

# The Evaluation of Event Sport Tourism on Regional Economic Development

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**Abstract**—Event sport tourism (EST) has become an especially important economic sector around the world. As the magnitude continues to grow, attracting more tourists, media, and investment for the host community, and many local areas/regions and states have identified the expenditures by visitors as a potential source of economic or employment growth. The main purposes of this study are to investigate stakeholders' insights into the feature of hosting EST and using them as a regional development strategy. Continuing the focus of previous literature on the regional development and economic benefits by hosting EST, a total of five semi-structured interview questions are designed and a thematic analysis is employed to conduct with eight key sport and tourism decision makers in Atlanta during July to August 2016. Through the depth interviews, the study will contribute to a better understanding of stakeholders' decision-making, identifying benefits and constraints as well as leveraging the impacts of hosting EST. These findings have provided stakeholders' perspectives of hosting EST and using them as a reference of regional development in emerging sport tourism markets in the US. Additionally, this study examines key considerations and issues that affect and are critical to reliable understanding of the economic impacts of hosting EST on the regional development, and it will be able to benefit future management authorities (i.e. governments and communities) in their sport tourism development endeavors in defining and hosting successful EST. Furthermore, the insights gained from the qualitative analysis could help other cities/regions analyzing the economic impacts of hosting EST and using it as an instrument of city development strategy.

**Keywords**—Event sport tourism, regional economic development, thematic analysis, stakeholder.

## I. INTRODUCTION

EST plays a key role in building a more successful and attractive destination. Hosting sports events help to bring new markets segments to a hosting region, and the event visitors bring tremendous economic impacts on the hosting communities and regions. Events bring people together of the same interests and are of limited duration. The EST has also become especially important in the economic sector in many parts of the world [73]. For a well-known mega event like the Olympic Games there will be a huge increase of tourists from different countries and many millions more watch the event on television, which can bring both benefits and losses for the host country. Especially, after the financially profitable 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games, a number of regions/cities began to compete for hosting the Olympics in order to facilitate national economic growth or regional development.

Sports events can create vast economic benefits, not only for the tourism industry but also for the overall economy of the host

nation or region. Reference [75] indicated that the cash flow from tourism expenditure will increase regional income, because the tourism multipliers derived from the tourist spending may influence positively and/or negatively the host destination. Because visitor spending can contribute to the local economy, many communities seek to enhance tourism and visitor-oriented activities. As a result, evaluations of the economic impacts of EST are of interest to a wide variety of interested parties. Recently, economic impact analyses of sports facilities and EST have come under increasing criticism. At the same time, visitors to sports events, festivals, and other visitor-oriented and sport event related activities can generate very substantial and tremendous economic impacts for the host communities/regions.

Emerging tourism destination markets all have a number of unique characters that set them apart from each other and the other more established tourism destinations [17]. Upon an environmental scan of current EST initiatives in the US, at least two municipal regions within each state have endeavored to host EST [53]. Furthermore, a number of cities have developed a bid/hosting program in attempt to attract various scales of sporting events and developed an informative manifestation on the network providing the stakeholders with the information of hosting events within the city [69].

In Atlanta, for example, where world-class sports take center stage and college football is religion, and as the host city of the 1996 Centennial Olympic Games, and the home of the College Football Hall of Fame and the world's largest city tennis league, the city supports an array sport events for tourists. Additionally, there are municipal and regional, amateur and professional sport organizations that range in sport and demographic to provide active and spectator event options for all sporting enthusiasts. These amateur and professional teams allow host cities the great opportunity to leverage the socio-economic benefits for their host communities [48]. However, considering the various types of EST that Atlanta has hosted and will be hosting, in the forms of local events as well as major sporting events like professional sports, amateur and spectator sports, and recreational sports, there is a considerable gap in the academic literature as to the strategic planning management and the means by which the cities' sport tourism stakeholders approach this form of sport tourism development. Atlanta's annual sport events like AJC Peachtree Road Race (Running), BB&T Atlanta Open (ATP World Tour), Celebration Bowl (NCAA), Chick-fil-A Peach Bowl & Kickoff Game (NCAA Football), Cobb County Classic Series (NCAA Lacrosse), Folds of Honor QuikTrip 500 (NASCAR Sprint Cup Series), Mitsubishi Electric Classic – (PGA Champions Tour), Petit Le

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Mans (Auto Racing), SEC Football Championship (NCAA), and the TOUR Championship by Coca-Cola (PGA) [68]. The Atlanta Sports Council (ASC), for example, a division of the Metro Atlanta Chamber, improves the regional growth and development by hosting major regional, national and international sports events. The organization serves a critical role in facilitating the quality of resident's lives in the region through sports, working to expose the visibility and acting as a promoter for regional teams and annual sports events. Over the years, the ASC has constructed a successful tradition within the sports community and has attracted and supported more than 100 major sporting events hosted in Atlanta.

Despite growing desires to increase EST in regions/states across the US, there has been a lack of research with respect to the strategic development of EST [1], [5], [24], [63]. Especially, measuring the economic benefits of a single EST is quite different from measuring the annual economic impacts of a comprehensive program of EST spanning numerous event types located at various places and times throughout the year, the latter being considerably more complex and challenging. Conventionally, visitor spending patterns are calculated event-by-event, using surveys of event attendees. Thus, estimating the total economic benefits of an entire annual sport tourism program with numerous sporting events using surveys would be expensive and need to employ an economic multiplier model.

