

Governance of Chinese professional football during Xi's authoritarian era: What is changing and what remains unchanged

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Introduction

Given the significant public investment in staging major sporting events, it is necessary that public officials, event organizers, and international sport federations demonstrate that the benefits to the host city outweigh the costs (Krauss, Sandäng, & Karlsson, 2020). As the validity of short-term economic impacts are treated with much skepticism (Dickson, 2017), longer term destination image and city marketing effects (Preuss & Hambreck, 2020) are now a common rationale for hosting of major sports events. However, there is little research examining city-destination image impact of major sports events from overseas markets, especially Chinese perceptions. Many destination image studies have focussed on nation/country image (Hahm, Tasci, & Terry, 2018; Tasci, Hahm, & Terry, 2019). Moreover, there is certainly no consensus as to whether the major sport events such as the Olympic have a positive impact on host city image (Ladhouri & Souidin, 2020).

This study investigates Chinese perceptions of Rio's destination image. We

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collected data about Rio's image from residents in Shanghai before and after the 2016 Olympics. The four research questions are 1) Does hosting the Olympic Games increase awareness of the city?; 2) Does awareness of being an Olympic host-city increase after hosting the event?; 3) How does host-city awareness impact pre-games and post-games perceptions of destination image?; and 4) How do perceptions of destination image change after hosting the Olympics?

Understanding Chinese perceptions is important because the Chinese outbound tourism is the biggest tourist segment in the world (Dichter, Chen, Saxon, Yu, & Suo, 2018). China has retained its leading position in the global tourism market since 2012 with outbound tourists accounting for approximately one fifth of the world's total spending on tourism (McCarthy, 2019). The Olympics are a logical choice to study destination image effects given its global popularity. The Rio 2016 Games was the first time that the Games are held in South America, a continent relatively distant geographically from many of the major out-bound tourist markets such as Europe and Asia, thus providing a good opportunity to examine the image impact of hosting Olympic Games. Studies that assess the evolution of image impacts over time are needed. Recently, Pike, Jin and Kotsi (2019, p. 3) wrote that within the destination image literature, there is "little attention towards one of the key aspects temporality".

This research seeks to advance the existing literature on city marketing and sports mega events by enhancing our understanding of how major sport events impact awareness of the host city, the image of the host city and whether/how this image evolves over time. The study identifies implications and practical suggestions for

Olympic host cities and organizers to better leverage the image impact of the Olympic Games. The remainder of the article comprises five sections: literature review, research methods, results, discussion, and conclusions and implications.

Background literature

Brand awareness

A major goal of marketing is to generate and maintain brand awareness. Brand awareness plays an important role in consumer decision-making, market performance, marketing mix, and brand equity (Zhang, 2020). Brand awareness, a combination of recall, recognition, and familiarity, is an important brand attribute (Stocchi, Pourazad, & Michaelidou, 2020). Together, brand awareness and image are the key components of customer-based brand equity (Tasci, 2020).

City marketing and city image

With increased economic globalization, the accelerating pace of technological advances, as well as the greater propensity for long-distance leisure travel, cities across the world are under growing pressure to compete with each other (Hautbois, 2019). City marketing was recognized as a significant urban phenomenon in the early 1980s when an increasing number of cities moved from traditional production-based activities, to a growing emphasis and dependence upon services, especially the more advanced services. Concomitantly city marketing became a popular idea among both practitioners and academics for the past three decades (Book & Edén, 2020).

A city's image is underpinned by four dimensions: 1) Political and economic

conditions (e.g. political stability, safety, economic development); 2) General and tourist infrastructures (e.g. transportation, health services, commercial infrastructure, buildings, hotels, restaurants, bars, tourist center); 3) Social environment (e.g. hospitality and friendliness, quality of life, language); and 4) Culture/history/art (e.g. gastronomy, customs, festivals, concert, historic buildings, museums) (Nukhu & Singh, 2020). A city's image can be enhanced or changed, and the deliberate use of various strategies to form, enhance or change a city's image by city marketers is often called city branding or city imaging (Chalip & Costa, 2005).

City marketing is increasingly used by local authorities to improve the market position of their cities to appeal to important stakeholders, including inward investors, multinational companies, tourists, and residents, both current and potential (Eshuis, Braun, Klijn, & Zenker, 2018). Image is a key factor and has influence on destination choice process (e.g. Shehab, & Som, 2020). It is widely acknowledged that the city image can also influence satisfaction and re-visit intentions of visitors (Li, Lien, Wang, Wang, & Dong, 2020).

