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Article

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Resident perceptions of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games: An examination of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Japanese residents' perceptions of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics. A nationwide survey measured attitudes towards the Games and perceptions of subjective well-being, comparing pre- and post-event evaluations to examine the impact of disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Surprisingly, the Wilcoxon signed-rank test indicated that perceptions on many items about community benefits significantly increased, while many concerns about quality-of-life and COVID-19 significantly decreased. The study found that, overall, attitudes towards the Olympics became more favourable despite the impact of the pandemic. The epidemic control strategy which isolated athletes from host residents and prioritised public health is discussed as a legacy for sustainable mega sport events.

1. Introduction

This paper discusses the impact of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games in Japan. The findings of a longitudinal study make a unique contribution to knowledge due to the unprecedented nature of the event caused by the intervention of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Games had to be postponed and, when they were held from 21 July to 8 August in 2021, it was not possible to realise the economic and social benefits that normally accompany the Olympics. The size and profile of mega-events make them susceptible to exceptional risks (Miles and Shipway, 2020) with consequent impacts felt by a wide range of stakeholders (Wong and Chadwick, 2016). Academic research has focussed on disaster preparedness (Toohey and Taylor, 2012) and the perceptions of risk among spectators and tourists (Walters, Shipway, Miles, and Aldrigui, 2017). There is a clear gap in relation to the perceptions of the host community and a need to understand how they may change through time due to the extended planning period associated with an Olympic Games. There has been a lack of quantitative analysis about crisis management (Toohey and Taylor, 2012) and a review of the literature about the social impact of mega-events specifically called for research to better understand the impact of COVID-19 on the 2020 Olympic Games (Mair, Chien, Kelly, and Derrington, 2021). In addition, few studies have examined attitudes and behaviour in Japanese society in relation to mega-events (Duignan,

2021; Inoue, Yoshida, Swanson, and Medway, 2023; Ito, Higham, and Cheer, 2022; Pratt and Chan, 2016).

The impact of COVID-19 on the 2020 Olympic Games was felt across Japan demanding ongoing adaptation at all levels of society from national politicians to community leaders. It was considered important to understand the dynamic nature of the pandemic and a review was made of the changing political environment, communication strategies and event planning as expectations about sports events are formed within a social context (Allen and Shaw, 2009; Madrigal, 1995). The media plays a significant role in forming public sentiment towards the Olympics (Parent and Foreman, 2007) so media coverage offered valuable data to inform the study which focussed on perceptions about the impact of the Games within the host community. The specific purpose was to measure whether changes caused by the pandemic affected attitudes towards the event. Surveys were conducted across Japan before and after the Games to determine whether perceptions about event impacts and levels of support for the event changed through time.

The 2020 Olympics can be seen as a case study of crisis management, but they also offer an opportunity to examine the changing nature of the social exchange between the host community and the event. Gaining community support in exchange for anticipated beneficial event outcomes is a necessary condition for staging successful mega-events such as the Olympics (Brown, 2020; Getz and Page, 2016; Ziakas, 2016). It

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has also been suggested that community support is achieved when residents believe that their well-being has been enhanced (Yolal, Gursoy, Uysal, Kim, and Karacaoğluf, 2016). Social exchange theory and social representations theory were used in the Tokyo Olympics study as explanatory frameworks to assist the research design. Adopting a mixed methods approach (Cresswell and Creswell, 2023) with interpretation based on the two theories (Li, Hsu, and Lawton, 2015), the research examined perceptions of mega-event impacts in extraordinary circumstances. The findings are of practical and theoretical significance.

2. Literature review

2.1. Residents' perceptions

Festivals and events create economic and social benefits and they offer opportunities for residents to exchange ideas and learn about their own culture (Yolal, Gursoy, Uysal, Kim, and Karacaoğluf, 2016). In a tourism context, Kim, Uysal, and Sirgy (2013) found that the subjective well-being of residents is one of the most important determinants of their overall quality-of-life and Yolal, Gursoy, Uysal, Kim, and Karacaoğluf (2016) suggested that there is support for festivals and events in host communities if they are considered to enhance the local quality-of-life. This makes the well-being of residents an important factor in determining the success and sustainability of events.

Li, Hsu, and Lawton (2015) applied social exchange theory as a micro lens and social representations theory as a macro lens to help interpret how host residents' perceptions were formed about the Shanghai 2010 World Expo. From the perspective of social exchange theory, residents' reactions are seen as the result of a comparison between expected costs and benefits and Ap (1992) has argued that if residents perceive that the benefits of tourism exceed the costs, they will support tourism in their community. Similarly, Li, Hsu, and Lawton (2015) stated that individuals tend to be more supportive of tourism events if they perceive the benefits to be greater than the costs. They also noted that residents' perceptions of events are formed in a social context, using social representations theory to understand how perceptions, values and attitudes towards tourism and events are shared in host communities. It was suggested that social representations become the reference point for people to make sense of the world. According to Fredline and Faulkner (2000), they are the product of direct experience, social interaction and media messages. Li, Hsu, and Lawton (2015) pointed out that the latter two sources are particularly important in shaping perceptions and attitudes towards hosting events. Furthermore, Wassler, Nguyen, and Schuckert (2019) stated that studies based solely on social exchange theory do not allow for the analysis of contextual factors and recommended the use of the mixed methods. In our study, media coverage and public attitude surveys were examined due to their potential influence on the development of social representations about the Tokyo 2020 Olympics. As reference points in communication between residents, they are likely to affect emergent perceptions about the costs and benefits associated with the Games.

