

What lurks beneath the event evaluation – Social media!

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In August 2013 Northern Ireland hosted the World Police and Fire Games. The official event evaluation found that the games projected Northern Ireland in a positive light; however this survey does not tell the full story. Leading up to this event Northern Ireland experienced four months of civil unrest. Many consumers turned to social media to seek reassurance and guidance. However, the event organisers did not provide such support. In fact, by mismanaging concerns regarding political stability and visitor safety this event in effect reinforced the negative stereotypical images of Northern Ireland and because it happened on-line it was ignored in the official event evaluation. The two key lessons pertinent to event organisers and destination marketers from this case study are do not underestimate the power of social media especially in a time of crisis, and in this digital age an event evaluation must consider comments made on social media.

Keywords: Events, Place Marketing, Crisis, Social Media, Event Evaluation, Northern Ireland.

1.0 Introduction

A key driver in the growth of events in recent years has been their potential to deliver a series of economic development outcomes (Schuster, 2001). Dredge and Whitford (2010), for instance, discuss how an increasing number of destinations are using events to rebrand and reimage. Building on this Florek et al. (2008) discuss how events have become part of an image-making process playing a critical role in positioning destinations against their competitors. This links into Ritchie (1984), Hall (1992), Foley et al. (2012) and Smith's (2012) argument that events are an effective enhancer of destination image. According to Gripsrud (2010) however, there is no guarantee that an event will improve the image of a destination in fact an event could actually cause harm if not effectively managed.

An event organiser is not in control of the external environment and as history has shown no country, region or city is risk-free. For instance, Avraham and Ketter (2008) discuss the devastation caused by terror attacks, the SARS epidemic and natural disasters such as hurricanes in the first decade of the twenty first century. Planned events during times of crisis may actually magnify image problems created for the host destination. Events attract media coverage consequently heightening public awareness on the host destination. Add social media and the open exchange of information to this mix then destination marketers could have a significant image problem on their hands if a crisis does occur and it is not properly handled.

This paper will discuss the misuse of social media in the planning and advertising of the World Police and Fire Games (WPFGs) in Northern Ireland in 2013. Northern Ireland experienced heightened civil unrest four months leading up to hosting what is now the third largest multi-sporting event in the world. Particular attention is paid to how the event organisers underestimated and consequently mismanaged social media during this crisis. This in turn had repercussions for the event and the international image of Northern Ireland yet, was not discussed in the formal event evaluation.

2.0 Place Image and Events

The political, economic, social and technological changes attributed to globalisation have shaped the way we live our lives in the twenty first century. According to Pigram (2003) globalisation describes the process of integrating economic activities and decision making beyond national and regional boundaries towards a borderless and interconnected world. A central feature of globalisation is the notion that many features of contemporary society can no longer be undertaken in relative isolation at the level of an individual nation. Yet, according to Fletcher (2009) to compete in this interconnected global system a nation must maintain its national identity. Building on this point Page and Connell (2010) discuss how standardising production, distribution and marketing across all countries can create efficiencies but it also creates an identity problem for nations, a problem that Foyle et al. (2011) refer to as 'sameness'. To counter this a nation must differentiate itself from competitors, hence the importance of destination image.

Hunt (1975) defined destination image as an individual's overall perception of a place. Lee et al. (1993, p849) defined destination image simply as 'an individual's mental representation of knowledge (beliefs) feelings and overall perception of a particular destination'. Other prominent researchers such as Crompton (1979) and Kotler (1993) have expressed the concept in similar terms with Bigne et al. (2001, p612) describing image as 'subjective and dependent upon an individual's interpretation'. Florek et al. (2008) argue that if image is subjective then an individual's perception of a destination can change depending on the experiences and the information available. In theory this is positive for marketers who can attempt to manage destination image. According to Gunn (1972), however, managing a destinations image is much more complicated than this as images can be either organic or induced. Induced images are created by promotional materials which are normally managed by the country in question. In contrast, organic images are formed by 'independent' information delivered from sources beyond the control of the country (e.g. media, word-of-mouth etc.). Obviously, it is the latter (induced) which makes the task of managing a country's image increasingly complicated.

In an attempt to control their international image an increasing number of countries are now bidding for and hosting events. Smith (2012) discusses how in the contemporary era events have become platforms to sell a variety of products, including the host destination itself. Horne (2007) put forward a similar argument when he stated events are seen as valuable promotional opportunities for cities and regions, showcasing their attractions to global audiences and helping to attract tourism and outside investment. According to Foyle et al. (2011) events have become one of the key strategic tools in repackaging a destination. They discuss how it focusses attention, kick-starts or showcases enhancement projects, galvanises local political actors and pressurises governments to ensure the watching world leaves with positive impressions of the locale. This links into Chalip's (2004) work on long-term leveraging and how countries use events and the media to enhance their image overseas.

