The impact of international TV media coverage of the Beijing Olympics 2008 on China’s media image formation: a media content analysis perspective

Keywords
mega-events, national image, Olympic Games, agenda-setting theory, China, host country

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Abstract
This study aims to explain the impact of the Beijing Olympic Games 2008 on China’s image in the international TV media. It applies agenda-setting theory to analyse foreign TV coverage of the Olympics in nine countries. Using Rivenburgh’s national image richness construct, it attempts to make sense of the coverage before and after Beijing 2008, particularly its impact on the image of the host country. The study concludes that the breadth and attribution of China’s image remained relatively stable, that these factors did not improve China’s national image directly but that indirectly they raised awareness of China in the international media and framed the host country’s image more clearly.

Executive summary
A country’s position in global competition can be influenced by its national image. Presently, mega-events (particularly those featuring sports) play a significant role in drawing media coverage and, by extension, impact on public perception. This paper aims to explain the impact of international TV media coverage of the Beijing Olympics 2008 on worldwide public perceptions of China.

This study builds on agenda-setting theory to analyse how foreign TV media telecasts of the Beijing
Olympics 2008 affected perceptions of China in nine different media lands. It refers to 7,261 news stories about China, from 8 August 2007 to 24 August 2009, collected in a database and subjected to content analysis by Media Tenor International. Based on this data, the change of Visibility, Valence, Breadth and Attribution of China's international televised image are analysed.

The visibility of the host country before the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games increased through TV coverage. However, it subsequently declined to a below-average level. The main contribution of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games for China has been an enhancement of understanding about the country worldwide.

It is difficult to determine whether China now has a more positive international televised image around the world than it did before the Games. Put differently, the Breadth and Attribution of China’s image appears to have remained relatively stable. Therefore, it cannot be concluded that the Beijing Olympics 2008 improved China’s national image directly. Indirectly, however, the international media can be said to have raised interest in the host country and helped define its national image more clearly.

This study provides findings on the effects of mega-events on the telecasted national image of a host country. Practical and theoretical implications are discussed and future research directions are provided.

Introduction

A country’s position in global competition can be affected by its national image. The staging of a mega-event plays, according to current popular belief, an important role in national image formation. Some countries use mega-events, including sports events, as a core component of their destination marketing strategy to appeal to visitors. In this process, the media is the key vehicle between a mega-event and the host country’s image formation. The interactions between media practices and audiences are becoming increasingly important in the shaping of public perception and meaning making (Dong et al, 2005). The latter is relevant because, in turn, media coverage shapes decision-making by both consumers and business executives. Thus, it is important for business and government leaders, as well as the public, to understand the impact of the media.

The media plays an important role in generating public interest (Cohen, 1963). Media agenda-setting refers to the deliberate coverage of topics or events with the goal of influencing public opinion. Researchers have used agenda-setting theory to determine the image of cities or corporations (Carroll & McCombs, 2003) and to examine the image of cities or countries (Rivenburgh, 1992; Avraham, 2000). However, the formation of national image consequent to mega-event staging, while relevant, has been an under-studied topic. Following Croteau and Hoynes (2003), this study considers “audiences to be active interpreters of the media rather than passive receivers”. However, it also acknowledges that media audiences are members of particular cultures and inter-cultural differences can easily result in misinterpretation of the meaning of media messages. This observation is particularly relevant in the context of telecasting the Beijing Olympics 2008 from China, with its unique historical, cultural and economic background, which differs markedly from the Western social context of interpretation.

There has been increasing academic interest in the study of mega-events in relation to place image measurement in the West. Despite the fact that China has received increasing media coverage due to its rapidly growing economy and rising political power, there have been few attempts to examine media coverage in relation to staged mega-events in the Chinese context. The Beijing Olympics 2008 is a phenomenon that is justified and relevant to be studied in order to enable an informed response to a complex issue, i.e. what effects can media coverage of mega-event staging have on the telecasted national image? Based on agenda-setting theory, this paper seeks to understand the implications of media
presentation and processes in relation to the Beijing Olympics 2008 and tourism. It asks, particularly, whether the Beijing Olympics 2008 may, or may not, have transformed the national image of China in international TV media.