2.2. Economic impacts and image enhancement

Getz and Page (2016) categorized the Olympic Games as an occasional mega-event which has both high tourist demands and high values. The values include economic benefits and the ability to enhance the image and brand of the host city (Arnegger and Herz, 2016; Brown, Chalip, Jago, and Mules, 2004; Mair, Chien, Kelly, and Derrington, 2021; Preuss, 2007). Based on a systematic review of research about the Winter Olympics, Gaudette, Roult, and Lefebvre (2017) concluded that the Winter Olympics stimulate urban regeneration in host cities and provide opportunities for the development of the tourism industry due to the combined effects of increased tourist flows and image enhancement. On the other hand, Lamla, Straub, and Grisberger (2014) reported an overall negative economic impact of the EURO Football

Championships in 2008 based on a survey of more than 700 Swiss hotels and restaurants. Mega-events also force host communities to pay the huge costs of building new facilities, organising the event and entertaining the guests (Blake, 2005). However, many studies confirmed that major sporting events have a positive impact on the host country's economy and their tourism and hospitality industries (Crompton, 1995; Fourie and Santana-Gallego, 2011; Lee and Taylor, 2005).

In the context of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, Japanese tourism, hospitality and transportation businesses had high expectations that international visitors to the Olympic Games would stay, travel and consume in Tokyo and other host prefectures (Fukuchi, Uehara, Kamata, and He, 2022). Unfortunately, due to the ban on spectators attending most of rescheduled events, the expected benefits would not be realised. The Japanese and Tokyo governments and the organising committee still incurred the costs of building the main stadium and venues and of organising the Olympic Games. As a result, there were concerns that Japanese citizens would have to cover financial debts into the future.

Getz (2008) noted that there is an extensive literature about the relationship between sport events and the image of the host city. In an influential longitudinal study of the impact of the 1988 Calgary Winter Olympics, Ritchie and Smith (1991) conducted a five-year survey and found an increase in awareness and a change in the image of Calgary. A study of the 2006 FIFA World Cup by Grix (2012) found that a systematic and purposeful leveraging strategy with a fan-centred approach and the creation of a feelgood factor around the tournament helped improve Germany's poor national image. In an analysis of medium-sized cities in Canada, Clark and Misener (2015) stated that the strategic sequencing and timing of several sport events served to significantly improve local development and the brand of host cities. Lai (2018) found that the event image of the Beijing 2008 Olympics positively correlated with the host city's image and proposed the use of mega-events for leveraging destination images.

Conversely, some studies have failed to find significant positive impacts on the image of the host country. Hahm, Tasci, and Terry (2019) measured Americans' perceptions of South Korea, the host of the 2018 Pyeongchang Olympics, at six different points before and after the Olympics and concluded that hosting the Olympics did not significantly change the image of the country. Tasci, Hahm, and Terry (2019) also found no influence of hosting the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympics on either the image of the host city or of Brazil. In a pre-post study of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, Kim, Kang, and Kim (2014) found that the modern image of the Olympics conflicted with the cultural image of China and had a negative influence among people with previous visit experience. These studies also noted the role of the media, including social media, in image formation. Parent and Foreman (2007) suggested that the media is a significant indirect channel to create and spread the image of large-scale sporting events to stakeholders and there may have been confusion in Japanese society due to contradictory messages sent by the mass media. This may have been compounded by the growing importance of social media which was the most powerful source of information about the event (Hahm, Tasci, and Terry, 2019; Inoue, Yoshida, Swanson, and Medway, 2023).

2.3. Social impacts

Another research stream has shed light on both the positive and negative outcomes associated with the social and cultural impacts of sport events on host societies (Mair, Chien, Kelly, and Derrington, 2021; Oshimi, Harada, and Fukuhara, 2016). Social concerns about traffic congestion, overcrowding, vandalism, terrorism, infectious disease and tax imposition have been found to generate negative attitudes in host communities even when there is a recognition of economic benefits (Hoang, Al-Tawfiq, and Gautret, 2020; Trendafilova, Graham, and Bemiller, 2017; Wynn-Moylan, 2018). Ritchie, Shipway, and Cleeve (2009) investigated residents' perceptions of the 2012 London Olympic and Paralympic Games in Weymouth and Portland, the location for the

Olympic sailing competition. They found that residents were supportive of hosting the event in the local area but concerned about traffic congestion, parking issues and potential increases in the cost of living. It was proposed that “the planners of the Olympics in the local area should consider engaging the community more in decision making, which could increase residents’ overall support for the event” (p. 164). Kim, Jun, Walker, and Drane (2015) studied the social impacts from hosting the Formula One Korean Grand Prix, finding that positive social impacts were considered to be more important than positive economic impacts. Gibson et al. (2014) investigated psychic income and social capital for the host nation of the 2010 South Africa FIFA World Cup in both the pre- and the post-event periods and found a significant increase in psychic income.

In a series of longitudinal studies on the Rio de Janeiro 2016 Olympics, Ribeiro, Correia, and Biscaia (2020) examined resident perceptions of social impacts, finding that the perception of positive impacts increased and negative impacts decreased during the event. In other studies of the Rio 2016 Olympics, Ribeiro and Almeida (2021) found a positive relationship between resident perceptions of trust in government and event support. Ribeiro, Yoda, Papadimitriou, and Correia (2022) found that the level of support for the event increased during the Games, but gradually decreased after the event. A recent article concluded that changes in young host adults’ social identification with the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games had a positive impact on changes in their universal-diverse orientation (Inoue, Yoshida, Swanson, and Medway, 2023).

2.4. Issues of risk

The Olympics has attracted considerable research interest due to “their magnitude, political and economic importance, prominence in the media and frequent controversy surrounding the IOC” (Getz, 2008, p. 412). Ribeiro, Correia, Biscaia, and Bason (2021) agreed that Olympic organising committees must address complex political issues and challenges associated with infrastructure development while applying management skills related to marketing, finance, human resources, event planning, event operations and event legacy. According to Boykoff (2014), “the Olympic Games have become much more commercialized, branded, and commoditized as private capital” and “private security firms have taken on a larger role in policing the Games” (p. 3). The authors also claimed that “the Olympics is a celebratory spectacle that is more about economic benefit for the few than economic prosperity for the many” (p. 2). Olympic Games have the potential to increase inequality by concentrating wealth and violating the rights of vulnerable people (Leal de Oliveira, Vainer, Mascarenhas, Bienenstein, and Braathen, 2020; Shin, 2012; Suzuki, Ogawa, and Inaba, 2018). Boykoff and Gaffney (2020) also claimed that the Tokyo 2020 Olympics were being used politically to whitewash the Fukushima nuclear energy plant accident. Brown (2020) has drawn attention to the use of design to communicate values of the host society with the development of an Olympic look providing opportunities for creative engagement. But elements of a design can be unpopular and attract considerable criticism. These controversies were covered extensively in the local mass media, increasing concerns about hosting the Games.

