



Attitudes toward attending the 2016 Olympic Games and visiting Brazil after the games[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Drawing on signaling theory and branding framework, the aim of this research was to describe the impacts of the interaction between, on the one hand, the brand images of the Olympic Games and Brazil (as a tourism destination), and on the other, attitudes toward attending the 2016 Rio Olympic Games and visiting the country after the event. A sample of American adults ($n = 722$), most (82.2%) with at least one international travel experience, was analyzed. Results showed that the interaction between the hospitality associated with the Olympic Games hospitality and that of Brazil positively affected attitudes toward visiting the country after the Games. None of the tested interactions affected attitudes toward attending the 2016 Olympic Games. In the second part of the study, five focus groups with sport management graduate students ($n = 23$) indicated that the association with the Olympic brand might bring fewer gains to Brazilian tourism than the expected.

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1. Introduction

In the last 15 years, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) started to award the Olympic Games hosting rights to developing countries. China hosted the 2008 Games in Beijing, Russia hosted the 2014 Winter Games in Sochi, and Brazil hosted the 2016 Games in Rio de Janeiro.¹ One of most appealing reasons for the IOC to award the Olympic Games to developing countries is to strengthen the Olympic brand in as many markets as possible. One of the strongest motivations for developing countries to host such events is to build a positive international image in association with the Olympic brand to promote tourism (Bodet & Lacassagne, 2012; Rein & Shields, 2007). While the Olympic brand has constantly been associated with positive attributes such as multiculturalism, global values, excellence, and fair competition (Madrigal, Bee, & LaBarge, 2005), many developing countries have historically struggled to be associated with positive attributes in international markets. Searching for strategies to build a positive international image, some developing countries have sought the hosting rights of the Olympic Games, which should work as a unique opportunity to improve their brand image via association with the positive attributes of the Games.

Image transfer between the Olympic brand and the host country brand has been reported in sport management (Florek, Breitbarth, & Conejo, 2008; Gibson, Qi, & Zhang, 2008) and tourism literature (Heslop, Nadeau, & O'Reilly, 2010; Qu, Kim, & Im, 2011). While this transfer can occur either from the Olympic Games to the host or in the reverse direction, previous investigations have shown that image transfer is more likely to happen from the sport event to the host place (Bodet & Lacassagne, 2012; Xing & Chalip, 2006). The transfer direction indicates that a difference in the strength of the brands has existed between the Olympic Games and the hosts, when the host is a developing country. Mainstream marketing investigations have shown that in joint promotions involving a “weak” brand and a “strong” brand, the former benefits the most from the association, because it acquires positive characteristics associated with the latter (Dahlén & Lange, 2005; Keller & Lehmann, 2006). Therefore, in the context of the Olympic Games hosted by developing countries, the country brand image should benefit more from the association with the event than the opposite.

Country brand image has been defined as “the unique, multi-dimensional blend of elements that provide the nation with culturally grounded differentiation and relevance for all of its target audiences” (Dinnie, 2008, p. 15). Country branding increases investments and tourism activity by creating international awareness and positive attitudes toward the country (Fetscherin, 2010). Two groups of stakeholders are commonly targeted in the process of country branding: Potential investors and potential tourists. In the current research, we focused on strategies to increase international awareness and attract tourists to the host country of the 2016 Olympic Games, Brazil. Because of that, even more important than country brand image is the concept of *destination*

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¹ As for developing countries, before this new trend, Mexico City hosted the 1968 Olympic Games.

brand image, which has been defined as “an attitudinal construct consisting of an individual’s mental representation or knowledge (beliefs), feelings, and global impression about an object or destination” (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999, p. 870). The end goal of destination branding is to promote a place as a tourism destination (Hankinson, 2005).

The destination brand image of Brazil as the host country of the 2016 Rio Olympic Games has been *interacting* with the Olympic brand image in the minds of potential international tourists around the world since it was chosen to host this event, because all marketing strategies to promote the event associate the Games with its host city and country. The process of interaction between brands is called *co-branding*, which was defined as “a form of cooperation of two or more brands with significant customer recognition” (Blackett & Boad, 1999, p. 7). Considering the strength differences between the brands, the assumption here is that Brazil can take advantage of co-branding with the Olympic Games mainly because the country is still little competitive as a tourism destination (Montanari, Giraldo, & Campello, 2014; Rezende-Parker, Morrison, & Ismail, 2003). In other words, co-branding can send positive signals about the quality of Brazil as tourism destination, based on the quality of the Olympic Games as a mega event. These signals should help the country to mitigate some possible negative attitudes that international tourists may have toward it. Therefore, the aim of this research was to describe the impacts of the interaction between the brand images of the Olympic Games and Brazil (as a tourism destination) on attitudes toward attending the 2016 Rio Olympic Games and visiting the country after the event.

