 3.31$). Moreover, some negative impacts were noted in the economic and social categories. The main economic and social costs were increased prices of goods and services ($M = 2.98$), increased cost of living ($M =$

2.82), and increased crime rate ($M = 2.68$). In addition, respondents had negative perceptions of the environmental impacts, with traffic congestion ($M = 4.10$) as the most serious concern, followed by litter ($M = 3.22$), pollution ($M = 2.91$), noise ($M = 2.69$), and damaged natural environment ($M = 2.44$).

Table 2
Perceived Impacts at Community and Individual Levels

Items	Community Mean	Individual Mean	T-value*
Employment opportunities	3.54	1.63	21.69
Investment opportunities	3.70	1.78	22.03
Increased trade for local businesses	4.21	2.16	18.55
Increased cost of living	2.82	2.12	8.24
Improved local economy	4.15	2.67	14.78
Increased prices of goods and services	2.98	2.20	10.08
Noise	2.69	2.17	6.93
Litter	3.22	2.12	14.16
Pollution	2.91	2.27	8.61
Traffic congestion	4.10	3.03	12.56
Damaged natural environment	2.44	1.76	11.27
Improved environment	2.82	1.71	14.77
Sense of pride of local residents	3.42	2.78	7.77
Enhanced city reputation and identity	3.61	2.59	11.86
More leisure opportunities for local residents	3.60	2.81	8.7
Sense of belonging to the community	3.31	2.37	11.14
Increased crime rate	2.68	1.82	10.92

* $P < 0.001$

At the individual level, respondents reported similar perceptions of the economic, social and environmental impacts of events. Traffic congestion had the most negative impact on their personal lives ($M = 3.03$). Local residents also felt that the events had affected their lives through more leisure opportunities ($M = 2.81$), increased sense of pride ($M = 2.81$), improved local economy ($M = 2.81$), and enhanced city reputation ($M = 2.81$). The results of paired sample t-test showed that the perceived impacts at the community level were more positive than at the individual level. Therefore, Hypotheses 1a-1c were supported.

A series of independent samples t-tests were conducted to test Hypothesis 2, which suggests the effects of tourism reliance on residents' perceived event impacts. Table 3 showed the results. At the community level, five out of the seventeen sets of comparisons showed significant differences, including three economic impacts, one social impact and one environmental impact. Residents who were economically reliant on the tourism industry perceived more positive impacts and less negative impacts. Two of the economic impacts were exceptions: increased trade and improved local economy. Residents who didn't rely on tourism income rated these two economic impacts higher. Thus, Hypotheses 2d, 2e and 2f were partially supported.

At the individual level, four out of the seventeen sets of comparison showed significant differences, including three economic impacts and one environmental impact (Table 3). Residents

who were dependent on tourism income indicated higher level of agreement on such impact items as “more employment opportunities,” “more investment opportunities,” “increased trade,” and “improved environment.” Hence, Hypotheses 2a and 2c were partially accepted. Although residents who were reliant on tourism rated all the five social impacts higher than those who were not, none of the differences was statistically significant. Thus, Hypothesis 2b was rejected. Overall, residents’ economic dependence on the tourism industry appears to affect their perceived impacts of events at both the community and individual levels.

Table 3

Differences in Perceived Impacts between Residents Reliant on Tourism and Those Not

	Community Level			Individual Level		
	Tourism Reliance Mean	Non-Tourism Reliance Mean	t Value	Tourism Reliance Mean	Non-Tourism Reliance Mean	t Value
<i>Economic Impact</i>						
Employment opportunities	3.75	3.39	-2.34*	2.17	1.42	-3.72*
Investment opportunities	3.74	3.67	-0.42	2.12	1.59	-3.07*
Increased trade	4.02	4.32	2.08*	2.50	1.97	-2.58*
Increased cost of living	2.81	2.80	-0.08	2.10	2.07	-0.15
Improved local economy	3.84	4.28	2.41*	2.89	2.54	-1.77
Increased prices of goods and services	3.02	2.96	-0.33	2.28	2.11	-0.86
<i>Environmental Impact</i>						
Noise	2.68	2.72	0.26	2.12	2.21	0.42
Litter	3.34	3.21	-0.71	2.09	2.16	0.36
Pollution	2.82	3.01	1.02	2.29	2.26	-0.11
Traffic congestion	3.78	4.22	2.40*	3.08	3.06	-0.10
Damaged natural environment	2.46	2.45	-0.03	1.73	1.80	0.37
Improved environment	2.86	2.76	-0.02	1.90	1.58	-2.28*
<i>Social Impact</i>						
Sense of pride	3.48	3.39	-0.54	2.97	2.73	-1.19
Enhanced city reputation and identity	3.75	3.49	-1.69	2.78	2.50	-1.49
More leisure opportunities	3.87	3.51	-2.22*	2.88	2.75	-0.60