Literature review

Mega-events and destination image
A long line of tourism research argues that mega-event staging results in considerable international attention and increased recognition of the host country as a potential tourist destination (Gunn, 1989; Brown et al, 2004; Lee et al, 2005). Other research indicates that improvement of the host country’s destination image (Brown et al, 2004; Giffard & Rivenburgh, 2000; Xing & Chalip, 2006) and the possible establishment of a legacy are among the benefits of hosting a mega-event.

Roche (1994) notes that mega-events may be short-term in nature but they offer potentially long-term consequences for the host country. In the long term, the benefits of staging mega-events for host destinations are spectators’ repeat visitation and increased tourism investments. Hede (2005) explores the efficacy of the Australian telecast of the Athens Olympics in 2004 in changing perceptions and attitudes of Greece as a tourist destination. He finds that 38.7% of respondents indicated their overall attitudes toward Greece as tourist destination had improved as a result of telecast consumption of the Athens Olympics.

Chalip et al (2003) compare destination advertising and sports event media effects in an experiment involving nine destination image dimensions in relation to the intention to visit a specific host destination. They find that event telecasting, event advertising and destination advertising each affect different dimensions of destination image. Each of the media forms used has some negative effect. Based primarily on evidence from three cities in the United Kingdom (UK), Smith (2005) explores the value of sport as a re-imaging theme for the contemporary city. He found that, although sport re-imaging does exhibit some advantageous qualities, there are also significant problems associated with this mode of place marketing. Smith’s study mainly focuses on domestic tourism. So far, few researchers have explored, specifically, the role of mega-event staging in changing national image in international media presentations. Furthermore, Xing and Chalip (2006) state, “we know very little about changing a destination’s image or brand”. The dearth of empirical evidence with regard to the role of mega-event staging in developing positive impressions of a particular host destination renders relevant this case study of the Beijing Olympics 2008; and, in particular, its relationship to the expected change it might have on China’s image in international telecasting.

International media coverage of national image
Insights into the media coverage process play a very important role in understanding issues that affect, and may possibly change, a perceived national image. For example, satellite television offers a place-independent international information space that broadcasts and represents information that appeals to target audiences. In particular, these broadcasters reflect a cultural mindset and should be framed accordingly (Go and Fenema, 2006).

Telecasting is an increasingly important aspect of event-related destination marketing strategies. Because of its global reach, telecasting plays an active role in defining, shaping and changing national images around the world. However, a televised national image portrayal does not automatically translate into an image held by audience members. This is particularly the case when audiences lack direct experience of, or information about, a particular nation. However, Rivenburgh (1992) inferred that repeated national images, as a component of mainstream media content, would influence the understanding of audiences.

Drawing on several definitional approaches considered appropriate to media content analysis, a
national image can be seen as a symbolic construction containing abstract and concrete representations associated with a given nation or people (Rivenburgh, 1992). Manheim and Albritton (1984) used interrupted time-series analysis to examine the efforts undertaken by professional public relations consultants to influence the image of foreign nations as portrayed in the United States press. Their analysis identifies consistent patterns of improvement along two primary dimensions of national image: Visibility and Valence. Based on previous research (Manheim & Albritton, 1984; Burriss, 1988) Rivenburgh (1992) constructs a framework of national image in TV media which includes four components: Visibility, Valence, Breadth and Attribution. Visibility refers to the quantity of media coverage of another nation (Manheim & Albritton, 1984; Rivenburgh, 1992). Valence refers to the degree to which a news item reflects favourably or unfavourably on the nation as derived by some assessment of cues within the content (Manheim & Albritton, 1984; Rivenburgh, 1992). Breadth, which tends to cluster around political or economic issues, is about the content themes or topics about other nations (Rivenburgh, 1992). Attribution focuses on how home television audiences interpret the behaviour of another culture. Such analysis can often be accomplished by looking at source characteristics (Burriss, 1988; Rivenburgh, 1992). Furthermore, taken together, these four dimensions can be applied to explore the richness of a national image.