Although many municipal regions are well-experienced in hosting small-scale or mega-events and continue to do so, there is limited research into the nature and impetus behind such tourism initiatives as experienced and perceived by the major stakeholders. Therefore, a further examination of different municipal EST plans and perspective bid packages show the various stakeholder groups that are required to collaborate for successful bids and subsequent hosting of EST. There are a number of stakeholders involved in the hosting of these types of EST and by extension improvement of a sport tourism development strategy. In addition, little academic research exists, with respect to the development of EST on regional scales. Moreover, there is also a scarcity of research on stakeholder involvement in regions that are in the early stages of developing EST initiatives. Ultimately, there is little literature on "emerging" EST, particularly those seeking to host small-scale/regional EST. Because of the perceived positive impacts such programs can have on local economies, sports tourism bundled as a multi-event annual program is thought by some to be an effective method for stimulating the economic development of small cities.

As EST continues to prosper in many regions or tourism destinations, this study endeavors to understand what constrains strategy development and strategic planning in the emerging sport tourism destinations. This study expects to address gaps in the current academic literature, especially with regard to the deficiency of research on EST. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate and garner stakeholder insights (i.e. governments and business communities) into the nature of hosting EST and using them as a regional development strategy in emerging sport tourism markets. Specifically, this

investigation will address the following research questions:

- (1) Why do the cities/regions engage in EST development strategies?
- (2) What are perceived limitations to employing EST as an instrument of city/regional development strategy?
- (3) How do the stakeholders of EST determine which sport events to bid on and to host should be prioritized?
- (4) What are the critical regional benefits or positive impacts from hosting EST?
- (5) How to leverage these impacts as the strategic development of EST?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. The Development of Sport Tourism

Sport is often considered as a vehicle for development heavily leaned upon by the tourism industry [15]. Within the context of tourism development, sport tourism can be approached as a traditional development paradigm in terms of social, ecological and economic growth [67]. Although, it can also be seen as an evolutionary process that is a dynamic industry as a part of social, cultural, political, economic and environmental facets of a society that is constantly fluctuating [37]. Reference [22] describes stakeholders in sport and event tourism to include local residents and citizens; interest groups such as heritage, cultural, environmental and social groups; different levels of governments (local, municipal, regional, state); not for profit organizations; event managers and staff; venue managers and the wider business community with interests in the event. For the success of sport events, organizing committees and related stakeholders must strategically plan to leverage the current and future benefits from EST beyond the event in order for the host destination to maximize the positive impacts such as tourism business and socio-economic prosperity [50]. Moreover, reference [37] indicated that sport tourism development should not only be about growth but also about the positive impact it may have on a country, region or destination, and should also be measured via the ideals of sustainability by including all stakeholders in the process of trying to achieve sustainable tourism development goals (social, economic, cultural, political and environmental). Reference [54] argued that there are even more sustainable dimensions to be considered in development via EST such as moral, legal, technical and political aspects. In a broader context, sustainable EST should endeavor to achieve sustainable goals aligning with the triple bottom line approach [61]. However, there can be issues with this approach as EST attracts large numbers of tourists that can bring negative long-term effects to the local environment and there is no guarantee that there will be positive social and economic benefits to all host communities [18].

Sport tourism is about understanding how to transform the sport event participation into a tourism experience and to convert the tourism destination into a sport practice venue [16]. Sport events are usually anticipated as a strategy to raise communal communication and celebration [9]. Moreover, sport events can allow individuals to adjust their attitudes and

behaviors, as well as break down hurdles between groups for a common goal. Thus, the connections between sport and tourism have improved both in their respective industries and academic fields [21]. However, reference [70] argued that a holistic concept of sport tourism should also include professional and amateur, competitive and non-competitive, social, recreational, and informal activities, as well as leisure, business, and day-trip tourism, to fall within its scope. The sport tourism industry has progressed substantially and so have the expectations of sport tourists, developing their needs and wants for more diversity of sport tourism. Hence, as researchers advance knowledge in this area, they should consider EST as an overall experience [58].

#### *B. Utilizing Sporting Events for Sport Tourism Development*

Sporting events have progressively been noted as critical components for any region ambitious to gain significant worldwide awareness as a tourism destination, to generate socio-cultural benefits and enhance economic development. These events are ultimately perceived as a considerable means for tourism development within a destination as they facilitate the increase in tourist arrivals, the development of a favorable destination image in addition to the regional development of areas within the destination [2], [6], [19]. As tourism markets and communities in emerging destinations attend to enhance their status with respect to socio-cultural issues, they can utilize some of the benefits of sport tourism to aid development [43]. Reference [43] indicated that promoting sport is a cost-effective solution to help tackle issues of broader social development, which include the creation of national identity, social integration, enhancing health, and distracting young people from anti-social behavior. However, reference [34] indicated that some of these emerging communities should use small-scale sport tourism, also known in some forms as participant events [25], as opposed to mega-events such as the Olympics and World Cup, to advance tourism. These types of events allow for controlled environments on a modest scale, whilst being more sustainable in the utilization of existing infrastructure and facilities, encouraging a consistent flow of tourists and can be managed by the community or region, thus not necessarily having to use public funding for the event [25]. Moreover, reference [74] addressed that small-scale/regional EST usually provide more benefits to stakeholders in the local community as it synergizes interests amongst various ongoing events including the associated tourism, socio-economic, socio-cultural and leisure benefits.

