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International Place Branding through Sporting Events: a British perspective of the
2008 Beijing Olympics

Abstract

The goal of this study is to examine if hosting major sporting events represents a relevant strategy to brand a place 'internationally' through brand association transfer and to identify whether or not it should be seen as co-branding process. Based on social representation theory and an abductive research strategy, a survey was carried out among British citizens to identify their opinions about the Olympic Games and the city of Beijing following the organisation of the Games in August 2008. The content and the structure of the social representations were analysed and then compared to determine whether or not a double transfer of associations occurred between the place and the sporting event. The analysis concludes that although there was a transfer of elements from the sporting event to the place, few clearly positive elements were transferred and several negative associations remain. The results do not explicitly corroborate the transfer of associations from the place to the sporting event. The paper confirms the value of sporting events in place branding strategies but highlights some limitations such as the transfer of negative elements and the lack of media control. It also highlights the importance of the place selection process to protect the sporting brand.

Keywords

Place Branding, Sporting Event, Co-Branding, Social Representations, Olympic Games

International Place Branding through Sporting Events: a British perspective of the 2008 Beijing Olympics

Introduction

On the 2nd October 2009, the final step of the bidding process to host the 2016 Olympic Games saw the victory of the city of Rio, after a long race and what several newspapers described as a fierce battle. It first illustrates the importance of major sporting events such as the Olympics and the FIFA World Cup and the increasing enthusiasm for hosting these kinds of events. Among the reasons for staging them, it seems that the importance of sporting issues has now been relegated to a second rank, overtaken in the hierarchy of motives by economic, social, symbolic, marketing and diplomatic objectives. Indeed, numerous frameworks (e.g., Cashman 2005; Chappelet 2006) support the idea that major sporting events have significant legacies in terms of infrastructure, knowledge, image, emotions, networks and culture (Preuss 2007).

Although the costs for staging these mega events are massive, the potential benefits and legacies, and the unique opportunities for international media exposure and promotion make them very attractive for host cities and sponsors (Milton-Smith 2002). Among these benefits and thus objectives, Rein and Shields (2007) identified that the development of a positive image, for both domestic and international markets, has become an important motive for staging major sporting events or at least for applying to become an official candidate. The underlying idea behind this development relies, as is also evident for official sponsors, on the image-transfer process (Gwinner 1997; Gwinner, Eaton 1999). By being associated with a major sporting event, places in general and negatively-viewed ones in particular, aim to modify their international image and obtain some positive associations.

Nevertheless, due to the size of costs involved, these place branding strategies need to be carefully evaluated to determine whether they present legitimate and achievable goals. Thus, the first objective of this research was to determine if hosting the 2008 Summer Olympic Games influenced or not the social representation of the city of Beijing among British people.

Many authors (e.g., Chalip, Green & Hill 2003; Xing, Chalip 2006) estimate that hosting a sporting event does not consist in a unidirectional image-transfer process from the sporting event to the place, but rather represents a co-branding process with an image transfer from the place, the hosting locus, to the sporting event or organisation. The confirmation, therefore, of the existence of a potential process affecting the sporting event is crucial for sport organisations which will seek to protect their brands and optimize the place selection process as well. Thus the second objective of this study aimed to evaluate a potential co-branding process, expressed by a transfer of associations from the Beijing's social representation to the Olympic Games' social representation among a British audience.

The paper first presents the main frameworks of the literature dealing with sporting events and place branding strategies and especially the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics case. It then goes on to analyse image transfer, the process by which places' images are influenced by the hosting of sporting events, and the fact that this process should be considered as a two-way process. Social representation theory is then identified as a relevant framework to evaluate the impact of sporting events on places' brand. The methodology is based on a questionnaire survey targeting British citizens which is presented, followed by an analysis of the two-way transfer of associations between the Beijing and the Olympics' in terms of social representation. A conclusion

is finally drawn from these results highlighting the main contributions, limitations and future perspectives of research.

Place Branding Through Sporting Events

Major and special events seem to have reached a flourishing period (Janiskee 1996), and numerous reasons linked to the impacts and legacies of these events can explain this phenomenon. Brown et al. (2004) reviewed numerous studies and identified the following factors: increased tourism in a region and enhanced tourism development; positive economic impact; increased employment; improvement in a destination's image or awareness; ability to act as a catalyst for development; reduction in seasonal fluctuations or extension of the tourism season; animation of static attractions; enhanced community pride; and advancement of political objectives. Besides the sporting and economic impacts and legacies, which may have been in the past the primary reasons for hosting major events in general and the Olympic Games in particular, creating a positive and attractive image events has been an increasing motivation. Rein and Shields (2007) commented that due to the globalisation trend and marketplace fragmentation, both established and emerging places were facing increasing international competition to attract and retain residents, investors and tourists. For these authors, sport can represent a powerful lever for place branding as different stakeholders are emerging, in-transition, negatively viewed, and in newly industrialised countries (Rein, Shields 2007). Furthermore, for Manzenreiter (2010), major events like the Olympic Games represent a relevant way to enhance the hosting nations' soft power because of their association with positive images of excellence, fairness, universal friendship and mutual exchange. The comments about countries can also certainly be applied to major cities, regions as well as nations (Anholt 2008). The main reasons for using sport as a place branding tool relies on the fact that sports