The level of risks associated with mega sport events has increased as they have become a target of terrorists (Hassan, 2014). As mass gatherings, they also have the potential to increase the spread of infectious diseases (Hoang, Al-Tawfiq, and Gautret, 2020; Ilevbare and McPherson, 2022; Petersen et al., 2016). Concerns about public health were experienced at the Rio de Janeiro 2016 Olympics due to the Zika virus (Petersen et al., 2016; Ribeiro, Correia, Biscaia, and Bason, 2021). Taku and Arai (2020) stated that the postponement of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics had raised fears about impacts on public health. Oblinger-Peters and Krenn (2020) and Taku and Arai (2020) focused mainly on the reactions of athletes and coaches to the postponement of the Games. In the context of tourism studies, Kock, Nørfelt, Josiassen, Assaf, and

Tsionas (2020) investigated the impact of COVID-19 on the visitors’ perceptions while Zenker and Kock (2020) recognised the need for studies of host residents’ perceptions about the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.5. Research design

A review of the literature described above demonstrated the need for comprehensive, longitudinal research to examine the impact of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics. Our research adopted a multistage convergent mixed methods design (Cresswell and Creswell, 2023), applying micro and macro theoretical lenses (Li, Hsu, and Lawton, 2015). Both qualitative and quantitative data was collected to identify any changes in the perceptions of residents about the Tokyo 2020 Olympics. As shown in Fig. 1, data about perceived benefits/concerns and subjective well-being was collected from the same respondents in the pre- and the post-event periods.

The study was structured to achieve the following aims:

1. To determine the level of support for hosting the Tokyo Olympics among residents in Japan before and after the event.
2. To identify the direction of any changes in residents’ perceptions about the impact of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games.
3. To identify factors that may have influenced any changes in perceptions.
4. To determine potential lessons from the Tokyo 2020 Olympics for the management of mega-events.

3. The Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games

The Olympic Games operate as an open system that interacts with and is affected by a wide range of environmental factors. As the setting for each Games is different, it is important to understand the local context and the influence of distinctive social and political characteristics (Brown, 2020; Leiper, 1979). When Tokyo won the right to host the 2020 Olympic Games in 2013, the event was regarded by the Japanese government as an opportunity to demonstrate to the world that Japan was steadily recovering from the 2011 earthquake and the nuclear plant accident (Boykoff and Gaffney, 2020; Duignan, 2021). In common with experiences during the planning phase at most Olympic Games, the path to 2020 was not straightforward and the International Olympic Committee and the Japan Olympic Committee faced a series of organisational problems (Ribeiro and Correia, 2021; Ribeiro, Correia, Biscaia, and Bason, 2021). They were widely reported in Japan and may have affected perceptions about the merits of the Games in the host community.

3.1. Stadium and emblem issues

Stadiums play an increasingly important role in shaping the image of Olympic Games and stand as a tangible event legacy (Brown, 2020). A study by Smith, Brown, and Assaker (2017) found that spectators’ satisfaction at the 2012 London Olympics was influenced by a sense of attachment to the venues. Unfortunately, major difficulties accompanied plans for a new National Stadium for the Tokyo Olympics. Following a global competition, a design by Zaha Hadid won in November 2012 but, the contract was cancelled in 2015 due to excessive cost increases. The main stadium was to be situated in the outer ground of the Meiji Jingū shrine built in 1920 and several Japanese architects and citizens raised concerns about the harmonization of the design with the surrounding environment. The bidding process was relaunched and a plan by a Japanese architect was chosen. It included the use of local timbers from 47 prefectures and a lower height for the stadium. It sought to better harmonize the stadium with the forest of the Meiji Jingū shrine (NHK News Web: https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/special/2020news/special/article_20200420_02.html).

The next problem concerned the design of the Olympic emblem. This

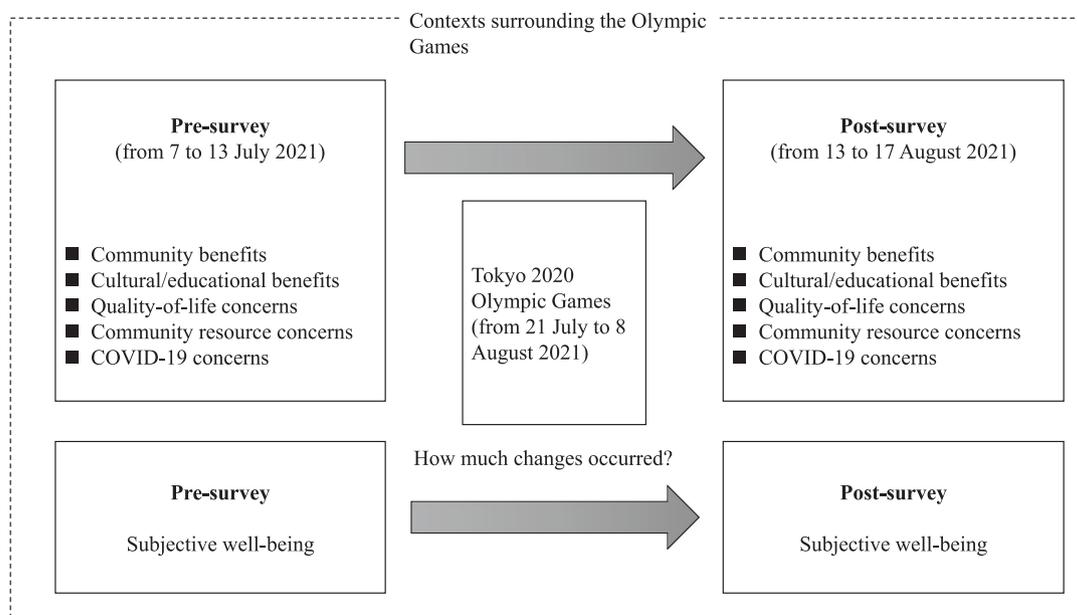


Fig. 1. Framework of this study.

