

Comparing the Image of the Beijing 2008 and London 2012 Olympic Games: What do the Spectators Think?

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The Olympic Games host cities prepare carefully to host the Games and for each Games a distinct message and image is communicated to the global audience through the international media. For example, the spirit of the London 2012 Games was aimed to be energetic, spirited, bright and youthful while their motto was 'Inspire a generation', reflecting the promise made when London bid for the Games (London 2012, 2012). For Beijing on the other hand, the goal was for the Games to be known as the "People's Games, Green Games and High-Tech Games" (IOC, 2010). Is that however, what the spectators perceive the Games to be? The lack of research with regards to this question is puzzling, thus the aim of this research was twofold: a) to compare and contrast what the spectators think about the Games and juxtapose it with the organizing committee's positioning, and b) to identify if there are salient themes in the image of the Games that can perhaps provide the basis for a scale development that aims to measure the Olympic Games image.

Looking at the studies that examine the image of either destinations or sport events, it is clear that sport event images consist of cognitive and affective components that are identified through certain dimensions such as emotional, environmental and socio-cultural (Hallman, Kaplanidou, & Breuer, 2010; Kaplanidou, 2007; Kaplanidou, 2009, 2010). Also, as noted in the marketing report from the Torino 2006 Games "The essence of the Olympic Brand consists of three essential pillars. The first of these is Striving for Success, which is founded upon the ideals inherent in sport – such as striving, excellence, determination, being the best. Attributes that define the Olympic Games as a global festival – such as global, participation, celebration, unity, festive – constitute the second pillar, Celebration of Community. The third pillar, Positive Human Values, is composed of the attributes that fulfill our understanding of, and aspiration to, universal ideals: optimism, respectful, inspirational. These three pillars support a powerful, emotive brand that transcends sport and resonates strongly with the people of the world." (IOC, 2006). Brand image is an antecedent to brand equity and it manifests through brand associations (knowledge structures) in memory (Keller, 2003). As Keller (2003) suggests "two key areas of consumer research in branding revolve around the creation and representation of brand knowledge. The challenge and opportunity for consumer research in both of these areas is fully appreciating the broad scope and complexity involved." (p. 599). Thus, understanding the salience and strength of brand image components can contribute to an increase in the brand equity, a goal aligned with the purpose of this study.

To understand the salience of the Olympic Games brand image, data were collected from spectators and tourists of two consecutive summer Olympic Games: Beijing 2008 and London 2012. For Beijing, the number of respondents was 481 while for London it was 172. For Beijing there were 12 interviewers (all of which were multi-lingual) working and they collected data every day during the Games starting one day before the event and finishing one day after the event concluded. The languages spoken by the interviewers included English, Spanish, Portuguese, Mandarin, Polish, Korean, and French. All of the interviewers went through formal training before collecting data. Data was collected at various Olympic sites, tourist destinations, market districts, and hotel districts. For London 2012, the concentration of spectators were at the Olympic Park, thus the data were collected by a trained doctoral student during four days (July 29, August 1, 4, 12) outside and inside that site. For the purpose of this study, one question was asked of the respondents: to list the three words that come to mind when you think of the Beijing/London Games. The words were then compiled into a master list and coded following an open coding process that allows the generation of concepts that can offer a foundation for theory building (Strauss & Cronin, 1998). For Beijing there was 1443 words and for London 497. Two coders examined the data holistically and identified some common themes in the data and agreed on these categories. Then a word by word coding took place

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under the initial theme identification. For the majority of the word classification there were no differences in the coders' assignment of words. For the words where differences existed, final classification was resolved with discussion.

For Beijing, eight themes were identified: Event Prestige, Commercial, Organization/Management, Athletes, Socio-cultural, Host Destination, Sports Competition and Emotional. For London the same topics were revealed along with nationalism as a new theme for the London Games. For Beijing the most dominant theme was "Athletes" while for London it was the "Emotional" theme. The second most important theme for Beijing was the Sports Competition and the same was for London. The third most salient theme for Beijing was the "Socio-cultural" theme while for London 2012, was the organization/management aspect.

The initial results from this comparison suggest that there seems to be some disconnect from the positioning of the organizing committee and the positioning of each Games in the consumers mind. For London 2012, inspiration drove their communication strategies, and this was revealed in the salience of the emotional theme for London Games. But then sports competition and management/organization emerged to reflect two themes that are connected with the direct experience of the spectators: the consumption of sports competition and the event's organization. For Beijing, there was more disconnect between the positioning of the organizing committee and the spectators' perceptions as the respondents brought more in mind the athletes than the competition and socio-cultural aspects. The latter does align with the "Peoples' Games" positioning, but there was no connection to the Green Games and "Tech Games" themes. Rather, it seems the spectators regressed on the Olympic values of success, human values, inspiration as evident in some of the identified themes. Interestingly, the themes across the two Games differed in only one category: London's nationalism. But the sample generated in the London games consisted primarily from British spectators, a limitation that has to be noted here. The sample from Beijing was more diverse as respondents came from all five continents. The commonality in the themes is encouraging toward the creation of a scale that measures the Olympic Games image which will benefit a number of stakeholders: the IOC, Organizing Committee, the sponsors to evaluate how the image of the Games influences outcomes such as loyalty and/or satisfaction with Olympic Games products and services.