

Impact of Mega Sport Events on the Host Country's Destination Image and Country Image

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Mega sport events are core components of destination and country images marketing (Dinnie, 2008; Getz, 1997). Hosting sport events are considered 'a shortcut' towards global recognition that garner global audience' (Jones, 2001, p.241), and strengthens the destination and country image leading to increased visit and purchase intentions (Kim & Chalip, 2004; Kotler & Gertner, 2002). Although the positive change is often the primary justification of the funding for the sport event (Chalip, Green, & Hill, 2003), previous research on the impact of sport events demonstrate ambiguous or insignificant change in the host's image and in consumer behavioral intentions (Smith, 2004; Hiu & Zhou, 2002). Therefore, an empirical study to better assess the impact of sport events on destination and country images is needed. In addition, comprehensive studies on the destination and country image are necessary for further theoretical and practical implications (Nadeau, Heslop, O'Reilly & Luk, 2008). Lastly, there is lack of longitudinal research despite "it is difficult to evaluate image change without longitudinal research" (Smith, 2004, p.232). Therefore, this research aims (1) to longitudinally measure the impact of hosting a mega sport event on the destination image and country image, (2) to investigate the influential factors, and (3) to find its link to visit intention and purchase intention.

Based on the schema and co-branding theory, destination image improves by transferring the desired image from sport events (Xing & Chalip, 2006). However, Chalip, Green, and Hill (2003) found that the change can be negative with small influence on the visit intention, and Smith (2004) identified that exposure from sport event did not necessarily link to reimagining the destination. Such results are inconsistent to previous research (e.g., Owen, 2005; Ritchie, 1991). Only few studies have investigated the country image in relations to sports, where sport helped building stronger image and greater purchase intention (Kim & Morrison, 2005). However, there are also contradicting findings about the effect of country image on purchase intention, both positive (Papadopoulos & Heslop, 1993) and insignificant (Hiu & Zhou, 2002).

Destination and country image studies overlap in targeting the same object-the image of a place-with the same goal to attract the international market (Mossenberg & Kleppe, 2005). Nadeau and colleagues (2008) explains that the difference lies in the scope and the academic discipline (i.e., tourism and international business marketing), and suggests considering both images in image building strategies for increased marketing efficiency and enhanced economic benefits.

A longitudinal study was conducted on the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games sampling the general public from ages 18 to 57 in Seoul, Korea. The destination image scale on seven dimensions (i.e., urbanization, nature, culture, value, safety, climate, and convenience) was developed based on Chalip and Green's destination image scale (1996), and the five dimensions of country image (i.e., people, political, social, economical, and cultural) scale by Yoon (2001) was employed. The sport involvement, visit intention, purchase intention, visit experience to China, media consumption, and demographics were surveyed. The first survey was conducted from 160 to 130 days prior to the games where 638 samples were selected through quota sampling. The samples were re-approached through email 3 to 33 days after the games where 172 samples completed the survey (response rate = 26.96%). The demographics (i.e., gender, age, occupation, income) of the sample were verified as analogous to the population. Using MPlus6, CFA confirmed the overall fit of the destination image scale model to be a good fit ($\chi^2/df=456.117/276=1.65$, CFI=.967, TLI=.958, RMSEA=.043, SRMR=.048, WRMR=1.416). Factor loadings ranged from 0.633 to 0.928 and no inter-factor correlation were greater than .749. The country image scale model demonstrated a good overall fit ($\chi^2/df=226.020/131=1.72$, CFI=.977, TLI=.970, RMSEA=.034, SRMR=.036, WRMR=1.161). Factor loadings ranged from .509 to .964 and no inter-factor correlation were greater than .675.

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In study 1, the destination image before and after the games was compared through mean structure analysis. Overall, 'convenience' significantly changed ($p=.015$). Further examination was conducted by dividing the data into two sets according to their sport involvement (High/Low), media consumption (High/Low), and visit experience to China (Yes/No). 'Convenience' in the high sport involvement group ($p=.002$), 'climate' in the low sport involvement group ($p=.034$), 'convenience' in both the high ($p=.019$) and low ($p=.019$) media consumption groups, 'convenience' among people with no visit experience to China ($p=.001$), and 'culture' among people with visit experience to China ($p=.008$) shown significant change. For country image, only 'cultural' in the high media consumption group ($p=.038$), 'social' in the low media consumption group ($p=.031$), and 'cultural' in the people with visit experience to China ($p<.001$) had significant change. All changes in 'cultural' image in the destination and country images were negative.

In study 2, a path analysis was conducted to simultaneously examine the relationships among the constructs of interest. The model fit was good ($\chi^2/df=1005.586/611=1.64$, CFI=.965, TLI=.957, RMSEA=.032, SRMR=.041, WRMR=1.284). In the path from destination image to visit intention, 'urbanization' (standardized $\gamma=.329$, S.E.=.083, $p<.001$) and 'value' (standardized $\gamma=.099$, S.E.=.045, $p=.028$) were significant. Destination image had direct effect on purchase intention where 'urbanization' (standardized $\gamma=.375$, S.E.=.076, $p<.001$), 'safety' (standardized $\gamma=.217$, S.E.=.064, $p=.001$), and 'convenience' (standardized $\gamma=.158$, S.E.=.070, $p=.024$) had significant influence. For country image, there was no direct path found.

The improvement in 'convenience' can be explained by its comprisal of sport facility feature, and China's successful message conveyance of it (Preuss & Alfs, 2011). The change in 'social' in low media consumption likely originated from the depth of information consumed through media where low consumption groups are more exposed to well-ordered and organized social image projected through the news while the others are more exposed to sport telecast or Olympic focused programs. In both destination and country images, 'culture' was a detriment among people with visit experience to China, and the schema theory can be applied to interpret that new information (i.e., China as the Olympic host country) incongruent to the existing information (i.e., China with beautiful scenery, abundant cultural and natural attractions, based on research by Gibson, Qi & Zhang, 2008) will distort or be 'filtered out' not to conflict the established image.

Sport event does have potential influence on visit and purchase intentions through change in destination image but, in this case, there was none. Marketing strategies to actualize the potential influence can be a worthy topic for future studies. An interesting finding was how the country image had no effect on both intentions and how only the destination image affected purchase intention. This finding aligns with Nadeau and colleague's research (2008) where country image were found 'directly relevant to destination beliefs and indirectly to intentions through evaluation of the destination' (p.101). Further studies to investigate this mechanism are needed.