

A PRE-GAMES EVALUATION OF THE IMAGE IMPACT OF THE 2012 LONDON OLYMPICS

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Abstract

Along with the World Cup, the Olympics is widely considered to be the most lucrative and sought-after mega-event for governments worldwide, and have thus been described as the 'the ultimate accolade that a city can earn on the world stage' (Gold & Gold, 2007: p. 320). For the host, they represent an opportunity to achieve urban and environmental renewal, to boost local and national economies and attract investment, to increase tourism, to present or reinforce local culture and identity, and, to achieve international prominence and/or national prestige through place marketing or even sporting success. A major strategic component in achieving what can be considered a successful Olympics is the image of host-city, in which mega-events provide an ideal opportunity to present the character and culture of the host and work to enhance its domestic and global reputation. There are, however, relatively few studies that deal specifically with the effects of mega-events and the image impact of host countries and cities (Florek et al., 2008).

The main purpose of this project is to evaluate the image impact of hosting 2012 Olympics, pre and post Games, for the city of London, with this part of the project representing the pre-Games assessment. In doing so, this project will investigate the perceptions, beliefs and opinions of the British population concerning the image of London and the impact that the 2012 Olympics will have on its domestic standing.

Broadly speaking, mega-events facilitate and are facilitated by the communication of selected images by the host-city, concerning its unique character, to millions worldwide - approximately 40 billion for the 2004 Games (Horne, 2007). Thus, host-cities often engage in aggressive and elaborate place branding and marketing schemes to communicate positive perceptions concerning its image. With regard to place, image, as described by Baloglu and

McCleary (1999, p. 870), can be thought of as 'an attitudinal construct consisting of an individual's mental representation of knowledge (beliefs), feelings, and global impression about [a] destination', and with this in mind, it is widely accepted that mega-events can have a significant effect on the formation, re-formation and development of image, as previous Olympics have demonstrated. For developed and developing countries alike, the competition to host mega-events is becoming increasingly fierce (Shoval, 2002) as they are considered to be 'valuable promotional opportunities for [places] to showcase their attractions to global audiences and help attract tourism and outside investment' (Horne, 2007, p. 83). Furthermore, for domestic audiences, successful and well-run mega-events can serve to legitimise project and government leaders, but perhaps more importantly, can serve to transform the internal perceptions of a place, for example, with Manchester hosting the 2002 Commonwealth Games, and, more recently, Liverpool's 2008 designation as the European Capital of Culture.

The main aim of this part of the research project is to evaluate the image of London, the Olympics and 2012 London Games among British people, one year prior to the start of the Games. There being no explicit terms of measurement for a city's image, it has proven to be a difficult concept to measure in the past. This study is underpinned by theoretical-methodological social representation theory, in which representations are organised around a central nucleus – in this case, image. That is, this project will seek to determine whether there is a transfer of associations from the Olympics social representation to the city of London's social representation, among the domestic population. To achieve this, this research will employ snowball sampling and utilise both quantitative and qualitative data – supporting a critical-realist perspective – gleaned from a questionnaire that will be conducted throughout the summer of 2011, and analysed before the conference. The questionnaire is comprised of questions measuring personal characteristics, demographic information, sport participation and level of engagement (quantitative) and randomised free word-association tasks (qualitative) using London, the Olympics and 2012 London Olympics as inductor terms. From the word-association tasks, social representations will be constructed, around the central nucleus (image), from identifying the most common connections between items, and the strengths of those connections.

London already benefits from its standing as a thriving international city, and therefore, any positive impacts on its image, following the 2012 Olympics, may be minimal (Shoval, 2002), and the Games may, in fact, negatively impact upon the city's image. Additionally, at this preliminary stage of the research project, the knowledge produced will inform Olympics organisers, policy-makers and marketers as to the level of British participation and engagement before the Games. The results of this study, consequently, are expected to contribute to the literature on place image.

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