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BEYOND ECONOMIC AND MARKETING BENEFITS: GENERATION Z PERCEPTIONS OF THE WORLD ATHLETICS INDOOR CHAMPIONSHIPS

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Abstract: *Sport mega-events can contribute to destination visibility and social engagement, but younger residents' perceptions of such events remain insufficiently explored. This study examined Generation Z university students' perceptions of the socio-cultural, direct economic, and tourism-related impacts of the World Athletics Indoor Championships Belgrade 2022, as well as their associations with excitement and support for event hosting. Data were collected during the championships through an online survey of 173 students from Belgrade and analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, and one-way ANOVA. Participants reported the most positive perceptions of tourism-related impacts, followed by socio-cultural impacts, while direct economic impacts received lower ratings. Tourism-related and socio-cultural perceptions were positively associated with excitement and support for hosting the event, whereas direct economic perceptions were not significantly associated with support. Female participants reported more positive socio-cultural and tourism-related perceptions than male participants. The findings suggest that, in this sample, international athletics events were evaluated primarily through tourism, symbolic, and social benefits rather than direct economic expectations.*

Keywords: resident perception; socio-cultural impact; tourism impact; event support; destination image

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Introduction

Mega-events are large-scale international gatherings that receive significant media attention, substantial economic investment, and considerable social impact. Roche (2000) described them as "modern society's big shows," emphasizing their role in shaping the cultural, economic, and political landscapes of the host societies. Sports mega-events, in particular, have increasingly become vital tools for tourism development, destination marketing branding, urban transformation, and international visibility (Roche, 2000; Müller, 2015; Ludvigsen et al., 2022). In the Serbian and regional context, previous studies have also emphasized the importance of sport marketing, sponsorship, digital communication, and strategic planning of sport and tourist events for the development and promotion of sport-related services and destinations (Ratković, 2023; Milačić, 2024; Trkulja et al., 2025).

The success of mega-events is not evaluated solely on financial outcomes or media exposure. It also considers the perceptions and attitudes of local residents. Research indicates that residents' support is significantly influenced by their perceptions of the economic, social, and cultural effects of hosting a major sporting event (Kim et al., 2006; Zhou & Ap, 2009; Kaplanidou et al., 2013). Positive perceptions are generally linked to benefits such as tourism growth, infrastructure improvements, community pride, increased sports participation, and international recognition. In contrast, negative perceptions often relate to rising living costs, traffic congestion, overcrowding, and disruptions to daily life (Andereck et al., 2005; Preuss, 2007).

Within the existing literature, Social Exchange Theory (SET) has emerged as a prominent theoretical framework for understanding residents' support for mega-events. SET suggests that individuals evaluate events based on perceived benefits and costs, likely supporting initiatives that yield positive outcomes for their communities (Woosnam, 2012; Giango et al., 2022). In the context of sports mega-events, perceived economic opportunities, tourism development, and social benefits can positively influence attitudes towards hosting such events. Meanwhile, Social Representations Theory (SRT) examines how societies collectively construct meanings and symbolic interpretations around social phenomena, including mega-events (Moscovici, 2000). Thus, sporting events can contribute not only to economic expectations but also to shaping destination images, fostering national pride, and facilitating symbolic international recognition (Bodet & Lacassagne, 2012; Kenyon & Bodet, 2018).

Research on mega-events has consistently highlighted the socio-cultural and economic dimensions as crucial aspects of resident perceptions. Socio-cultural impacts include community pride, cultural exchange, enhanced social cohesion, and increased interest in sports participation, while economic impacts are generally linked to tourism growth, infrastructure investments, employment opportunities, and destination branding (Kim & Petrick, 2005; Prayag et al., 2013; Ribeiro et al., 2020). Among these aspects, perceptions related to tourism are particularly important, as residents often associate mega-events with heightened international visibility and a long-term appeal for their destinations.

Additionally, generational differences are becoming increasingly significant in sports consumption research. Generation Z, typically defined as individuals born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, represents the first fully digital-native generation (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). Their patterns of media consumption, communication, and sports engagement differ markedly from those of previous generations. Existing studies suggest that Generation Z primarily consumes sports through digital and social media platforms, values short-form and interactive content, and places a greater emphasis on experiences and social engagement than on traditional forms of sports fandom (Katz et al., 2022). Despite their strong digital orientation, younger audiences still show interest in live sports events due to the social and experiential value these events provide.