was a surprise as the Tokyo 1964 Olympics is remembered for its innovation in design and its influence on techniques applied at subsequent Olympics (Brown, 2020). The Japanese designer who won the competition for the design of the emblem in 2015 was accused of plagiarism. A Belgian designer sued the International Olympic Committee, claiming that his design for the theatre, Théâtre de Liège, had been copied. The organising committee was forced to cancel the design and to launch a new competition for the 2020 Olympic emblem.¹

3.2. Ethical issues

The preparations were disrupted by a series of inappropriate actions by senior officials. At the Japan Olympic Committee meeting in February 2021, the president of the Tokyo Olympic Organising Committee complained that female participants tended to speak too much, and that meetings with many female board directors took too long. These discriminatory comments were severely criticised both in Japan and in other countries and 400 people withdrew applications to volunteer at the Games. The president resigned just five months before the start of the Olympics (BBC: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56020674>). In a similar vein, the creative director of the opening and closing ceremonies insulted the appearance of a Japanese actress who was appointed to perform in one of the ceremonies. This was regarded as a violation of human rights and, after discussions with the International Olympic Committee, the Tokyo Olympic Organising Committee asked the director to resign in March 2021, just four months before the Olympics.² To make matter worse, a composer of the opening ceremony, a Japanese musician, admitted that he had previously engaged in bullying people with disabilities. The organising committee initially allowed him to continue in his role but, following extensive criticism he decided to resign just 4 days before the opening ceremony. Finally, a director of the opening ceremony, who used to be a comedian, had ridiculed the holocaust in a skit performed in 1998. This behaviour was attacked by the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, and the director resigned a day before the opening ceremony.³

This unethical behaviour by responsible Japanese people was

contrary to the fundamental principles of Olympism manifested in the Olympic charter. Domestically, they were considered to be examples of shameful, outdated Japanese beliefs about diversity, equality and social inclusion. They were widely reported, and became an embarrassment for Japanese people and may have influenced attitudes towards hosting the event.

3.3. The pandemic

The organisers of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics were confronted by an unprecedented epidemic. The World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 to be a global pandemic in March 2020, just 4 months before the start of the Games. The organising committee and the Japanese and Tokyo governments were forced to decide whether to postpone or abandon the event that had been subject to so much planning and investment. They decided to postpone it until July 2021 in the hope that the epidemic would have improved by the following year. Despite the pandemic becoming worse as shown in Fig. 2, the Tokyo 2020 Olympics was held from 21 July to 8 August 2021. The implementation of a “bubble” strategy meant the event was held without spectators and athletes were isolated from Japanese citizens. There were exceptions in three prefectures outside Tokyo where a limited number of domestic spectators were allowed to attend cycling and soccer games. The “bubble” strategy sought to ease concerns among Japanese citizens about an explosion of severe COVID-19 cases during the Olympics (General Research, 2021). Without spectators and Games visitors, hospitality, food and transportation businesses were denied opportunities to gain revenue from the expected increase in domestic and international visitors.

The environment prior to the Games caused opinion in Japanese society to fluctuate. This was revealed in a series of surveys that were conducted by Asahi Shinbun, a Japanese newspaper.⁴ It was found that on 5 and 6 October 2013, 77 % of respondents thought it would be good to host the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, while only 16 % thought the opposite. There was a positive atmosphere and a desire to welcome the Olympic Games at this time. However, on 14 and 15 March 2020 just after the World Health Organisation declaration of the pandemic, 63 % believed

¹ See the news source in Appendix A, Supplement 1.

² See the news source in Appendix A, Supplement 2.

³ See the news source in Appendix A, Supplement 3.

⁴ See the news source in Appendix A, Supplement 4.

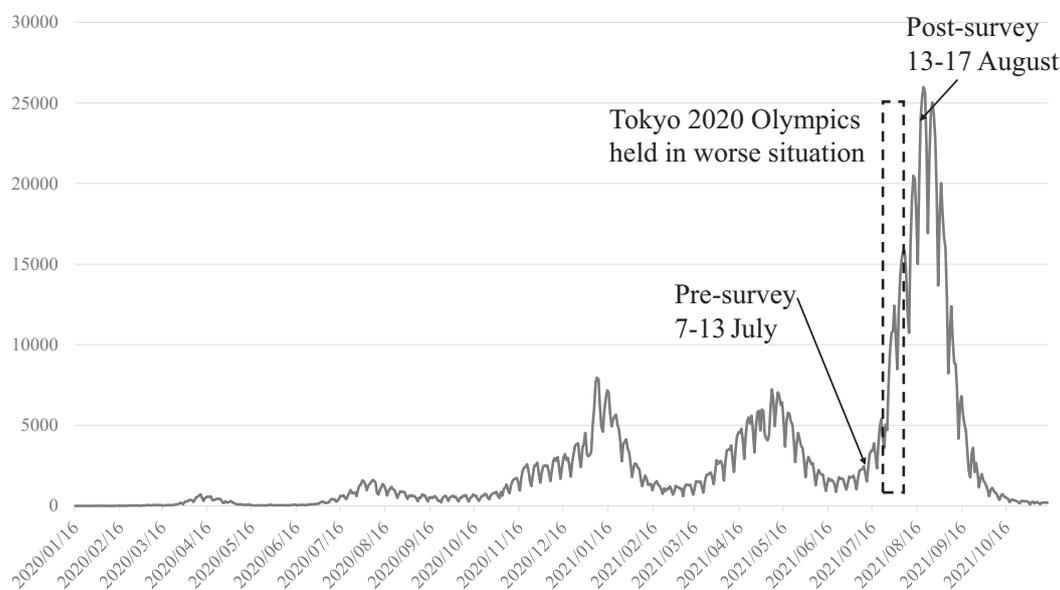


Fig. 2. Number of COVID-19 patients in Japan.