The Olympic Games telecasts not only report on the sports, but they increasingly provide coverage of the host country. There are worldwide media audiences – most significantly TV audiences – who conceive image as important, either via direct or indirect perception (Soderman & Dolles, 2008). Dong et al (2005) investigate the keywords of 3,607 reports in foreign media on the Olympics in Atlanta, Sydney, Athens and Beijing. They find that mass media reports on the Beijing Olympics 2008 tended to focus more on political issues when compared to coverage of previous host cities. They also suggest that the Beijing Olympics 2008 should have adopted an integrated strategy to build the national image in cooperation with the media and enterprises and engage in active communication with the Western media. Utilising a problem-centred approach, Lai’s (2009) study aims to identify a general theory which helps to explain the various impacts of mega-event staging on the host nation image. These studies contribute to a better understanding of the role of mega-event staging and to a favourable change for a particular host country. However, it has proved hard to explicitly detect the impact of media presentations of the Beijing Olympic Games 2008 in relation to the potential change of China's televised national image. To understand the impacts we need to gain insights into agenda-setting theory.

Content analysis of national image and agenda-setting theory

Content analysis is a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication (Berelson, 1971). This method has very often been defined as ‘quantitative content analysis’, whereas techniques developed in the linguistic tradition are labelled as ‘qualitative’. In contrast to other analysis methods – which try to identify and analyse the characteristics and define elements of media content – quantitative content analysis, in the first step, establishes the numerical distribution of the variables and, in the second step, makes inferences from these findings.

With regard to content analysis, McCombs and Shaw (1972) produced the first in a stream of research that confirms the agenda-setting role of the media, i.e. that the media has a strong impact in shaping the public’s view of events and their importance. Currently, agenda-setting research appears to be in a state of flux: its parameters have expanded from the question ‘Who set the public agenda?’ to ‘Who set the media agenda?’. This expansion has resulted in three major study areas: media agenda-setting, public agenda-setting and policy agenda-setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1993, Takeshita, 2005). Media agenda-setting studies
focuses on media routines, including news diffusion, selection and emphasis, and supports journalists, scientists and politicians as well as managers. In investigations of agenda-setting there is considerable discussion about the appropriate time lag between coverage in the media and subsequent changes in issue perceptions (Stroud & Kenski, 2007). Answers range from lags of one and two months (Behr & Iyengar, 1985; Winter & Eyal, 1981) to lags of a few days (Watt & Berg, 1978). The likely appropriate time lag differs depending on the issue and the medium employed (Wanta & Hu, 1994).

The aforementioned studies all focus on the time lag between media coverage and issue perceptions. But the time lag between mega-event staging and media coverage is rarely studied. There exists a plethora of marketing, public relations and corporate branding research in the framework of agenda-setting theory; but little attention is given to the national image in international media. Rivenburgh (1992) studies the impacts of mega-events on the national image of South Korea using agenda-setting theory. But this research does not focus on the change of national image of a host country with mega-events. Lee (2009) proposes a theoretical model of national image processing in the media involving three factors – Environmental, Relational and Strategic public prominence. Based on the frameworks of Rivenburgh (1992) and Lee (2009), this paper extends the idea of media agenda-setting as a mechanism to explore mega-event staging effects in relation to perceived change of national image in media coverage.

Interaction of mega-events, media coverage and the change of national image
Event media coverage increases recognition of the host country (Brown et al, 2004). However, the impact of mega-event staging on a particular destination image, while relevant, remains an understudied topic. Telecasting of mega-event coverage provides opportunities to project images about a host country to audiences it attracts around the world. Therefore, Giffard and Rivenburgh (2000) argue, nations increasingly use the hosting of global media events as a strategy to enhance their image.