have a widespread free media-coverage, which provides a valuable visibility and produces emotional heat and common bonding, often seen as positive outcomes (Rein & Shields, 2007). Thus, sporting events represent a powerful lever for the transmission of information and representations (Manzenreiter 2010). Moreover, they also attract numerous sport tourists into places where they would otherwise be unlikely to go. More specifically, hosting a sporting event constitutes a platform for place branding and several relatively successful past examples can be cited. Kurtzman (2001) noted that the city of Perth (Australia) has tried to brand itself as the “City of Sporting Events” and that Lake Placid has tried to re-image itself as the “Winter Sports Capital of the United States” (p.19). Several cities such as Sheffield (UK) have used the expression “national city of sport” in their marketing initiatives a sobriquet formally acknowledged by UK Sport (Smith 2005). Other cities such as Calgary (Ritchie, Smith 1991), Indianapolis (Schimmel 2001), Sydney (Brown et al. 2002), Birmingham and Manchester (Smith 2005), and countries such as South Korea (Kim, Morrison 2005) and Germany (Florek, Breitbarth & Conejo 2008) provide similar examples. Some places such as South Africa with the organisation of 2010 FIFA World Cup and some Middle-East states such as Bahrain with the Formula One Grand Prix, and Qatar with the 2022 FIFA World Cup and the Doha Sports City, also appear to be following the same strategy, and this tendency appears to be increasingly evident in the case of Asian nations and places (Dolles, Söderman 2008).

However, as mentioned by Smith (2005), it is necessary to observe that these previous experiences have not always been entirely successful and that effects can sometimes be negligible or even negative. This was the case for Chalip, Green and Hill (2003) who found that the Gold Coast’s natural image was negatively affected by the motor race staged in the area, for Mossberg and Hallberg (1999), who did not observe any

impact of the World Athletics Championships on the city of Gothenburg's image, and for Smith (2005) who found that a lot of reimagining initiatives had been overshadowed by established reputations for the cities of Manchester, Birmingham and Sheffield and that the concept of sporting cities proved too elusive for some interviewees.

Furthermore, as no long-term longitudinal studies have been conducted so far, it is difficult to determine if these positive images are deep and sustainable (Florek et al., 2010).

As for the Olympic Games, Brown et al. (2004) analysed the case of the 2000 Sydney Summer Olympics and more specifically the role the event played in destination branding. The authors, quoting the IOC's marketing director and the Australian Tourist Commission's managing director, observed that Australia was the first host nation to take full advantage of the Games and that they clearly changed and broadened the way Australia was seen internationally. In this case, the successful strategy seemed to have been achieved by bringing together Brand Australia – launched in 1995, two years after the Games had been awarded to Sydney –, the Olympic brand, and the brands of Olympic partners (Brown et al. 2004). The immediate results seemed quite encouraging, demonstrating a positive image impact with a significant increase in international visitor arrivals and bookings right after the games but the consequences of the terrorist attacks in the USA in September 2001 and the subsequent international crisis annihilated such positive outcomes (Brown et al., 2004). This example stresses again the importance of image sustainability and strength.

More recently, according to Berkowitz et al. (2007) and Manzenreiter (2010), China's will to host the 2008 Olympic games corresponded to a desire to brand the Chinese nation as a leader in the international community and to integrate itself and its culture

into the rest of the world. For Liu and Hong (2010) and Zhou and Ap (2009), China's objective to host the 2008 Olympic Games was embodied in the motto of these Games 'One World, One Dream' and corresponded to a desire to show the world the country's renaissance and opening up as well as a way to boost Chinese people's national pride. It should be observed that although the main strategy aimed to re-image or brand the whole country of China, the event was not as spread over the country as other events which are not limited to a single city. As noted by Berkowitz et al. (2007), China rated poorly in the 2005 Anholt Nation Brand Index (ANBI), based on six areas (i.e., tourism, exports, governance, investment/immigration, culture/heritage and people), and hosting the Olympics games was certainly seen as a way to modify these perceptions. Although the branding issue may have primarily concerned foreign tourists and countries as illustrated by the ANBI ranking, the internal impact of branding should not be underestimated, particularly for a country as big and populated as China. For Brownell (2008), the domestic audience may have even been the primary target.

Specifically in relation to the Olympic Games, the city of Beijing adopted a three-fold aim and slogan: the People's Olympics, High-Tech Olympics and the Green Olympics (Berkowitz et al. 2007). According to Manzenreiter (2010), the 'People's Olympics' slogan either referred to the Games as an opportunity to familiarize Chinese people with globalisation and a globalised world, and/or a harmonious and fruitful blending of Chinese and Western cultures. The High-Tech Olympics goal corresponded to a will to dissociate China from low-quality goods and cheap product services and show its capabilities to make the transition from "made in China" to "created in China" (Berkowitz et al. 2007). Finally, the Green Olympics goal corresponded to both an

increasing worldwide concern about environmental issues and specifically to a wish to counter the international criticism of China's pollution issues (Manzenreiter 2010). The first results about the impact of the Beijing Olympic Games on the perception of China in general and Beijing in particular are not clear-cut. From a Chinese perspective, hosting the Olympic Games was doubtless perceived as successful and has even increased national tourism with a lot of visits by the domestic population to the iconic and famous stadiums which have become places for remembering the symbolic rise of China to global leadership (Manzenreiter 2010).

