The Influence of Attitudes Toward the International Olympic Committee and Olympic Games’ Brand Personality on Word of Mouth Behavior

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Introduction

The literature on mega events and the onsite experience of the event has shown that event images can be positive and influence pertinent behaviors such as travel to future Olympic Games (e.g., Kaplanidou, 2007). The meanings associated with the sport events can be affective and cognitive in nature (Kaplanidou, 2010). Affective imageries can be fairly dominant wherever direct experience is present (McKay & McVetty, 2002). As a result, more complex knowledge about the object of experience is present and can provide a deeper pool of information regarding word-of-mouth activity. Researchers, however, have paid scant attention to spectator responses related to word of mouth (WOM) behaviors (i.e., sharing Olympic experiences with friends in person and on social media pages). Indeed, WOM behaviors may be of considerable importance to Olympic marketers. “The word of mouth communication process is one of the most powerful forces in the marketplace and tends to by highly persuasive” (Bansal & Voyer, 2000, p. 166). Moreover, WOM communication occurs on a regular basis amongst friends and has been recognized as an important promotional tool among researchers and practitioners (Wilson, 1994). Among the components of the Olympic Games sport event experience is the IOC, who along with the organizing committee can influence decisions on major experiential components and organization of the Games. Thus, people who are interested enough to attend the Games most likely have formed an attitude toward the IOC and have impressions about the personality of the Games, which can be intertwined with the personality of the host destination (Malfas et al., 2004). Such intertwining can create an interaction process between all the entities (e.g., spectators, event delivery organisations) involved (Parent, Eskerud, & Hanstad, 2012). Within this mindset, evaluation of the mega event’s brand personality as well as attitudes toward the IOC as the overarching organization for the Olympic Games could provide some initial insight as to how they stimulate traditional (e.g., talking with your friends face to face, or via the telephone) and social media WOM about their Olympic Games experiences. Thus, our paper addresses the following two research questions: 1) How do attitudes toward the IOC and perceptions of the Olympic Games’ brand personality influence WOM behavior in the form of sharing Olympic experiences with friends? 2) How do attitudes toward the IOC and perceptions of the Olympic Games’ brand personality influence WOM behavior in the form of sharing Olympic experiences on social media pages?

Method

In order to explore the research questions of the study, data were collected from 172 London 2012 Olympic Games spectators using onsite survey methodology in the London Olympic park during four days of the Games. The spectators were intercepted as they were waiting to attend their sport in the park’s open areas. For the research questions of the study, attitudes toward the IOC as the leader organization of the Olympic movement was measured with three seven-point semantic differential items (good-bad; pleasant-unpleasant; favorable-unfavorable) that measure attitudes toward an object (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989), while brand personality was measured with five seven-point items representing the five dimensions of brand personality as indicated by Aaker’s work on brand personality and further validated in the tourism context by Ekinci and Hosany (2006). The brand personality items were sincere, spirited, reliable, sophisticated and rugged and were evaluated on how non-descriptive (=1) or descriptive (=7) they were of the personality of the Games. Word-of-mouth activity was measured with two items that asked the respondents to indicate on a five-point scale the likelihood that they will share their experiences through social media and that they would talk to all their friends about their Olympic Games experiences (1=very unlikely, 5=very likely). Factor analysis of both the attitude construct and the personality construct revealed one factor solutions for the attitude toward the IOC construct and the Olympic Games brand personality construct. For the brand personality construct, the term “rugged” did not load very well in the factor and was excluded from further analysis. The one factor solutions allowed the creation of single items by taking the mean of the construct
items (for personality only four out of five). Two multiple regressions were estimated with the two WOM variables as the DV.

Results

Descriptively, the likelihood of engaging in traditional WOM activity (M=5.55) was higher than social media WOM activity (M=3.36). Attitude toward the IOC was lower (M=3.18) while the personality of the Games was much higher (M=5.03). The results from the two regressions showed a significant negative impact of the attitudes toward the IOC on traditional WOM ($\beta=-.18, p<.05$), while the brand personality of the Games had a significant positive impact ($\beta=.22, p<.01$) on traditional WOM. Collectively these two variables explained 10% of the variance on WOM ($R^2=.10$). Regarding the social media, only attitudes toward the IOC variable had a significant but negative ($\beta=-.19, p<.05$) influence on social media. The variance explained in this regression was rather small ($R^2=.06$). These results suggest that less favorable attitudes toward the IOC were associated with an increased likelihood of engaging in both traditional and social media WOM activity, whereas stronger perceptions of brand personality was only positively associated with traditional WOM activity.

Discussion

Although leadership organizations such as the IOC can influence with their decision making the image and activities of the Games, the data from this study suggest that the IOC does not garner positive attitudes among spectators of the Games. This can have unwanted consequences regarding WOM activity about the experience of the Games themselves. The negative relationship between the attitudes toward the IOC and WOM is perhaps signaling a disconnect between the Olympic Games image and the IOC despite the nesting relationship (the Games are under the auspices of the IOC) of the two entities. This finding can be in contradiction with the notion of the homogeneous event brand image where all the stakeholders interact with it (Parent et al, 2012). Perhaps it shows the need for the IOC to connect their image more with the personality of each Games. Although the results may not generalize to all Olympic Games spectators, the findings of this study provide an initial platform of discussion regarding matching of perceived images for stakeholders directly involved in the event delivery and their collective influence of WOM activity.