

THE ROLE OF SPORT MEGA-EVENTS IN NATION-BRANDING: THE CASE OF SOUTH AFRICA AND THE 2010 FIFA WORLD CUP™

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Abstract

Aim

While the hosting of the 2010 FIFA World Cup™ in South Africa represented a unique platform and opportunity for creating and/ or managing the host nation's brand, it was unclear exactly what this impact would be. This paper looks at the role of sport mega-events in nation-branding. It also sets out the findings from an initial, exploratory investigation that sought to identify perceptions of international visitors to South Africa during the World Cup event, regarding the nation brand and its key attributes, and to ascertain the role of the mega-event in the formation and/ or change of these perceptions.

Theoretical background

There has been growing academic support for the notion that nations have a brand image (e.g. Anholt 2007 and Kotler & Gertner 2002) and that this image is made up of a collection of: images, symbols, history, perceptions, media, experiences, observations and stereotypes. While some scholars are hesitant that a nation should be considered a brand, Anholt (2007), proposes that a powerful, positive nation brand provides a strong competitive advantage for a nation and recommends that a nation's image needs to be skillfully created and carefully managed, just like any other brand. There is also a growing awareness of the potentially significant impact that hosting sport mega-events can have on a country's brand image (Kotler & Gertner 2002). Sport mega-events have become increasingly important in the contemporary era, with their hosting becoming an object of policy for an increasing number of states in the world, especially "as a means to gain international visibility in some ways" (Cornelissen 2007: 242). Sport mega-events represent a unique publicity platform and opportunity for place marketing (Essex & Chalkley 1998). Such events may provide an opportunity to create or promote an image

and also re-brand a nation (Anholt 2007). Despite the growing academic interest in this subject, there is still a need for work on the strategic use of sports as a branding tool for countries other than the industrialised and established ones (Rein & Shields 2006).

Methodology, research design and data analysis

The theoretical background was compiled through a desk-top analysis of academic literature related to the areas of branding, destination branding and specifically the role of sport mega-events in nation-branding. The primary research design featured a brand perception survey among 561 international visitors to South Africa. These respondents were interviewed in the official fan parks or stadium precincts of two of the major host cities and top tourist destinations, Cape Town and Durban, during the event period (June-July 2010). This consisted of face-to-face, mall-intercept type interviews, employing a spatially-based, purposive sampling approach. This method ensures that the survey is not skewed towards a particular area or group of visitors within the fan park or stadium precinct. Both open- and closed-ended questions related to nation branding perceptions were asked. The computer software package SPSS was used to analyse the quantitative data.

Results, discussion and implications/conclusions

The primary investigation revealed that the vast majority of respondents were first-time visitors, whose primary reason for travel was the World Cup event. Many of these were from the host's non-traditional tourist markets. While prior knowledge and perceptions of South Africa were limited, new perceptions related to many positive aspects, such as natural beauty, good climate and friendly people. Although safety was a major concern for organisers prior to the event, the majority of respondents considered the country a safe destination for tourists. There was also strong support for the nation as host of the World Cup and as a potential host for future mega-events. The findings suggest that many visitors who did not have strong perceptions of South Africa now have strong positive perceptions and will act as "brand advocates" for the destination. While further investigation continues to investigate the impact of the mega-event on the nation brand, the findings appear to support the literature that promotes the successful hosting of sport mega-events as a nation-branding platform. This study adds to the growing body of knowledge in this regard, and particularly in the use of sport mega-events as strategic brand development opportunities in a developing nation.

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