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The Role of Visitors' Sports Attachment on Olympic Tourism Experience

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ABSTRACT

This study intends to examine Olympic tourists' consumption experience by taking account of the visitors' sports attachment. A total of 486 completed and usable surveys were collected during the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. The results indicated that sports attachment served as an important factor which may influence Olympic tourists' destination perception and their overall experience. Olympic tourists with higher degree of sports attachment were more motivated to travel and attend the Games, and had better destination image of the host city than those who had lower level of sports attachment. In addition, they tended to reflect a better Olympic experience and were more likely to have repeat visitation to the host city in the future. When combined with the effect of the demographics, sports attachment was the primary driving force that influences the variation of visitors' experience evaluation. The study provided insights of the relative importance of Olympic visitors' own emotional involvement of sports and athletes/teams on their judgment of the total experience.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism growth brought by the Olympic Games, especially the enhanced visitation levels within and beyond the event duration, is one of the essential economic legacies and positive impacts host cities and countries attempt to achieve (Faulkner et al. 2003; Kang and Perdue 1994; Teigland 1999; French and Disher 1997). Researchers have examined the tourism-related aspects of the Olympic Games through different focuses, such as economic impact (Kirkup and Major 2006; Madden 2002; Hiller 1998; Kasimati 2003); social impact (Waite 2001, 2003); motivation to attend the Olympic Games (Neirotti, Bosetti, and Teed 2001), country image (Quelch and Jocz 2005), the host/resident perception (Ritchie and Lyons 1987, 1990; Ritchie and Aitken 1984, 1985; Jeong and Faulkner 1996; Mihalik and Simonetta 1999; Deccio and Baloglu 2002), and strategic leverage for tourism (Morse 2001). However, research of Olympic tourism is still limited and there is an overall lack of understanding of the behavioral patterns of Olympic

tourists (Kirkup and Major 2006). Much has been researched about the Olympic organizations, athletes, and sponsors, while the Olympic tourists and their experience were neglected (Neirott, Bosetti, and Teed 2001). Still rare, but studies of sports tourism consumer experience have emerged. Bouchet, Lebrun, and Auvergne (2004) suggested that sports tourist consumption experience should consist of physical activities and destination as two major components. A more recent study proposed that the quality of destination, sports venues, accommodation should all be included in predicting sports tourist satisfaction on service quality (Shonk and Chelladurai 2008).

Sport tourism is defined as “leisure-based travel that takes individuals temporarily outside of their home communities to participate in physical activities, to watch physical activities, or to venerate attractions associated with physical activities” (Gibson 1998, p. 49). The Olympic tourist is, first of all, considered a sports tourist, whose motivation to travel can be remarkably similar to sports participants (Weed 2007). Unlike other forms of tourism, in the Olympic context, sports attachment and emotional involvement due to the nationalism or patriotism play an important role in Olympic tourists’ experience and their perception of the host destination, which may influence their overall satisfaction, destination image, and future travel behaviors such as intentions to return, recommendation to others, and so on.

This study is an attempt to examine Olympic tourists’ experiences taking account of their sports attachment. To better illustrate the study approach, a theoretical model of Olympic tourism experience was proposed based on extensive literature review (Weed 2007; Shonk and Chelladurai 2008; Bouchet, Lebrun and Auvergne 2004). The conceptualization of sports tourists’ experience focused on both sports-related and tourism-related aspects (see Figure 1). This particular study does not intend to test the whole comprehensive model, but only focuses on the following specific research objectives: 1) to explore the Olympic tourist market segments based on sports attachment; 2) to identify the dimensions of Olympic tourist motivations; 3) to examine the differences between the sports attachment segments in terms of travel motivation, destination affective image, evaluation of the Olympic tourism experience, and behavioral intentions; and 4) to examine the interaction effect of sports attachment and demographic characteristics on Olympic sports-related experience.

METHODS

Survey instrument. The survey consisted of five sections. The first section included specific questions of the visitors’ Olympic travel behavior, such as length of stay, expenditure, travel group, previous Olympic travel, major goals of this trip, and so on. The second section focused on the Olympic visitors’ motivation and sports-related experience, as well as their sports attachment. The third section focused on the tourism-related attributes and visitors’ satisfaction of the tourism experience. The fourth part included questions of the overall satisfaction of the Olympic tourism experience, affective destination image of Beijing, and behavioral intentions. The last part asked demographic characteristics such as age, gender, education, income, and place of residence.

The survey was developed in both English and Chinese. The survey instruments were first developed in English, based on the extensive literature which mostly published in Western academic journals. The survey was then translated into Chinese by the leading

researcher, and were reviewed and edited by other two bilingual researchers in English and Chinese.