The idea that a major event can showcase a state or city was first empirically measured by Richie and Smith (1991) who identified an international increase in awareness of Calgary as a result of hosting the 1998 Winter Olympic Games. They found that Europeans' awareness of Calgary increased significantly in the build up to the Games and during the event. However, there was a slight drop off in the year following the Games suggesting decay is a legitimate concern and challenge to sustaining an event's image related benefits. But this was not the case in Webb and Magnussen's (2002) study of the 1999 Rugby World Cup hosted by Wales. Their initial research phase estimated that the short-term impact of the Rugby World Cup was £82.3 million. A follow-up survey of non-Welsh respondents conducted in 2002 indicted that 44% of the sample had subsequently returned to Wales and 77% had recommended Wales as a place to visit. However, it is

just not those who attend that can be influenced by an event. For instance, Hede (2005) studied the effects of Australian media telecasts during the Athens 2004 Summer Olympic Games. The results indicated that 39% of the sample had improved their overall impression of Greece as a tourist destination and a place to visit.

It is important to note at this stage that the image that can be projected through events does go beyond tourism. Grix (2012) for instance discusses how emerging economies use events to accelerate their entry into, and acceptance within, the world's mature economies. India's staging of the Commonwealth Games in 2010 and Brazil's hosting of both the 2014 FIFA Football World Cup and 2016 Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games are examples of emerging economies ready to announce they have finally arrived on the international stage. More recently, small Gulf states, such as Qatar and Bahrain, have become interested in staging mega-events with Qatar scheduled to host the 2022 FIFA Football World Cup. But it is not just emerging countries that use events for reimagining purposes. Foley et al. (2011), for instance, discuss how Germany used the 2006 FIFA World Cup to alter perceptions of their nation. By developing an outward-facing strategy that had at its heart the slogan 'A time to Make Friends'. The campaign had the full backing of the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, who described the 2006 World Cup as 'a unique opportunity for Germany to present herself as a hospitable, joyful and modern nation, bursting with ideas' (Florek et al., 2008 p.203). The findings from Florek et al.'s (2008) study would suggest this campaign was a success with the respondents describing Germany as a friendly multicultural place. German businesses also benefited moving up in the Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands Index from seventh in 2004 to first in 2007.

According to Grix (2012) the systematic and purposeful leveraging of a mega event to alter a nation's image is easier for countries which suffer or have suffered from a poor national image. Lepp and Gibson's (2011) study of South Africa lends support to this argument. They discuss how during the apartheid period (1948-1994) the state was increasingly characterised as a rogue nation and was the subject of international boycotts, embargos and sanctions. Clearly, at the end of the apartheid period, a significant challenge to the 'new' South Africa and its iconic President Mandela was reimagining the nation. As a response South Africa placed major sporting events at the centre of its reimagining strategy. According to Lepp and Gibson (2011) this strategy has been a success and the image of South Africa as a racist and corrupt nation has been replaced by the Rainbow nation, a nation recognised as modern and multicultural as most recently demonstrated by the 2010 FIFA World Cup.

Following on from this discussion it is no surprise that the competition to host events has intensified in recent years. However, even the best planned event can go wrong and Whitelegg (2000) warns that when problems do occur the event can have a negative impact on destination image. He refers to the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta which was remembered for its logistical problems and traffic congestion. Gripsrud et al. (2010) in their study of the 2006 Winter Olympics in Turin also concluded that there is no guarantee that the image of the host country will improve, it may conversely deteriorate. In this instance the scandal and publicity surrounding the Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, overshadowed the Games and damaged Italy's image in overseas markets. On a similar note Dimeo and Kay (2004) investigated the content of Western media reports surrounding the 1996 Cricket World Cup which was co-hosted by India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. From the destinations' perspectives the intent was to reimage the countries of Southern Asia as modern and progressive. Yet, the use of pervasive stereotypes and criticism by Western commentators actually reinforced the existing images of these countries as violent, primitive, underdeveloped, strange, fanatical and corrupt.

More recent examples of events that have attracted negative publicity include the 2013 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia and the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil. In the case of the Sochi Games even though the organisers went as far as sending the Olympic torch into space it was the Russian Government's anti-gay laws that made the headlines, resulting in violent protests and stories of athletes threatening to boycott the Games; this did not project Russia in a positive light. Likewise, the protests in Sao Paulo, Brazil against the hosting of the 2014 FIFA World Cup dominated the news in the build up to what was supposed to be a celebration of football. These started out as peaceful demonstrations but quickly descended into street riots. Such images coupled with stories of inequality and poverty did not enhance Brazil's reputation as an emerging economic power.

