Image Fit between Sport Events and Destination and Its Impact on Attitude and Future Behavior

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Sport tourism Thursday, June 4, 2015 20-minute oral presentation (including questions) (Seigniory)

Abstract 2015-027 11:00 AM

Sport events, especially major sport events, are increasingly used as tools for city marketing. As indicated by researchers and experts in academic and practical fields, sport events can boost the economy of the host cities, and more importantly, improve the image of host cities and build up high reputation in global market. In recent 20 years, cities in China are very keen to hold various sport events for improving destination image.

There are a lot of discussions on how sports events influence destinations. Events and destinations influence each other's imagery because the image can transfer between them. The match-up hypothesis suggests that the direction and intensity of image transfer will depend on the fit between event image and destination image (Xing & Chalip, 2006). According to co-branding theory, the pairing of brands will create spill-over effects. Their joint fit will positively influence the evaluation of brand alliance while subsequently impacting the attitudes towards the partner brands (Simonin and Ruth, 1998). Higher fit between sport event and sponsor resulted in better sponsorship response (Koo, Quartermann, & Flynn, 2006; Speed & Thompson, 2000). Image fit between celebrity and endorsed brand was acknowledged as an important factor influencing the effectiveness of the endorsement (Lynch & Schuler, 1994; Till &Busler, 2000). Hallmann & Breuer (2010) performed one of few studies on the image fit between sport event and destination. They calculated the image fit between sport event and destination based on an indirect multi-attribute measurement, and examined its impact on intent to revisit the event and destination.

Therefore, this research aims to examine how the consumer perceive the image of sport event and the host destination, and how the image fit impact consumer's attitude and future behavioral intentions. Based on the co-branding theory, match-up hypothesis and theory of reasoned action, the following hypotheses were developed:

H1: the image fit positively affects both attitudes towards event and destination;
H2: the image fit positively affects the intention of revisiting the event and destination and the intention of recommending the event and destination;
H3: the attitudes towards event and destination positively affect future intentions.

The initial variables to measure event and destination image were derived from relevant literature and discussion of a focus group which was combined of 16 graduates specialized in sport-related major. 18 pairs of bipolar adjectives in a 7-point semantic-differential scale were determined to measure the sport event image and destination image. Both attitudes towards sport event and destination were examined by the statement of “I have positive attitude towards the sport event / destination” in a Likert-7-point scale. Future intentions were tested in a Likert-7-point scale by the statements of “watch the sport event in the next two years”, “visit the destination for vacation in the next two years”, “recommend the sport event to my friends”, and “recommend the destination to those who want advice for travel”.

For the purpose of the study, research sample were non-local spectators from two international sport events hosted in Shanghai. A total of 253 copies of questionnaires were distributed on the site of Formula one Chinese Grand Prix (Hereinafter referred to as F1) and 222 copies were fully completed, representing a response rate of 87.7%. A total of 304 copies of questionnaire were distributed on the site of Shanghai ATP 1000 Tennis Masters (Hereinafter referred to as ATP) and 269 copies were fully completed, representing a response rate of 88.5%. Of the respondents from F1, 74.8% were male and 25.2% female. 74.3% resided in the Mainland and 25.7% out of Mainland. 76.1% were first-time visitors and 23.9% were repeat visitors. Of the respondent from ATP, 59.5% were male and 40.5% female, 72.5% resided in the Mainland and 27.5% out of Mainland. 68.4% were first-time visitors and 31.6% were repeat visitors. The majority of participants from both events (i.e. 46.8% for F1, 59.1% for ATP) ranged in age between 18-30 years old.
The whole sample was randomly divided to conduct separate exploratory (EFA) and confirmatory factor analyses (CFA). EFA produced both satisfactory four-factor event image and destination image. Activity, emotion, quality, and competence consist of the dimensions of the event image, containing 15 items. Activity, emotion, culture and competence consist of the dimensions of the destination image, containing 12 items. The event image and destination image have three common dimensions and 10 common items. Amos was used to conduct CFA, and sport event and destination image measurement model with three common dimensions showed to be satisfactory. Then, the image fit variable was developed by the absolute differences between sport event image and destination image on the 10 common indicators. The calculated method has been used by Musante & Milne (1999) and Hallmann & Breuer (2010).

Hierarchical regression analysis was utilized to examine the impact of image fit on the attitudes and future intentions. Socio-demographic variables such as gender, age, education, household annual income, residence, as well as past experience were treated as controlling variables; image fit and attitude were independent variables.

In F1 sample, image fit had significant impact on destination attitude but not on event attitude. Image fit served only as a predictor of intention of recommending the destination. The destination attitude fully mediated the relationship between image fit and intention of recommending the destination. In the ATP sample, the impact of image fit was indicated as a non-significant determinant of attitudes, revisit intention, and referral intention. Attitudes were significant predictor of future intentions in both two samples. Therefore, H1, H2 were partially supported and H3 was fully supported in F1 sample, and only H3 was supported in ATP sample.

These findings contribute to the existing body of relationship between event image and destination image. They may suggest that image fit does not directly impact the attitudes or future intentions. There are some mediators, such as support of the brand alliance between event and destination. The implications and practices will be discussed and future research directions will be provided in this presentation.