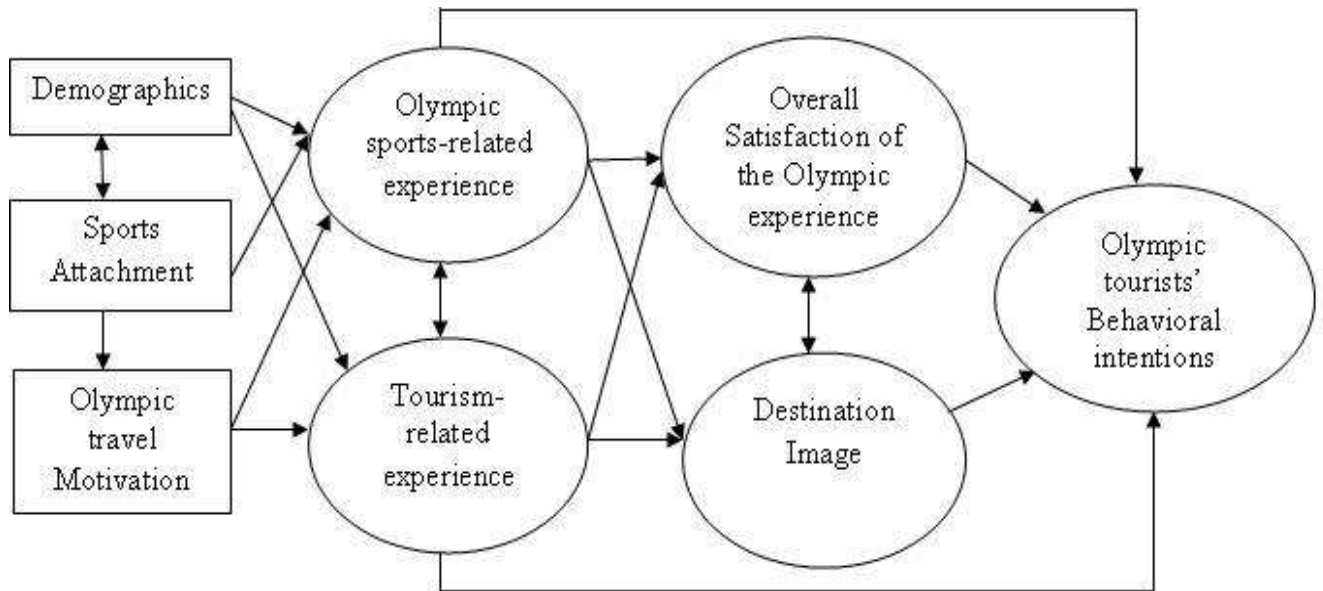


Figure 1. Theoretical Model of Olympic Tourism Experience and Behavioral Intentions

Sampling and data collection. The sample population of this study consisted of international and domestic visitors who are 18 years old or above and took at least one night in Beijing during the Olympic Games. Potential respondents were asked a screening question “Is attending/watching Beijing Olympic Games one of your purposes to visit Beijing?” at the beginning of the survey. Those who answered “No” were indicated to stop at this stage to make sure that all the respondents were “Olympic tourists”.

The surveys were distributed to Olympic tourists by a group of college students who served as Olympic volunteers in Beijing. The data collection took place during August 13-23, 2008 (Day 6th to 16th of the event) at over 70 different locations in Beijing. These locations included Olympic competition venues, Olympic athlete villages, tourist attractions, airport, hotels, volunteer service stands, and so on. Respondents were approached at these locations on each day (evenly dispersed) and asked to complete a self-administered survey on site. This multi-location data collection was used to prevent responses resulting in a profile of only one type of Olympic visitors. A total of 600 surveys (300 in English and 300 in Chinese) were distributed, and 495 surveys were collected. Nine surveys were removed due to the incomplete response. As a result, 486 completed and usable surveys (232 from international visitors and 254 from the Chinese visitors) were utilized in the data analysis, yielding a response rate of 81.0%.

FINDINGS

Analysis of the demographic characteristics revealed that the majority of the respondents were female (55.6%), half of the respondents (50.1% of the sample) were 25 to 44 years old, and the average age was 31. Over half of the respondents (54.3%) were single and 42.9% were married. Most of the people surveyed had a college degree (40.2%), or a master's or doctoral degree (19.9%). These characteristics were very similar to previous research findings on the demographics of Olympic visitors (Kaplanidou, 2007; Neirotti et al., 2001).