Based on the analysis framework (Figure 1), the present study explicates the applicability of agenda-setting theory to explain the influence of the media on China’s image in international telecast presentations. The main aim of this case study is to analyse how the process of TV media telecasts of the Beijing Olympics 2008 affected worldwide perceptions of China. The
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media set used represents nine different media lands and provides results that are subsequently interpreted and discussed. Finally, we draw conclusions, assess implications and limitations and propose suggestions for further research.

Although the present paper and the study by Xing and Chalip (2006) both focus on the effects on destination image from hosting a sports event, they differ. Xing and Chalip (2006) focus on investigating the individual scale. In contrast, this paper leverages data about international media in nine media lands. So, whereas the former reveals the opinions of public agenda, the latter examines the results of deploying the media agenda within the Beijing Olympics 2008 case study context.

Methodology

This paper employs the case study method, an approach deemed appropriate when the research conducted focuses on contemporary situations and does not require control over behavioural events (Yin, 2008). Eisenhardt (1989) describes the case study process as highly iterative and tightly linked to data. The logic of a case study is unique to the inductive, case-oriented process and the resultant theory is often novel, testable and empirically valid (Eisenhardt, 1989). The case study method is used in conjunction with other research methods in this study.

Several researchers have used the case study method to study mega-event staging (Arthur & Andrew, 1996; Persson, 2000). In this study, the case method is used to investigate the international telecasts of the Beijing Olympics 2008. The method serves as a unit of analysis so as to, by extension, determine the coverage’s effects on the possible future change of media presentation of China’s image.

The Beijing Olympics 2008 were performed in seven cities of China. The majority of events were held in Beijing, but events that required specific facilities were performed away from the Chinese capital. For instance, the sailing event was held in Qingdao; equestrian events in Hong Kong; and men’s and women’s football matches were played in the cities of Tianjing, Shenyang, Qinghuangdao and Shanghai. In the case of the Beijing Olympics 2008, there are multiple factors that might impact on China’s image, particularly international telecasts, and how worldwide audiences perceived China. Media agenda-setting theory helps us to gain insights into the various layers that represent the determinants that are involved in the research process.

The international television coverage of the Beijing Olympics 2008 serves for several reasons as an excellent case study on the possible change of televised national image through mega-event staging. Firstly, according to the Olympic Charter, the modern Olympics are intended to promote international understanding and cooperation. Television coverage is acknowledged as an important means of doing this (International Olympic Committee, 2007) as telecasting tends to ‘beam’ to audiences a view of the host country. Secondly, the Olympic Games 2008 was a well planned media event. Generally, TV networks give audiences the best they are able to offer so as to get high ratings. Thirdly, the government of China had an explicitly stated desire for its national image to be portrayed positively to the rest of the world.

Paradoxically, a mega-event begins before the actual event is staged. We distinguish three mega-event phases: Phase 1, the period before staging; Phase 2, during staging; and Phase 3, after the mega-event. There are different news reports on what happens, with whom and why throughout these phases.

The opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics was on 8 August 2008 and the closing ceremony was on 24 August 2008. During the period of the Olympics, international media mainly focused on the games per se. During the ‘before’ and ‘after’ periods (Phases 1 and 3) of the Olympics, the international media decentralised their focus to include all kinds of topics, including political, economic, social and cultural environments. For the aim of investigating the possible change of China’s image, it is appropriate, therefore, to compare the broadcasts one year before and one
The two comparative periods used are from 8 August 2007 to 7 August 2008 (Phase 1) and from 25 August 2008 to 24 August 2009 (Phase 3). Multiple Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) on a dataset of news items before and after the Olympics in nine media lands aims at assessing the change of media presentation of China’s image.