In all of the examples provided above traditional media played a role in shaping the image of the event and the host destination. The written press and television in particular are very powerful and with the introduction of 24hour TV News Channels the public are bombarded with information. Avraham and Ketter (2010) discuss the intensive media coverage surrounding events and how journalists and their editors are well known for their preference for negative news. This is why authors such as Bladen et al. (2012) urge event organisers and destination marketers to try and manage their image by working closely with the media. However, in recent years this task has become increasingly difficult with the way the Internet and social media has been transforming the way information is communicated. Over 50% of world population is under 30 years; of that group 96% has joined at least one social network site (Xenos et al. 2014). Thus, social media has become a powerful hub of interconnected communities which event organisers and destination marketers cannot afford to ignore. This is summed by Shayne and Chris (2011, p.23) when they state 'armed with easy to use web publishing tools, always on connections and increasingly powerful mobile devices, the online audience have become an active participant in the creation and dissemination of news and information'.

2.1 Social Media

While there is a lack of consensus on a formal definition of social media it can generally be understood as internet based applications that carry consumer-generated content. Such content encompasses 'media impressions created by consumers, typically informed by relevant experience, and archived or shared online for easy access by other impressionable consumers' (Blackshaw and Nazzaro, 2006 p.1). This includes a variety of applications in the technical sense which allows consumers to 'post', 'tag', 'dig' or 'blog', and so forth on the internet (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). In 2014 the most popular social sharing site was Facebook with one billion active users worldwide whilst the second largest was the micro blogging social site Twitter generating 5,700 tweets per second (Leveragenewagemedia.com, accessed 2014). These sites and social media in general has fundamentally reshaped the way we communicate.

Increasingly our everyday lives coalesce around social media sites which are used to share comments, opinions and personal experiences (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). Kaplin and Haenlin (2009) discuss how participants on social media applications have the desire to actively engage and to become both producers and consumers of information, hence the term 'prosumers'. This information is not only shared among friends and relatives but also strangers which makes social media a very powerful platform. Rong et al. (2012) refer to eWOM (electronic Word of Mouth) and the opportunities and challenges it creates for businesses. Indeed, many companies have tried to embrace social media because of its potential for engagement and collaboration with consumers. Hudson and Hudson (2013), for instance discusses how through social media, marketers can gain

rich, unmediated consumer insights, faster than ever before. Politicians have also recognised the power of social media with Xenos et al. (2014) attributing Barack Obama's initial and later re-election victories to his campaign's deft deployment of social media to mobilise the youth vote.

From a destination perspective increased exposure is the number one benefit of social media (Stelzner, 2014). This is certainly the case when it comes to hosting major international events. For example, at the time writing the 2014 edition of the Tour de France had 1566,824 followers on Facebook whilst the opening match of the 2014 FIFA World Cup between Brazil and Croatia recorded 58 million unique and 140 million interactions on Facebook (L'Equipe, 23 June, 2014). A number of host destinations have used this online exposure to their advantage. Hudson and Hudson (2013) discuss how England made effective use of social media during the London Olympic Games 2012 to increase awareness and to build engagement with consumers. They achieved this by having a strong social media strategy that integrated Facebook, Flickr, YouTube and Twitter with more traditional marketing techniques all of which were supported by new mobile technology. Scotland is another example of a destination that has effectively integrated social media into its events marketing strategy. One of Scotland's largest events, the Edinburgh Festival, not only has its own online television station, edinburghfestival.tv, it also broadcasts material about the event and the city on internet sites like YouTube and Myspace (Quinn, 2013).

Social media can, however, be both a blessing and a curse (O'Connor, 2010). On the one hand it is an excellent way to create a 'buzz' for an event and in doing so make people aware of the host destination (Davidson, 2011). On the other hand event organisers and destination marketers are not in control of what is written and consumers can easily distribute damaging information via social media (Kim and Hardin, 2010). Although some of these posts/comments may lack credibility and are motivated by revenge (Kim and Hardin, 2010) Xue and Zhou (2011) found that negative reviews and comments are more likely to be trusted and shared within the online community. Of course, it is not just written comments that can be posted online. Munar and Jacobsen (2014) discuss how web-based platforms allow for 'real-time' recordings to be shared almost instantaneously with the online community. Images of the Boston Marathon bombings in 2013, for instance, were available on-line within minutes of the second explosion.