In recent years, as a niche within a vast tourism market, EST has been receiving increasing attention by researchers, practitioners and policy makers [64], [47], [37]. Hosting events are a direct and significant driver of tourism and have become a prominent part of tourism plans in a number of destinations [24]. In terms of hosting sporting events, there is a similar motivation. These events are seen in both the developing and developed countries as part of a broader tourism plan focused on enhancing the cities, regions and countries as a whole [44]. Local communities and organizations are continuing to align their interests in hosting sport events even though the event can pose challenges for organizers and hosts, as they are very

dynamic and temporary whilst being simultaneously produced and consumed [11]. Therefore, the success of sport tourism development strategies cannot just be compounded on the economic benefits. Some cities often use EST as attractions that are used in turn to advance the urban center's destination image and also utilize it as a regeneration strategy [28] whilst others hope to use the event as an impetus for increasing levels of well-being through sport participation and physical activity in the host community [55].

In the past three decades, there has been an integral role for EST in the process of globalization as well as the regeneration process of local, regional and national identities. These events have become commodities that are increasingly sought after for emerging destination markets and developed countries alike as their countries and economies grow [65]. Hence, more destinations are using this aspect in their marketing communications and campaigns whether it is a new or established sport event that may already take place elsewhere [31]. All sport events, whether mega-events or small-scale events have impacts on their host community, but organizers usually neglect social and ecological impacts in favor of economic gains [65].

Historically, tourism destinations are places that attract and provide experiences to cater to the needs and expectations of visiting tourists whilst accommodating the tourist travel flow. There are various reasons for travelling to a destination, but the phenomenon that has made the most recent progress is to visit a destination to consume sporting events. A positive relationship has been established between visitor experiences at sport events as they contribute to the profile and uniqueness of the destination [34]. Reference [33] noted: "Attending a sport event, participating in a sport activity, or visiting a sport museum or a famous stadium are each a form of experience." Thus, modern destinations that use sport events as a major attraction provide the relevant attributes for the tourist's benefit. The setting where the sport is experienced and the destination hosting the sport event both have pivotal roles in the sport tourist experience [33]. Eventually, tourism destinations are taking full advantage of the opportunities to get the perceived benefits associated with hosting sport events.

Sport events as tourist attractions are a unique blend of two thriving industries, which serve as an approach to connect tourists and visitors to places in distinct ways [37]. EST is required to be managed and planned accordingly as with any other tourism attraction. Thus, there needs to be proper management of change in order for decision-making stakeholders and event planners to meet their objectives. Often times, development can spawn planning and development issues that affect the process; these can be internal and external factors that hinder development. As a tourism product, sport events can become commoditized by an intrusion of global market factors and processes which can affect its representation, whilst also fostering homogenization of sport culture through globalization [37]. These globalization forces push sport tourism destinations that host events to position themselves as a global destination that compresses international networks and can traverse national boundaries. Conversely, due to sport's

widespread outreach, organizational fragmentation and viable partnerships become more complex to seek out and maintain. It becomes quite difficult to maintain successful goal-oriented relationships and alliances with a range of stakeholder involvement [37]. Striving towards a sustainable sport tourism development strategy can become quite complicated at all levels.

### *C. The Relationship of EST and Regional Development*

In the modern sport tourism era, sporting events are not only being used to encourage local patronage, fanfare and economic regeneration but also for their exposure and facilities which are being used by cities as a tool to re-brand themselves [59]. There has been great enthusiasm and a highly competitive nature to host sport events within urban environments within the last two decades as cities and urban regions continue to develop strategies into their wider strategic plans as a means of public, private and tourism investment into the urban area [4]. Reference [32] noted the usefulness of sport as an avenue for regenerating a city's identity. Subsequently, reference [60] suggested that a number of municipal regions are now going through the process of using sport as a reimagining tool whereby governments and private sector partners collaborate to plan and implement sport events as the new central theme of the destination image in the urban region.

Within recent history, a number of destinations have seen immense growth through sport tourism or are engaging sport tourism as a form of destination revolution and development [71]. These advancements allude to sport providing a wide range of development opportunities for national, regional and local tourism destinations [35]. The importance of sport tourism destinations is also magnified by the spatial utility of sport tourism in various levels of destination development, within the spheres of national-local, urban-rural or central-periphery development initiatives. The growth of these destinations that include EST has been due to the influences of sport promotion via different media outlets, global connectivity and communications and the reality of sport events being linked to recognized destinations [35].

As part of a wider tourism destination development strategy, the planning and implementation of sport events must incorporate strategic management tools to encourage long-term stakeholder collaboration [42]. There are specific ways that destinations can adapt sport tourism development for economic growth and prosperity [37]. However, reference [63] emphasized that for more efficiency, the destination needs to adopt a synonymous sport and event strategy as merely developing them autonomously will not reap the potential benefits for the destination. Whilst sport events can also be used as an effective strategy for economic development and urban regeneration purposes [71], they bring distinctive offerings to a destination with various types of participants into local/regional contexts where they are executed [35]. In addition, it is usually a matter of administration, collaboration and relationship building between stakeholders, including the local organizing committee, event organizers, tourism organizations, and business community for smooth and effective planning and

execution of the EST to leverage the benefits for the destination [45].