From an international perspective, Manzenreiter (2010) compared the Anholt Brands Nation Index for China between 2005 and 2008 and noted considerable progresses which may be partly due to the hosting of the 2008 Beijing Games even if providing an estimate proportion remains impossible. Nevertheless, China still scored low in government and people, average for investments, export and tourism, but high for culture and heritage (Manzenreiter 2010). Based on a survey conducted by the Gallup Organisation measuring the global attitudes towards China, Manzenreiter (2010) observed an improvement from 2001 – the awarding of the games – to 2007, but one year after the Olympics, the proportion of people having a positive opinion toward China remained unchanged and relatively low (i.e., 41%). On the contrary, Gries, Crowson and Sandel (2010) found that American attitudes towards Chinese people and government worsened over the course of the two and half weeks of an increased exposure to China during the 2008 Beijing Olympics. In the same vein, Heslop, Nadeau and O'Reilly (2010) found that the American perceptions of Olympics event performance, excitement and evaluative response, all declined after the Games as did American perceptions of Chinese country-people competence and country policies as

well. Only the American perceptions of Chinese people's character slightly improved after the Games whereas perceptions about China as a destination remained the same. Nevertheless these survey results should be carefully analysed as none of them were specifically designed to measure the Beijing Olympics' impact on China's image (Manzenreiter 2010). A more qualitative approach was used by the Communication University of China in Beijing which found that China's image, its cultural image and Beijing's image showed moderate improvements although political and people's images remained the same. These results need however careful consideration as very little information is available regarding the methodology adopted in this study (Manzenreiter 2010). Thus, it seems that further research, specifically designed and more qualitative in nature, is needed to fully capture the impact of hosting the Olympic Games in general and the Beijing Games in particular on place image.

Image Transfer and the Co-Branding Process

Hosting major sporting events constitutes a place branding strategy based on an image-transfer process from the event, the competition and the organising brand. In this sense, a parallel can be drawn with sport sponsorship as sponsors aim to get image elements or associations from the sponsee entity (Gwinner 1997; Gwinner, Eaton 1999). In the case of the Olympics, some values, as defined in the preamble of the Olympic charter such as universalism, friendship, sportsmanship, solidarity and joy of effort, could then be transferred to the hosting city, region and nation. However as we have noted some negative elements can also be transferred. As in the case of sponsorship image transfer, one of the key factors relies on the perceived fit or match between the hosting entity and the sport organisation or event which qualifies the level of congruency between two different images. On one hand, if the perceived fit is high, the image transfer will then be easier, however if the place and sporting event's

images are too close, the rationale for hosting a major sporting event may be called into question since as the cost-benefit ratio would not be very positive since benefits would be limited. On another hand, if the perceived fit is low, the image transfer will be much more difficult to achieve, however it would be grounded from a managerial point of view, as newly industrialised or negatively-viewed places look to associate with positive values (Rein & Shields, 2007). Moreover, if too great a distance is perceived between these two images, people may have the perception of an incongruent and almost hypocrite strategy, questioning whether the host's interest in sport and in sporting events is genuine, and this would significantly alter the image transfer and then the branding process.

Nevertheless, image transfer should not be seen as a one-way process but rather as co-branding process (Chalip, Green & Hill, 2003), defined as a collaboration between several brands which implies a co-definition and a co-signature (Kapferer 2008).

Although Kaplanidou and Vogt (2007) seemed to have found a positive relationship between the sport event images on the destination image, the authors did not support the reverse relationship. However, the fact that the image variables were not measured with the same scales and that the survey concerned a small-scale event could explain such a result. Despite this unsupportive result, the co-branding process remains theoretically relevant, in line with claims by Brown et al. (2004), Chalip, Green and Hill (2003) and Xing and Chalip (2006).

This might particularly be the case for the Olympics given the nature of the organisation, process and lines of responsibility (i.e., a local organising committee is in charge of the delivery of the Games charged with operating in line with the IOC's guidelines) and given the fact that they represent a powerful brand which numerous organisations want to be associated with. For instance, Berkowitz et al. (2007) and

Heslop, Nadeau and O'Reilly (2010) noted that human rights violation and environmental issues were often associated with China and it might be thought that some of these negative elements could have been transferred to the Olympics' brand image. As for DeLisle (2009), the political dimension of the Olympics, even if denied by the IOC, could also affect the Olympic brand. The same kind of process was previously highlighted with several controversial Olympic sponsors such as tobacco companies (McDaniel, Mason 1999). Regarding the increasing interest in place branding, more negatively viewed places will probably be candidates to host major sporting events (given their greater need for positive associations) and sport organisations therefore need to be fully aware of this two-way process in order to protect their brand from acquiring negative associations. By contrast, positively-viewed places could also transfer some positive elements which would reinforce the image of the sporting event or organisation. Thus, there is a double managerial stake in evaluating a potential partner's image. From the place perspective, the identification of positive elements associated with major sporting events is crucial to determine if it is worthwhile to host a particular event when, for instance, potential images are too close and when the cost is too high in relation to the place branding benefits. After the sporting event has taken place, such an evaluation could also serve as a measure of impact of the place branding strategy on the place's image. From the sport organisation side, the branding issue should also be taken into consideration in the bidding and selection processes as the association with a negatively-viewed place could have negative consequences for the sport organisation brand although an association with a positively-viewed place could be beneficial.

The Social Representation Theory

As mentioned above, using major sporting events to improve a place's image appears promising but the full estimation of such a strategy is closely related to the appreciation of its impact on people's knowledge, perceptions, opinions and prejudices. One relevant way to assess people's thoughts, perceptions and opinions of a specific object is to employ the concept of social representation introduced by Moscovici (1961). According to Moscovici (1961) and the researchers who have embraced this framework (see Wagner, Hayes 2005 for a review), social representations characterise a form of socially elaborated and shared knowledge, with practical consequences. Moscovici (1984) argues that representations have two roles. First, "they conventionalize the objects, persons and events we encounter. They give them a definite form, locate them in a given category and gradually establish them as a model of a certain type, distinct and shared by a group" (p. 22). They contribute to the construction of a common reality among social groups (Jodelet 1989). These models or conventions, which are continuously fed by individual's experiences and communication messages, help them to structure their environment, interpret messages, classify individuals, and organize their perceptions and thoughts; in a given group, "the purpose of all representations is to make something unfamiliar, or unfamiliarity itself, familiar" (Moscovici, 1984, p. 37). Second, and for the reasons previously mentioned, representations are prescriptive as they influence people's practices. As noted by Jodelet (1989, p.43-4), representations are practical knowledge because they are produced by people's practices, but furthermore because they are "used for acting in the world and on others".