Earlier in this paper the authors discussed how countries such as Germany and South Africa were able to use events to improve their international image. They achieved this by working closely with the event organiser to strategically position and market the country alongside the event. Today, however, social media has made this more difficult as the event organiser and the host destination have less control over the information that is available about them. In fact, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) go as far as to state that businesses have been relegated to the side-lines as mere observers, having neither the knowledge nor the chance - or sometimes even the right - to alter publicly posted comments or images.

Although Kaplan and Haenlein's (2010) statement may be a slight exaggeration there is no denying that social media is a major issue for those countries that have included events in their place marketing strategy. Problems can and do occur during the planning and implementation stages of an event. Yet, there is a significant gap in the literature when it comes to analysing how problems that are viewed and discussed on social media are managed and the impact this can have on the event and the image of the host destination. Against this backdrop this study examines how the organisers of the World Police and Fire Games responded to social media during four months of civil unrest in Northern Ireland, the host destination. In the following section the authors will set the scene by

discussing Northern Ireland's troubled past and why it has placed events at the heart of its marketing strategy. This is followed by the methodology and a discussion of the key findings. The final section of the paper will discuss the lessons other countries can learn from this case study when faced with a crisis.

3.0 Context

From 1968-1998 Northern Ireland was a war zone with an ongoing cycle of protest and violence fuelled by sectarian division and hatred. During this period, which is often referred to as the 'Troubles', over 3,600 people were killed and over 30,000 injured. In 1998 the Good Friday Agreement (1998) was signed and this provided a historic opportunity for the people of Northern Ireland to put aside the divisions and violence of the past and to move forward and build a stable future together. In the 'post-troubles' era events have emerged as a major policy instrument in Northern Ireland. Major events in particular are being used to help remove stereotypical images of Northern Ireland's troubled past and showcase the country as a safe and attractive place to visit, live, study and invest.

In recent years Northern Ireland has hosted prestigious international events such as the 39th G8 Summit and the 2011 MTV Music Awards. In August 2013 Northern Ireland organised the World Police and Fire Games which is a biennial event for serving and retired police, fire, prison and border security officers comprising a wide range of individual and team sports. Winning the right to stage the Games was an achievement for Northern Ireland, as it is the third largest international multi-sporting event in the world. However, even in the 'post troubles' era political tension and sectarian strife are never from the surface in Northern Ireland and in the build-up to the World Police and Fire Games a dispute over the flying of 'national' flags in public buildings resulted in four months of civil unrest on the streets of Northern Ireland. The 'flag protests' as it became known resulted in 140 police officers being injured and over 200 people were arrested for a broad range of offences including serious rioting, hijacking of vehicles and attacks on politicians' offices. For the organisers of the World Police and Fire Games 2013 it was unfortunate that at time when they were trying to encourage athletes and their families to visit Northern Ireland it was once again making news headlines for all the wrong reasons.

4.0 Methodology

The epistemological view adopted by the authors for this paper perceives knowledge as an attainable goal. This study is grounded in the worldviews of international athletes who either attended the World Police and Fire Games in 2013 or were considering attending the Games but were deterred by the civil unrest in Northern Ireland in the build up to this major event. An interpretivist approach was adopted and mixed empirical methods used.

Netnography- Data Collection Before and During the WPFGs

Netnography is a sphere of research based on the analysis of user-generated content on the internet. According to Kozinets (2010) such online interactions are esteemed as a cultural reflection acquiescent of deep human understanding, similar to in person ethnography although not as intrusive. The nature of this study was to focus on the perceptions of athletes before, during and after the WPFGs in Northern Ireland; as well as exploring how the event organisers mediated the flow of information to athletes at the various stages. As such, various on-line interfaces were consulted to explore international athlete's interactions with each other, as well as the event organisers. The researchers reviewed daily on-line commentary from the events official Facebook

page, Twitter account and You-tube channel from October 2012 to September 2013 (when the WPFGs Facebook page was shut down). Additionally, website commentary generated by 15 international newspapers /TV news channels including the BBC, Sydney Morning Herald, CNN and Le Monde were followed to gain an insight into how the ‘flag protests’ in Northern Ireland were reported by the international media and how such reporting informed the discussions on social media.

Asynchronous Online Focus Groups -Data Collection Following the WPFGs

Lee et al. (2014) discuss how difficult it is to estimate the intention-behaviour gap at major events i.e. what proportion of visit intentions are actually realised. This was a particular problem in this study because of the ‘lurker’, a person who reads views online but never posts (Baym, 2010 p.48). The ‘lurker’ made it very difficult for the authors to gauge exactly how many people were deterred from travelling to Northern Ireland because of the ‘flag protests’. In attempt to work around this the authors designed a post event online-questionnaire that they intended to send to all athletes who had registered an interest in participating in the WPFGs 2013. Initially the event organisers agreed to facilitate this survey but they later rejected the idea citing ‘survey over-load’. In response the authors did organise two Asynchronous Online Focus Groups (AOFGs) subsequent to the games with 12 international participants. The aim was to try and encourage them to discuss colleagues/peers who were put off from going to Northern Ireland because of the flag protests. Informants were first emailed and upon consent to participate they were invited to Yahoo’s free discussion group service in July 2014. The participants were split into two groups of six; Table 1 below illustrates the details of the informants participating in the AOFGs, as well as identifying which informants were in a dialogue together (A and B).