In general, the prominent drivers of sport tourism development have been urban developers, government agencies and policy makers, facility owners and operators and event organizers [35]. However, reference [72] highlighted that as a tourism system, the attractions and events have the most significant parts in the development and holistic success of a destination, and there needs to be different management strategies for attractions and events as the former has a physical identity where the latter are supplementary activities that augment the elements of the physical attractions. Reference [20] illustrated an example of a booming urban sport tourism destination in Melbourne, Australia, and showed that the municipal destination has realized the benefits from hosting international major sporting events. The media exposure of the city, the capability of its infrastructure and the progress of its subsidiary services to satisfy the needs of tourists around the world boosted the destination image as a "Sport City". The authors also noted that these benefits were the achievement of the city's collaborative efforts between government agencies, organizers and businesses to move forward as a sport tourism destination. Certainly, it included their improvement and development of facilities and transportation infrastructure alongside a marketing strategy to appeal to international markets as an attractive destination for the sport tourist.

### *D. The Economic Impacts of EST*

Sport events are an effective way of assuring the touristic benefits for small towns and rural areas. Major sporting events can be the catalysts for improved infrastructure and new facilities. The major benefits for a community that is hosting a sports event are increased "city pride" at being the host to a great event and improved leisure opportunities [23]. EST is recognized as being comprehensive of all planned events in an included part of marketing and development. Sport events are one-time events that have deeply long-term impacts, both of a negative and positive nature on the host society. In spite of the negative impacts, communities compete against each other to host sport events because of the expected benefits and profits for local businesses and communities. One of the greatest profits that a hosting community will gain is the permanent facilities created for the event that are generally used by residents after the event. For example, major sporting events are supposed to improve shopping and cultural opportunities for the local residents, strengthen regional traditions and values, and can also lead to a better understanding and image of other countries [30]. Major sporting events also act as catalysts for attracting image-makers and tourists, increasing competitive advantages, positioning destinations in the tourism market, and creating destination profiles [6]. The aim of such events is to create a positive destination image, promote the tourist-destination, increase the economic revenue of the destination, expand the traditional tourist season, and draw international and national visitors [13]. Similarly, reference [75] addressed that previous studies have placed greater emphases on the financial impacts of EST, mostly to substantiate

expenditure and to encourage local governments and communities to meet their budget goals.

The economic impacts of EST can be recognized as the change in the industrial development and economy from hosting a sport event. The economic impacts of EST were dependent on the number of foreign visitors because they spent money in the hosting region of sport events. The number of visitors strongly depends on the geographical location of the host destination. From a touristic perspective, major sporting events are often utilized to facilitate regional development, because the “free” promotion it brings to the destination and the long-term benefits including an enhanced tourism image [56].

The changes are usually caused by the activity created by the use and operation of sport facilities and services [46]. A variety of influences affect the spending habits and behavior of tourists attending these events, including their level of income; cost of travel, exchange rates, types, frequency and scope of sporting event, as well as the culture and attractiveness of the destination. Hence, the economic impact or estimated value of hosting a sport event is a dynamic set of variables that range and differ by sport, event and destination [57]. In the event bidding and hosting process there is often an investment of public funding for sporting events which is often criticized, as these resources could be used for existing social shortcomings in education, infrastructure and health care, which will have a wider influence in the host destination community [18]. As there is no guarantee that the long-term benefits of hosting the sport event outweigh the current value of the event to the host community, there is often uproar and scrutiny for hosting these events [18].

Major sporting events are being recognized as some of the world’s major tourist attractions. For example, the Olympic Games, Commonwealth Games, the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) Football World Cup and International Rugby Board (IRB) Rugby World Cup, as well as small-scale events which include marathons (e.g., Boston, New York, London), cycling events (e.g., Giro d’Italia, Tour d’France) and domestic professional sporting leagues (e.g. English Premier League (England), National Football League (NFL) and National Basketball Association (NBA), have a major role to create a favorable image of the country for the international tourists and to promote the host country in the tourism marketplace [52]. Reference [40] indicated that the perceived economic benefits that come from hosting mega sporting events are usually associated with television rights, corporate sponsorships and visiting tourists (media, participants, spectators, etc.), but hosting these events often have their own benefits and risks as a result of bidding for, planning and hosting the mega-event [41]. Some cities often neglect to consider that hosting major sporting events can generate substantial revenue on both a short- and long-term basis, even though the expansion of these benefits may be a complex process. Because this process can cause the dispersion of huge sums of money that considers the host destination last, as a considerable portion may go to the international sport governing organization, and the expenditure on infrastructure and promotion may exceed the regional economic profits and

long term demand, so there may not be an immediate benefit [62].

With respect to impacts that are created by small-scale sporting events, reference [27] discussed that small-scale EST usually generate economic benefits to a community with most of the tourist expenditure being acquired through accommodation and food services. A consistent factor amongst these events is in the benefits overshadowing the cost which is attributable to these events using existing facilities, bring visitors that are new and have no other motivation to visit the destination and provide expenditure during the event at the destinations subsidiary services such like gas stations, restaurants, and retail stores. In order for the continued sustainability of the event, planners need to ensure that they happen on a regular basis [51].