**Data collection**

This study adopts a content analysis method using a database of news coverage about the Beijing Olympics 2008 supplied by the Media Tenor Institute for Media Content Analysis. Media Tenor provides international media content analysis of print, TV, radio, online blogs and news groups for use by journalists, scientists, politicians and managers. This paper utilises, as a methodological approach, Media Tenor’s content analysis and qualitative data gathering method and sophisticated coding system to gain insight into the qualitative and quantitative volume of coverage in the media sets. More than 250 Media Tenor analysts scrutinise contributions in the major daily and weekly newspapers and monthly journals, as well as TV news and magazines, from all over the world on a daily basis. Sentence by sentence the analysts ask what topics – and from what originator and source – the journalists selected for print or broadcast. Following a set of criteria established in cooperation with the universities and the partner institutes in the International Media Tenor Association, the contents of the media are then subjected to a scientifically approved analysis. This offers the opportunity of measuring – beyond personal bias – what matters to the media and what does not. A database is produced, of which the terms include Media Name, Original Countries, Results of Content Analysis, Thematic Structure (sports, foreign affairs, etc.) Source of News Coverage and so on. Based on the research framework of this study: Media Name and Original Countries relate to Visibility; Results of Content Analysis provide data on image Valence; Thematic Structure can be used to analyse image Breadth; and Source of News Coverage connects with Attribution of Image.

Television is selected as the main media type for this study because satellite technology allows diverse cultural groups to view each other and television is currently a primary source of international information for the world. Data collection is from selected TV news channels.
programmes broadcast by leading channels in nine different ‘media lands’; that is, eight different countries – Germany, France, United Kingdom, Italy, Switzerland, Spain, the United States of America and South Africa – and Arabic speaking channels Al-Arabiyyah and Al-Jazeera. This gives a spread of data from four continents: Europe, Asia, North America and Africa. Analysis over the two comparative periods – before and after the Games – shows the change of television presentation of China’s image. The media setting is listed as Table 1. The tone of coverage relates to the main protagonist of the news story, as opposed to one of countries mentioned. For example, news items such as ‘British athlete wins the gold medal in China’ were included as these will have influenced viewers’ perception around the world of China. In total 7,261 news stories focusing on China as location of Olympic events, from the period 8 August 2007 to 24 August 2009, were collected in a database for content analysis.

In order to organise the coding of valuations in a stringent way, only valuations of subjects (persons and organisations) are coded. The valuation only refers to the description of the coded subject, not to the event covered in the news. In addition, there is continuous coding of the nation in terms of economic, social and value-based developments. Valuations can be expressed in two ways – by the use of either clearly positive or negative terms. The explicit rating can be contrasted with an implicit rating that embeds the description of the protagonist in a positive or negative context. Implicit valuations are those that refer to facts or issues that are perceived in a positive or negative way in a certain society. Rising unemployment figures constitutes negative information, even when a journalist does not assess this development in explicit terms. In some cases, when this cannot be decided unequivocally, media analysts are required to code the valuation as ‘ambivalent’. Descriptions are coded as ‘neutral’ if there is no clear rating (Media Tenor International, 2006). In this study, we do not discriminate between ‘ambivalent’ and ‘neutral’ but treat them alike.

Media Tenor distinguishes between manifest and latent valuations and measures both dimensions separately on a five-point scale: 1 (positive), 2 (rather positive), 3 (neutral or ambivalent), 4 (rather negative) and 5 (negative). It also combines two five-point variables into one variable so as to improve valuation. Two steps are applied to achieve such result. Step 1 recodes the valuation rating by adding relevant values of explicit and implicit valuation (wertung = (explicit + implicit)/2). Step 2 recodes valuation into the three-level format (-1, 0 and +1). For example, if the valuation is lower than 2.5, then the value is being recoded into 1. In case the valuation represents a value higher than 3.5, it is recoded into -1. Finally, if the value is between 2.6 and 3.4, it is recoded into 0.