2. Literature review

2.1. Signaling theory

Signaling (information asymmetry) theory posits that a typical transaction in the market is a two-sided transaction, where each side holds different information regarding the transaction (Spence, 1974). Rao and Ruekert (1994) noted that information asymmetry is a problem for “experience products” (e.g., tourism), whose quality is only observable after purchase and use. In this case, the seller knows more about the product than does the buyer, implying in information asymmetry. In such cases, brands function as “quality signals”, which decrease the asymmetry giving more information for the buyer about the product (Montgomery & Wernerfelt, 1992). Signals are described as “observable, alterable attributes that the business can invest in to communicate superior but unobservable or hidden ex-ante and complex attributes of the product being offered, which are primarily quality and the promise of customer satisfaction” (Smith & Font, 2014, p. 944).

Highly reputable brands help to mitigate information asymmetries by transmitting quality signals (Besharat, 2010). Hosting sport mega-events has been reported as a strategy of co-branding to promote tourism destinations, because the brand of such events transmits quality signals. Sport mega-events have developed strong brand images based on their global appeal, association with excellence and fair competition, and widespread free media attention (Madrigal et al., 2005; Rein & Shields, 2007). Meanwhile, developing countries have been reported as having weak brand images in the tourism market because of their lack of positive attributes and benefits for tourists (Manzenreiter, 2010; Rezende-Parker et al., 2003). Therefore, developing countries started to seek sport mega-events more aggressively, hoping to accrue the benefits of co-branding with a stronger brand.

Mainly in the last decade, developing host countries have created brand alliances with the Olympic Games to send a quality signal to potential international tourists (Gibson et al., 2008; Heslop et al., 2010). For example, China used the quality of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games to showcase the country as an open market and a culturally stimulating tourism destination (Heslop et al., 2010). Since 2008, when Beijing hosted the Games, China has experienced an increased awareness of its tourism destinations (Gibson et al., 2008). Russian

president Vladimir Putin openly declared that the most important legacy of the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics would be to position the city as a world-class resort for international tourism (Müller, 2012). In co-branding the city with the Olympic Games, Russian authorities meant to send a quality signal about the new winter facilities and infrastructure to international tourists (Müller, 2012). In the Sochi case, clearly the event did not manage to improve the host image as tourism destination to the world (Müller, 2014). Interestingly, developed host countries have not focused on tourism development as a primary motivation to host the Games (e.g., the USA and Atlanta 1996, the UK and London 2012); rather, these countries have focused on other aspects such as urban regeneration and sport participation (Girginov & Hills, 2008; Grix & Carmichael, 2012). The reasoning behind this option is that London and the UK, for example, are already strong international tourism brands (Smith & Stevenson, 2009).

Brazil still does not have a highly reputable brand as a tourism destination (Montanari et al., 2014; Rezende-Parker et al., 2003), therefore, it needs associations with other (highly reputable) brands to become a much stronger competitor in the tourism market. Brazil strategically bid to host the 2016 Olympic Games to create a brand alliance with the strong Olympic brand (Grix, Brannagan, & Houlihan, 2015). This association should to some extent send a quality signal to potential international tourists, informing about Brazil positive characteristics as a tourism destination. As it happened in 2000 and 2008, when Sydney/Australia and Beijing/China respectively hosted the Games (Chalip, 2002; Gibson et al., 2008), not only the host city, but also the whole country should benefit from the alliance with the Olympic brand.

2.2. Co-branding sport event and host country

Co-branding implies that a cooperation between two brands exists and the name of both brands should be associated to one “product” (Besharat, 2010). The brand alliances between the Olympic Games and their hosts meet the three most common criteria to define an alliance as a co-branding strategy (Baumgarth, 2004; Besharat, 2010; Washburn, Till, & Priluck, 2000). First, the alliance should be based on a long-term agreement and cooperation. Any edition of the Olympic Games is granted to its host seven years before the event, which represents a long-term process of cooperation between the IOC, the guardian of the Olympic Games, and the host. While the host uses this time to prepare the city/country to receive tens of thousands of tourists, to build/remodel sport arenas, to improve infrastructure, and to handle the demands of a huge number of media personnel, the two brands constantly appear together in the media. Second, the name of both brands should be present on the product. In fact, co-branding is ubiquitous in the Olympic marketing strategies mainly because the name of the host is always associated with the name of the event. For example, we recently watched *the 2012 London Olympic Games* and *the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympic Games*. The product *Olympic Games* always comes along with the name of a host city associated to it, indicating a co-branding association between the event and the host. Third, an important objective of the alliance is to launch a “new” product in the market. Although we cannot say that the Olympic Games have ever introduced a new city/country to tourism market, the Games have definitely reshaped the competitive advantage of developing host cities/countries in the tourism market, creating a new perspective about some places as tourism destinations (Bodet & Lacassagne, 2012; Gibson et al., 2008).

Previous studies have investigated the influences of sport events and destination brand images on intentions to attend events and to visit the host country (Gibson et al., 2008; Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2007). However, none of these previous studies have empirically measured influences of the *interaction* between the event and the destination brand images on visiting attitudes. For example, Kaplanidou and Vogt (2007) investigated the effects of the destination image on intentions to visit the host city of a bicycling event in the United States. They considered both the

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