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### A. Research Design

Over the recent decade, all types and skill levels of sports have been conceptualized as a ‘touristic activity’ [36]. For long-term development of the sport tourism industry, there needs to be strategic planning that involves effective collaboration amongst sport and tourism stakeholders (e.g., local governing organization, affiliated businesses and destination management/marketing organizations (DMO)) in the region [14]. There is a general consensus that the measures related to economic impact are conceptually simple, but the actual collection of such information is extremely difficult and time consuming [38]. Thus, this study utilizes qualitative approaches to clarify and evaluate the main five questions of hosting regional EST mentioned in Section I.

The questions were adjusted to the theory and research questions so it would be easier to analyze the collected data and ensure the high validity of collated data. Also, the respondents are reliable because they work for the responsible tourism and sports authorities of the region that they represent in Atlanta. It means that the study has a deductive approach. This approach has a relationship between research and theory in which the latter is conducted to ideas. The inductive approach analyses data that the study seeks universal explanation of a phenomenon by pursuing the collected data until all cases that are consistent with hypothetical explanations of phenomenon are found [10].

#### B. Qualitative Semi-Structured Interviews

Continuing the focus of previous literature on the economic impacts of hosting EST, a total of five semi-structured interviews were designed and using thematic analysis [7] conducted with key sport and tourism decision-making stakeholders in Atlanta during July to August 2016. Qualitative research will give a superior analysis of the empirical data because the stakeholders’ viewpoints are conducted by e-mail or telephone interviews about the guiding questions. Further facts have been collected and contrasted on their official websites, which are aligning with the text [3]. From a hermeneutical viewpoint, the interviews comprise of text but

not of statistics. This study is based on hermeneutics because it can help doing an analysis of the chosen theme by collected data and literature [8]. The study primarily concerns with the viewpoints of the key decision makers for EST and socio-economic development of Atlanta, Georgia.

Aligning with the qualitative approach, which is inductive and exploratory in nature, the findings may not be generalizable beyond the group of stakeholders being examined. Therefore, a realist approach was adapted to examine stakeholders' explicit assumptions and experiences with respect to their insights into the nature of hosting EST, and using them as a development strategy in the regional markets. The intentions of applying the qualitative approach are to gain deep insight through decision-making stakeholders' experiences related to EST as a development strategy.

In the study, the stakeholders were contacted via phone or email to attain their interest in participating. The interview contained approximately 14 open ended questions with appropriate probes shown in Table I. Suitable dates and locations were arranged via email to conduct the interviews, which lasted approximately 30-40 minutes each. The interview questions were an extension in scope of the broader research questions and were posed as necessary throughout the participant interviews. The interviews were made from a semi-standardized perspective because the questions that were asked over the telephone and sent by e-mail were asked in a consistent and systematic order [3]. The formulation of the questions was adjusted to the respondents so they could answer clearly and easily.

The municipality being used for analysis in this study is the Atlanta region. A total of eight stakeholders are interviewed. These individuals were selected because they had a good understanding of the functionality of EST development. Stakeholders ranged from officials involved with the respective municipal DMO to community stakeholders with adequate knowledge of economic development, tourism and sport organizations, public and private businesses that were all related to sport tourism initiatives. As the main source of primary data, the interviews were semi-structured, recorded and transcribed for the data analysis process. As a conversation between researcher and participant, the semi-structured interview included partially structured and open ended questions used to informal perspectives and opinions from respondents [12]. As an exploratory study, the latter analysis process took an inductive approach to identify the key themes from the transcribed interview data.

The selected respondents have fully established and implemented a regional sport tourism strategy authorized by their respective DMO; however, they are host to current sport organizations and events. At the beginning of interviews, the participant was provided with an opening statement regarding the study and the objectives. They were then given a letter explaining the data collection process, and were asked for their consent to participate and for permission to use the data in the study. They were also asked for their permission to be recorded and for notes to be taken during the interview.

### C. Thematic Analysis of Data

Qualitative data collection and analysis in this study can be carried out by means of several approaches often representing a variety of epistemological, theoretical and disciplinary perspectives [29] and are extremely diverse, complex and nuanced [39]. The plan and design for any specific analysis will depend on the general research approach taken and the expected outcome, commonly known as the analytic purpose [29]. Similarly, Reference [7] noted that thematic analysis is a method of inquiry that is basically independent of theory that can be applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches. Thus, this method of analysis is valuable to the study as it takes the multifaceted meanings and values of the stakeholders' opinions, as each contribution is a part of the tourism industry in Atlanta.

According to the argument of [7], thematic analysis is functional as the main research analysis method for this study as it is an "essentialist or realist" method, following the outlined tenets of this research, which describes and reports on experiences, meanings and reality of participants. Based on this, thematic analysis is a method that is applicable to this current study as it examines stakeholder perceptions for the purpose of sport tourism strategy development. Thus, it allows for the research to reflect the current realities and explore the surface of this reality that is given by the stakeholders.

The data was analyzed in the six steps of thematic analysis. The transcripts were firstly read and re-read to generate initial ideas within the data. Through this step, initial codes were then derived across the entire data set. The next step involved organizing the codes into the potential themes and clustering relevant data into the sub-themes. The themes generated were then checked for validity over the entire data set to ensure they were appropriately related to the coded data. Upon further review, the themes were then defined and named, refining the specific facets of each theme to address the purpose of this study. The most appropriate examples of data were used to deal with the research questions stated previously, involving the final analyses to the study's purpose and relevant literature.