Previous studies have examined resident perceptions of mega-events, particularly in contexts such as the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup, including the 2002 FIFA World Cup in South Korea, the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games, the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Games, the South Africa 2010 FIFA World Cup, and the Rio 2016 Olympic Games (Kim et al., 2006; Zhou & Ap, 2009; Kaplanidou & Karadakis, 2010; Kaplanidou et al., 2013; Ribeiro et al., 2020). However, significantly less attention has been paid to athletics events and to younger population groups. This gap is particularly relevant because younger audiences represent future consumers, participants, and supporters of international sporting events, and their support may be shaped not only by economic expectations but also by symbolic, experiential, and tourism-related perceptions.

The World Athletics Indoor Championships Belgrade 2022 represented one of the most visible international athletics events hosted in Serbia in recent years. As such, it provided an appropriate context for examining how Generation Z perceive the broader socio-cultural, direct economic, and tourism-related meanings of hosting an international sporting event in Southeast Europe.

Therefore, this study aims to explore Generation Z's perceptions of the socio-cultural, economic, and tourism-related impacts of the World Athletics Indoor Championships in Belgrade 2022 and to analyze how these perceptions relate to excitement and support for hosting the event. It was hypothesized that more positive perceptions of the event's socio-cultural, direct economic, and tourism-related impacts would be associated with higher excitement and stronger support for hosting the event.

Methods

This study focused on the World Athletics Indoor Championships held in Belgrade in 2022. It was an international athletics mega-event organized by World Athletics. The event featured 612 athletes from 129 countries and received extensive media coverage, with broadcasting rights extended to over 100 countries. This championship was one of the most significant international sporting events hosted in Serbia in recent years and provided a suitable context for examining perceptions of Generation Z regarding mega-event hosting.

A cross-sectional survey design was used to investigate perceptions of the socio-cultural, economic, and tourism-related impacts associated with the event. The study also explored excitement about the championships and support for hosting such events in Belgrade.

Participants

The study involved 173 Generation Z participants from Belgrade, Serbia (age: 21.36±1.58, range 19-25). These participants were university students recruited from various higher education institutions in the city using a convenience sampling method.

Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous, with all participants providing informed consent before taking part. Before completing the survey, participants were informed about the purpose of the research and assured that their responses would be used exclusively for scientific purposes. The study adhered to the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the Ethics Committee of Singidunum University (Approval No. 705-1, dated May 25, 2026)

Data collection

Data were collected using an electronic questionnaire created with Google Forms. The questionnaire was distributed during the competition to university students in Belgrade.

It was adapted from the instrument developed by Al-Emadi et al. (2017) for research on residents' perceptions of the FIFA World Cup in Qatar. The original instrument developed by Al-Emadi et al. (2017) was previously used in research on residents' perceptions of the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar and included dimensions related to perceived event impacts, excitement, and support for event hosting. In the present study, the questionnaire was contextually adapted to the World Athletics Indoor Championships Belgrade 2022, and internal consistency was assessed for all multi-item scales in the present sample. All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree").

The perceived socio-cultural impact was assessed through nine items that examined perceptions related to cultural exchange, national pride, community cohesion, sport development, and potential negative consequences of hosting the event. Composite scores were calculated as arithmetic means after reverse coding negatively worded items. The internal consistency of the scale was found to be acceptable, with a Cronbach's alpha of .74.

The economic impact was evaluated through nine items divided into two dimensions. The first dimension assessed perceptions of economic and business development, focusing on employment opportunities, infrastructure development, and business investment. The second dimension addressed tourism-related impacts, including destination image, international visibility, and tourism attractiveness. Composite scores for economic impact were calculated as arithmetic means of item responses, with reverse coding applied where necessary. Reliability coefficients indicated acceptable to good internal consistency for

economic impact (Cronbach's alpha of .77) and tourism-related impact (Cronbach's alpha of .85).

To evaluate excitement and support for the event, two single-item measures were used: 1. Excitement about the event, and 2. Support for hosting the championships in Belgrade. Both were measured on a five-point scale, ranging from 1 ("not excited at all" or "not supported at all") to 5 ("very excited" or "fully supported").

Statistical analysis

Data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics 27. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages, were calculated to summarize the demographic characteristics and the primary study variables.

The internal consistency of multi-item scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients. Pearson correlation analysis was used to explore the relationships between perceived socio-cultural, economic, and tourism-related impacts and the dependent variables of excitement and event support. Additionally, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was employed to analyze differences in perceptions based on gender and levels of excitement. A statistical significance level of $p < .05$ was established.