Cluster analysis was employed to identify groups of respondents based on 12 sports attachment items. Two clusters were examined as the most appropriate solution, and the total 486 respondents were all clustered into the two groups. Cluster I (named as "sports enthusiasts") had significant higher mean scores than Cluster II (named as "low sports attachment") on each sports attachment variable (see Table 1). Demographic and behavioral profile showed that the two clusters were significantly different on two variables: age and marital status. Cluster I was comprised of 48.7% married respondents, versus 29.8% in Cluster II ($X^2=20.677$, $p<.01$). The majority of Cluster I were middle aged (32.5% were 35-64, and 34.4% were 25-34), whereas Cluster II had 41.8% of respondents between 18 and 24 ($X^2=13.726$, $p<.05$).

Table 1. Cluster Means on Sports Attachment Items ($N = 486$)

	Cluster I (N=312)	Cluster II (N=174)	F- Value	Sig. Level
When someone criticizes my favorite athletes, it feels like a personal insult.	3.71	2.30	225.078	.000
I feel like I have won when my favorite athletes wins.	4.21	2.80	271.756	.000
My favorite athletes' successes are my successes.	3.99	2.29	427.304	.000
If a story in the media criticized my favorite athletes, I would feel embarrassed.	3.70	2.18	314.988	.000
Win/loss record of my favorite athletes/teams adds excitement to the game.	4.20	3.30	106.401	.000
I am very interested in what others think about my favorite athletes.	3.90	2.57	230.143	.000
I feel better about myself when my favorite athlete wins.	4.09	2.78	231.162	.000
When I talk about my favorite athletes/teams, I usually say "we" rather than "they".	3.82	2.32	244.481	.000
When someone praises my favorite athletes/teams, it feels like a personal compliment.	3.89	2.31	310.154	.000
The Olympic Games means a lot to a country.	4.43	3.90	39.516	.000
If my favorite athletes/teams perform well, I will feel that I have a good Olympic experience, and vice versa.	4.06	2.92	173.167	.000
My favorite athletes/teams performance directly influences my feeling about the whole Olympic trip.	3.91	2.60	193.175	.000

Note: Mean values are computed on the basis of 5-point Likert scale: 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neutral; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree.

In order to determine the underlying dimensions of the Olympic tourists' motivation, factor analysis was performed by utilizing a principal component analysis with varimax rotation. The Barlett Test of Sphericity was significant at .000 level, with the KMO value of 0.921. The results suggested that a six-factor solution be identified, representing 60.88% of the total variance in Olympic tourist motivation. The six factors were labeled as: Excitement and Entertainment (MOT1), Sports and Athletes (MOT2), Business/Education Opportunities (MOT3), Host City/Country and Culture (MOT4), Family/Friends Togetherness (MOT5), and Personal Relationship (MOT6). The first factor "Excitement and Entertainment" explained the most variance (18.4%), followed by Sports and Athletes (12.03%), Business/Education Opportunities (9.39%), Host City/Country and Culture (8.12%), and Family/Friends Togetherness (7.94%). The reliability coefficients of the factors were all above .70 (except one factor Host City/Country and Culture $\alpha = .666$). Although some existing research of sports event tourism has explored visitors' motivation, limited studies focused on the Olympic Games context. The identified factors in this study were generated from a more comprehensive list of motivation items. It shared similarities with the previous research, but more importantly, revealed some unique perspectives of the Olympic tourists.

The comparisons between the two clusters on Olympic travel motivation, host destination affective image, satisfaction of the Olympic tourism experience, and future travel intentions revealed that Cluster I had significantly higher means than Cluster II on all the factors/variables ($p < .01$), except one destination image item "Blunt-Kind" ($p > .05$). The results indicated that sports attachment plays an important role in Olympic tourists' perceptions and experiences (see Table 2).

MANOVA was utilized to examine the interaction and main effect of sports attachment cluster and demographic variables (age, marital status, and education) on the overall evaluation of the Olympic sports-related experience. The result revealed that no interaction effects of sports attachment cluster and three demographics existed. None of these demographic variables showed main effect on the evaluation of the Olympic sports-related experience, except the marital status on one variable "The experience had special meaning to me". However, sports attachment cluster showed significant main effect on most of the experience evaluation variables (see Table 3). The results revealed that the sports attachment cluster itself drove the variation of respondents' experience evaluation.

APPLICATION OF RESULTS

The research findings indicated that sports attachment served as an important factor which may influence Olympic tourists' evaluation of their experience, perception of the host destination image, and future travel intentions. Olympic tourists who had high degree of sports attachment (Cluster I) tended to reflect a better experience and would be more likely to return to visit the host city/country, compared to those who had low sports attachment (Cluster II). This observation provided some insights of the relative importance of Olympic visitors' own emotional involvement of sports and athletes/teams on their judgment of the total experience. The results contribute to a better understanding of sports tourist experience. It is also hoped that the study would help the Olympic Games organizers, planners, and destination managers adjust the marketing focus of the Olympic Games and host city/country's tourism promotion, so as to better serve the sports tourism market from the perspective of sports emotional involvement.

