An evaluation of the image impact of the 2012 Olympic Games: Domestic pre-Games perceptions

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1. Introduction

While economic benefits and worldwide media exposure often provide the prime motives for place's wanting to host major sporting events, the opportunity to improve image, both at home and around the globe, has provided increasing motivation in recent years for countries and cities looking to differentiate themselves in an increasingly competitive global market (Rein & Shields, 2007). The reasoning here is very much the same as that of the commercial sponsors of major sporting events, who aim to draw upon the image of the events they sponsor to improve the perceptions and opinions that exist of them and their products. Research suggests that this achieved (for place and products) through an 'image-transfer process' (Gwinner, 1997; Gwinner & Eaton, 1999) whereby image elements from one entity, which can either be positive, neutral or negative, transfer onto another (figure 1).

Although London is already considered to be a leading and popular global city with a strong image or place 'brand' (e.g. 2011 Anholt-GfK Roper City Brands Index), a key objective for those involved in the development and delivery of the 2012 Olympics is to manage and improve London's image, and to address any potential negative image formation that may occur (DCMS, 2008). Improving a place's image, however, especially one hosting an Olympics, is not a straightforward undertaking: organisation, security, infrastructure and transport, for example, can negatively affect how an Olympic Games and thus its host are perceived.

Figure 1 – Image transfer process

Co-branding process
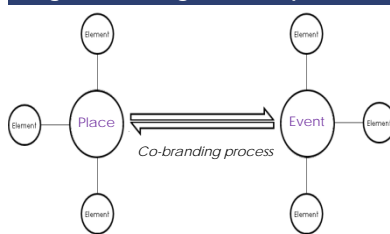
(see Chalip, Green, & Hill, 2003; Xing & Chalip, 2006)

2. Research Aim

The aim of this study, underpinned by theoretical-methodological social representation theory (Moscovici, 1984), is to evaluate the image impact of hosting the 2012 Olympics, pre and post Games, for the city of London. It will seek to present and compare the images generated by UK citizens concerning London as a city (i.e. its place brand), the Olympics' as a mega-event (i.e. brand 'Olympic') and the 2012 Games as a one-off spectacle, and then determine whether there is any transfer of image elements between these entities before and after the 2012 Olympics.

3. Methodology

This study is between-subjects, longitudinal in design and follows a critical realist-informed, abductive research strategy. It utilises a mixed-methods questionnaire as the data collection instrument and will involve repeated applications of the same questionnaire before and after the London 2012 Olympic Games.

UK citizens (n=610, age=28±13.5) completed a mixed-methods questionnaire one year to eight months prior to the Games. This was comprised of questions measuring personal characteristics, demographic information, sport participation, national pride, and level...

3. Methodology continued...

...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…'.*

Data analysis involved collating the responses of the free word-association tasks into semantic word clusters, with one word (or phrase) representing each theme – be that an object, emotion, an opinion, etc. Only words or phrases cited by 15% of participants were used to construct the core meanings of each entity. Semantic word clusters were then used to construct the image (social representation) of each entity (i.e. image of London, the Olympics, and the 2012 Games) (see Bodet & Lacassagne, 2012).

4. Results

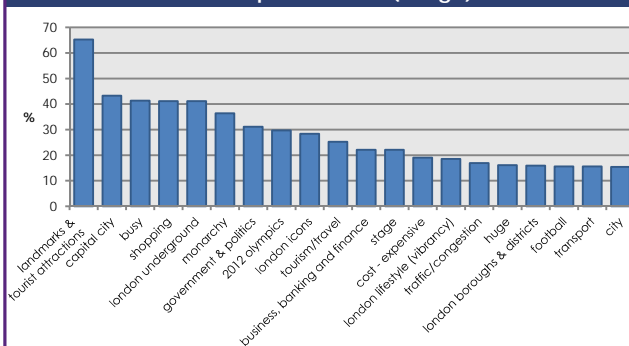### Table 1 – Social representation (image) of London

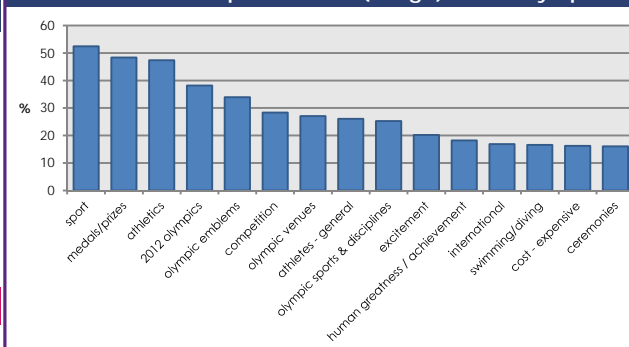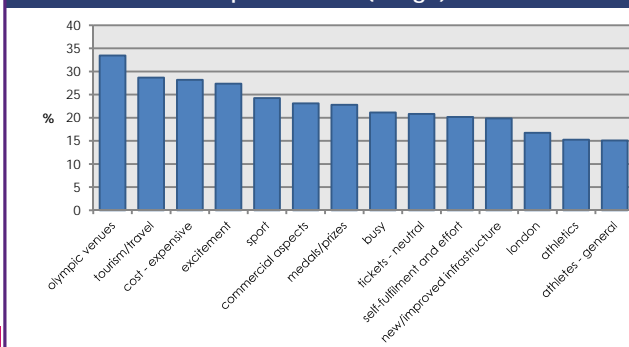### Table 2 – Social representation (image) of the Olympics

Table 3 – Social representation (image) of London 2012

5. Discussion

The image of London might generally be considered to be quite positive. While the majority of the terms that make up this image might, on their own, be considered to be neutral and/or descriptive – e.g. that it's *huge* for example – many of these elements relate to reasons for people to visit London: *landmarks and tourist attractions, shopping, tourism, stage* and *football,* for example.

London also presents some negative characteristics. It is interesting to note though that the negative characteristics presented here – *busy, cost-expensive and traffic/congestion* – are probably not going to be improved by hosting the 2012 Olympics, and may, in fact, be exacerbated by them. Indeed, *busy* and *cost - expensive* also make up the social representation of the 2012 Games, representing its only negative elements.

For the Olympics, overall its social representation can be considered to be relatively positive, it contains only one negative element: *cost-expensive.* It also references the types of things that make it a unique event, including its *[olympic] emblems* – a semantic cluster which contains phrases such as Olympic flame, Olympic torch, Olympic rings, etc – and reference to its *ceremonies,* opening/closing, podiums, etc.

For London 2012, again, it's viewed in a generally positive light. For example, *excitement* features as a significant characteristic of its image, which supports the view that the resident UK population are positively anticipating the Games. *Commercial aspects* also features as a significant element of London 2012's social representation, although it doesn't feature in the image of the Olympics. This suggests is that, in the long run, London 2012 may be remembered for being a commercial event as much as a sporting one.

6. Conclusion

The results presented here provide specific knowledge on how each entity is perceived, and provide a good basis for longitudinal analysis. Further analysis, at the pre-Games stage, will involve re-examining the categories, looking at the strength of connections between phrases, and segmentation based on relevant quantitative variables.