

Introduction

In 2012 the city of London will host the XXX Olympic Summer Games. For both developed and developing countries alike, the competition to host the Olympic Games, and other mega-events, is becoming increasingly fierce (Shoval, 2002). Aside from a host of other perceived benefits, mega-events are considered to be 'valuable promotional opportunities for [places] to showcase their attractions to global audiences' (Horne, 2007, p. 83). In a domestic context also, mega-events are considered key in the development of a positive place image; that is, 'places [...] aim to modify their image and obtain some positive associations [from hosting mega events]' (Bodet & Lacassagne, 2012). Additionally, successful and well run events can serve to legitimise project and government leaders to domestic audiences (Tomlinson, 2010). For although London is already considered to be a leading global city (e.g. Knight Frank Global Cities Index, 2011), a key objective for those involved in the development and delivery of the 2012 Olympic Games will be to manage the image of London (and the wider UK), to aim to improve this image nationally and internationally, and to address any potential negative image formation (DCMS, 2008).



Mayor of London, Boris Johnson

Key theories	
Image	...the total impression an entity makes on the minds of others (Dichter, 1985: p.76).
Brand	...the sum of all the mental connections people have of [an object] (Brown 1992).
Place branding	...to identify and distinguish place through positive image building (Cai, 2002).
Social representation theory (Moscovici, 1984)	...concerned with the communication of a collective elaboration of an object by a group

Research Aim

The aim of this study, underpinned by theoretical-methodological social representation theory (Moscovici, 1984), is to evaluate the image impact of hosting the 2012 Olympics, pre and post Games, for the city of London. It will seek to determine, compare and present the images generated by UK citizens concerning London as a city (i.e. its place brand), the Olympics' as a mega-event (i.e. brand 'Olympic') and the 2012 Games as a one-off spectacle, and whether there is any transfer of image elements between these entities before and after the Olympics has taken place.

Methods

This study is between-subjects and longitudinal in design. It utilises a mixed-methods questionnaire as the data collection instrument – supporting a critical-realist perspective. It will involve repeated applications of the same questionnaire before and after the London 2012 Olympic Games. Presented here is a preliminary analysis of the total pre-Games data.

Table 1 – Social representation (image) of London

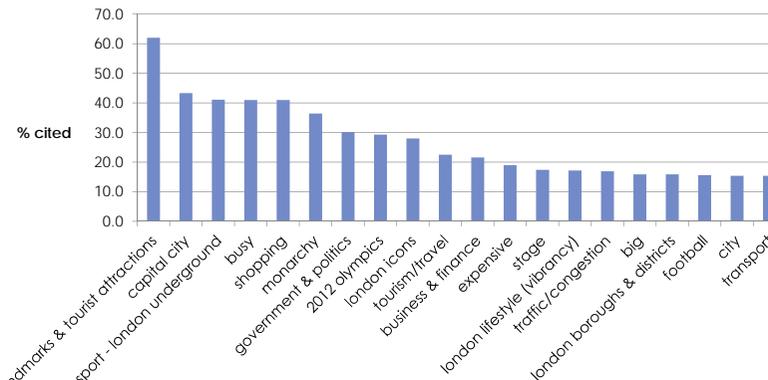


Table 2 – Social representation (image) of the Olympic Games

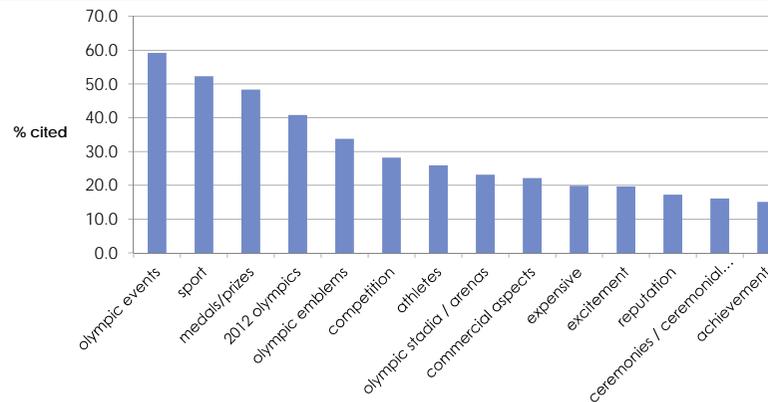
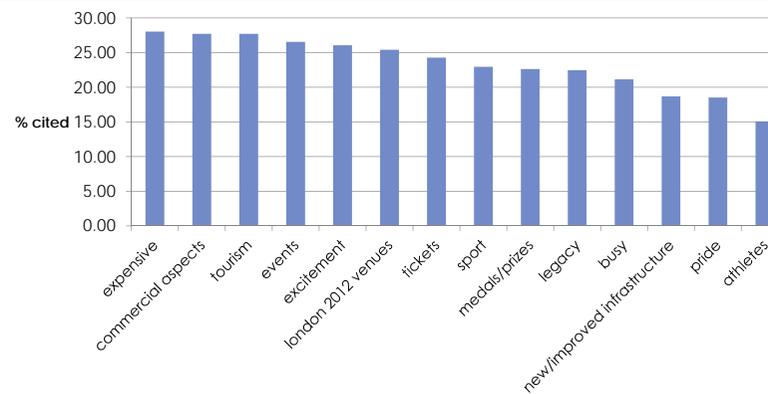


Table 3 – Social representation (image) of London 2012



Methods continued

UK citizens (n=610) completed a mixed-methods questionnaire one year to six months prior to the Games. This was comprised of questions measuring personal characteristics, demographic information, sport participation, national pride, and level of engagement in the Olympics (quantitative) and three randomised free word-association tasks (qualitative) using London, the Olympics and 2012 London Olympics as inductor terms; i.e., *Please give the first 10 words that come to mind when you hear the term...*

Results

Data analysis involved collating the responses of the free word-association tasks into semantic word clusters; one word (or phrase) representing each theme. Only words or phrases cited by 15% of participants were used to construct the core meanings of each entity. Semantic word clusters were then used to construct the image (social representation) of each entity (i.e. image of London, the Olympics, and the 2012 Games) (see Bodet & Lacassagne, 2012).

Discussion

Overall, the results tend to show that the three entities (London, the Olympic Games, 2012 Games) are well perceived, and that the people of the UK are excited about the forthcoming Olympic Games. This can be seen, for example, in the fact that the 2012 Olympics are already a characteristic of London's image; and, that *excitement* features as a core element of the 2012 Olympics image. However, London presents some negative characteristics which may not be improved by hosting the 2012 Olympics (i.e. busy, expensive, traffic/congestion); elements which may, in fact, be exacerbated by the Games. Indeed, *busy* and *expensive* also make up the social representation of the 2012 Games, representing its only definitive negative elements. *Expensive* is also characteristic of the Olympic Games generally, but might be considered a peripheral element, rather than a core element as with the 2012 Games.

Conclusion

The results presented here provide specific knowledge on how each entity is perceived, and provide a good basis for longitudinal analysis. Further analysis, at the pre-Games stage, will involve re-examining the categories, looking at the strength of connections between phrases, and segmentation based on relevant quantitative variables.

References

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