

INVESTIGATING THE IMPORTANCE OF PLACE IMAGE DIMENSIONS ON TRAVEL INTENTIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE OLYMPIC GAMES

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Synopsis:

Abstract:

Aim of Abstract – Research Question

This paper examines the importance of place image dimensions on travel intentions in the context of mega-events, such as the Olympic Games. When considering a travel destination, people consider a variety of factors when developing a list of alternatives and deciding where to visit. Many places (countries, cities) decide to host major events in the hopes of increasing future tourism and interest in their country and city. Specifically, places seek to brand themselves around their points of distinction (Papadopoulos & Heslop, 2002). This research initiates a research program to broaden the understanding of place images in tourism marketing by assessing the impact of a previous Olympic Games on the images tourists hold about the host country and, in turn, their travel intentions. Based on these thoughts we address the following research questions:

1. Which place image dimensions and factors can be identified pre-Games?
2. Which place image dimensions and factors can be identified post-Games?
3. What differences exist between pre- and post-Games?

Theoretical Background

At the beginning of the 21st century, international competition between cities for limited resources, like tourists, qualified workforce, and companies was called a “gigantic supermarket” (Anholt, 2002). In response, cities placed more and more emphasis on their brands in order to differentiate themselves from the competition. A considerable body of research (e.g., Zimmerbauer, 2011) exists around place branding, where places strive to build their brands through tourism, urban policy, international relations, marketing, and public diplomacy activities (Rojas-Mendez, Murphy & Papadopoulos 2013). In marketing their offerings, these places promote their brand attributes (i.e., culture, nature,

geography, economy, technology, and heritage) to their target markets of residents, tourists, investors, students, and companies. This study focuses on tourists, who are considered to be an important source of short-term economic return (via their intention to visit as a direct result of the marketing program) and long-term economic return (by building positive images and brands to lead to enhanced reputation through word of mouth and other communications). Previous research tells us that positioning a place brand in the minds of tourists must be reasonably based on no more than two associations, with associated images that influence the desire and intention to visit the location (Nadeau et al., 2008).

Methodology, Research Design, and Data Analysis

In order to assess the importance of hosting the Olympic Games on place image dimensions and travel intentions, a survey was administered to tourists during the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, China. Data was collected in high traffic areas of the host city of the Olympic Games. Altogether, 1,795 usable surveys from American, Canadian, and Chinese tourists were collected that included specific questions asked about place image dimensions and travel intentions. The place image dimensions refer to associations with China as a vacation destination and to general associations with the country, its people, and its products. Travel intentions include the willingness to travel to that destination as well as the willingness to recommend that destination to others. Furthermore, the data analysis is separated into a pre and post analysis of the Olympic Games with 50.2% of the data generated before and 49.8% of the data generated after the Olympic Games.

Results, Discussion, and Implications

The results of our analysis provide insights into the drivers of willingness to travel and willingness to recommend the travel destination. Two exploratory factor analyses were undertaken, one on a sample of pre-Games tourists (n=709) and one on a sample of post-Games tourists (n=763). Results show a similar set of variables and factors both pre- and post-Games supporting that the Olympic Games have limited impact on the willingness to travel to the destination and the willingness to recommend the destination to others. Altogether, six factors were identified, namely "Quality of Chinese Products", "China as Vacation Destination", "Olympic Games as Destination", "Safety of the Destination", "Personality Characteristics of the Chinese People", and "Demographics of the Chinese People". Based on the analysis, a framework for future research around travel intentions in the context of mega-events like the Olympic Games is provided.

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