
Should they always fit? Analyzing visitors' perceptions of high-fit vs. low-fit images of sports events and their host destinations

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Abstract

Aim

Since sports events can increment the number of sports tourists (Dimanche, 2003), choosing the right sports event for the right destination is necessary to change perceptions of the host destinations, as strong relationships have been identified between images of sports events and destinations (Hallmann & Breuer, 2010; Xing & Chalip, 2006). As a contribution to the field, this paper focuses on the identification of conditions under which a high-fit or a low-fit pairing between a sports event and a host destination is more promising for the host destination to favourably change its image; a challenging question as existing literature has revealed mixed results. Therefore, the identification of which conditions under a high-fit or a low-fit pairing between a sports event and host destination is more promising for the host destination to favourably change its image, is of high academic and practical relevance. Moreover, host destinations are enabled to effectively select sports events (i.e., with high or low levels of fit to the host destination) in order to favourably change (i.e., improve) their brand image.

Theoretical Background

Existing literature shows that by pairing images of events and host destinations together, image congruence occurs, creating a common image capital (Hallmann & Breuer, 2010; Xing & Chalip, 2006). Subsequently, the concept of image fit, the result of common image associations between a sport event and host destination bears great significance, as previous studies have suggested that the image of the event can positively influence destination image perceptions when the two entities are considered a fit (Jago et. al, 2003; Xing & Chalip, 2006). Other research, however, has shown that a certain degree of dissimilarity between the two is quintessential for image change (Brown et. al, 2004). This paper analyses the main hypothesis that low-fit events are primarily

suitable for favourably changing host destinations' image for first-time visitors to the host destination, while high-fit events are most effective for attendants with previous destination visitation.

Methodology

The empirical analysis is based on primary data collected by means of self-administered questionnaires at two sporting events in Esbjerg, Denmark: (1) National Meet 2013 (N = 814), (2) Tall Ships Races 2014 (predicted: N = 800). We measured our dependent variable "favourable change of perception" on a one item, seven-point Semantic Differential scale (1 = very negatively; 7 = very positively): "The event National Meet has changed my perception about Esbjerg ...". Our first independent variable "perceived event-destination fit" was indirectly measured by the difference of the following two items, each measured on a one item, five-point Semantic Differential scale (1 = international; 5 = regional): the smaller the difference between the two items, the higher the perceived absolute fit. According to Hallmann & Breuer (2010), we chose the fit-dimension "regional/international" since both are highly characteristic for cities as well as events and is of significant interest to this paper as the global industry of tourism has seen record-breaking numbers of international arrivals in the year 2013, and are expected to increase in the future . Finally, we measured our second independent variable "previous visitation to the host destination" by using a binary item "no/yes". We ran an analysis of variance (ANOVA) in order to test whether the interaction effect between "perceived event-destination fit" and "previous visitation to destination" on the favourable change of perception of Esbjerg was significant. Therefore, we used a split-half-procedure to recode our independent variable "perceived event-destination fit" into a binary variable "high vs low event-destination fit".

Results, discussion and implications

In line with our hypothesis, results from the first event show that first-time visitors to the host destination more favorably changed their image toward the host destination when a low-fit with the event was present. Oppositely, attendants who had previously visited the destination, more favorably changed their image toward the host destination when a high-fit with the event was present. The research project is currently ongoing and will be finished in August 2014. The second event of the study will serve to try to replicate the results from the first event, as well as empirically investigating mediating effects which might have caused the significant interaction. The results will offer important insights on the management of sports events and also for policy makers on when strategically assessing the content of their event portfolio for a host destination.

References

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