City marketing through sports events

Major and mega sport events are routinely employed by cities as an imaging tool (Oshimi & Harada, 2019). In practice, major/mega sports events can either create a new image, or to reinforce positive images already established in the minds of the target audience (Trotier, 2017). In some cases, major/mega sports events are also used to change a destination's negative image or connotation. For example, one of the aims of hosting the 2006 Men's FIFA Football World Cup was to reposition the stereotype of

Germans being “conformist, time-dominated, serious” (Lewis, 2006, p. 223). The organizers and government launched a hospitality concept including service of government resorts, location-marketing for Germany, a cultural program and a service and friendliness campaign. In addition to the sports mega events themselves, attention is also directed to the image impact of constructing major spectator arenas and facilities in which major regular and one-off events can be staged (Preuss & Hambreck, 2020).

Prompted by increased skepticism towards the short-term and/or direct economic impact of hosting major sports events (Dickson, 2017), other non-economic and longer term and indirect rationales now feature prominently (Lundberg, Armbrecht, Andersson, & Getz, 2017). For example, impact on the host city’s image may be more pronounced and long-lasting than the short-term and/or direct economic impact (Liu, 2015). Thus, city marketers should leverage of major sports events to enhance the host destination’s brand through strategic and long-term planning (Van Den Berg, Braun, & Otgaar, 2017).

Sport events and destination image change

Despite the prevalence of urban sport imaging and the widespread practice of city marketing through sports events, there is a dearth of research regarding the event’s impact on host city image and there remains an incomplete understanding of the underlying mechanisms (Chalip & Costa, 2005; Liu & Gratton, 2010; Smith 2006). For instance, Chalip et al. (2003, p. 229) believed that more research should be undertaken “to identify and explore the way that event audiences construct and interpret what they see, hear and read about the host destination”. Since Chalip’s (2003) call, there have been a few efforts to address his concerns (e.g., Chalip, 2004; Chalip & Costa, 2005;

Hallmann, Kaplanidou, & Breuer, 2010; Liu & Gratton, 2010; Smith, 2005, 2006; Xing & Chalip, 2006).

Adopting an integrated framework with ideas from communications and destination image theory, Smith (2002, 2005, 2006) evaluated the impacts of sport initiatives (including events, event bids and the construction of new facilities) on the images of potential tourists in three UK cities – Birmingham, Manchester and Sheffield. He suggested that potential tourists must first be aware of sport initiatives (including events and facilities) through communication (e.g. publicity and media exposure), and then this information is received and interpreted by recipients on both a denotative level in an operational manner (leading to attribute-based image impact) and a connotative level in a metonymic or symbolic manner (leading to holistic image impact). Smith's (2005, 2006) findings suggested that potential tourists tend to hold favorable perceptions (i.e. modern, progressive and vital) about sports events.

Scholars have also turned to general marketing and tourism theories to better understand the role of event media on destination image (Chalip et al., 2003), and how sport events might be incorporated into tourism marketing mix through bundling strategy (Chalip, 2004). In an experiment underpinned by schema theory, Xing and Chalip (2006) suggested that by pairing the event's brand with the destination brand, elements of the event brand would transfer to the destination brand through the event and place communication that would prime the relevant schemata and direct consumers' attention, leading to image enhancement or change.

Kaplanidou and several other researchers mainly studied the relationship

between sports events and destination images among sports tourists. Kaplanidou (2009) confirmed that cognitive event image perceptions of Olympic spectators would positively influence the cognitive destination image perception. In another study that focused on the interrelationship between sport events and destination image, Kaplanidou and Vogt (2007) observed a significant impact of event image on destination image but the impact was unilateral. Hallmann, Kaplanidou and Breuer (2010) measured sports events images held by sports tourists at four marathon races in Germany and concluded that the perception of event images was different for active and passive sports tourists as well as for different types of destinations. Through empirical studies, it was also revealed that the image impact of Shanghai Formula 1 (F1) Grand Prix tended to be largely positive on the host city image of Shanghai from the perspectives of both live spectators (Liu & Gratton, 2010) and international students studying in the city (Liu, 2015). Lai (2018) examined the impact of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games on the destination image from the perspective of onsite Chinese tourists during this event. He indicated that event image was positively correlated with destination image, and this correlation varied in intensity according to different levels and dimensions of the two image constructs. These results are consistent with Tavakkoli (2016) that studied the image impact of the 30th Iran International Cycling Tour and confirmed positive word-of-mouth (WOM) from the perspective of spectators.