Results

For the period studied a total of 7,261 international TV news stories are identified. The period is divided into three phases. Phase 1 (before the Olympics) comprises 3,969 TV news stories, Phase 2 (during the Olympics) comprises 1,198 TV news stories and Phase 3 (after the Olympics) comprises 2,094 TV news stories – almost double that of Phase 2. Based on news data, change of Visibility, Valence, Breadth and Attribution of international televised China’s image is analysed.

Visibility of China in coverage by different countries

In media analysis, Visibility provides a quantitative measure related to exposure. As an image dimension, Visibility is important because it often speaks to the salience of one nation to another. (Although, it must be noted that salience can also result from meeting other media format characteristics such as drama, conflict, disaster and the like.) Visibility can be measured by share of stories in the international news. However, unexpected events can disrupt structures of reporting. For example, in ‘routine coverage’ the share of China varies between 0.9% and 4% of all foreign news. But dramatic events, like the
Tibet riots or the Sichuan earthquake, can boost the visibility of China significantly.

Attention on Chinese affairs varies markedly between the different analysed media markets over the total period studied (Phases 1-3). US TV focuses most intensively on China, with a total of 7.99% of US TV news about foreign countries focused on China over the whole period. French and South African TV news also paid great attention to China, with totals of TV news focus on China for the whole period of 6.05% and 5.91% respectively. Arabic, Swiss and Italian TV show less interest in China, with the ratio of China news to all foreign news being lower than 3.5% in these three countries for the whole period. The results are shown in Table 2 and Figure 2.

To compare the change of Visibility and Valence before and after the Olympics in the countries included in the dataset, an overall multivariate
analysis of variance (MANOVA) was calculated. Four variables, including Visibility, Valence-negative, Valence-neutral and Valence-positive, are taken as dependent variables with Time and Country as fixed factors. MANOVA with planned contrasts provides a powerful, parsimonious and informative analysis, with Time being a repeated measures variable. The data analysis showed a significant group-effect with Wilks Lambda = 0.732, F=22.999, p<0.01. This indicates a group difference between Phase 1 and Phase 3. At the same time, the difference of visibility between Phase 1 and Phase 3 (Estimate – Hypothesised) equals 2.725 with the p<0.01, which indicates there is a significant change of televised visibility of China’s national image.

With MANOVA, the visibility of China before the Olympics is significantly higher (1%) than after. Common sense suggests that mega-event staging will enhance the host country’s visibility both before and after the event. In the case of the Beijing Olympics 2008, this was the case before the event, however, afterwards media weariness set in – i.e. there was a loss of enthusiasm for giving further attention to covering the host country.

Valence of China’s internationally televised image

The data of Valence collected are primarily concerned with how favourably (positive) or unfavourably (negative) a respondent views another nation, as reflected in the common usage of evaluative scales (like/dislike, friendly/unfriendly, etc) and semantic differential approaches (lazy/industrious, peace-loving/aggressive, etc). When used in the analysis of media content, Valence refers to the degree to which an article or item reflects a positive or negative view on the nation as derived by some assessment of cues within the content. This affective aspect of image content is judgmental and evaluative, often based on ethnocentric notions of what is ‘right’, ‘good’ or ‘valued’ by a particular culture when it looks at the other. Similarly, assessment of image Valence is subjective in both measurement and application.

News is the recording unit for Valence. In Phase 1, more than 35% of segment themes were found to be negative, 48.39% neutral and 16.27% positive considering the value perspective of the nine media lands. During Phase 2 (the Beijing Olympics 2008) only 17.44% of segment themes were found to be negative, 39.15% neutral (which decreased compared with Phase 1) and 43.42% positive (which is far

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TABLE 3 Contrast results of before and after periods)
higher than Phase 1). In Phase 3, 40.77% of segment themes were found to be negative (a 5.43% increase from Phase 1); 26.39% neutral (decreased 22%); and 32.84% positive (double that of Phase 1) in the nine media lands. The data are mixed. The results of data analysis cannot substantiate that China gained a more positive international televised image worldwide post Beijing Olympics 2008.