(Source) Based on Japan Broadcasting Corporation website of COVID-19 (<https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/special/coronavirus/data-all/>; accessed on 14 November 2021).

that the Games should be postponed with only 23 % supportive of the event being held on the original date. A survey on 15 and 16 May 2021 reported that 43 % believed that it should be suspended, 40 % wanted it to be postponed and 14 % wanted it to be held in that summer. A survey on 17 and 18 July 2021, when there was no longer an option to postpone, showed that 55 % felt that the Olympic should not be held, while 33 % thought that it should be held. The same survey asked, “Do you think it is feasible to implement the Olympic safely and securely?” and 68 % of respondents replied “no”.

Consistent with social representations theory, the division in Japanese society about whether to support or oppose the Olympics might have been affected by news coverage about the pandemic. For instance, in June 2021, *The Japan Times* (2021a) reported that the country’s top COVID-19 adviser warned the Japanese government against holding the Olympic Games amid the pandemic. Another article in *the Japan Times* (2021b) reported that the top COVID-19 adviser decided to no longer provide advice after the Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga expressed his intention to go ahead with the Games at the Group of Seven (G7) Summit in Britain. The adviser commented that “the experts found their discussions on the issue to be fruitless after Suga’s remarks at the G7 Summit” and underlined “it was Suga’s administration that would ultimately decide how to proceed”. The confusion among the infection control advisers and the government may have made the public uncertain about the merits of hosting the Olympics.

There were other, potentially influential, messages by important stakeholders. Tokyo Shinbun, a Japanese newspaper, reported that a hospital in Tokyo had put up a sign against the Olympics (<https://www.tokyo-np.co.jp/article/120045>). Toyota Motor Corporation, an important Olympic sponsor, made the unusual step of deciding not to use the Olympics in its promotional campaign. It was concerned about the risks of being associated with the pandemic and negative feelings in Japan towards the Olympics (Forbes, <https://forbesjapan.com/articles/detail/71336>).

Contradictory policies were adopted by local governments in regions outside Tokyo. The Governor of Fukushima decided to hold the qualification rounds of the baseball and softball tournaments in the prefecture without spectators to avoid the risk of COVID-19. However, the Governor of Miyagi Prefecture, the adjoining prefecture to Fukushima, ignored advice from Sendai City Medical Association and Tohoku

University Hospital that spectators should not be present at the Games, and decided to allow spectators to attend the qualifying games of the soccer tournament that were held in his prefecture. A survey by a local newspaper in Miyagi prefecture found that 93 % of local residents disagreed with the governor’s decision.⁵

Japanese citizens were aware of the confusion about the suitability of pandemic measures and the contradictory messages from medical experts and government officials. Eventually, the Japanese government passed the responsibilities to the prefecture governors, asking them to decide how to proceed in each region. The governors made decisions that did not reflect public opinion and the views of the medical experts (*The Japan Times*, 2021a, 2021b; see also the news source in Appendix A, Supplement 5). The lack of clear leadership heightened tension about whether the Games should proceed amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. Methods of data analysis and collection

A series of statistical tests was used to measure the impact of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games on host residents’ perceptions. It was decided to use the Wilcoxon signed-rank test due to the non-normal distribution of data. As shown in Fig. 1, we compared perceptions about benefits/concerns and subjective well-being of the same respondents in both the pre- and the post-event periods.

Many of the items included in the questionnaire replicated those used by Yolal, Gursoy, Uysal, Kim, and Karacaoglu (2016), since their research examined issues of common concern related to community benefits, quality-of-life and the well-being of host residents. Items, translated using the back translation process, were evaluated by a 5-point Likert scale. Additional questions sought to identify how many respondents agreed or disagreed that the Tokyo 2020 Olympics should be held during the pandemic. To capture attitudes at the different times, wording of the questions had to be slightly adjusted. For example, “Which do you think; the Tokyo Olympics should be held or suspended?” for the pre-survey, was changed to “Which is your opinion; it was good to hold the Tokyo Olympics or not?” for the post-survey. Another question concerned respondent perceptions of the infectivity

⁵ See the news source in Appendix A, Supplement 5.

of COVID-19 in this period. Based on the articles such as [Kock, Nørfelt, Josiassen, Assaf, and Tsionas \(2020\)](#), [Zenker and Kock \(2020\)](#) and a public opinion survey by [General Research \(2021\)](#), questions were included to examine perceptions about the COVID-19 pandemic concerns. In addition, an open-ended question about opinions or views of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics was included to aid interpretation of the responses.

An internet-based survey was conducted on our behalf by Neo Marketing Inc., a widely respected Japanese marketing research company. The respondents had to live in Japan since this research wanted to know the perception of host residents. Our survey had the benefit of asking the same respondents in the pre- and the post-period, so it had two stages. The first stage, as the pre-Olympic survey, was conducted from 7 to 13 July 2021 and collected 1000 replies. The second stage, as the post-Olympic survey, was implemented from 13 to 17 August. We asked 1000 respondents who had completed the first survey again, and 865 respondents completed the second survey. Therefore, the final size of the sample, who responded to both pre- and post-Olympic surveys, was 865.

The Table (see Appendix A, Supplement 6) gives the profile of the survey respondents. The sex and age are equally represented in the pre-survey but the final sample is slightly biased towards male respondents

Table 1
Support for the Olympics.

Pre-survey	Frequency	%	Post-survey	Frequency	%
Absolutely to be held	44	5 %	Very good to hold	109	13 %
To be held	148	17 %	Good to hold	217	25 %
Netutral	217	25 %	Neutral	246	28 %
To be suspended	256	30 %	Good not to hold	154	18 %
Absolutely to be suspended	200	23 %	Very good not to hold	139	16 %
Total	865		Total	865	

Table 2
Perceived infectivity of COVID-19.

