Tracing the Perceptional Changes Roused by a Mega Sport Event in the Context of Strained Bilateral Relations: Measuring the Effect of the 2018 FIFA World Cup Russia on the Perceptions of Georgians

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Regarded as one of the mechanisms of soft power, sport has shown its utility in the realm of international relations. While mega sport events can impact relations and several studies (e.g., Ferreira et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2014) have sought to identify the effects of hosting such events, research has also examined the dynamics of host countries’ projected images (e.g., Knott et al., 2015). The concepts of country and destination image serve as conceptual underpinnings in such research as both can enhance the way a country is perceived (e.g., Chen, 2010). With a particular focus on examining changes and behavioral intentions in relation to country and destination image, the current study used the 2018 Russia World Cup to examine the impact of a mega sport event on the strained bilateral relations between Russia and Georgia. Thus, the purpose of this study was to identify and measure the impact of this event on the perceptions of Georgian citizens about the host country, Russia.

Using modified image scales by Alvarez and Ocampo (2014) and Kim et al. (2014) as well as measures of behavioral outcomes (e.g., Chen et al., 2016), data were collected before and after the 2018 FIFA World Cup to assess any changes among Georgians (N=335) with regard to their views on Russia and intentions to visit. The CFA showed an acceptable fit ($\chi^2$/df = 2460.44/1294, RMSEA = .04, CFI = .97, TLI = .97). The path model consisted of four constructs and the model for both pre- and post- events presented a good fit ($\chi^2$/df = 1652.87/578, RMSEA = .05, CFI = .95, TLI = .95). The results of path analysis indicated that for both pre- and post- events, affective country image and destination image had a significant and positive association with behavior intention ($p < .01$), while cognitive country image did not have a significant association with behavior intention ($p > .05$). Furthermore, only urban ($\beta = .25$, $p < .01$) and climate ($\beta = .17$, $p < .05$) dimensions of the destination image had a positive association with behavior intention in the pre-event context, whereas urban ($\beta = .18$, $p < .01$), convenience ($\beta = .22$, $p < .05$), and value ($\beta = .35$, $p < .05$) had a positive association with behavior intention in the post-event context.

The results indicate that the pre-perceived cognitive image on reputation, respect, and development of Russia show nonchanging insignificant effects on behavioral outcomes. While such a finding aligns with Alvarez and O’Campo (2014), the current findings also revealed a positive association between the emotional aspect of country image and destination image and behavioral intention remain identical. It could be posited that because of the changes in the positive effect of destination image (urban, convenience, and value: post-event), the World Cup event led the Georgian spectators to regard Russia’s images of modernity, reasonableness, and convenience of travel projected through the event as influential variables likely to shape their behavioral intentions.