The main difference between social representation and the concept of image, which is a widely-used construct in the marketing and tourism literatures in relation to brands and destinations (e.g., Baloglu, McCleary 1999; Chalip, Green & Hill 2003; Heslop,

Nadeau & O'Reilly 2010; Kaplanidou, Vogt 2007; Xing, Chalip 2006), is that images are produced by social representations, where social representations are considered as a process and images as products (Moliner 1996). Social representations are more stable in time and less contextual, which explains why a social representation may produce several different but consistent images according to different situations. In this sense, images are considered as snapshots of the reality, and do not have the prescriptive strength of social representations. Another difference stems from the fact that social representations are socially produced and reproduced (Moscovici 1961). Thus the existence of a social representation is embedded in a specific social group. Three conditions are required for the elaboration of a social representation (Moliner 1996; Moscovici 1961). The first is the spreading of information regarding an object of representation and relies on the fact that individuals can not fully access accurate and direct information, which therefore favours an indirect spreading of information and some distortions (Moliner 1996). In the context of major sporting events and hosting places, information dissemination is closely linked to individuals' personal experiences and interactions, marketing and communication campaigns and the way objects are treated by international media. The second condition is the position of the group in relation to the object which determines the level of interest or disinterest of the group, termed 'focalisation', which will prevent them from grasping a global vision of the object (Moliner 1996). For place branding strategies, this condition refers to the segmentation of targeted prospects and publics and it is sensible to consider that, for instance, local and different foreign targets (e.g., Western and Asian countries) will not hold the same social representation as they do not have the same relationship with the object. In relation to sporting events and the Olympics in particular, this condition may appear highly discriminant among foreign populations

as the Olympics are often criticised as Eurocentric (McNamee 2006). Finally, the third condition, termed ‘inference’, characterises the fact that individuals have a tendency to fill their areas of uncertainty about a specific object, which encourages them to adopt the main opinions of a specific group. For all these reasons, it seems relevant to study the social representations of both place and sporting event objects for a given population to know how they are socially perceived and how they can prescribe individuals’ behaviours.

Methodology

This study seeks to determine if hosting the 2008 Summer Olympic Games influenced or not the social representation of the city of Beijing among British people and conversely, if the social representation of the Chinese capital influenced the social representation of the Olympic Games.

Participants

The choice of participants is closely related to the sporting event selected for the investigation. We opted for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games because it was the most recent major sporting event and because several authors (e.g., Anholt 2008, Berkowitz et al. 2007; Heslop, Nadeau & O’Reilly 2010; Rein, Shields 2007) estimated that the city of Beijing and indirectly the nation of China clearly aimed to host the summer Olympic Games to fulfil place branding objectives. However, unlike Heslop, Nadeau and O’Reilly (2010), the city rather than the country was selected to measure the place branding strategy. About the population choice, United Kingdom citizens and residents were selected based on several factors. First, we wanted to select a western population as place branding often targets western countries (Anholt 2008); second the United Kingdom outbound market is a high spending generating market worldwide (UNTWO 2009); and third, because the 2008 London Olympic torch relay

drew a lot of protests in relation to the human rights violation issue which characterised a specific relationship and focalisation of British people on the Beijing Olympics. The fact that London was designated to host the 2012 Olympic Games was also an interesting factor which would characterise a special relationship with the Games and then the most recent ones. Hence, our population comprised all British residents with a sample size of 129 individuals. Although this sample size may at first sight appear limited, such sample sizes are common in mixed quantitative and qualitative studies since, as for semi-structured interviews, above a certain threshold, new and additional information gains become marginal. This is especially the case with objects which are strongly socially anchored such as the Olympic Games. Respondents were randomly selected and surveyed on the market place, the city's place with the most traffic, by a research assistant to reach a wide range of individuals. The individuals surveyed were all British citizens, mainly male (58%) and white (86%), of an average age of 26.4 years old ($SD = 9.6$), living in a middle-size English city (60 000 inhabitants) and most of them (i.e., 56.6%) followed the 2008 Beijing Olympics through the media at least regularly.

Materials and procedure

Several methods can be used to study the organisation of a social representation (see Viaud, Roussiau 2002 for a review) but one of the most commonly employed is based on free associations of words. According to Lahlou (2005) free word association tasks represent a relevant way to measure and seize the complexity of social representations as individuals integrate, under the form of associations of ideas, the associations between the objects they have experienced in the "real" world and the social and cultural visions of these objects as well, and that the associations of words represent these associations of ideas. Abric (2005) also identified free-association methods,

considering both the words frequency of citation and their rank of citation, as extremely adapted. However, according to Abric (2005), the rank of citation of a word should not be interpreted as a rank of importance of the theme to the subjects, as the most important items do not necessarily appear at first. For this reason, Lacassagne et al. (2004) developed a technique based on Kendall's tau relying on the frequency, for each pair of word/items (XY), for which individuals spontaneously cited word X before word Y. This focuses on the links between words based on their citation rank order corresponds to the analysis of the proximity between ideas, which is for Lahlou (2005) at the heart of the analysis of social representations.