Item	Pre mean	Post mean	Dif	WSRT z
If an infectious disease like COVID-19 is going around, I will get it.	3.01	3.12	0.11	-3.578 ***
My past experiences make me believe I am likely to get sick if anyone around me is sick already.	2.86	2.90	0.04	-1.424
I think I'm one of those who will have more severe symptom if I get COVID-19.	2.89	2.97	0.08	-2.669 **
In general, I am more likely than the people around me to catch an infectious disease.	2.68	2.78	0.1	-3.332 **
If I get COVID-19, it may hit me harder than others.	2.91	3.02	0.11	-3.436 **

Dif (mean difference); Post mean–Pre mean.
z; negative (–) Pre–Post<0, positive (+) Pre–Post>0.
Asymptotic significance (two-side); *** < 0.001, ** < 0.01, * < 0.05.
WSRT = Wilcoxon signed-rank test.
(Source) Items are based on [Kock, Nørfelt, Josiassen, Assaf, and Tsionas \(2020\)](#).

Table 3
Perceived benefits of the Olympics.

Item (Post-survey changes the tense of verbs to past like in the parenthesis.)	Pre mean	Post mean	Dif	WSRT z
<i>Community benefits</i>				
The Tokyo Olympics enhance (enhanced) the image of Japan.	2.69	2.94	0.25	-6.843 ***
The Tokyo Olympics help me to show foreigners why Japan is unique and special.	2.47	2.62	0.15	-4.449 ***
The Tokyo Olympics contribute to my personal well-being.	2.36	2.76	0.4	-10.3 ***
Assisting in organising the Tokyo Olympics help to build leaders in Japan.	2.41	2.45	0.04	-0.74
The Tokyo Olympics allow for the sharing of ideas among groups in Japan.	2.60	2.64	0.04	-1.309
<i>Cultural/educational benefits</i>				
Japanese people who participate in the Tokyo Olympics have the opportunity to learn new things.	2.79	3.00	0.21	-6.066 ***
The Tokyo Olympics act as a showcase for new ideas.	2.71	2.76	0.05	-1.357
I am exposed to a variety of cultural experiences through the Tokyo Olympics.	2.60	2.62	0.02	-0.824
I enjoy meeting sponsors, athletes and volunteers of the Tokyo Olympics.	2.29	2.32	0.03	-0.904

Dif (mean difference); Post mean–Pre mean.
z; negative (–) Pre–Post<0, positive (+) Pre–Post>0.
Asymptotic significance (two-side); *** < 0.001, ** < 0.01, * < 0.05.
WSRT = Wilcoxon signed-rank test.
(Source) Items are based on [Yolal, Gursoy, Uysal, Kim, and Karacaoglu \(2016\)](#).

(male = 52 %, female = 48 %) due to the nature of two staged survey.

5. Findings

A key objective of the study was to determine the level of support for hosting the Tokyo 2020 Olympic ([Brown, 2020](#); [Getz and Page, 2016](#); [Ziakas, 2016](#)). [Table 1](#) reveals that, initially, 192 respondents (22 %) were positively disposed towards the Tokyo Olympics but a majority (456 respondents, 53 %) were against holding the Games. Conversely, in the post-survey, the number who were supportive of holding the Games had increased to 326 respondents (38 %), exceeding the figure of 293 respondents (34 %) who were against holding the event. The results clearly show that there was an increase in the level of support for hosting the Tokyo 2020 Olympics during the period of the Games.

The findings can be considered in the context of beliefs about the scale and impact of the pandemic. As [Table 2](#) indicates, residents' concerns about the infectivity of COVID-19 had significantly increased from the pre- to the post-event periods of the Games. This is not surprising as the situation had worsened ([Fig. 2](#)). The number of COVID-19 daily patients was much higher, and the stronger infectivity of the Delta variant had become a significant problem for Japanese people. The post-Games survey was implemented immediately before the peak of patient

Table 4
Perceived concerns of the Olympics.

Item (Post-survey changes the tense of verbs to past like in the parenthesis.)	Pre mean	Post mean	Dif	WSRT z	
<i>Quality-of-life concerns</i>					
Vandalism in Japan increases (increased) during the Tokyo Olympics.	2.82	2.61	-0.21	5.187	***
Car/bus/truck traffic increases to unacceptable levels during the Tokyo Olympics.	3.12	2.71	-0.41	9.823	***
Pedestrian traffic increases to unacceptable levels during the Tokyo Olympics.	3.09	2.80	-0.29	6.891	***
Noise levels are increased to an unacceptable point during the Tokyo Olympics.	2.97	2.58	-0.39	9.582	***
<i>Community resource concerns</i>					
The Tokyo Olympics are a source of negative competition between Japan and neighbouring countries.	2.83	2.66	-0.17	4.265	***
Certain people or groups in Japan receive more of the benefits of the Tokyo Olympics than other do.	3.20	3.16	-0.04	0.968	
Power is not equally distributed among Japanese groups in the Tokyo Olympics.	3.07	3.19	0.12	-2.543	*
The Tokyo Olympics overtax available Japanese financial resources.	3.58	3.65	0.07	-1.914	
<i>COVID-19 concerns</i>					
COVID-19 expands in Japan during the Tokyo Olympics.	3.76	3.68	-0.08	1.863	
Novel mutant strains of COVID-19 emerge in Japan during the Tokyo Olympics.	3.61	3.28	-0.33	7.82	***
COVID-19 (including novel mutant strains) is brought from foreign countries to Japan during the Tokyo Olympics.	3.74	3.32	-0.42	10.198	***
The increase of COVID-19 patients severely damages the Japanese medical system during the Tokyo Olympics.	3.65	3.55	-0.1	2.729	**
The number of serious injury and death increases due to the expansion of COVID-19 during the Tokyo Olympics.	3.56	3.49	-0.07	2.195	*

Dif (mean difference); Post mean–Pre mean.

z; negative (–) Pre–Post<0, positive (+) Pre–Post>0.