Table 1 Informant Details

Informant	Gender	Country of Origin	Focus Group
1	Male	Germany	A
2	Female	Germany	A
3	Female	France	A
4	Female	England	A
5	Male	U.S.	B
6	Female	Spain	A
7	Male	U.S.	B
8	Female	Canada	B
9	Female	Canada	B
10	Male	Spain	A
11	Female	U.S.	B
12	Male	U.S.	B

Survey – Data Collected During the WPFGs

The authors were involved in the formal event evaluation survey that was carried out during the full 12 days of the WPFGs event from the 30th July to the 10th of August 2013. Questionnaires were distributed at the forty three venues. A total of 2707 surveys were collected and analysed using a descriptive analysis in SPSS. It should be noted that although the authors helped design the questionnaire they were encouraged not to include questions relating directly to the 'flag protests' in this survey.

In-depth Interview – Communications and Marketing Manager WPFG 2013

An in-depth interview was conducted with the Communications and Marketing Manager for the World Police and Fire Games (2013) in March 2013. The authors combined the general interview guide approach with an open-ended approach which allowed them the flexibility to probe and ask questions about the events formal marketing strategy and in particular how it managed social media during the 'flag protests'.

5.0 Results and Discussion

Gripsrud et al. (2010) discuss how cities around the world - backed by governments at the state and country level - compete fiercely to host major international events. One reason for this is that hosting such events is regarded as a means to promote the image of the country and/or city acting as host. This was certainly the case with Northern Ireland's bid to host the 2013 World Police and Fire Games (WPFGs). The Games received £6.04 million from central government and one of the strategic aims outlined in its business case was 'to enhance the image and profile of Northern Ireland nationally and internationally through the successful delivery of the Games' (Games Strategic and Business Plan, 2012). According to the Post Event Evaluation Report the feedback from the 2707 people surveyed during the games would suggest this aim was achieved. Thirty one percent of attendees stated that the event had exceeded their expectations, with a further 68% saying the event met their expectations. From a marketing perspective 99% of participants either strongly agreed or agreed that the event would improve Northern Ireland's reputation as a destination for tourists. An impressive 87% indicated that the event would make them more likely to visit Northern Ireland again for a holiday or short break whilst 97% would recommend friends and family visit Northern Ireland.

In their bid document Northern Ireland promised to host the 'friendliest Games' and according to the President of the WPFGs Federation, Mike Graham, they achieved this:

'The 2013 World Police and Fire Games have been the friendliest and best games ever. The organisation and professionalism of the WPFG delivery team has been exemplary, the warmth and welcome of the many thousand volunteers has been outstanding, the support of the local people has been second to none and even the weather has been fabulous' (Post Event Evaluation Report, 2014).

The publication of the event organiser's Post Event Evaluation Report was followed by a government report entitled 'The Legacy of the Games' which also heralded the Games a success. In this document the Minister for Culture, Arts and Leisure stated that 'the Games cemented the profile of Northern Ireland as a tourist destination and an event destination'. However, neither report tells the full story as they are based on the official post evaluation survey which only focused on athletes who attended the event. In the business case which was presented to the Northern Ireland Assembly the event organisers estimated the Games would attract 10,000 athletes. This figure was based on the average attendance from the last five WPFGs which amounted to 10,500. Northern Ireland, however, only attracted 6,700 athletes. It could be argued that the economic downturn was

responsible for this shortfall but it did not deter athletes travelling to Vancouver and New York in 2009 and 2011. The following quote from the Communication and Marketing Manager WPGA 2013 would suggest the more likely cause of this shortfall was the civil unrest Northern Ireland experienced between December 2012 and March 2013 as a result of the 'flag protests':

'There is no denying that registration has been very quiet since the start of the flag protests'.

Violent clashes occurred during street protests over the flying of flags and these were broadcasted around the world at a time when the majority of international competitors and their families were finalising travel arrangements to visit Northern Ireland. For example, on the 18th December 2012 the violent clashes between the police and flag protestors were the top story on Sky News Australia whilst four weeks later the French publication Le Monde had an article about the rioting underneath a picture of burning debris on a Belfast street (Northern Ireland's capital city). The seriousness of the situation is summed up in the following quote from the Communication and Marketing Manager WPGA 2013:

'If we [Northern Ireland] had submitted our bid to host the World Police and Fire Games in the current climate (civil unrest) we would not have been successful'.