Results

The final sample consisted of 173 Generation Z participants residing in Belgrade, Serbia. Detailed demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants.

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	52	30.1
	Female	121	69.9
Study field	Economics	89	51.4
	Tourism & hospitality	38	22.0
	Sports-related studies	20	11.6
	Other	26	15.0
Sport participation	Active	71	41.0
	Non-active	102	59.0

Note: F - number of respondents; **%** - percentage of the total sample.

Participants reported moderately positive perceptions of the socio-cultural impact of the World Athletics Indoor Championships Belgrade 2022 (M = 3.62; Table 2). Tourism-related impact received the highest rating (M = 4.13), whereas direct economic impact was evaluated less positively (M = 2.87). Participants also reported moderate excitement about the event (*M* = 3.23) but very high support for hosting it (*M* = 4.71).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of examined variables.

Variable	M	SD
Socio-cultural impact	3.62	0.68
Direct economic impact	2.87	0.87
Tourism impact	4.13	0.73
Excitement	3.23	1.11
Event support	4.71	0.65

Pearson correlation analysis revealed significant positive relationships among socio-cultural impact, tourism impact, excitement, and support for event hosting (Table 3). Specifically, socio-cultural impact was positively associated with excitement ($r = .44$, $p < .001$) and with support for hosting events ($r = .20$, $p < .01$). Additionally, tourism-related impact exhibited significant positive relationships with excitement ($r = .38$, $p < .001$) and support for event hosting ($r = .37$, $p < .001$). In contrast, perceptions of direct economic impact were not significantly related to support for hosting the event ($r = .06$, $p > .05$).

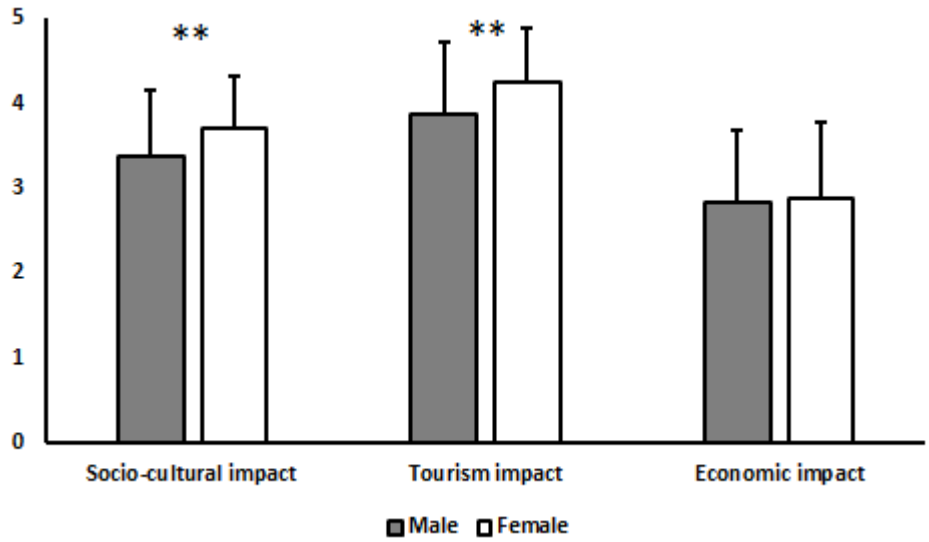
Table 3. Correlations among variables.

Variable	Socio-cultural impact	Economic impact	Tourism impact	Excitement	Event support
Socio-cultural impact	—				
Economic impact	.536**	—			
Tourism impact	.572**	.391**	—		
Excitement	.437**	.284**	.381**	—	
Event support	.203**	.058	.371**	.224**	—

Note: Pearson correlation coefficients are presented. **p < .01.

A one-way ANOVA revealed significant gender differences in socio-cultural impact ($F = 9.14$, $p = .003$) and tourism-related impact ($F = 9.61$, $p = .002$). Female participants reported more positive evaluations than male participants in both dimensions (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Perceived socio-cultural, tourism-related, and direct economic impacts by gender.



Note: Columns represent mean values; error bars represent standard deviations. ** $p < .01$ for gender differences.

Significant differences in perceived impacts were also observed across levels of excitement, including socio-cultural impact ($F = 10.41$, $p < .001$), economic impact ($F = 3.82$, $p = .005$), and tourism-related impact ($F = 7.41$, $p < .001$).

Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine Generation Z perceptions of the socio-cultural, economic, and tourism-related impacts of the World Athletics Indoor Championships Belgrade 2022 and to analyze how these perceptions relate to excitement and support for event hosting. The findings indicate that Generation Z generally perceived the event positively, particularly regarding tourism promotion and socio-cultural benefits, while perceptions of direct economic impact were considerably less positive.

One of the main findings of the study is that tourism-related impacts received the highest evaluations among all measured dimensions. Respondents strongly associated the event with international visibility, destination promotion, and improvement of Serbia's image abroad. These findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that residents often perceive mega-events as important instruments for destination branding and tourism development (Kim & Petrick, 2005; Kaplanidou & Karadakis, 2010). In the context of Social Representations Theory, such perceptions may reflect the symbolic value of hosting an international sporting event, where the event functions not only as a sports competition but also as a mechanism for international recognition and image construction.

In contrast, perceptions of direct economic impact were notably lower. Respondents appeared more skeptical regarding employment opportunities, infrastructure development, and broader economic benefits associated with the championships. Furthermore, economic

impact was not significantly related to support for event hosting. This finding is particularly important because it suggests that Generation Z may evaluate mega-events less through traditional economic expectations and more through experiential, symbolic, and social dimensions. Such findings partially support the assumptions of Social Exchange Theory, but also indicate that perceived intangible benefits may be more influential than material outcomes among younger populations.

Socio-cultural perceptions also played an important role in shaping attitudes toward the event. Positive associations were identified between socio-cultural impact, excitement, and support for hosting. Respondents perceived the event as beneficial for national pride, social atmosphere, cultural exchange, and promotion of sports participation. Similar findings have been reported in previous mega-event studies, where community pride and social cohesion were identified as important predictors of resident support (Kim et al., 2006; Zhou & Ap, 2009; Ribeiro et al., 2020). The present findings further suggest that younger generations may particularly value the emotional and social experience surrounding sports mega-events.

Another important finding relates to excitement as a psychological factor associated with event perceptions. Significant differences in perceived impacts were observed across levels of excitement in all three measured dimensions. This finding indicates that emotional engagement is associated with how participants evaluated the event. Previous studies on Generation Z have emphasized that younger audiences value experiences, social interaction, and emotionally engaging content more strongly than previous generations (Katz et al., 2022). The current results appear to support these observations within the context of athletics mega-events.

The study also identified gender differences in socio-cultural and tourism-related perceptions, with female respondents reporting more positive evaluations than males. These differences were statistically significant for socio-cultural impact ($F = 9.14$, $p = .003$) and tourism-related impact ($F = 9.61$, $p = .002$), as shown in Figure 1. Although previous research on gender differences in mega-event perception remains inconsistent, some studies have similarly reported stronger emotional and symbolic engagement among female respondents, particularly regarding social and community-related dimensions of sports events. However, these findings should be interpreted cautiously due to the gender imbalance within the sample.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that organizers of athletics mega-events should place greater emphasis on experiential, social, and destination-related aspects when targeting Generation Z audiences. Traditional narratives focused exclusively on economic benefits may be less effective for younger populations. Instead, communication strategies emphasizing community atmosphere, international visibility, social interaction, and unique live-event experiences may contribute more strongly to engagement and event support.

Several limitations of the study should be acknowledged. First, the study relied on a convenience sample of university students from Belgrade, which limits the generalizability of the findings to the broader Generation Z population. Second, the dependent variables related

to excitement and support were measured using single-item indicators. Single-item indicators were used due to the exploratory nature of the study and to reduce participant burden. Third, the study focused on a single athletics mega-event within a specific socio-cultural context, which may limit transferability to other countries or event types. Future research should include larger and more diverse samples, longitudinal approaches, and comparative analyses across different mega-events and cultural settings.

Overall, the findings contribute to the growing literature on sports mega-events and Generation Z by demonstrating that younger populations may evaluate athletics mega-events primarily through tourism, symbolic, and socio-cultural dimensions rather than through direct economic expectations.

Conclusion

This study examined Generation Z perceptions of the World Athletics Indoor Championships Belgrade 2022 and found that respondents viewed the event positively, particularly regarding tourism promotion, destination image, and socio-cultural benefits, while direct economic benefits were perceived less positively. Tourism-related perceptions and emotional engagement were significantly associated with support for event hosting, suggesting that Generation Z evaluates athletics events primarily through symbolic, experiential, and social dimensions. Despite methodological limitations, the findings contribute to the limited literature on younger audiences and sports events in Southeast Europe and provide a basis for future research on Generation Z and perceptions of mega-events.

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