In Phase 1, coverage is strongly driven by business news, with Arabic and South African TV reporting most positively above the average level. Generally low coverage tends to be strongly associated with negative news. Telecasting in France, United Kingdom, Italy and Switzerland showed scant interest in China and had more negative tone than in other markets. In Phase 3, percentage of positive tone in South Africa remained the highest in the nine media lands. TV reported more positively during Phase 3 in Germany, France, UK and Spain. This suggests China's image improved in these countries after the Olympics.

The Valence of international televised image of China was polarised in Phase 3. The results of MANOVA in Table 3 indicate the change of the percentages of negative, positive and neutral tone. The percentages of negative tone increased significantly (contrast estimate = -0.137, p<0.01). The percentages of positive tone increased, but not so significantly (contrast estimate = -0.029, p=0.215). And the percentages of neutral tone in international television decreased significantly (contrast estimate = 0.166, p<0.01). This suggests that the TV reports in the nine media lands began to understand and cover, China more clearly; this owes to the power and influence of the Olympic Games.

FIGURE 3 Breadth of China's internationally televised image by month

Data analysis cannot substantiate that China gained a more positive international televised image worldwide post Beijing Olympics 2008.
Breadth of China's internationally televised image

While open to refinement, this study uses the following categories list derived from an exhaustive survey of multicultural communication literature (e.g. Rivenburgh, 1992): political values, party politics, crime/domestic security; foreign affairs, economy/public policy, business (companies), media; business (other aspects); society/education/arts; religion/church; foreign affairs, human rights, environment, transport, energy, science/technology. Each category can be identified, analyzed, and other topics. For each category, the inclusion of the category Olympics, of course, pertains directly to this study.

National image research reveals that people, rather than acquiring or retaining a diverse range of knowledge from which to better explain cross-cultural behavior, tend to perceive other nations rather narrowly, based on political alignment, economic development and, to a lesser degree, geography and population factor (Perry, 1985).
The Olympic messages were well placed by the media in advance of the Games, with sports being the most important message in the second half of 2007. After the unrest in Tibet, discussion of the Beijing Olympic Games, especially about the merits of a boycott, drove up the share of coverage again. Enthusiasm decreased late in 2007. In 2008, evaluation of sports coverage from China was less positive, however, it was nevertheless notably better than in other reports from China as the international media emphasised the positive impact of the Olympics on the development of China.

Table 5 shows the segment main topics that can be broadly categorised. Sports news plays a significant role in international TV coverage. This holds true for the media image of China. At a glance, sport was the number one message about China on international TV both before and after the Olympics. Apart from the Olympic focus, China was also framed as an important business spot in some markets. Business, foreign affairs, accidents and natural disasters generally feature centrally in international news. The top six coverage themes in Phase 1 were sports, other topics, business (other topics), foreign affairs, domestic policy and domestic security. Coverage of other topics dropped from second in Phase 1 to fifth in Phase 3, while other five themes listed in the top six in the Phase 1 stayed in their previous order. Although the sum of coverage declined significantly after the Olympics, the breadth of China’s
internationally televised image showed no significant change before and after.

**Attribution of China's internationally televised image**

The concept of Attribution, drawn from intercultural communications literature, refers to the interpretation of another's behaviour (Burriss, 1988). When involving people from the same culture, Attribution confidence increases as people discover that they share behaviours with similar meanings (Gudykunst, 1988). In the international context, however, few shared meanings are found to exist, so Attribution confidence is low. The natural tendency is to project one's own cultural perspectives and assumptions onto the behaviour of the others. This results in misunderstandings, misperceptions and even conflict (Albert & Triandis, 1988; Rivenburgh, 1992).