## IV. RESULTS

The interviews with stakeholders revealed the value perception of hosting EST, the need to build relationships with key community partners in order to develop strategy and prioritize EST development and also illustrated the stakeholders' demand to bid for sport events that would fit in with the regional development. As well, the question was directly asked about their engagement in an EST development strategy and its status on the region's tourism development schedule.

The eight stakeholders interviewed, which comprised of four males and four females, were key decision-makers involved in sport tourism development and sport and tourism strategy development in Atlanta. This included individuals associated with the regional DMO, municipal governments, Chamber of Commerce, members of regional sport and tourism organizations, as well as individuals affiliated with local

business organizations. The interview data is analyzed and recorded through the steps of thematic analysis. Table II presents the main themes and subthemes that emerged from the interview data. For the purposes of the following examination of the resultant data, the eight stakeholders are referred to as 'Interview 1-8'. The detailed opinions and discussions of the stakeholders are summarized as Appendix A. For a concise article, the perspectives of the stakeholders are extracting into the following thematic focus.

#### A. Environment of EST

A majority of stakeholders mentioned that for hosting EST in their region to be a successful phenomenon, there needed to be a certain level of collaboration to build successful relationships among stakeholders. The level of collaboration depended on the type of EST that was being hosted.

TABLE I  
 THE SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The Guiding Question	Probe
1. Why do destinations engage in EST development strategies?	
1-1 What is the role of your organization as a tourism stakeholder in the region?	How do you have a specific role in this organization?
1-2 How do you feel about an EST development strategy?	How would it benefit the region? What are the constraints, if any?
1-3 How is your region currently developing or engaged in a sport tourism strategy of any kind?	Is there a model that the region bases this on?
1-4 Where does EST fall as a part of the region's tourism and development agenda?	Is it a priority? Why or why not?
2. What are perceived limitations to employing EST as an instrument of regional development?	
2-1 What are the potential benefits of hosting these events?	Can the community benefit from hosting these events?
2-2 What are the potential constraints of hosting these events?	Can these be mitigated?
3. How do the stakeholders determine which EST to bid on and to host?	
3-1 Could you tell me about successful EST that the region has hosted in the past?	Were they a success? Why or why not?
3-2 What sports or tournaments do you think the region is capable of hosting or should pursue to host on a regular basis?	Why would these sports be beneficial to the region?
3-3 How is your organization involved in the bidding process for EST?	Is it involved? Why or why not?
4. What are the critical regional impacts of hosting EST?	
4-1 What, in your opinion, are the potential impacts (positive & negative) of hosting EST?	Economic, Social, Environmental?
4-2 How is your city differentiating itself as an EST destination?	In Georgia or in the US?
5. How to leverage these impacts as the strategic development of EST?	
5-1 Are there reasons why your region should pursue this form of tourism over other forms?	Why do you think so?
5-2 How does the region ensure that impacts reach the host community?	Are there strategies in place?
5-3 Has the region invested in any infrastructure or facilities related to EST?	Yes- Why and what examples? No- Any plans for the future?

Hosting sport events has varying levels of priority in the destination. These priorities vary according to the maturity level of the region as a tourism destination, what they wish to add to their destination brand or the availability of resources they have at their disposal to pursue sports events. Moreover, stakeholders understood that in order to successfully move forward with sport tourism development initiatives, it was necessary to appropriately manage and embrace their current

situations. EST development had to become a priority for regional stakeholders, citizens, business people and government officials alike, and the collaboration and interaction necessary to change the mind-set to get everyone on board to prioritize EST for development purposes.

TABLE II  
 THEMES AND SUBTHEMES THAT EMERGED FROM THE INTERVIEW DATA

Main Themes	Sub-Themes
The EST environment	- Creating the relationships among stakeholders - Prioritizing EST - Specifying EST development - Strategic planning and strategy development
The benefits of hosting EST	- Encouraging community engagement - Promoting sport development and resident well-being - Embracing volunteerism - Job creation - Economic diversification - Facilitating destination enhancement and image
The challenges of hosting EST	- Facility and infrastructure constraints - Dealing with displacement - Exhausting destination resources - Battling for dedicated resources - Navigating the political environment
Regional development and hosting EST	- Perception of regional impacts - Building regional awareness of impacts
Leverage the impact of EST	- Leveraging sport events for destination development - Legacy planning

The stakeholders depicted an understanding of the value of hosting EST and using it to drive regional growth and development. However, in their attempts to advance their EST development endeavors, there were some mixed descriptions on what kind of formal strategy existed and where the region was at in terms of developing a regional EST strategy.

#### B. The Environment of EST

Some of the stakeholders' opinions on sport as a development tool are to encourage diversity and engagement in their communities. They stated about these social aspects of sport and sporting events at length in the interviews. In the sub-themes of this section, stakeholders incorporated their understanding of the social benefits to the community by facilitating community engagement, initiating the community in extended sport development and well-being initiatives, including how it can encourage volunteerism to embrace the skills and opportunities afforded by hosting EST. In addition, promoting positive well-being as a component of community development was an important issue that several stakeholders had input into, as they anticipated it as a benefit of EST development and also a promoter for these phenomena in the region. One of the other substantial socio-economic impacts that stakeholders established as a great legacy from hosting EST was creating employment. Employment in a post industrialized economy allowed them to make up the gap between the social perception and economic benefits.