Ideally, the most accurate way to measure place branding impact is to assess two place's social representation measures, one before and one after the sporting event. The differences in terms of associations of words would then indicate the impact of the sporting event hosting on the place. As it was not possible to conduct a first assessment of social representations before the event, it was decided to measure both Beijing's and the Olympic Games' social representation and measure impact by looking at the communalities and the differences between them. At this stage two options were then available: either the two social representations were measured within the same sample (i.e., two free-association tasks per participants) or using two different samples but with similar characteristics (i.e., one free-association task per sample). As the comparison of two samples would have required similar sample size and individual characteristics which represented important constraints, the first option was selected. Consequently, participants took part in a free word-association task, giving the first ten words which came to mind when they hear the inductor words 'Beijing' and 'Olympic Games'. Respondents were asked to provide ten words but could provide less than ten words as long as they had thought carefully / deeply about

the object and had mentally manipulated it from different perspectives, representing different social views (i.e. what kind of words other people could associate to the object). Bodet, Meurgey & Lacassagne (2009) and Lacassagne et al. (2004) previously used the same technique to respectively measure the social representation of a brand name and the social representation of sport among two different cultures. Although this question is qualitative by nature, it was inserted within a questionnaire in order to maximise returns and thus the size of the sample. Before this question, individuals were first asked if they were British citizens. This preliminary verbal question ensured that respondents belonged to the targeted population but also activated the link between the respondents and their social group (i.e. British people) which would allow access to the social representations of this particular group. Nevertheless, because the question order could represent a bias in the answer, since some mental connections activated with the first question could more easily be activated with the second question, two types of questionnaire were generated. Questionnaire A posed first the questions about Beijing and second the questions about the Olympic Games whereas questionnaire B asked the questions in reverse order. We ensured that, during the administration process, questionnaires A and B were distributed evenly and that respondents were not permitted to return to the previous question. Questionnaires were completed with questions relating to the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents and a question measuring the extent to which participants followed the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. This question was rated using a five-point Likert scale, from 1(not at all) to 5(extensively). The study took place about four months after the end of the Beijing 2008 games, which thus remained an active topic in the media and among the general public.

Analysis

Following an abductive research strategy (Blaikie 2007), the first stages of the analysis aimed “to discover how social actors view and understand that part of their world of interest to the researcher” (Blaikie 2007, p.101) and consisted in determining the field of representation which includes all words cited by more than 15% of the participants as social representations are defined as ‘common sense knowledge’ (Jodelet 1989). Although Bodet, Meurgey and Lacassagne (2009), Lacassagne et al. (2001) and Lacassagne et al. (2004) had previously used a cut-off threshold of 10% (i.e. words kept when cited by more than 10% of the participants), which generally corresponds to retaining about ten words, it was estimated that a 15% cut-off threshold was more appropriate considering that both objects (i.e., the Olympics Games and Beijing) are highly social objects, producing too many words for a lower threshold. From an analysis point of view, with a high number of retained words, it is also less likely that many respondents would mention simultaneously most of the retained words, as they were limited to ten in the questionnaire, which is a shortcoming of the analysis. The second stage aimed “to abstract or generate second-order concepts from these first-order lay concepts” (Blaikie, 2007, p.101) which was done in gathering words based on their semantic meanings (as social representations rely on main concepts rather than very detailed and specific idiomatic terms) and analysing their structure. For instance, the words ‘televised’, ‘television’, ‘media’ and ‘TV coverage’ were gathered under the term ‘media’; ‘travel’, ‘travelling’ and ‘tourism’ were gathered under the term ‘tourism’; ‘worldwide’, ‘global’, ‘mega event’ and ‘international’ were gathered under the term ‘global event’. The structure analysis consists in looking at the links between the words defining the specific field of the social representation. As noted by Wagner and Hayes (2005), the analysis of social representation structure relies either on methods searching for consensus (similarity

analysis) or opposition (correspondence analysis). As Beijing and the Olympic Games are here studied through the lens of the collective appropriation of an event by a target population and not as an intergroup stake, the search for common sense, and then consensus terms, was deemed the most appropriate strategy to adopt. Hence, in a manner similar to that adopted by Bodet, Meurgey and Lacassagne (2009) and Lacassagne et al. (2004), a similarity index was calculated based on Kendal's correlation coefficient which takes into consideration the hierarchical ranking of the words given by each respondent. The correlation table produced is then modified (i.e., $1 - x$) to obtain a similarity matrix. An ascendant hierarchical classification based on Ward's method and the Euclidian distance was then conducted to produce a dendrogram which indicates the links of proximity and then connections between the words composing the social representations. The shorter the distance on the graph is and the more connected the words are in respondents' minds. Finally, the third stage aimed to compare the social representations to determine if a double image transfer occurred between the place and the sporting event.

Results

The social representation field

Following the 15% cut-off threshold, 15 words defined the Olympics' social representation: 'Medals' (cited by 65.1% of the respondents), 'London 2012' (47.3%), 'Athletics' (45%), 'Sport(s)' (39.5%), 'Beijing' (33.3%), 'Competition' (29.5%), 'Money' (29.5%), 'Olympic rings' (27.1%), 'Swimming' (20.9%), 'Global Event' (20.2%), 'Nations' (19.4%), 'Doping' (18.6%), 'World records' (18.6%), 'Media' (17.1%) and 'Success' (17.1%). Eleven words were cited by more than 10% of the respondents but did not reach the 15% threshold: 'Running' (14.7%), 'Stadium(s)' (14.7%), 'Athletes' (14%), 'Olympic torch' (14%), 'Politics' (14%), 'Winning'

(13.2%), 'China' (12.4%), 'Controversy' (11.6%), 'Celebrations' (10.9%), 'Pride' (10.9%) and 'Usain Bolt' (10.9%).

Following the same rule, 13 words defined the Beijing's social representation:

'Olympics' (82.2%), 'China' (80.6%), 'Pollution' (45.7%), 'Stadium(s)' (34.1%), Food (26.4%), 'Communism' (24.8%), Medals (22.5%), Repression (19.4%), 'Politics' (17.8%), 'Usain Bolt' (17.8%), '2008' (17.1%), 'Chinese people' (16.3%), 'Sports' (16.3%). Seven words were cited by more than 10% of the respondents but did not reach the 15% threshold: 'Money' (14.7%), 'Populated' (14%), 'Success' (14%), 'Asia' (12.4%), 'Big' (10.9%), 'Buildings' (10.9%) and 'Poverty' (10.9%).