While the majority of the empirical studies examining the image impact of major sports events focused on the perspective of spectators or sports tourists (Lai, 2015; Zhang, Byon, Williams, & Huang, 2019), Ritchie and Smith (1991) was one of the few

empirical studies that centered on an overseas market perspective through a longitudinal approach, and in this pioneering study, it was found that the Calgary 1988 Winter Olympic Games did impact on the levels of international awareness and the image of the host city of Calgary before and after the Games. Using the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games as an example and based on a sample of US college students, Gibson, Qi and Zhang (2008) tested the relationships between destination image, travel intentions and tourist characteristics. The respondents perceived China and the Beijing Olympic Games positively and destination image was a valuable prophetic indicator of the intention to travel to China and the Olympic Games. However, because the focus was on the relationships between destination image and travel intentions without comparing the results with respondents without awareness of Beijing Games, it is actually impossible to determine the image impact of hosting Beijing Games on the host city's image. More recently, a study investigated Americans' perceptions of South Korea before, during, and after the 2018 Winter Olympic Games, revealing no significant changes in country image, destination image, or Olympics image over time (Hahm, Tasci, & Breiter, 2019).

While aforementioned empirical research confirmed the positive impact of sports events on host city image from the perspective of sports tourists and spectators, a few other studies cautioned the danger of possible negative image impact of sports events from the perspective of actual or potential tourists. Liu (2013) found that the awareness of sports events hosted in Shanghai actually depressed the tourism atmosphere and service image of the destination from the actual tourists' perspective

and thus suggested that the image impact of major sports events may be different among sports tourists and general tourists. In another study examining the image impact of the London 2012 Olympic Games from potential tourists' perspective, Liu and Wilson (2014) confirmed the existence of significant crowding out effect of the London Olympics. In the context of the Meetings, Incentives, Conferencing and Exhibitions (MICE) industry, there is evidence that people perceived mixed impacts of EXPO2020 on Dubai. The positives included increased job opportunities, economic growth, and cultural diversity, but this was at the expense of over-population and pollution increases (Gomba, Hyland, & Paris, 2018).

A noteworthy challenge regarding city marketing through major events is the sobering risk of negative media coverage brought by the events. While it has been suggested that the most important city marketing impact of hosting a major sporting event comes from the possible media exposure and coverage of the host city brought by the event (e.g. Jin, X & Cheng, 2020; Kassens-Noor, Vertalka, & Wilson, 2019), media exposure is also a double-edged sword as it is not directly controlled by either the organizing committee or the host country/city government. In a world where bad news makes headlines, it is not uncommon to see media coverage full of negative stories associated with the host city/country of a mega sports event. A notable example is the Chinese media's coverage of the wrong Chinese flag drama during the Rio Olympic Games, detailing how China has reacted angrily after the wrong Chinese flag was raised by Rio officials repeatedly at the medal ceremonies. When a Chinese flag with wrongly aligned stars was raised for the second time at the women's volleyball medal ceremony,

a Chinese official was saying in the media that “apparently there is no supervision and checking system at the Rio Olympics, even after the incident sparked wide criticism and reached the level of a diplomatic incident more than ten days ago”, and Huang Xiaoming, a Chinese actor who has 49 million Sina Weibo followers, posted following “Another wrong flag? Can we not just compete in a good mood?” (Staufenberg, 2016).

A recent review of the literature reported "mitigated results" for the impact of major sport events on destination image, noting that some studies report significantly positive and others report no significant impacts (Ladhourri & Souidin, 2020, p. 461). Based on the literature review, it can be seen that there are many nuances to the relationship between sport-events and destination image. Using the 2016 Summer Olympic Games in Rio as the context, and Chinese consumers as the participants, this study examines Rio’s destination image before and after the event.

Method

Research context

Shanghai and Rio de Janeiro were “chosen deliberately on the basis of specific significant attributes” (Denscombe, 2007, p. 39). From a theoretical perspective, these two cities are “typical/representative” (Stake, 1995, p. 4), or “exemplifying” (Bryman, 2016, p. 62). More specifically, China is Brazil’s largest trade partner, and Brazil is already a popular market for Chinese tourists (China Council for the Promotion of International Trade Representative Office in Macao, 2019; Xinhuanet, 2018, 2019).