Unsurprisingly, such coverage projected a very negative image of Northern Ireland and raised doubts in the minds of potential competitors many of which turned to social media to express their concerns and seek reassurance. The following were posted on the official Facebook event page during the Flag Protests and sum-up the mood of athletes:

'Those videos were very disturbing!! More evidence to convince us to not take a chance to go to Belfast' (Canadian Female, 22nd December 2012).

'Why in the world would the World Police and Fire Games Federation pick a place that has history of violence i.e. Northern Ireland' ? (Australian Male, 21st January 2013).

'I'm sure it's beautiful and we were so excited about coming - but what we see over here (USA) tells a different story. I can see why your tourism is hurting. Just not willing to take a chance. But we pray everything is safe for all who choose to go!' (American Female, 12th January 2013).

'Athletes who go to the World Police and Fire Games in a place like Northern Ireland have to fear for their safety' (Spanish Male, 12th February 2013).

These posts are just a snap-shot of what was being discussed on the official event Facebook page leading up to the games during the 'flag protests' and the negative images that were being projected on Northern Ireland. A number of athletes openly stated they were not willing to risk travelling to Northern Ireland but many others were likely to have been put off from travelling simply by reading such posts. Baym (2010, p48) discusses how not all people are willing to share their views online. In fact he goes on to state that the most common role in online communities is that of 'the lurker': a person who reads but never posts. The lurker makes it very difficult to gauge exactly how many people were deterred from travelling to Northern Ireland because of the flag protests. To try and circumvent this problem the authors conducted two online focus groups subsequent to the games with 12 international participants to establish if they were aware of colleagues/peers who were put off from going to Northern Ireland because of the flag protests. Indeed, four participants were able to discuss peers/colleagues who perceived the risks to be too high:

'As a representative of the German Police Service Athletics Federation I received a lot of phone calls and [e]mails [from Germans] asking me about the situation in Northern Ireland and in the end many of these athletes decided not to travel for safety reasons' (German, Female, 18th July, 2014) .

'I am aware of a female from the Met police [England] who didn't attend because of the bad press Northern Ireland had received and I also know a female from New Zealand who always attends the WPFs who didn't attend because of potential trouble' (English, Female, 10th July, 2014).

'I know of a whole woman's golf team in Colorado that opted out of attending/competing in the games in Northern Ireland. They had already registered but later asked for their event fees to be returned because they had safety concerns' (American, Male, 22nd, July, 2014).

'There was quite a lot of talk about various people not attending due to the protests. Personally I know a number of athletes who travelled without their families because of safety concerns (Canadian, Female, 24th, July, 2014).

Richter (2003, p.341) defines risk as 'an individual's perception towards uncertainty and exposure to the possibility of loss or injury'. Risk creates anxiety and according to Lepp and Gibson (2011) perceived risk is a major factor for travellers when selecting a destination. Understandably the pictures that were beamed around the world of the 'flag protests' raised doubts in the minds of potential competitors as they gave the impression that Northern Ireland had not moved on from its troubled past and was still an unsafe place to visit. For instance, during the interview with the Communication and Marketing Manager WPF 2013 he discussed how a number of the Sport Associations had warned their athletes about the danger of travelling to Northern Ireland at this time:

'At the end of January (2013) the English Prison Services Sport Association told their members that they we were not sending an official team to the Games in Northern Ireland because they could not guarantee their safety'.

George and Swart (2012) discuss how making tourists feel safe and secure before and during a holiday is becoming increasingly important for international destination competitiveness since tourists usually consider several alternatives. In this study it was obvious from some of the posts on Facebook that those contemplating visiting Northern Ireland for the WPFs were worried. They wanted reassurance that it would be safe and that measures were in place if they withdrew from the event due to safety concerns:

'Been watching the rioting on the news... is it still safe to bring my family to the Games in Belfast? (Canadian Female, 19th December, 2013).

'What measures are in place for security due to the recent events' (UK Male, 16th January, 2013).

'Dozens of policemen have been injured - water cannons and plastic baton rounds used very close to the city centre. This does not sound like a place I want to visit for the 10-12 days of the games. I think u should advise that money will be refunded to people who have already paid for their games and do not feel safe going to them' (American, female 23rd January, 2013).