Sense of belonging	3.26	3.27	0.07	2.56	2.25	-1.62
Increased crime rate	2.50	2.78	1.67	1.87	1.79	-0.38

Discussion and Conclusion

Built upon two theoretical frameworks of Social Exchange Theory and Social Representations Theory, the current study investigates how rural residents have perceived the impacts of the major annual events on the community and their personal lives as well. The results showed that rural residents recognized the economic, social and environmental impacts at both the community and individual levels, and confirmed the usefulness of the two theories in explaining residents' perceptions of event tourism. Overall, greater impacts were perceived at the community level than the individual level. The findings support the conclusion of Li et al.'s (2015) investigation into Chinese residents' perceptions of the 2010 World Expo. They argued that the differences resulted from the underlying mechanisms of the two theoretical frameworks (i.e., SET and SRT). When evaluating the impacts of events at the individual level, respondents used the SET and calculated their personal gains and loss from the events. In comparison, the event impacts at the community level were abstract and unfamiliar. Respondents were more likely to use the SRT to form a reference point and make judgement. Both theories can complement each other and apply in different circumstances.

This study differs from Li et al.'s (2015) research in several ways. First, this study added a new dimension of the impacts of events: environmental impacts. Due to the growing interest in adopting a holistic approach and measuring the impacts of events from multiple perspectives, the current study examined three types of event impacts: economic, social and environmental. Although both the positive and negative impacts were perceived in each of the three dimensions, more negative environmental impacts were reported by the local residents. Secondly, this study focused on a set of small-scale recurring events in a rural community, whereas Li et al.'s study examined a single mega-event in an urban context. The findings showed that similar to mega-events, small-scale rural events held on a regular basis also generated economic, social and environmental impacts on the host community and the residents' personal lives as well. Local residents were more likely to agree with the positive impact statements than the negative ones. At the community level, the perceived economic and social benefits (e.g., improved economy and enhanced reputation) outweighed the negative environmental impacts (e.g., traffic congestion and litter). At the individual level, despite the traffic congestion problem, the residents were slightly aware of the impacts of events on their personal lives. The findings were in line with previous studies, indicating that residents' awareness of event impacts is relatively low in rural areas (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2017; Sharpley, 2014). Further, the current study included five major community events, and thus provided a rather comprehensive view of the impacts of events on the study area (Chen, 2011; Egresi & Kara, 2014).

In addition, findings from this research suggest that local residents' economic reliance on the tourism industry affects their perceptions of the impacts of events. Specifically, more positive impacts were perceived by those residents who were economically dependent on the tourism industry. Rural residents who were not dependent on the tourism industry were likely to have an unfavorable attitude toward event development and its impacts. These are particularly true when the

impacts were measured at the individual level. These findings were in accordance with the general tourism studies (e.g., Chen & Chen, 2010; Jurowski et al., 1997; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2010), which indicated that tourism reliance is associated with positive attitudes toward the industry.

At the community level, two economic impact items were exceptions. Residents who were not reliant on tourism perceived more trade opportunities and better local economy than those who were reliant on tourism. A possible explanation might be that the two economic items were more about the overall economic condition of the community whereas the other economic item (i.e., employment opportunity) was more related to respondents' own financial well-being.

From a practical standpoint, findings of the study can help the rural government and event organizers develop a sustainable approach to community event management. These small-scale recurring events aimed to boost local economy, showcase local tradition, and enrich residents' lives. Negative environmental impacts (e.g., noise, pollution, congestions) were not considered as an issue due to the remote rural location. However, this study reported that traffic congestions and litter disrupted the lives of local residents. It is imperative for local government and event organizers to take immediate actions to mitigate and minimize the perceived negative impacts. It is also suggested that the attitude of local residents should be monitored on a regular basis. Destination policy-makers should establish systematic procedures to ensure such assessment and incorporate the results into destination planning and management policies. To gain local support, event organizers should communicate with the host community about the event impacts and how the benefits of events contribute to their daily lives. This study shows that tourism involvement influences residents' perceptions of event impacts. Event organizers may plan some opportunities to involve local residents into the event planning and management process. This will foster the sense of personal gains (Li et al., 2015).

This study has some limitations. First, the survey used a convenience sample. Local residents chose to participate in the survey based on their self-judgement. Although the sample was adequate for statistical analysis, the conclusion cannot be generalized to represent the overall population. Second, the data were collected in the summer, right after two of the five major events: Summer Art Festival and Downtown at Sundown. Thus, the responses might be more based on the two recent events rather than all the five. Moreover, this study was operated at a particular point of time. Like other tourism products, these recurring events have a life cycle. At different stages of development, residents' perceptions might vary (Kaplanidou et al., 2013; Li et al., 2015). Future researchers could conduct longitudinal studies to track the residents' attitudinal changes over time.

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