Sample and data collection

Data were collected from separate samples pre- and post-event. The use of separate samples for pre- and post-event data collection is an established practice within the event tourism literature (Han, Wang, Zheng, & Zhang, 2017).

In the pre-Games stage, data were sourced from residents of Shanghai between late May and early June 2016 for two weeks. This was approximately three months before the Rio Games opened. Twenty-two trained college students were grouped into eleven pairs and assigned to public places (e.g. shopping malls, retail outlets and public parks) in Shanghai to collect data through self-completion structured questionnaires. Data were collected at each site during different times of the day and different days of the week. Participants who agreed to complete the questionnaire were thanked and offered a small souvenir. In general, the residents approached were cooperative and willing to answer the questionnaires. In total, 602 questionnaires were collected. Twenty-nine incomplete surveys were removed from the ensuing analysis of the 573 complete questionnaires.

For the post-Games stage study, data were also gathered from Shanghai residents during the last two weeks of November 2016. This was approximately three months after the Rio Games. Again, 22 trained college students were grouped into eleven pairs and assigned to public places in Shanghai. This process yielded 584 questionnaires. With 20 incomplete questionnaires, the ensuing analysis was performed on the remaining 564 questionnaires.

Instruments

A questionnaire in Chinese Mandarin was developed that consisted of demographic

items (i.e. age, gender) and binary measures of Rio visiting experience (i.e. “Have you ever visited Rio?”), intention to watch the Olympics (i.e. “Do you intend to watch the Olympics?”) and actual watching of the Olympics (i.e. “Did you watch the Olympics?”).

The next category of questions probed awareness of the 2016 Olympic host city (i.e. “What city will host the 2016 Olympic Games?”) and awareness of Rio (i.e. “Have you ever heard of Rio before?”). The questions were asked in this sequence to avoid bias. Only the participants with an awareness of Rio as a city were invited to complete the questions on Rio’s destination image. This is because it is not possible to possess a destination image without an awareness of the destination.

The final category of items measured destination image. Destination image is multidimensional (Guerreiro, Mendes, Fortuna, & Pinto, 2020). Our study utilized a destination image scale with well-established psychometric properties (Gibson, Qi, & Zhang, 2008; Liu, 2013). The 20 items are distributed across four dimensions – affective image, tourism infrastructure and service, tourist attractions, and adventure and climate. The scale questions start with description: “Below are listed some statements which refer to the image of Rio as a tourist destination. For each statement please indicate to what extent you agree with it on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).” The original English-language items were translated into Chinese Mandarin and then back translated to ensure linguistic consistency. The relevance of each item of the scale was then evaluated by six specialists in the field of sport tourism. Item level Content Validity Index (I-CVI) was computed and the scores for all items were above 0.80 indicating adequate content

validity (Zamanzadeh et al., 2015).

Data analysis

SPSS 15.0 underpinned the analysis of the destination image impact of hosting Olympics through calculation of descriptive statistics, exploratory factor analysis (EFA), ANOVA, and an independent sample mean t-test.

Results

Participant characteristics

Refer to Table 1 for a summary of the pre-Games and post-Games demographic characteristics of the participants.

Insert Table 1 here

The post-event participant characteristics largely reflected those of the pre-event participants. ANOVA analyses were further performed, and no significant differences were found between the two samples either in gender ($p>0.05$) or age distribution ($p>0.05$). Very few participants had visited Rio, and the high proportion of participants indicating their intention to watch the Olympics was not reflected in the participants who did.

Changes to awareness levels

Table 2 provides a summary of the participants awareness levels.

Insert Table 2 here

Prior to the Olympics, 70.9% of participants had been aware of Rio. This increased to 80.1% after the Olympics ($F=13.025$, $p<0.01$). Prior to the Olympics, 45.2% of participants had known that Rio would host the event. After the Olympics, this increased to 66.3% ($F=70.749$, $p<0.01$).

Destination image – principal component analysis

For the destination image items, we first performed a principal component factor analysis with varimax rotation. After removing two items for poor loading (below 0.50) or cross-loading, the factor analysis identified 18 items which loaded on four factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, explaining 63.413% of the variance. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy value was 0.906, and the communalities were all considered acceptable (above 0.5). The final factor loading matrix is presented in Table 3.

