

One World, One Dream, Different Brand Perception: The Olympic and Paralympic Games

Luisa Velez, State University of New York College at Cortland, USA, HeiseyK@cortland.edu

Kevin Heisey, State University of New York College at Cortland, USA

Ted Fay, State University of New York College at Cortland, USA

Uk Joo Sang, State University of New York College at Cortland, USA

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to analyze the brand value and awareness of the Paralympic Games using the Olympic games as a comparative benchmark.

The value and awareness of the Paralympic brand have been increasing dramatically in recent decades (Burton, 2000).

The 12th Paralympic Games in Athens, Greece established new standards for total participants in terms of both athletes and nations, and the number of accredited media representatives.

Moreover, approximately 850,000 tickets were sold and tickets to the opening and closing ceremonies sold out.

The International Paralympic Committee's (IPC) expanded working relationship with the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in regard to future Games integration of organizing committees, media and sponsorship has led to the belief that the Paralympic movement is on the verge of achieving new levels of brand value and awareness.

While progress is notable, sport for people with disabilities is still often overlooked (Hums, Moorman, & Wolff, 2003) , and in comparison to the Olympics, the brand equity of the Paralympics falls far short (Hums & Fay, 1995, Fay, Burton, & Grevemberg, 2004).

In the United States, the gap between the two seems to be widening. The fact that there was no television coverage of the Paralympic Games in the United States in 2004 indicates a low level of media interest in disability sport, which remains a problem in the effort to grow brand equity and awareness (Hudson 2004) .

The creation of brand equity, defined as the value added to a product by virtue of its name and marks (Farquhar, 1990) , is dependent on brand awareness, brand loyalty, perceived quality, and brand associations (Aaker, 1991).

This study extends the conceptual framework developed to assess the brand equity of NCAA Division I intercollegiate athletics by Gladden, Milne, and Sutton (1998) to international sport. It particularly focuses on long-term brand-management activities by the IPC, National Olympic and Paralympic Committees (NOCs and NPCs), and Local Olympic and Paralympic Organizing Committees (LOOCs and LPOCs).

Data were collected from interviews with IPC, NPC, and LPOC personnel and Olympic and Paralympic corporate partners, sponsorship records, examination of IPC, NPC, and LPOC records, a survey of sport fans, review of Paralympic promotional materials, and a review of newspaper stories, trade journal articles and other anecdotal evidence.

A qualitative examination of the data incorporates a trend analysis focused on uncovering the emergence and role of brand equity components (IPC related, NPC related, LPOC related, and market related) in the development and realization of brand awareness, perceived quality, brand loyalty, and brand associations. Data analysis also seeks to reveal the role of the brand equity components in the realization of positive (or negative) marketplace outcomes.

While it is undeniable that the brand equity of the Paralympic movement has grown along with the IPC's integration into the broader Olympic movement, the gap that exists and is growing in some cases between the brand equity of the IPC and the IOC will likely remain.

Visions of a separate but equal Paralympic games will not be realized given the current state of affairs (Fay, Legg, & Wolff, 2005).

Although attendance figures, corporate support, and merchandise sales have all increased, and should continue to increase, for the Paralympics, the national and international media exposure will continue to lag behind (Fay, Burton, & Grevemberg, 2001).

The cost to devote equal television coverage to both the Olympics and Paralympics at a national and international scale is too high and the audience too often suffers from "Olympic fatigue" by the time the Paralympics begin two weeks after the Olympic closing ceremony.

A comparison of the brand equity between the Olympics and Paralympics is similar to comparing the brand equity of Major League Soccer (MLS) and the National Hockey League (NHL) with the other major professional sports in the United States.

While MLS and NHL games have a great atmosphere and draw significant and increasing crowds, corporate support, and local media coverage, they lack the national television exposure of the National Football League, Major League Baseball, and the National Basketball Association.

The brand equity in MLS and NHL is continually growing, but the gap between those leagues and the major U.S. sports leagues is increasing. The same holds true for the Paralympics (Fay, 1999, 2000) .

Without national and international television coverage equal to that of the Olympics, the brand equity gap will remain.

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