Impact of International Sport Events on Host Countries' Destination Images: A Comparison of the 2014 Winter Olympics and the 2015 IAAF Championships

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Since international sporting events represent a unique opportunity to create positive images of a country as a tourism destination (Chung & Woo, 2011), it is necessary to understand how the images of the host country in customers’ minds influence perceptions toward the country. However, in the sport tourism literature, the impact of such a sport event on host country images demonstrates ambiguous or insignificant change in the country's images and in behavioral intentions (Smith, 2004; Hiu & Zhou, 2002). With the lack of consensus on the impact of hosting the sporting event, scholars cast doubt on the findings of previous research, noting that to examine the effects of international sporting events without considering event attributes would not accurately reflect how the events affect country images (e.g., Kim, 2015). Accordingly, it is noteworthy that it should not treat all international sporting events as equivalent mega-events which attract international attention and a large number of event visitors because each event possesses a number of distinctive characteristics (e.g., event duration, viewership, size, event popularity).

Despite the possible role of sport event attributes in country image formation, little empirical research has been conducted to explore its effects on host country’s destination images. Therefore, the purpose of this study was threefold: (a) to examine changes in the host country’s destination images held by foreigners (i.e., U.S. citizens) before and after the events; (b) to develop and test a conceptual model delineating the relationships between sport event involvement, destination images, and consumer’s response (attitude and intention to visit) to the country; and (c) to examine if the research model shows a similar pattern of relationships across different sport events. For the purpose of this study, the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics and the 2015 IAAF Championships were used.

According to Yim, Kim, and Shin (2013), consumers’ sport event involvement play an important role in determining a host country’s image. Their findings indicate that highly-involved consumers are most likely to develop a favorable image of a country hosting sporting events. It is expected that event involvement will positively influence the host country’s destination images. In tourism research, destination image is defined as “the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person has of a destination” (Crompton, 1979, p. 18). Mega sport events such as the Olympics or the FIFA World Cup are powerful brand elements where the event image effectively transfers to destination images (Kotler & Gertner, 2002), which drive tourist visitation and other related profits (e.g., Kaplanidou & Gibson, 2010; Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2007). Based on the literature review related to sport involvement, country images, attitude, and behavioral intention, it is hypothesized in a research model that a high level of event involvement positively influences the host country’s destination images, and the images are positively related to attitudes toward the country, which lead to behavioral intention (visit intention).

A pre and post-test design was implemented for two different international sporting events: the 2015 IAAF World Championships and the 2014 Winter Olympics. Using an online survey, the general public from age 18 to 61 was recruited from a popular portal service website. A total of 698 participants (390 for the 2015 IAAF Championships; 308 for the 2014 Winter Olympics) completed both pre-post surveys. All of the scales were adopted from previous research with some modifications. The destination image scale on seven dimensions (i.e., urbanization, nature, culture, value, safety, climate, and convenience) was employed (Chalip & Green, 1996). Using AMOS18, the results of a series of Confirmatory Factor Analysis indicate that the measurement models are a good fit to data collected in two sporting events.

The destination images before and after the games were compared through mean structure analysis. ‘Urban’ and ‘Safety’ significantly changed (p < .05) after both sporting events. ‘Culture’ and ‘Nature’ in the 2014 Winter Olympics (p < .01) had significant change. Next, Structural Equation Model analysis was conducted to examine the relationships among the constructs of interest. The model fit was good (χ²/df = 811.17/451 = 1.779, p = .000, TLI
In a model for the 2014 Winter Olympics, all path coefficients from event involvement to destination images had significant influences. Destination images had direct effects on attitudes toward the host country where ‘Urban’ (standardized $\gamma = .440, p < .001$), ‘safety’ (standardized $\gamma = .393, p = .001$), ‘Culture’ (standardized $\gamma = .313, p = .024$) and ‘Nature’ (standardized $\gamma = .243, p = .01$). The attitudes had direct effects on visit intention.

In a model for the 2015 IAAF Championships, all path coefficients from event involvement to destination images had significant influences, except the paths from Involvement to Culture, Value, and Nature. Destination images had direct effects on attitudes toward the host country where ‘Urban’ (standardized $\gamma = .350, p < .001$), ‘safety’ (standardized $\gamma = .348, p < .001$), and ‘Culture’ (standardized $\gamma = .271, p < .001$) and ‘Nature’ (standardized $\gamma = .187, p = .01$). The attitude had direct effects on visit intention. However, there was no direct path from Destination Images to Visit Intention in both models.

The current study extends the scope of the research on international sporting events, focusing on changes in destination images within longitudinal research and the role of event types/attributes in country’s destination image formation. The findings demonstrate potential effects of major sport events on visit intentions through destination images, but a different pattern of relationships across sport events was observed in this study. Major sporting events can be used to create or reinforce global sport fans’ perception about the host country by highlighting urbanization and safety factors of the host country. It provides strong evidence that attitudes toward the country lead to intention to visit the country. For sport practitioners, marketing strategies to actualize its potential effect can be a worthy topic for future studies.