Two words (i.e., 'Sports' and 'Medals') are common to both social representations although more words are common if we consider a lower threshold at 10% (i.e., 'Politics', 'Stadiums', 'Success', 'China' and 'Usain Bolt'). 'Beijing' was found in the Olympics' social representation and 'Olympics' was found in Beijing's social representation.

The social representation structure

As showed in Figure 1, the closest link, which characterises the closest psychological distance, can be observed between 'London 2012' and 'Beijing' which are then associated to a group of three words (i.e., 'World records', 'Success' and 'Doping') to form a first block. This block is linked to another block gathering ten words and structured around two sub-blocks. In this first sub-block, 'Media' is closely connected to 'Sports' and further associated to 'Athletics', 'Competition' and 'Olympic rings'. In the second sub-block, the closest association is observed between 'Swimming' and 'Medals', and 'Success' which are further associated to a pair formed by 'Money' and 'Global Event'.

-Insert Figure 1 here -

Looking at Figure 2, the structure of Beijing's social representation is composed of three main blocks. The first block gathers the pair 'Usain Bolt'- 'Stadium(s)', connected to 'Olympics' and to 'Medals'. The second block is articulated around the pair 'Pollution'- 'Politics' associated to 'Communism' and 'Repression'. Finally, the third block, which is linked to the gathering of the two previous blocks, is articulated around the associations of 'Food'- 'Chinese people' and 'Sport(s)'- 'China' to '2008'.

- Insert Figure 2 here -

Discussion

The first objective of this research was to determine if hosting international sporting events in general and the Olympic games in particular would represent an appropriate strategy to develop an international brand for a place in general, and a city in particular. Second, this study aimed at evaluating a potential co-branding process, expressed by an image transfer, either positive or negative, from the place to the sporting event.

The first element of response consists in looking at the social representation of the Olympic Games to identify if the Games are generally positively perceived and if they carry positive and unique associations. The results tend to show that the Olympic Games are overall well perceived with only two negative elements which are 'doping' and 'money'. Looking closely at figure 1, it can be observed that host cities are closely related to what could be called a sporting success block where 'doping' could be seen not as a main characteristic of the Olympic Games but rather a correlate of sporting success and records. The second block of the social representation tends to refer to the global and multinational dimension of the Olympics, except for the term 'swimming' (the British swimming team performed very well during these games), although the third block tends to emphasise the media and communication side of the

Olympics with 'media', the 'Olympic rings' which represent the brand logo as well as 'athletics' and the one hundred meter final which may be the most iconic and globally-viewed event.

At the other end, some words classically associated to the Olympics do not appear in their British social representation. For instance culture and education were not found although they constitute important pillars of Olympism as stated in the preamble of the IOC's Olympic charter (McNamee 2006; Parry 2006).

Similarly, numerous positive elements composing the Olympic charter were not found such as universalism, joy, effort, non-discriminatory, friendship, solidarity, sportsmanship, mass participation, human dignity. This result counterbalances the sole analysis of the words produced and would invite place managers to exercise prudence in considering whether to apply for the Olympic Games rather than other sporting events.

The social representation of Beijing seems to be articulated on several dimensions. Two dimensions seem to be related to China with one dimension relatively descriptive with 'Chinese people', 'food' and 'China' and one negatively perceived dimension relating to political and human rights (i.e., 'politics', 'communism' and 'repression'), and environmental (i.e., pollution) issues. However the third dimension is clearly related to the Olympics with the terms 'Usain Bolt', 'stadiums', 'Olympics' and 'medals'. The presence of these closely linked elements seems to demonstrate the impact of the Olympic Games hosting on the Beijing's social representation.

However, it is difficult to clearly determine if these representations are neutral or if they carry negative or positive connotations. Regarding the results of the Olympics' social representation, it seems they are positively connoted. The contrast between the 'Olympic block' and the negative dimension would therefore tend to reinforce the

place branding strategy, almost as if the Olympics' elements were there to counterbalance the negative associations. Although it appears at first to have provided a result legitimating the strategy of place branding through sporting events, it cannot be excluded that the respondents directly associated negative elements to the Olympic elements as Milton-Smith (2002) observed some disillusionment with the Olympics. In this case the place branding effects would not be as positive as expected.

On the contrary, very few words are directly and exclusively linked to the city of Beijing, which would mean that there is no huge difference between the British social representations of Beijing and of China. Only 'stadiums' explicitly refer to Beijing's hard primary structures, as categorised by Preuss (2007), with in particular the Beijing National Stadium coined the 'Bird's Nest Stadium' and the Beijing Olympic National Aquatics Centre nicknamed the 'Water Cube'. However, no elements seem to refer to the Beijing's touristic and cultural attractions. For instance, neither 'Tiananmen Square' nor the 'Forbidden City' was retained in the social representation.

Nevertheless, the iconic stadiums could represent a touristic attraction, for both sport and non-sport tourists. In this case, hosting the Olympic Games seemed to have a positive impact on the branding of the nation of China rather than the capital city which seems to correspond to the desires of the hosting stakeholders (Berkowitz et al. 2007). Nevertheless, the sport dimension brought by the Olympics may have eclipsed or cannibalized the cultural dimension of the city's social representation. The observation of the comparison of the ANBI index between 2005 and 2008 realized by Manzenreiter (2010) seems to reinforce this interpretation as a relative decline can be noted regarding the culture and heritage dimension of the China's evaluation. This could be seen as a negative impact. Contrary to the stadiums which appear as sustainable features, some sports elements such as 'Usain Bolt', 'sports' or even

‘medals’ may only be ephemeral elements of the social representation and may vanish with time.