#### C. The Challenges of Hosting EST

The region faced common challenges, represented in the subthemes, including a lack of facilities; infrastructure

constraints; navigating the political environment in their region, as well as handling displacement concerns and local resident nuisance. In addition, other subthemes derived from the limitations and challenges inquiries in the interviews were the notions of exhausting the destination resources and a lack of dedicated resources towards hosting sport events and planning for EST development. Because sport events delivery standards and exhausting various resources, such as staff, volunteers and facilities, as a result of hosting too many events during different annual periods that will lead a serious problem of exhausting regional resources. The other aspect of destination exhaustion was illustrated by some resident nuisance and discomfort due to the host of EST.

#### *D. Regional Development and Hosting EST*

The opinions on the impacts were closely related to the positive benefits that were associated with hosting EST. The stakeholders' also alluded to the negative impacts as perceived challenges connected to the hosting of EST. The aspect of sport tourism development was more aligned to the regional impact of sport events on the cities and communities within the region. The stakeholders related the impacts of EST to the region through different viewpoints. While some associated impacts with the positive and negative effects that the events had on the city, others saw the impact entirely from a regional perspective. The subthemes are related to the main theme as they present the stakeholders understanding of the impacts to the region, as well as their acknowledgement of the necessity for a greater awareness amongst all regional stakeholders to garner "buy in" for EST development in their region.

#### *E. Leverage the Impact of EST*

The issue of leveraging the EST was stated about by the stakeholders that they were able to leverage the positive impacts, which took various forms of socio-economic impacts to the community, including job creation, sport development, volunteerism and enhanced well-being, destination image development, increasing community engagement, differentiating their tourism attraction offerings, as well as diversifying the economy through tourism and repeat business. These responses were associated with questions that were set about leveraging the impacts of hosting EST in their communities. They described leveraging the benefits of these sport events as a manner to further the development of the region through hosting the EST. Neither region had a separate formula or strategy for how they would benefit from these events as they recognized the significant distinctions and influences that each event dominated, so it was difficult to strategize to leverage the potential impacts of any specific event. Stakeholders stated about leveraging the events for socio-economic impacts on their region through sport development and engaging their local sporting or tourism organizations, as well as in some cases the way in which they could also leverage their natural facilities to attract certain events for destination development. The other subtheme that related to leveraging the impacts of EST was the legacy planning that the region had executed for hosting sporting

events. Similar to leveraging the impacts, stakeholders did not have formal or long-term plans as part of their bid and hosting processes developed for the legacy planning process from each sport event. They stated that the planning for leveraging the legacy of the sport events should be aligning with a respective event basis.

### V. DISCUSSIONS

From the stakeholders' perspectives, the region benefited from hosting EST and they were conscious of the impacts, challenges and constraints that accompany these sport events. Additionally, there were indications that proper strategy development, planning, implementation, execution and evaluation were all necessary functions for these emerging sport tourism destinations to progress. Without a regional strategy to align future plans, the stakeholders were mindful that consistent, continuous efficient regional strategic planning was necessary to continue to drive sport tourism development in their destinations. For a region to continue pursuing sport events and keep the initiatives a priority, they need to develop a regional strategy for sport tourism. Moreover, each destination would need to identify a means of defining stakeholder involvement in the various planning processes that go into sport tourism development. Stakeholders identified these initiatives as a priority by instituting dedicated sport tourism bodies in the region. However, they also expressed the perspectives of continuous calculated developmental progress that is required to continue progressing in order to garner regional support and acceptance to promote sport tourism as a development strategy.

In this study, stakeholders presented their perspectives and opinions through their experiences with hosting EST and the subsequent impacts that were experienced in Atlanta. They shared the rationale for pursuing sport tourism events in their regions, and the benefits and constraints they perceived to be associated with hosting small-scale/regional events. Indeed, several of the insights gained from stakeholders were consistent with previous researches [37], [27], [26] which have discussed the potential for sport events to support growth and development in the EST destinations. The stakeholders spoke about the ways in which EST can often differentiate their destination and augment their attraction profile but there was no clear indication as to how they chose to develop EST over other forms of tourism in the regions. However, they understood the value that it brought to their destination through tourism product differentiation and destination enhancement of their current tourism profile and attractions. Stakeholders recalled that these events were already taking place in their destination regions and it was one of the simpler forms of tourism that they could develop as they already possessed some the complementary facility, accommodation and destination attraction inventories, that are desired by event organizers, to attract EST to the region.