Insert Table 3 here

Effects of Host-City Awareness on Destination Image Changes

ANOVA analyses were conducted to test the effects of host-city awareness on perceived image factors. Amongst the pre-Games sample, Table 4 indicates that a significant difference was found only for Tourism Infrastructure and Service. Notably, this image dimension was lower for participants who were aware that Rio would soon host the

Olympics.

Insert Table 4 here

For the post-Games sample, Table 5 indicates that perceptions of affective image and tourist attractions were higher for people aware that Rio had recently hosted the Olympics.

Insert Table 5 here

Pre- and post-games comparison of destination image

To examine the image change associated with the Olympic Games, ANOVA analyses compared pre- and post-Games destination image perceived by the respondents with Olympic host city awareness. According to Table 6, a significant difference was found only for Tourism Infrastructure and Service. The perceived image of Rio's tourism infrastructure and service was lower than it had been before the Games.

Insert Table 6 here

Discussion

Using a sample of Shanghai residents, this study empirically tested the image impact of the 2016 Olympic Games. The study showed that three months before the actual

Games, just under half of the respondents from Shanghai (45.2%) had been aware of Rio being the host city of the incoming Olympics, and that percentage does not seem to be very low given that, after all, only 70.86 % of the respondents had heard of the city of Rio before. In less than three months after the Games, both the awareness of Rio and of its status as the Olympic host rose significantly to four fifths (80.2%) and two thirds (66.3%). It is also revealed that the majority of the respondents (73.0%) followed the Rio Games. These results indicated and confirmed that the Olympic Games are indeed largely effective in promoting awareness building, largely spurred by the massive world-wide media exposure (Chalip, 2004; Liu & Gratton, 2010; Ritchie & Smith, 1991). It is clear that this kind of awareness building is very significant and precious especially given that Rio is still a relatively new and emerging tourist destination for the Chinese market indicated by the significant percentage of respondents not even knowing the existence of the city. Brazil, along with many other countries and cities in the world, has been actively attracting tourists from China, potentially the biggest outbound tourism market in the world because of the country's population with growing spending power. It is estimated that China's outbound tourism witnessed a year-on-year increase of 16 percent, with more than 114 million overseas visits in 2014 (Zhen, 2014). In addition, Chinese tourists are also generous consumers on overseas travel, illustrated by the fact that their average spending on overseas travel was 846 Euros per person, compared with the global average of 502 Euros. As a result, "no destination on the globe wants to miss out on this huge economic pie of China's outbound tourism" (Zhen, 2014). Rio 2016 stakeholders would be very happy to see

that the Olympics have raised the city's awareness significantly amongst the Chinese.

Theoretical reflections

Not all findings attest to the value of the Olympics as an image-enhancing platform. The study also examined the image building impact brought by the Rio Olympics before and after the actual Games. In the case of pre-Games study, tourism infrastructure and service were negatively impacted by the Olympic host city awareness. In the post-Games study, two image dimensions (i.e. affective image and tourist attractions) were affected by Olympic hosting awareness, but again respondents who had been aware that Rio was the Olympic host city had worse perception about the city than those without Olympic host city awareness. Additionally, tourism infrastructure and service image of Rio was lower after the event than before the event.

In other words, in certain aspects, Olympic hosting awareness did nothing but depress the destination image perceived by the Chinese market. Ostensibly, this may conflict with the theoretical arguments and some empirical studies found in the existing literature. It has been argued that city marketing through sport events can be explained by co-branding theory in which elements of the event brand would transfer to the destination brand through the event (Xing & Chalip, 2006), and sports events appear to have encouraged positive connotations amongst potential tourists, including modernity, progress and vitality (Smith, 2005; 2006).

Theoretically, however, if Olympic city marketing could be regarded as co-branding and the job is to transfer the desired elements of the Olympic Games to the destination's brand by pairing the two brands together (Chalip & Costa, 2005), then

potentially both negative as well as positive transfer could occur as a result of hosting Olympics. In an era when bad news makes headlines, it is not uncommon to see media attention focused on all the negative stories in the lead up to many Olympic Games, and very often the bad news also tends to go far and get inflated with the rising media explosion.

