



## Branding national images: The 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics, 2010 Shanghai World Expo, and 2010 Guangzhou Asian Games

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### ABSTRACT

International mega or hallmark events such as the Olympics and World Expo, are believed to help brand national and government images of the host country. Existing studies explain that mega-event images are *transferrable* to a host country and/or government. Yet, such an assumption has not been widely tested, or studied with country cases. Furthermore, while international mega events are assumed to target chiefly the international community for country branding purposes, there is reason to assert that they may just as much aim at *domestic* audiences for regime's political legitimization. By focusing on China's recently hosted three mega events – the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics, the 2010 Shanghai World Expo, and 2010 Guangzhou Asian Games, this study addresses these issues.

The analyses reveal that people are likely to associate event images, especially positive ones, with those of China and Chinese government. A set of presumably influential factors, which may either strengthen or weaken that association, are examined, showing that "people's involvement and participation in these events" are the most significant. The findings also verify that internationally oriented mega events can aim at the host country's internal audience. Indeed, solidifying its domestic legitimacy always seems to be an integral part of the Chinese government's strategy in pursuit of a favorable international image. Although exploratory, this study provides clues and fertile ground for further research on the relationship between international mega events and national and/or governmental image building, projection and branding.

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### 1. Introduction

National images abroad and at home are widely regarded as a state's intangible soft-power resource (Nye, 2004). While externally becoming essential elements of a state's strategic asset, they, internally, contribute to political capital for both democratic systems and authoritarian regimes.

There is growing recognition that national images can be branded. The traditional concept of branding asserts that brands are created when there is a balance in perception and reality about a product, resulting in a favorable, or a balanced image. Consumer-behavior studies find that such an image can have an impact on everything from purchasing habits to perceptions of nationals from a specific country (Berkowitz, Gjermandt, Gomez, & Schafer, 2007). Following the same logic, the concept of nation or place branding has recently come into play, evident, for example, in the increasing acceptance of the Anholt Nation Brands Index (ANBI). S. Anholt's nation brand hexagon based on six categories (tourism, exports, governance, investment and immigration, culture and heritage, and people) offered an analytical framework for national brands of 50 countries,

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developed and developing ones alike, in 2009 (GfK Group, 2009). To brand national images is believed to gain a favorable image of at least the three major stakeholders of a country: its people, society and certainly government (including its institutions). Here, it is implied that the branding of government image is an integral part of the branding of national image.

International mega or hallmark events, either sports tournaments such as the Olympics, or cultural and trade shows like the World Expo, can facilitate country's image branding. The term "mega-event" characterizes "large events of world importance and high profile which have a major impact" on the hosting country or place (Law, 1993). In explaining why a growing number of countries show interest in hosting such events despite the high costs and complexity of the bidding process and actual event hosting, several studies have identified economic growth, infrastructure upgrading, and image promotion as chief benefits to hosting countries (Kim, Kim, & Odio, 2010; Kim & Petrick, 2005; Matos, 2006). Such events are not only pleasurable in themselves but attractive to money-spending visitors who are likely to forge positive images about places rich in culture, spirit and value (Horne & Manzenreiter, 2006; Therkelsen, 2003).

Recently, China hosted three such mega events: the Beijing Summer Olympics in August 2008, the Shanghai World Expo in May–October 2010, and the Guangzhou Asian Games in November 2010. Still an authoritarian system, the Chinese government fought vigorously in bidding for the permits to host these events and worked hard in organizing them. With enormous resources invested, the government believed that every penny spent was worthy, particularly as a necessary expenditure for public diplomacy. Along with new opportunities for urban development, Chinese officials have claimed that the images of China's three largest cities are branded nationally and internationally, and so is the image of the Chinese government via hosting these three mega events (Hong, 2010; Zhang, 2010). While many try to characterize the actual impact of the mega events on the country's image abroad (Berkowitz et al., 2007; Lamberti et al., 2011; Wang, 2010), some find that the branding of the Chinese government has achieved only limited results (Rabinovitch, 2008).

Whether or not mega events help brand a nation and/or government image remains an interesting and important issue, both academically and policy-wise. Applying Gwinner's model of image creation/transfer in event sponsorship as a frame of reference, and approaching the issue from a government public relations perspective, this investigation focuses on a substantial set of research questions and hypotheses.

## 2. Literature review, research questions and hypotheses

Event sponsorship is believed to generate effects on image building. When striving to hold a mega event, the decision making of a sponsoring organization is often based on the assumption that sponsorship, like any promotional efforts, produces positive effects on the image that a target audience may have of the sponsors, hence, promoting the sponsoring organizations (Nelson, 1990).

With this assumption in mind, Gwinner (1997) proposed a theoretical model to explain the mechanisms by which image branding may be impacted through activity sponsorship. The model simply suggests that the impact on image is transferrable: *from that of the event to that of the sponsor*. In identifying factors that may shape the event-image branding, he regards three – event type, event characteristics, and individual factors (e.g. number of meanings, as well as past history with the event) – as outstanding determinants in positioning a given event in a new light. In tracking how the event image may lead to impact on the sponsor image, he believes that such factors as degree of similarity, level of sponsorship, event frequency, and product involvement are among the most relevant. Together, these factors are likely to warrant the transferring of an event image to a sponsor image. This is largely driven by a belief, he argues, that organizations select to sponsor an event to brand organization image, aiming to influence consumers' attitudes towards the organization brand. So far, the Gwinner model has yet to be validated so as to become normative. Moreover, even if the image transferring impact may occur with organizations, it remains unclear whether such an impact may take place when a country or a city sponsors an event – particularly an international mega event.

Many of those who study the impacts of mega events – mainly sporting events – find positive effects associated with events sponsorships. Boosted local economy, improved infrastructure, and increased tourism are among those intended "hard" benefits (Crompton, 1999; Getz, 1998; Hall & Hodges, 1996; Kim & Morrison, 2005; Richie & Smith, 1991; Richie & Yangzhou, 1987; Smith, 2005). Others identify enhanced destination image (awareness and knowledge of the hosting country or place), with community pride as the "soft" benefits that mega events can bring to a hosting country or place (Allen et al., 2002; Chalip, 2006; Fredline & Faulkner, 1998; Lee et al., 2005). Although encouraging in finding a link between mega events and images of a hosting country or place, many of these studies remain descriptive, and are particularly short in pin-pointing how, for example, the "soft" benefits are pursued, managed, and achieved.

Few empirical studies have been conducted to measure whether the intended image transfers actually happen in the branding process. In other words, there is little hard-data supported evidence that a mega-event image would automatically rub off onto that of the host country. Furthermore, few government PR scholars have investigated whether a mega event that a country – in fact, government – sponsors might lead to the assumed image transferring result. Thus,

Research question 1: Do audiences associate a mega-event image with that of sponsoring country or government?

Research question 2: If there is an association between mega-event image and that of host country or government, what factors may moderate – strengthen or weaken – this connection?

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