Table 2. Comparisons of Motivation, Destination Image, Experience Evaluation, and Behavioral Intentions based on Degree of Sports Attachment

	Cluster I (N=312)		Cluster II (N=174)		t-value	Sig.
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Motivation (Factors)^a						
Excitement and Entertainment (MOT1)	4.28	.59	3.92	.69	5.86	.000
Sports and Athletes (MOT2)	4.43	.64	4.06	.84	5.14	.000
Business/Education (MOT3)	4.03	.80	3.45	.88	7.41	.000
Host City/Country and Culture (MOT4)	4.34	.65	4.01	.80	4.61	.000
Family/Friends Togetherness (MOT5)	3.81	.95	3.19	1.09	6.31	.000
Personal Relationship (MOT6)	3.39	1.51	2.64	1.53	5.19	.000
Destination Affective Image^b						
Dull-Exciting	5.92	1.05	5.42	1.28	4.40	.000
Distressing-Relaxing	5.71	1.25	5.30	1.37	3.29	.001
Gloomy-Cheerful	6.02	1.19	5.66	1.19	3.21	.001
Unpleasant-Pleasant	6.12	1.02	5.73	1.21	3.62	.000
Unattractive-Attractive	5.93	1.17	5.70	1.28	2.00	.046
Uncomfortable-Comfortable	6.11	1.07	5.65	1.23	4.12	.000
Inconvenient-Convenient	5.90	1.16	5.59	1.27	2.64	.009
Nasty-Clean	6.05	.98	5.55	1.21	4.70	.000
Blunt-Kind	6.00	1.16	5.97	4.10	.142	.887
Dangerous-Safe	6.26	.95	5.80	1.28	4.09	.000
(Food) Disgusting-Delicious	6.20	1.13	5.66	1.35	4.44	.000
Behavioral Intentions^c						
Recommend Beijing trip to my family and friends	4.39	.84	4.17	1.02	2.62	.009
Say positive things about Beijing/China to other people	4.45	.79	4.09	1.00	4.09	.000
Recommend Beijing to those who want advice	4.39	.77	4.12	.95	3.22	.001
Go back to Beijing to spend my vacation in the future.	4.32	.92	3.86	1.06	4.77	.000
Attend 2012 Olympics in London.	3.65	1.53	3.26	1.56	2.68	.008
Overall Satisfaction of the Olympic Experience^d	5.73	.99	5.34	1.15	3.68	.000

Note: a. items were measured on a 5-point scale, with 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree;

b. items were measured on a 7-point scale, with 1= low end of the scale, 7 = high end of the scale;

c. items were measured on a 5-point scale, with 1 = highly unlikely, 5 = highly likely;

d. items were measured on a 7-point scale, with 1 = extremely unsatisfied, 7 = extremely satisfied.

Table 3. MANOVA Result for the Evaluation of Olympic Sports-related Experience

	Multivariate Wilk's F		Between Subject Effects					
			V1 F	V2 F	V3 F	V4 F	V5 F	V6 F
Age*Cluster	.972	932	2.029	1.446	.554	.888	1.295	2.053
Age	.946	1.215	.529	2.145	1.706	.671	.076	.203
Cluster	.955	3.054*	.912	4.062*	9.245**	2.626	5.580*	6.660*
Marital Status*Cluster	.978	.734	.207	.188	.232	.536	.465	.169
Marital Status	.962	1.271	1.215	3.592*	2.945	1.134	2.121	1.107
Cluster	.965	2.310*	.637	2.600	8.289**	1.360	4.150*	4.946*
Education*Cluster	.923	1.332	2.162	1.979	1.042	1.412	1.829	.846
Education	.922	1.348	1.019	.723	1.846	1.330	1.754	.563
Cluster	.921	5.688**	13.057**	20.130**	16.000**	12.544**	22.239**	16.454**

Note: *p<.05, **p<.01.

V1. The experience gave me unique or special moments; V2. The experience had special meaning to me; V3. The experience was better than I expected; V4. The experience was satisfying to me; V5. It stands out as one of my best experiences; V6. The experience was worth the price I paid for it.

CONCLUSION

The Olympic Games provide both opportunities and challenges to a host country's tourism development in many aspects. It is essential to understand the Olympic tourists and their behavioral patterns. The examination of the sports attachment on Olympic tourists' motivation, evaluation of the experience, destination image, and future travel behaviors, provided a new approach of the understanding of Olympic tourism experience. This effort contributed to the body of knowledge in this particular research area. The limitation of this study included: 1) the sampling frame may not be representative of all Olympic travelers, all venues, and intercept time frames; 2) for international Olympic tourists, only respondents who could read and speak English could participate in the study. Therefore, attention should be paid to the generalization of the results.

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