Regrettably, the response from the event organisers to the flag protests was poor. The event did have an official Facebook page, Twitter account, You-tube channel and e-newsletter but the organisers did not use them adequately to reassure registered or potential competitors. In fact, the organisers ignored or downplayed the threat and the concerns of potential competitors and their

families. The event had 23,070 followers on Facebook yet they did not respond to questions or enter any of the discussions on the flag protests. The below post encapsulates the lack of information provided by the event organisers:

'I am watching the BBC News from here in the United States and am VERY concerned about the safety aspect of being in Belfast. There have been 40 days of rioting mostly going on in the City Centre where we are scheduled to stay. I see no mention of it here on your Facebook page which I feel is wrong! (American Male, 16th January, 2013).

Almost two months after the 'flag protests' had started a formal message of reassurance from the Deputy Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (and Chair of the 2013 WPFGB Board) was posted on the event's Facebook page. However, according to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p.66) a social media site such as Facebook 'is not the place to post prefabricated press announcements'. They go on to discuss how 'interaction and feedback are critical elements of all social media'. This was something the organisers of WPFGBs failed to grasp and because they did not try to explain the situation and reassure the athletes the on-line chatter increased exasperating the images problem created by the 'flag protests'. The haphazard response to the 'flag protests' by the event organisers is synthesised in the following quote from the Communication and Marketing Manager WPFGB 2013:

'At first we tried to sit on it, as we felt the unrest would blow over but when that didn't happen we issued a reassuring statement to the athletes'.

As part of their marketing campaign the event organisers in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board did organise a familiarisation trip for five international athletes eight months before the event. By chance this coincided with the 'flag protests'. Footage from the trip was used to make a promotional video which was posted on the Game's official YouTube channel. This was good publicity for the Games and Northern Ireland as the athletes discussed how much they enjoyed their visit and were looking forward to the Games. It also showcased Northern Ireland's top visitor attractions but there was no mention of the 'flag protests' and the riots which these five international athletes actually did witness during their stay in Belfast. This was another missed opportunity to explain to potential visitors that the violence was confined to small pockets of Northern Ireland and that it was 'open for business'. The event organisers made the same mistake with Twitter as they merely used this platform to send out promotional messages advertising local visitor attractions.

Perhaps even more damaging to Northern Ireland's international image was the decision to remove posts which the event organisers deemed to be too controversial. In fact during the interview with the Communication and Marketing Manager WPFGB 2013 he openly admitted that his team removed posts which they deemed unsuitable:

'You get the odd rouge person popping up on our Facebook page stating don't go to Northern Ireland as it is still a war-zone but we just wipe these message out'.

According to one participant in the athletes focus group (in July 2014) when her post was removed she was told her comment 'didn't meet their [Belfast's WPFGBs event organisers] policy'. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p.67) warn against interfering with posts and online discussions because this will be noticed since 'you are dealing with technologically sophisticated people'. In this case by removing posts from the official WPFGBs 2013 Facebook event page suggested that the event organisers and, of course, Northern Ireland had something to hide. This is summed up in the following post:'

'Why was my Question regarding the violence that is going on in Belfast removed from your comments? As potential visitors to your country we have a reason to be concerned about our safety. We want to know what is going on. Please answer' (American, Female).

Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier (2009) and Cox et al. (2009) discuss how increasingly people are turning to social media for support and guidance during the purchase decision making process. Removing posts of potential visitors therefore only added to their anxiety and made them and less likely to visit Northern Ireland – thus contributing to the disappointing numbers that attended the Games in August 2013.

6.0 Conclusion and Implications

One of the potential benefits of organising a major event is that it can be used to improve the 'image' of the host destination (Jago et al., 2003; Chalip, 2004; Getz, 2013). However, as this study has shown events can be a double edged sword. One of the reasons why the Government in Northern Ireland supported the World Police and Fire Games was because it would help remove stereotypical images of its troubled past yet for some this event actually helped reinforce existing negative images. The Games were hailed as a great success by the Government and were described by the World Police and Fire Games Federation as the friendliest Games ever. Indeed, the results from the official event evaluation survey were very positive with almost 90% of out of state visitors stating that the event would make them more likely to return to or recommend Northern Ireland as place to visit. However, this survey does not tell the full story because it only focused on those who attended the Games.

In the build up to the Games many people were put off from travelling to Northern Ireland because of civil disorder. Violent clashes over the flying of flags occurred at a time when the majority of international competitors and their families were finalising travel arrangements to visit Northern Ireland. Accordingly, they were more likely to be tuned into what was happening in Northern Ireland. For some, the stories and images of rioters rampaging the streets of Belfast were simply too much whilst others turned to social media for reassurance and guidance. The event organisers did not provide such support, in fact the way they handled the comments on their Facebook event page actually created more doubts, specifically for those who had their comments removed and/or those who witnessed the removal of concerned posts. In this case the event organisers underestimated the power of social media and consequently mismanaged the situation.

