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Sport tourism Saturday, May 31, 2014 20-minute oral presentation (including questions) (Allegheny)

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Introduction

On December 2nd, 2010, FIFA announced to the world that the host country of the 2022 World Cup would be Qatar. The Middle East has the opportunity to host such a mega event for the first time in a timeline that allows the country of Qatar a twelve year preparation period. The main claim of the bid related to destination image changes from hosting the event not only for the host country itself, but for the region. This claim was stated by the Chairman of the Qatar 2022 Bid Committee Sheikh Mohammed bin Hamad Al Thani who said: “The economic benefit will be substantial for every country in the Middle East. It will be a huge platform towards changing the Islamic and Middle East’s perception of the outside world. I truly believe that football – and people might think it’s an extravagant claim – plants the seeds for an open, more accepting world towards other cultures, and that in itself will create and pave the way for the future.” (Time Out Doha, 2010). FIFA also noted about the 2022 World Cup that it “will come for the first time to a region brimming with sporting potential and passion. More than 435 million Middle Easterners will be waiting for the Game in 2022.” (2022 FIFA World Cup Qatar). The FIFA statement suggests the importance of the event for the Middle East.

Given the distant host date from the 2022 World Cup, a number of countries in the world are still unaware of the place that is hosting it. Ritchie and Smith (1991) showed in their study about Olympic Games host country awareness that the closer to the event people get, the higher the awareness of where the event is hosted. The higher the awareness or interest, the more salient certain image perceptions of the host country (Li & Kaplanidou, 2013). What is not evident in the literature is the spillover effects of the host destination image on the countries of the region, on the perceptions of the host country character and on relevant behaviors among people from long haul tourism markets such as the USA. Given that awareness is an antecedent to interest, desire and action stages of consumer behavior (Milman & Pizam, 1995), the purpose of this study was to explore how awareness levels of hosting the 2022 World Cup in Qatar moderated host destination image perceptions, host country character perceptions, image perceptions of countries neighboring the country of Qatar given the 2022 bid’s claim to change perceptions of the Middle East globally and relevant behaviors among people from a long haul tourism market for Qatar: the USA.

Method

The data for this study were collected through Amazon Mechanical Turk, an online consumer panel comprised of people that resemble the US population profile (Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012). A web survey was used rewarded participates 75 cents for their complete responses to all the survey questions. The number of respondents was set to 300 which allowed for the first 300 people who saw the web survey link and were willing to participate to complete the survey. The survey featured a number of destination image items including cognitive, affective and overall image components (Kaplanidou, 2007; 2009) country character items (Nadeau, Heslop, O’Reilly, & Luk, 2008), overall image perceptions for nine countries neighboring or close to Qatar, including Qatar, to assess the regional destination perceptions, one item evaluating the awareness levels of Qatar hosting the World Cup (not at all aware—extremely aware), traveling intentions to Qatar, the Middle East, and interest to attend the 2022 World Cup and to watch it on TV. To create a high and a low awareness group we conducted a median split of the responses removing from the grouping those respondents who selected the middle of the scale as their awareness levels. This resulted in the high group having 219 respondents and the low group 60 respondents. Independent sample t-tests were
estimated (p value set to .05) with awareness levels being the IV and all the destination image, country character and behavioral intention variables as the DVs.

Results

The results showed the awareness of the location of host country of the 2022 World Cup positively influenced one component of the cognitive destination image (factor named as safety, hygiene and tourism product quality $M_{high}=4.39$, $M_{low}=3.61$), affective destination image ($M_{high}=4.01$, $M_{low}=3.51$), country character ($M_{high}=2.94$, $M_{low}=2.52$), the overall destination image of Qatar ($M_{high}=4.22$, $M_{low}=3.72$) travel in Qatar in the next 5 years ($M_{high}=1.73$, $M_{low}=1.32$), travel in the Middle East in the next 5 years ($M_{high}=2.22$, $M_{low}=1.62$), the overall destination images of Kuwait ($M_{high}=3.97$, $M_{low}=3.39$) and Turkey ($M_{high}=4.78$, $M_{low}=4.19$). Interest to watch the Qatar World Cup on TV was higher among the high awareness group ($M_{high}=3.76$, $M_{low}=2.30$) and the same held for travel to Qatar for the World Cup ($M_{high}=2.10$, $M_{low}=1.42$) No differences were observed in the destination image perceptions of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria, and Bahrain.

Discussion

The results of this study provide empirical claim that awareness of the host country of a mega event improves host destination image perceptions, selective regional country perceptions, country character and relevant behaviors to either travel there or to watch the event on TV. However, although differences were noted based on awareness levels, the results of this study show that there is room for improvement in all variables measured here. Thus, practical implications include a coordinated tourism promotional program about the country where the World Cup is the main attraction given its ability to enhance perceptions. Theoretically, the role of awareness for a host country is heightened with the results of the study. Next steps in this research will examine the interplay of country character and destination image to identify the dominant factors in the formation of psychologically and geographically distant sport tourism markets for mega sport event host countries. Further, samples from other countries in Europe will also be collected and compared to the US sample.