Chinese newspaper headlines during the event certainly highlighted negative features – demonstrations, health risks, security and crime concern, infrastructure failures, and poverty amongst local residents. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC, 2016) even had a special report on Chinese media coverage of Rio Games entitled *Rio Olympics are worst ever, say Chinese social media users*, citing all kinds of negative stories reported in the Chinese media in the lead up to the Games. For example, Xinhua News Agency identified a “security issue” after Chinese women fencers were robbed and shooting team members noticed “unauthorized payments” on their credit cards. Social media highlighted holes in the ceiling of rooms accommodating athletes, and the less than reliable supply of electricity and water within the Athletes’ Village (BBC, 2016). With this kind of negative stories, it is perhaps hardly surprising that the Olympic awareness generated negative rather than positive impact on the destination image.

While a number of empirical studies in the literature support the positive image impact of hosting major sporting events, it is worth noting that a majority of them examined the impact from the perspective of spectators or sport tourists (e.g. Kaplanidou, 2009; Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2007; Liu & Gratton, 2010; Tavakkoli, 2016).

The findings of the current study actually resonate with Liu (2013) who found that the awareness of sports events hosted in Shanghai actually depressed the tourism atmosphere and service image of the destination from the actual tourists' perspective and thus suggested that the image impact of major sports events may be different between sports tourists and general tourists.

Another noteworthy issue is that only few dimensions of the destination image were affected by the Olympic hosting awareness. In the pre-Games study, only one out of four dimensions had been affected, while in the Post-Games study, two dimensions were affected. In general, the perceived image remained relatively stable before and after the Games with just one dimension decreasing. In other words, a co-branding effect between the Olympics and the host city as suggested by some scholars (e.g. Chalip & Costa, 2005; Xing & Chalip, 2006) was not well corroborated by our findings. A possible explanation resides in more media attention devoted to the Games rather than the host city itself and the concomitant lack of perception by Shanghai's "long haul" residents. Further investigation is needed to explore why some, but not all, image dimensions were impacted.

Limitations and future research

Consistent with the advice of Brutus, Aguinis, and Wassmer (2013, p. 66), we acknowledge here "those weaknesses that matter most". These limitations are presented according to threats to internal, external and construct validity. Internal validity cannot be guaranteed as the dependent variable may be influenced by the existence or variability in another variable. The external validity (i.e. generalizability) of our

findings is limited because the study utilized participants from one city regarding a quadrennial sporting event. Therefore, the extent to which our findings are transferable among other events, host cities and Chinese residents outside of Shanghai should be further explored. A threat to construct validity is common method variation, also known as monomethod bias.

Brutus et al. (2013) argued that future research suggestions should focus on immediate and incremental opportunities. Connecting city-images to behavioural intentions is a likely next step. So too is linking perceptions of the event owner (e.g. the International Olympic Committee, IOC; and International Federation of Association Football, FIFA) to explaining host city image and host city image changes. Qualitative data provide an opportunity to complement quantitative assessment. On that basis, future research is encouraged to collect data via semi-structured interviews and/or focus groups.

Implications

Media coverage is a doubled-edge sword. When the world's attention is attracted to the host city, mishaps are easily inflated, and bad news spreads faster and further than good news. Because many organizing committees or the host city governments have limited control over the media particularly foreign media content, it is all important for the organizers and host cities to do what it takes to prevent things from going wrong. Moreover, when things do turn for the worse, organizers should have plans to reduce and limit the damaging impact. Within this context we highlight briefly the need for destinations, and more specifically organizational stakeholders, to be resilient. Resilient

stakeholders have a greater capacity to mitigate the extent of the crisis and facilitate destination recovery (Rittichainuwat et al., 2020).

Host city marketers are also encouraged to take active measures including media relationship building and proactive marketing campaign to fully leverage the positive image impact of Olympics. Without active marketing initiative and proper media management, the Olympics Games would not bring the positive image impact automatically, or even worse, make the destination known for the wrong reasons.

Conclusion

The limited number of empirical studies of major sports events and more specifically the Olympics have not reached any consensus on whether these events impact a destination's image. Whilst most studies indicate a favorable impact, our study is certainly a minority and dissenting voice, challenging the widespread belief – as distinct from the empirical evidence – that the Olympics enhance the image of the host city. While co-branding through image transfer from event to host city has been suggested as the most relevant theory, much more work needs to be done and more factors need to be added to better understand the mechanisms at work.

This study examined the impact of hosting the 2016 Olympic Games on how Chinese people perceive Rio. The results highlighted the challenges of Olympic host city marketing and should be reminder to both the local organizer and the IOC. On the one hand, the Olympic Games are capable of building a city's awareness in distant markets. However, on the other hand, there is every possibility that a less-positive image of the city will accompany this increased awareness.

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