Considering the associations composing Beijing’s social representation and the overall positive social representation of the Olympic Games, it can be said that hosting the Games was a successful support to branding the city of Beijing and by extension the country of China. However, from a Chinese perspective, these results can also appear disappointing. First, even if the Olympics were associated to Beijing, no explicitly-positive terms such as joy, participation, fair-play, friendship and solidarity were associated with the Chinese capital. The three-fold slogan of the 2008 Olympic Games (i.e., People’s Olympics, High-Tech and Green Olympics) did not appear either. Second, several strongly negative and unattractive terms, such as ‘repression’ and ‘pollution’ were associated with the city. Therefore, it might even be thought that hosting the Olympic Games may have emphasised these issues due to the huge international media coverage before, during and even after the games (Heslop, Nadeau & O’Reilly 2010) owing to the lack of control of media identified by Smith (2005) as a real issue in place re-imaging. For instance, the Tibetan troubles in March 2008 might not have been so widely covered by the media without the Games. Similarly, the media focused their attention on the pollution issue which was at first a sporting concern - the IOC threatened to postpone or cancel the endurance events if pollution standards were not satisfactory (DeLisle 2009) - and this rapidly became a general environmental concern. In both situations, hosting the Games may have been counterproductive as media attention was raised about negative and problematic issues too. This seems to corroborate the results found by Gries, Crowson and Sandel (2010) on the American perceptions of China which deteriorated during the Games as the media exposure increased and showed the ability of China to become an

international leader. This may represent the other side of the coin of hosting international major sporting events.

The final point of the analysis concerns the impact of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games on the Olympic brand. As no pre and post-games evaluations were conducted, it is difficult to have a definitive view on the matter. However, by studying the results obtained, several comments and hypotheses can be made. The first comment relates to the words constituting the social representation of the Olympic Games and which can be indirectly related to Beijing. One of these concerns the ‘doping’ issue and, in this case, it can be said that the Beijing Games did not have a significant impact as the number of anti-doping controls was superior to those in the 2004 Athens Olympic Games and that, even with post-games retests, the number of athletes who failed the tests has seemed to be fewer than for the Athens Games. It can also be thought that the Beijing Games contributed to the international and global dimension of the Games (i.e., ‘global event’ and ‘media’), which is a positive thing, as one of the common criticisms is that Olympism and by extension the Olympics Games are too western or euro-centric (McNamee 2006; Parry 2006). Beijing was also found in the Olympic Games’ social representation but it is difficult to determine if the connection between Beijing and the Olympic Games was seen as neutral, such as London 2012, or if it carries a negative or positive connotation. Nevertheless, the choice of the next Olympic places is crucial in the protection of such a social representation and the selection of the Russian city of Sochi for the 2014 winter Games and the Brazilian city of Rio for the 2016 summer Olympics could introduce some negative words such as controversy (cited by 11.6% of the respondents) in the social representation, due for instance to human rights and safety issues respectively. Consequently, it seems relatively important that the International Olympic Committee gives some

considerable weight in the host city selection process to the need to avoid any deterioration of the Olympic brand, which has already suffered from scandals and disappointments in the recent years (Milton-Smith, 2002).

Conclusion

The goals of this research were first to assess the relevance of using the organisation of international major sporting events to improve a place's image for non-domestic public opinion, potential tourists and investors, and second to evaluate a potential image transfer from the place to the sporting brand. Through the analysis of the British social representation of the Olympic Games and the city of Beijing and their comparison, it can be said that hosting sporting events can play a significant role in the development of positive associations in the minds of people who are targeted. However, the analysis also revealed that the impact of this place branding strategy may not be as high as expected due to the lack of transfer of clearly positively-connoted elements or the transfer of negative elements largely. It would seem, due to the important media focus on non-sport related and controversial issues. Paradoxically, the fact that the Games were "too perfect" or "hyper-successful" maybe have produced negative perceptions from westerners because such outcomes might have been seen as indicative of a controlling society (Heslop, Nadeau & O'Reilly 2010) . Bearing in mind the important costs and investments for hosting major sporting events, one might wonder whether taking a decision to bid based only on a place branding strategy is worthwhile if no other objectives are seriously considered (e.g., sporting, social and economic). As for the co-branding process, no definitive evidence can be drawn from these results since no explicit terms from Beijing, except for the city itself, were directly transferred to the Olympic Games. However, this can be partially due to the theoretical approach as social representations

are considered as deep structures which are only slightly changed overtime and the methodological approach which relied only on a post-Games assessment.

The main shortcomings of this study concern the procedure of relying on the post hoc comparison of both social representations measured after the Olympics, and longitudinal studies, such as Ritchie and Smith (1991), Florek, Breitbarth and Conejo (2008) and Heslop, Nadeau and O'Reilly (2010), certainly represent a better way to assess these kinds of strategies or effects. Repeated measures after the event would also add reliability to the analysis. The analysis could also implement some segmentation distinguishing for instance people according to their travelling frequency, their sport interest and involvement, or their media exposure as Gries, Crowson and Sandel (2010) found that greater sports exposure was associated with a reduction in negative attitudes.

Finally, some links between the words induced and the object of the social representation need further analysis and it would be interesting to pursue this by determining, either quantitatively as Bodet, Meurgey and Lacassagne (2009) and Stewart and Lacassagne (2005) have done, or qualitatively, particular connections, as the triangulation of methods is fundamental to fully seize the complexity of these social representations (Apostolidis 2005).

