A Photographic Analysis of Official and Unofficial Images of the 2010 Winter Olympics

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Mega sport events, such as the Winter Olympics, are a multi-sensory experience. One of the more powerful and predominant senses is the visual experience. Host organizing committees establish a visual identity (i.e., what the organization is; Balmer, 1985) with logos, mascots, marketing campaigns, and branding. They also produce souvenir photographs, postcards, posters, videos, and books. Media are involved in transmitting images (i.e., impressions of an organization held by others; Hatch & Schultz, 1997) of the event. Spectators and tourists capture their experiences of the event through photographs and videos. With social media, some of these images are shared with larger communities. These official and unofficial images become a lasting, visual legacy of the games and the host committee. Despite the prevalence of visual images associated with mega sport events, there has been little examination of the content of those images. Are there consistent messages being conveyed through the various sources of images? Do different sources produce different images of the event? Are there conflicting, absent, or unusual images, which contribute to a more fragmented and ambiguous picture of the event? Critically examining these visual artifacts of the games may provide new insight into how “such events are negotiated, enacted, performed, lived in and lived through, [and] contested” (Silk, 2011, p. 744).

There is a body of literature in the sport management field on images of sport events. Some researchers have examined the relationship between sport event image and destination image (e.g., Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2007; Moon, Connaughton, Ko, & Lee, 2011; Xing & Chalip, 2006). Others have identified dominant images of a sport event based on tourists’ and spectators’ perceptions (e.g., Hallmann & Breuer, 2010; Kaplanidou & Buta, 2010). There has been research on the relationship between hosting sport events and the image of communities (e.g., Chalip, Green, & Hill, 2001; Smith, 2006). Another area of interest has been the media’s production of images of sport events (e.g., Ramshaw & Hinch, 2006; Silk & Andrews, 2001). Parent and Foreman’s (2007) study of image and identity management of host committees for mega sport events is one of the few that has framed the topic from an organizational perspective.

These studies have provided insight on tourist and consumer behaviour, branding of communities, and the influence of the media. Surprisingly, the visual images associated with the event have not been a focus of research. There is little critique of the official pictures of the event produced by host committees or how external stakeholders (e.g., media, spectators, visitors) make sense of the event with their own images. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to compare the official and unofficial images of the 2010 Winter Olympics, with the intent of highlighting the points of consistency, differences, and ambiguity.

The study is framed using Martin’s (1992, 2002) three perspectives of organizational culture: integration, differentiation, and fragmentation. Although the framework was established to examine the internally derived system of symbols, values, and assumptions, Hatch and Schultz (1997) argued “culture, identity and image form three related parts of a system of meaning and sense-making that defines an organization to its various constituencies” (p. 357). Thus, we suggest that Martin’s framework can also be applied to organizational images developed by external stakeholders. The integration perspective assumes there is consistency in the substance and interpretation of images. The differentiation perspective suggests that consensus in organizational images exists at the stakeholder level. The fragmentation perspective assumes there are contradictions, paradoxes, and ambiguity associated with the organizational images.

For this work in progress, a visual research approach (cf. Pink, 2007; Spencer, 2011; Stanczak, 2007) was employed. Recognizing that images convey meanings (Stanczak, 2007), this approach focuses on the meanings and interpretations associated with visual data. According to Spencer (2011), analyzing visual data provides an alternative approach to understanding social reality and allows researchers to explore the visual aesthetics of lived experiences. The study examined researcher-found and researcher-created images (Prosser, 1998) of the 2010 Winter Olympics. The found images were photographs from the official commemorative souvenir book and from a
sample of local and national Canadian newspapers and magazines that covered the games in Vancouver. Photographs of the event taken by one of the authors were also used in the study. The photographic images were categorized and themed. Categories were established based on the subject matter in the image (e.g., Olympic athlete) and the narrative associated with it (e.g., failure). Narratives were determined from the captions or stories associated with the photographs. The resulting themes were compared using Martin’s (1992, 2002) framework.

An initial comparison of images has identified consistent themes of nationalism, athletic success, and place identity (i.e., positive images of Vancouver and British Columbia). The commemorative book and media show images that are not typically accessible to spectators and tourists. These included behind-the-scenes or up-close photographs at sport events and non-sport events (e.g., medal ceremonies). Newspapers and personal photographs captured elements of commercialism, politics, and protest that were generally absent in official photographs.

The findings of this study have implications for recognizing the value of visual images to sport events and host organizing committees, and for understanding, at a deeper level, how these events are experienced (Silk, 2011). Specific implications for organizational image and identity management will also be discussed.