Moreover, after completing this study, it became apparent that legacy planning and leveraging of positive sport event impacts should be involved in the initial stages of the planning and bidding processes. There are often criticisms towards sport events that leave a negative legacy in tourism destinations, as



the economic gains may not be worth the associated social and economic impacts [66] often associated with and left by mega-events. However, these impacts can be mitigated by hosting sport events in emerging sport tourism markets as they become more manageable by the city or region and it does not usually entail high associated overhead cost [25]. This idea was explored in the regional contexts under investigation, stakeholders in the region described positive impacts that can be conveyed on a destination, as well as the ways in which the challenges of negative impacts can be mitigated through strategic and proactive planning. Even though these destinations are in their relative infancy in sport tourism development, stakeholders have engaged in collaborative planning for the sustainable prosperity of their regions. The destinations justified the socio-economic benefits that sport events are perceived to attract and the associated tourism related activity which include the added marketability and increased image profile of the destination [28]. In addition, in order for emerging sport tourism destinations, there cannot be just a focus on hosting mega-events; there must also be continuous planning and collaborative efforts to attract smaller sporting events that can be hosted in second tier cities and regions so that they can also garner the benefits from EST. As sport tourism continues to gain notoriety amongst destinations that are attempting to diversify economies, moving away from traditional industries, within the regional destinations, stakeholders related their perceptions of their region engaging in EST and the strategy development that is needed to deal with the concerns. However, with no current regional sport tourism strategy, but moving forward with a dedicated organization for sport tourism, it is apparent that they will continue to bid for and host sport events with continuous strategic planning for the region until they can no longer achieve their goals without a formal strategy. This region is progressing as sport tourism destinations as they are associated with what [49] illustrates as the conditions for regional tourism development by establishing sport tourism as a destination development initiative they wish to pursue; identifying the prerequisites for regional sport tourism development by garnering community understanding and collaboration between EST stakeholders and decision makers; as well as developing the tools to support EST development including formalizing programs for EST development, infrastructure constructions and marketing.

One of the wider social matters that were not thoroughly discussed by stakeholders was the cultural opportunities that hosting these sport events bring for the destination. Some events are seen as an opportunity to add socio-cultural activities to complement the events to attract a wider range of tourist. This notion was briefly discussed by a stakeholder of each region as another component to sport tourism development that they have seen in their experiences but the topic did not further resonate amongst the rest of the stakeholders. This could be due to the stakeholders' focus on bidding for and hosting smaller events in their regions as these are the events that they are mainly able to accommodate. These socio-cultural activities are usually associated with mega-events and hallmark or major events [24]. Given the emerging nature of these regional sport

tourism destinations and the infancy and focus of sport tourism development, it is a facet of hosting EST that these destinations should strive for in the future as they mature as sport tourism destinations.

Another issue that was not widely discussed by stakeholders in the region was the way they see themselves moving forward in developing a regional sport tourism strategy. However, reference [63] highlighted that sport tourism strategy development was not a prominent academic research endeavor and it seems to also be equally lacking on the side of sport tourism industry. This was not a great part of the discussions and it was something that seems to be lacking in the planning, even though some stakeholders were aware of the need for a regional EST strategy to advance their destination. Nevertheless, the stakeholders are carrying out what [63] describes as the distinction between strategy development for certain aspects of a destination and strategic planning for implementing destination management and growth. As a somewhat normal process in the dynamic sport tourism industry, strategies take time to develop but there usually needs to be dedicated resources to do so. The stakeholders stated of their strategies or business plans for the regional DMO but at the same time they also admitted the need for the development of a regional sport tourism strategy.

## VI. CONCLUSIONS

This study aims to provide stakeholders' perspectives of hosting regional sport events. The study will contribute to a better understanding of the bidding process, stakeholder decision-making, identifying benefits and constraints, as well as leveraging the impacts of hosting these events. As [7] noted: "Thematic analysis provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data." The thematic analysis produced themes from the data linked to the collaboration efforts and current sport tourism development initiatives in each region related to strategic planning for sport tourism development.

The findings of this paper could help other cities/regions bidding, analyzing the economic impacts of sport event tourism, and using EST as a development strategy. The findings show that EST hosting in Atlanta gives economical and tourism benefits that usually give good long-term perspectives for the hosting region. Moreover, it would be interesting to find out if the regions in the US could gain any benefits from the professional games and create long-term impacts on the local economy such like tourism development because it can increase the awareness and the image of the destinations. Thus, the insights gained will be able to benefit future planning and management organizations (governments and community businesses) in their sport tourism development endeavors in defining and understanding the rationale and collaborative relationships that are necessary for preparation and the successful hosting EST. The upcoming events like 2018 College Football Playoff National Championship, 2018 NCAA Men's Basketball South Regional, Super Bowl LIII in 2019 and the 2020 NCAA Men's Final Four are dependent of the big amount of fans that will come and spend their money in Atlanta

regions. This is a good opportunity for Atlanta to promote them as destinations, and EST may bring high economic benefits to the near regions of Atlanta.

Although the other regions of Georgia will have to compete with destinations and the rest of the country to find their niche in the competitive EST market, they are on the right path as emerging sport tourism destinations. Each region should establish a dedicated EST organization to assist in the collaboration and community interaction necessary to advance their abilities to bid on and host EST. As well, they have identified the facilities, amenities and infrastructure that they possess or lack for hosting these events so that they can proactively strategize knowing their strengths and weaknesses as an EST destination. Moreover, the emerging sport tourism regions in this study have identified what they want to achieve for their communities as an EST destination in the form of socio-economic benefits, destination enhancement, sport development and improved community well-being. However, Atlanta, as an established EST destination, will need to identify where EST fits in the scope of its destination profile. In a similar manner, the other cities or regions will need to adjust their limits of progress and adaptation of sport tourism as a developing EST destination. Thus, proactive strategic planning is crucial on all levels if these EST destinations/regions are to progressively establish in their socio-economic, socio-cultural, political, and tourism development.

Note: For the consideration of shortening the article, the summarized interviews of stakeholders for the five theme questions in Appendix A are omitted.

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