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Figures

Figure 1: Dendrogram for the Olympic Games' social representation

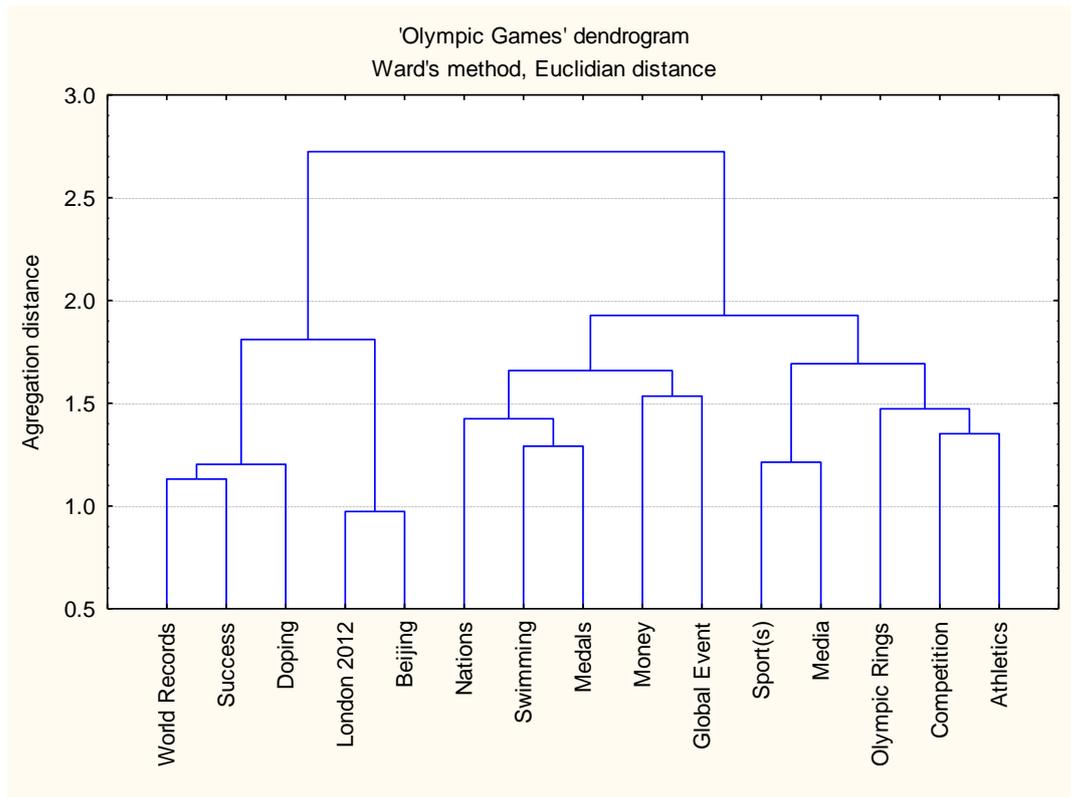
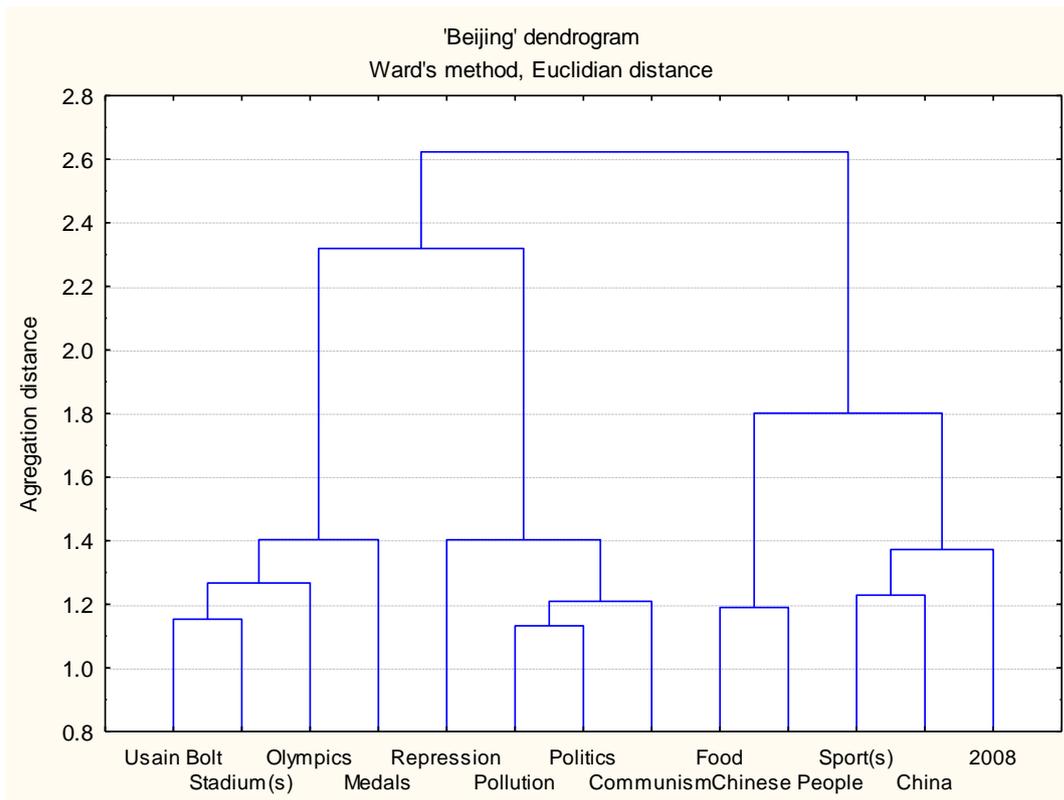


Figure 2: Dendrogram for the Beijing's social representation



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