An International Perspective on Awareness and Consumption of the Youth Olympic Games

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Marketing Abstract 2011-170 Saturday, June 4, 2011 8:30 AM 20-minute oral presentation (Room 35)

On July 6, 2007, IOC president Jacques Rogge officially announced the plans for a Youth Olympic Games (YOG); a sporting event targeted specifically for teenagers (14-18) beginning in 2010 for Summer Games in Singapore and 2012 for Winter Games in Innsbruck (Digel, 2009). Since that announcement, there has been an ambitious effort to create awareness and interest in this global sport festival. These games seek to embody the Olympic ideals encapsulated within the Olympic Charter that connect the event to youth, health, sportsmanship, peace, education and enjoyment (Loland, 1995). At the same time, there is an effort to guard against an unbridled exploitation of the event which could potentially increase various negative aspects of youth sport: over-training, increased dropout rates, cheating, and overzealous youth coaches putting youth athletes in danger. To this point, Digel (2008) contended that the YOG might fuel the hyper-commercialism seen in the current Olympic Games.

As the first YOG approached, however, the event received very little attention from the traditional sport media (Brennan, 2007). Even those involved in the youth sport movement seemed minimally aware of the YOG as it rapidly approached. Personal and perceived public awareness of the YOG was reported to be extremely low among athletes, coaches, administrators/sport officials, and parents involved in six Summer Olympic sports in the United States (Judge, Petersen, & Lydum, 2009). A study of Greek coaches and physical educators also demonstrated a surprising low level of personal and perceived public awareness amongst a nation that prides itself in its passion for the Olympics (Judge, Kantzidou, Bellar, & Petersen, 2010). Additionally, a study of American figure skating coaches reported very low mean scores for personal and public awareness of the YOG despite the opportunities it might afford their athletes (Judge, Petersen, Bellar and Gilreath, 2010).

The purpose of this research study was to collect data from a diverse international sample of academicians and professionals in the areas of physical education and sport science attending an international conference 90 days prior to the inaugural YOG games in Singapore. An 11-item survey was administered to 215 professionals with a gender mix of 56.3% male and 43.7% female, all of whom were involved with the international conference. The research questions were analyzed according to the key demographic variables of nation/region of residence.

Primary research questions focused on personal familiarity ($M = 3.60, SD = 1.81$) and perceived public awareness ($M = 2.85, SD = 1.70$) of the inaugural YOG via a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from totally unaware (1) to very familiar (7). These total sample mean values are extremely low for a global sporting event such as the YOG. Further analysis via ANOVA revealed several significant differences within the demographic groups in both personal awareness and public awareness. Additional research questions focused on the anticipated consumption of the games via event attendance and via television. They were also measured on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from not at all likely (1) to very likely (7). A final component of the survey assessed the ability to identify the YOG logo from a group of five graphic options.

The study participants included representation from 26 nations that were grouped according to proximity to the host nation for the YOG (Singapore 45.8%, Southeast Asia 16.0%, Asia 20.7%, Australia/New Zealand 5.2%, Europe 5.6%, and North America 6.6%). Significant differences for YOG personal familiarity ($F(5,207) = 3.12, p = .010, Eta = .265$) were identified with those from Australia/New Zealand ($M = 4.27$) as significantly greater than those from North America ($M = 2.45$). Significant differences in perceived public awareness by region were also noted ($F(5,207) = 11.08, p < .001, Eta = .459$) with Singapore ($M = 5.57$) significantly greater than North America ($M = 1.64$), Europe ($M = 1.17$), and Australia/New Zealand ($M = 1.45$). Levels of intention to attend the YOG were also stratified according to nation/region with significant differences ($F(5,207) = 48.26, p < .001, Eta = .734$) noted between the mean for Singapore ($M = 5.70$) and all other groups: SE Asia ($M = 3.29$), Asia ($M = 2.91$), Europe ($M = 1.17$), North America ($M = 1.07$), and Australia/New Zealand ($M = 1.73$). Significant differences in the area of expected YOG television consumption were also identified by nation/region ($F(5,207) = 26.20, p < .001, Eta = .403$). Residents of Singapore ($M = 5.59$) rated their intentions much higher than those from Europe ($M = 3.92$) or North America ($M = 3.43$). The overall level of correct YOG icon identification for the sample was 83.8%, and an analysis by nation/region revealed the following levels of icon identification: Singapore 98.9%, Southeast Asia 88.2%, Asia 73.8%, Australia/New Zealand 90.0% Europe 58.3%, and North America 21.4%.

Despite the generally low means for personal familiarity and public perception of the YOG within this sample, the mean values for both factors demonstrate higher values than prior studies of Judge et al. (2009 & 2010). The trend of increasing levels of personal and public familiarity compared to prior studies could be attributed to both the timing of studies and the nationalities of the subjects surveyed. The trend of a steady increase in mean scores from the prior and current studies could be connected to...
the YOG event drawing closer and perhaps exposure to the increase in marketing efforts for YOG. The McCann World Group was appointed by the Singapore Youth Olympic Games Organizing Committee (SYOGOC) to develop the marketing campaign for the inaugural Singapore 2010 Youth Olympic Games. McCann developed a promotions activities plan (regional and international) that included planning online promotional activities to create awareness of the Games and to drive traffic to its websites for the Games (Bakht, 2009). The current study was the first to specifically assess a diverse international audience in a single sample, and the highest level of perceived public awareness was from the host nation, Singapore. It is also of interest to note that the mean scores for both personal familiarity and public awareness tend to increase as the region/nation group is more proximal to the host country. The high level of icon identification reflects favorably on the YOG marketing efforts to create increased awareness for their icon which results in recall by sport consumers. However, it is not clear whether or not the subjects of this study had been exposed to this logo prior to their travels to Singapore.

Results of this study present some interesting conclusions and suggestions for future research related to the YOG. What can and will be done to aid in the development of a YOG marketing message that increases awareness, generates interest, arouses desire for involvement, and initiates action on the part of all involved in youth sport? The general statistics show improving trends of awareness but they still remain rather low for a global sport festival with such strong connections to the Olympic Games. There is a need for future studies to assess the outcome of the inaugural YOG and its marketing efforts by direct measures of event attendance and consumption and continue to explore national/regional differences in relation to the outcomes of the initial YOG.