

North vs. South: UK's regional perceptions of the image impact of the 2012 London Olympics

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Aim

The wider aim of this project – based on social representation theory (Moscovici, 1984) and a critical realist-informed, abductive research strategy – is to evaluate the image impact of hosting the 2012 Olympics, pre- and post Games, for the city of London. It seeks to determine whether London's hosting of the 2012 Olympics affects the social representation of the city among the domestic population, and conversely, if London influences the social representation of the Olympics. The goal of this communication is to present an analysis of the pre-Games data that reveals whether the social representations of London, the Olympics and the 2012 Games are more favourable from participants living in the more southern regions of England, than they are in the rest of the UK.

Literature review

Mega-events, particularly the Olympic Games, are widely considered to be a significant facilitator in the development of positive place image for the host city/nation, both on a domestic and global scale. The 2012 Summer Olympic Games then provides the city of London with a platform to modify and build its image, and better communicate its identity to a global audience and throughout the UK. Although London is already considered to be a leading and popular global city with a strong 'brand' (e.g. 2011 Anholt-GfK Roper City Brands Index), a key objective for those involved in the delivery of the 2012 Olympic Games will be to manage and improve London's image, and to address any potential negative image formation that may occur, or that may have already taken place (DCMS, 2008). For example, hosting the Olympics may enhance the wider UK's perceptions of London, like with previous smaller-scale events hosted in the UK (i.e. Manchester 2002 Commonwealth Games, Liverpool 2008 European Capital of Culture). Further, as previous Olympics have demonstrated, a successful and well run 2012 Summer Olympic Games might serve to legitimise project and government leaders to both London residents and to the domestic UK population, like, for example, with Beijing in 2008 (Tomlinson, 2010). Nevertheless, managing the image of a city, especially one hosting the Olympic Games, is not a straightforward undertaking (Shoval, 2002): organisation, security, infrastructure and transport, for example, can negatively affect how an Olympic Games and thus its host are perceived. Although measuring image and the impact

of/from mega-events has been overlooked in the past, some recent studies have aimed to address this knowledge gap (e.g. Florek, Breitbarth & Conejo, 2008). One of the objectives of this project, therefore, is to contribute toward this growing literature base.

Methodology, research design and data analysis

Exponential non-discriminative snowball sampling was used to recruit participants (UK citizens, n=610) who completed a mixed-methods questionnaire one year to six months prior to the Games either online or offline. This was comprised of questions measuring personal characteristics, demographic information, sport participation, national pride, and level of engagement in the Olympics (quantitative) and three randomised free word-association tasks (qualitative) using London, the Olympics and 2012 London Olympics as inductor terms; i.e., 'Please give the first 10 words that come to mind when you hear the term...'

Analysis of the data, which is currently being conducted and will be completed in time for EASM 2012, will involve collating the responses of the free word-association tasks into semantic word clusters; one word (or phrase) representing each theme. Only words or phrases cited by 15% of participants will be used to construct the core meanings of each entity. Semantic word clusters will then be used to construct the social representation of each entity (i.e. images of London, the Olympics, and the 2012 Games). The data presented here will compare the responses of participants residing in the south of England (n=304), compared with those living in the rest of the UK (n=306).

Results, discussion and implications

The results of this analysis will provide specific knowledge on how each entity is perceived by participants in the UK according to where they live; that is, this communication will explore the regional variations in UK citizens' perceptions of London, the Olympic Games and the 2012 event. It will compare engagement with, and the relevance and appeal of the London 2012 Olympic Games for participants living inside the Greater London area and in regions across the wider UK, as well as exploring how the city of London is perceived. What is interesting here is that outside of London the potential benefits arising from staging the London 2012 Olympic Games are more limited, despite government suggestions to the contrary (e.g. DCMS, 2008). It will determine whether, and to what extent a North-South divide exists in opinions.

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