Asymptotic significance (two-side); *** < 0.001, ** < 0.01, * < 0.05.

WSRT = Wilcoxon signed-rank test.

(Source) Items are based on [General Research \(2021\)](#), [Kock, Nørfelt, Josiassen, Assaf, and Tsionas \(2020\)](#) and [Yolal, Gursoy, Uysal, Kim, and Karacaoğluf \(2016\)](#).

Table 5
Perceptions about well-being.

Item (Post-survey changes the tense of verbs to past like in the parenthesis.)	Pre mean	Post mean	Dif	WSRT z	
Overall, I feel the Tokyo Olympics enrich (enriched) my life.	2.41	2.55	0.14	-3.689	***
I am glad that I am involved in the Tokyo Olympics.	2.34	2.55	0.21	-5.871	***
In the Tokyo Olympics, I accomplish my purpose of the experience and this experience enrich me in some way.	2.41	2.51	0.1	-3.116	**
The Tokyo Olympics are rewarding to me in many ways that I feel much better about things and myself with the Olympics.	2.48	2.63	0.15	-4.464	***

Dif (mean difference); Post mean–Pre mean.

z; negative (–) Pre–Post<0, positive (+) Pre–Post>0.

Asymptotic significance (two-side); *** < 0.001, ** < 0.01, * < 0.05.

WSRT = Wilcoxon signed-rank test.

(Source) Items are based on [Yolal, Gursoy, Uysal, Kim, and Karacaoğluf \(2016\)](#).

numbers, while the pre-survey had been conducted at the beginning of the wave.

Perceptions about the impact of the Tokyo Olympic Games became more positive ([Table 3](#)). The mean scores for community benefits were low (below 3) but three of the five benefit items significantly increased between the pre- and post-surveys. Residents believed that the image of Japan and the unique and special qualities of Japan had been enhanced. Perceptions about personal well-being also improved. Only one item of cultural/educational benefits significantly increased, and there was no significant change in other items. Respondents agreed that people “who participated” in the Olympics had the opportunity to learn new things even though few were able to do so due to the “bubble” strategy. It is not surprising that the items of “exposed to a variety of cultural experiences” and “enjoy meeting” did not increase significantly.

The mean scores in [Table 4](#) indicate that the concerns perceived by host residents were generally higher than the benefits before the Olympics but many of the concerns decreased from the pre- to the post-Games period. All items of quality-of-life concerns, such as vandalism, overcrowding and noise problem, significantly decreased. The anticipated traffic congestion and the noise did not eventuate during the Olympics due to the restrictions. Some items about COVID-19 concerns significantly decreased from the pre- to the post-survey periods. Host residents perceived that the Olympics had not caused the pandemic situation to become worse even though they were still worried about the Delta variant and its infectivity. In terms of community resource concerns, the perception about negative competition with neighbouring countries significantly decreased but there was an increase in

perceptions about power inequality. Although the means for subjective well-being are not high, [Table 5](#) reveals that all items significantly increased. Even as the pandemic situation worsened, the Olympic may have helped to lift host residents’ subjective well-being.

6. Discussion

In many ways, the findings are surprising as, to those outside Japan, the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games seemed to offer many costs and few benefits, but the surveys revealed an improvement in attitudes towards the event. While 53 % of respondents were against holding the Olympics in the pre-Games period, only 34 % expressed this opinion in the post-Games period. In addition, scores for residents’ subjective well-being significantly increased. The findings suggest that the Tokyo 2020 Olympics changed host residents’ minds from negative to positive even amid the pandemic. This seems to be counter to expectations as viewed through the lens of social exchange theory as the balance in the cost-benefit relationship did not seem to favour the host population. There were fewer evident social and economic benefits due to the unusual circumstances in which the Games were held. In the absence of clear economic benefits from the considerable investments that were required, residents may have perceived alternative outcomes that were valued and there is evidence that respondents felt much better about themselves and believed that their life had been enriched by the Games.

Concerns about COVID-19 and fears that new strains of the virus might be introduced from outside the country moderated even though the situation worsened. It may be that people had expected the impact of

the pandemic to be even greater and the findings reflect a sense of relief about the reality in the post-Games period. There was also support for the decisions which prioritised managing the pandemic rather than seeking to optimise traditional event benefits. The “bubble” strategy limited interaction, reducing the potential for the virus to spread and, unfortunately, for cross-cultural exchange. Hence, the cultural/educational benefits did not increase significantly. However, consistent with the findings of [Ritchie and Smith \(1991\)](#), it was perceived that the Olympics helped to improve the image of Japan and enhance knowledge about the country’s uniqueness. At the time of the study by Ritchie and Smith, social media did not exist, and it may have played a role in shaping social representations in Tokyo. It was widely reported that many foreign athletes who were isolated in the athlete’s village sent favourable social media messages and photos.⁶ They praised the hospitality of Japanese volunteers, the landscape of the nearby Bay area, the food served in the village, and the souvenir shops and beauty salons in the village. They also sent messages of appreciation, thanking Japan for hosting the Olympics amid the pandemic. As suggested by social representations theory, the creation and sharing of knowledge within the host community about the positive messages sent by the athletes may have improved perceptions of community benefits. Hosting a mega-event in such difficult circumstances may have created a sense of national pride with the Games regarded as a gift to the world. This proposition could be examined in future research.

It is noteworthy that the surveys found a significant increase in the perception of the inequality of power distribution. [Boykoff \(2014\)](#) commented that “certain groups turn the Games to their economic advantage while other groups are left at the monetary margins” (p. 99). Further insight about this issue was revealed by qualitative data given in response to the open-ended question in the survey. As shown in the Table (see Appendix A, Supplement 8), several short comments about inequality were found in the post-survey. The comments reflect long-reported critical socio-political analyses of the Olympic Games by authors such as [Roche \(2002\)](#) and [Rojec \(2013\)](#) but there may be additional event-specific dimension in the context of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics. It seems that the examples of insensitive behaviour by people in authority, the dogmatic attitude of politicians who ignored the opinions of residents and the conflicts between pandemic experts and the prime minister might have caused Japanese citizens to feel a high level of power distance between themselves and those in positions of authority.