Event organisers and destination marketers from around the world can learn valuable lessons from this case study. Admittedly Northern Ireland does have a troubled political past but every country will at some time have to deal with issues, not necessarily political, that may affect their international image. For instance Hurricane Katrina (USA), the Fukushima nuclear leak (Japan) and the Ebola epidemic (Western Africa) were all unexpected but would have created doubts in the minds of those contemplating attending an event in these countries/regions. Increasingly the general public are going online to research both the event and the host destination and if there is a crisis, seek reassurance before finalising travel plans. This links into Court et al.'s (2009) work on consumer decision making in which they found that consumers are now spending longer at the evaluation stage conducting background research before purchasing and much of this is done online.

According to Hudson and Hudson (2013) because online discussions and reviews have such a major bearing on consumer behaviour it is imperative that event managers integrate social media into

their marketing and communication strategy. Social media is, however, an active and fast moving domain. What may be up-to-date one minute could have disappeared from the virtual landscape the next. During the early stages of planning for an event the event organisers and his/her team must therefore agree on a social media strategy that is current and would allow the team to respond to a crisis. This strategy should also be transparent and thus accessible to all those who will use social media. Such a strategy is meaningless unless sufficient resources are allocated towards implementing it. For instance, in this study it was only after the debacle of the 'flag protests' that the organisers the WPFs realised they needed a dedicated team to deal with social media and recruited four new members of staff in March 2013 (four months after the 'flag protests' started). Budgets are often tight when planning large scale events but event organisers need to prioritise and understand that allocating resources towards social media is an investment and not a cost. Social media is now part of an events personality and how it conducts itself online reflects directly on the host destination and how it is perceived at a local, national and international level.

The fact that 1.5 billion people per day visited a social network site in 2013 highlights the reach and marketing potential of social media (Stelzner, 2014). However, because social media sites are public by nature there is always the chance that in a time of crisis users will intentionally or unintentionally post comments that may harm the image of the event and/or the host destination. In either case the event team must be proactive and respond. This is an opportunity for the event organisers to deliver their side of the story and if there is a crisis then take control of the situation. In this paper the organisers of the WPFs adopted the 'ostrich approach' (i.e. stuck their head in the sand and pretended nothing untoward was going on). This was rather naive considering that in the age of the Internet and social media the modern audience is immediately aware of any crisis, its course and its results, regardless of its physical location. According to Avraham and Ketter (2008) in a time of crisis it is important to provide as much information as possible otherwise people start speculating. This is particularly the case when dealing with a mode of communication such as social media which is all about participation and the sharing of information. To that end, if there is a crisis the event organisers must act quickly and set up a discussion thread. This proactive approach will give the event team a head start by setting the tone of the conversation; it will also help reassure potential customers that there is nothing to hide.

Although the team should be proactive it must also humble and accept that they are not in complete control of the conversation. Social media is about engaging in open and active conversation so it is important for staff to be honest, respectful and transparent. Event staff with responsibility for social media must be prepared to answer difficult questions and only remove posts if they are libellous, defamatory or offensive. In a time of crisis customers seek the truth and reassurance; therefore it is important they do not receive confusing or contradictory messages which can be an issue if there is a lack of communication between the senior management and the social media staff. To make sure they are not sending contradictory messages it is also important that event staff liaise with other stakeholders such as the local / national tourism departments who may also be communicating with potential customers.

In their social media strategy an event team must also consider how it can include online content/discussion in the event evaluation. The evidence from this study would suggest that event organisers are relying on traditional methods to collect primary data and by ignoring social media the 'real' impact of the event may not be revealed. This is a pressing issue given the growing involvement of public agencies in organising and supporting events at local, regional and national level. One of the main reasons why public agencies support events is to improve the 'image' of the

host destination therefore, a comprehensive and accurate event evaluation should consider comments made on social media in relation to both the event and the host destination.

In summary events focus attention on a particular location allowing the host destination to promote itself in a positive light. However, in the age of the Internet and social media if something goes wrong in the build-up to or during an event the host destination can become the topic of online conversations for all the wrong reasons. According to Avraham and Ketter (2008) the best way to handle a crisis is to be ready for it which in the modern world includes having a social media strategy. If this is overlooked, as was the case in Northern Ireland when it hosted the WPFs, then both the event and the host destination will pay the price; something which can go unnoticed because social media content is often overlooked in the official event evaluation. To this end more research is needed into how event organisers are using social media in a 'crises' and what exactly is good and bad practice. Given the reach of social media researchers must also examine if and how the comments made on social media are included as part of the formal event evaluation and explore the best ways to analyse this material.

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