Social representations theory directs attention to the role of the mass media and negative stories about the Games were widely reported. The Japanese mass media frequently announced how much money was spent on the opening and closing ceremonies and the high price of the hotel rooms used by members of the International Olympic Committee. This negative information was shared within the host community, as has been found in other studies ([Fredline and Faulkner, 2000](#); [Tasci, Hahm, and Terry, 2019](#); [Wassler, Nguyen, and Schuckert, 2019](#)). This created new reference points for interpreting the Games. This helps to explain the pre-Games negativity and, although some attitudes improved during the Games, negative views about the concentration of power endured.

7. Implications and conclusion

This study delivers a rare insight into the relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and the Olympic Games, as perceived by the host community. In several ways, the findings are surprising but, despite the unique context, there may be valuable lessons for the management of other mega-events. The organisers of mega-events try to achieve multiple objectives and compromise is an inevitable requirement as environmental conditions change and resource expectations are found to be unrealistic. At the Tokyo Olympic Games, the priority was placed on

making sure the competitive events could be held safely. In recent times, safety procedures at mega-events have been dominated by concerns about possible terrorist threats but in Tokyo it was necessary to focus on the health of athletes and host residents ([Hoang, Al-Tawfiq, and Gautret, 2020](#); [Miles and Shipway, 2020](#); [Toohey and Taylor, 2012](#)). The perceptions of the latter who had to forego opportunities traditionally associated with the Olympics are revealed in the pre- and post-event surveys. Despite an increase in the perceived infectivity of COVID-19 (Table 2) and in the number of patients (Fig. 2), resident concerns about COVID-19 decreased during the Games (Table 4). Conflicts between politicians and epidemic control experts were widely reported especially in the pre-Games period, but fears about the pandemic were allayed. The Olympics were not considered responsible for any increase in COVID-19 infections nor the emergence of new variants of the virus in Japan. This was due to the effectiveness of management practices with the “bubble” strategy receiving wide support. It seems that the decisions made by the organising committees and the governments to place a higher priority on minimizing pandemic risks rather than attempting to gain economic, social and cultural benefits was regarded as unavoidable and not as misjudgements. The need to prioritise public safety and health offers a lesson from the Tokyo 2020 Olympics to future mega-events. Measures to minimise threats of terrorism and to ensure public safety, in its many forms, are now unavoidable costs associated with staging mega-events.

As far as possible, community expectations must be met but it is also important that decision-making is transparent with outcomes communicated effectively. It is suggested that the organisers of mega-events especially those exposed to higher risks related to pandemics, terrorism and vandalism, should seek to build mutual trust with multiple stakeholders including host residents and the media ([Parent and Foreman, 2007](#); [Ribeiro and Almeida, 2021](#); [Ritchie, Shipway, and Cleeve, 2009](#); [Walters, Shipway, Miles, and Aldrigui, 2017](#)). Effective communication is a prerequisite for the development of trust and the model of internal marketing can be used by treating members of the host community as a key constituent. Messages to inform about activities and opportunities for meaningful consultation should be treated as a permanent feature of event planning and management. The growing importance of social media and the influence of athletes’ voices must also be acknowledged. They have the power to create and disseminate positive messages and to enhance a sense of pride about the Olympics and the host country. This can affect attitudes across the country, not just in locations where tournaments are held. The Tokyo Olympics demonstrate the need for the organising committees of mega-events to adopt a proactive communication strategy that encourages the dissemination of positive messages sent by athletes and visitors.

The adoption of a dual theoretical lens perspective assisted interpretation of the findings. The theory of social representations encouraged us to be cognizant of the social and political context of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics. A particular focus was on the nature of media coverage and the findings of public surveys. This made evident the negative coverage in Japanese newspapers which was in contrast with the positive messages communicated by athletes through social media. The lens of social representations helped interpret these, contrasting influences. Previous studies based on social exchange and representation theories attempted to capture individual-level and community-level perceptions, respectively, and statistically tested the differences between the two levels ([Li, Hsu, and Lawton, 2015](#)). Our research reinforces claims about the benefits of measuring the direct and indirect effects of social context on residents’ perceptions about mega-events.

The social exchange lens informed us that hosting the Tokyo Olympics increased positive perceptions about the host country’s image and decreased negative perceptions about the possible impact on the quality-of-life. As [Ap \(1992\)](#) and [Li, Hsu, and Lawton \(2015\)](#) have suggested, residents can become supportive when they perceive more benefits than costs but there is scope for greater clarity in causal relationships. Qualitative research could inform questionnaire design by seeking to

⁶ See the source of athletes’ social media in Appendix A, Supplement 7.

identify the factors that are considered to be the most important outcomes (Cresswell and Creswell, 2023). National pride was identified by our research as a surprisingly important factor and this should be examined in future research. Traditionally, studies adopting an exchange theory approach have measured economic benefits in quantitative surveys but this focus may underestimate the importance of intangible outcomes such as national pride in evaluations made by hosts. There is an opportunity for post-event research to provide more nuanced understanding of the relative importance of factors that shape beliefs about event satisfaction and community well-being.

Finally, the limitations of this study are noted. First, although the impact of media coverage has been interpreted qualitatively in this study, an analytical framework would need to be developed to capture it quantitatively. The theoretical integration of the two lenses would have been enhanced by statistically testing how media coverage positively and negatively influenced residents' perceptions. It would be valuable to measure the extent to which residents' perceptions of the Tokyo Olympics endure through time, as in the study by Ribeiro, Yoda, Papadimitriou, and Correia (2022). In particular, research could examine the extent to which the perceptions of well-being and image enhancement that increased during the Olympics persist after the event. The findings would help improve knowledge about the long-term impacts of mega-events on the host residents and communities.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Takatoshi Murayama: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Graham Brown:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Atsushi Akiike:** Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Kohsuke Matsuoka:** Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

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