Source characteristics can be selected to analyse whether or not cross-cultural Attributions are being excessively guided by a Western-centred approach. From Table 6, the political section controlled and dominated the narrative about China before and after the Olympic Games. After the Games, coverage by the political section declined sharply, while coverage by the economics section rose. By comparison, Phase 1 coverage by the sports section also declined in Phase 3. Therefore, the Attribution of China's internationally televised image showed no change before and after the Olympics.

**Conclusion**

Based on the TV database derived from Media Tenor, content analysis and a framework comprised of Visibility, Valence, Breadth and Attribution, this research provides insights into the effect of mega-event staging in relation to media presentations of televised national image in the China context. The construction of national image richness is used to describe the national image in the studies of Manheim and Albritton (1984) and Rivenburgh (1992). This paper extends this framework to explain the change of China’s image with the impacts of the Beijing Olympic Games 2008. Based on the data analysis, the Beijing Olympic Games 2008 apparently did not improve media presentations of the televised national image of China directly. But it did stimulate interest in China and its people among the international media enough to present a defined televised image of China to international audiences around the world that was better than previously.

The media presentation of China’s image has not been improved by Beijing Olympics 2008. This result is distinct from previous studies (Hede, 2005; Xing and Chalip, 2006). In Hede’s study, the overall attitude of Australians towards Greece as a tourist destination changed as a result of their consumption of the telecast of Athens 2004. Xing and Chalip
(2006) found that “a destination hosting an event that is perceived to be active will evoke a more active image than if the destination were not hosting that event”. This study used the content analysis method to analyse the change of media presentations of China’s image. By comparison, the aforementioned studies, used the survey method to investigate the resident or student samples. The different conclusions could, therefore, be explained by the deployment of divergent research objectives and method. The subject is sufficiently relevant to warrant further study.

The visibility of a host country often rises sharply before mega-event staging. Issue perceptions then change during and after the media coverage. Theoretically, the time lag between mega-event staging and media coverage is very much linked to the proposed mechanism underlying agenda-setting effects, which have been little studied. For example, previous studies (Lim, 2006; Stroud & Kenski, 2007) focus mainly on the time lag between media coverage and public perception. There is little agreement in the literature about the mechanism underlying agenda-setting effects. An explanation may be that international Olympics TV coverage can be accessed before and during the Olympics. Enhanced accessibility leads reporters of TV news programmes to cover the Olympics. At the same time, audiences of international TV news often watch news reports before and during the Olympics, only to lose interest afterwards. TV newscasters have no or little incentive to cover the Olympics once media weariness sets in with their audiences. The time lag mechanism implies that agenda-setting effects are rather short and provides an argument for empirical research into the field of agenda-setting theory to gain more insight into the time lag phenomenon.

Valence becomes one of the most important aspects of national image. With the comparison of Phase 1 and Phase 3 (before and after the Olympics) the trend of Valence change can be summarised. The percentages of positive and negative tone in international television about China increased significantly. The international televised image of China became clearer, which owes to the power and influence of the Beijing Olympic Games 2008. This indicates that the Beijing Olympics reached one of the main IOC targets of increasing international understanding and that the media does have a fundamental role to play in brokering understanding of China (Latham, 2009).

In conclusion, this case study demonstrates the complex effects of mega-event staging in relation to the televised national image of a destination. Based on content analysis of telecasted national image of China, we conclude the following. Firstly, prior to mega-event staging, a host country’s Visibility in international media tends to increase above average; afterwards a host country’s visibility declines to a below-average level. Secondly, the main contribution of 2008 Olympic Games for China is to enhance the understanding of China around the world. However, the televised national image of China has not been improved around the world as a result of the Beijing Olympics 2008, with the Breadth and Attribution of China’s image remaining relatively stable.

Implications

This paper provides insights into the efficacy of TV media coverage of Beijing Olympics 2008 in relation to changing China’s televised national image. In particular, the study findings regard the effects of mega-events on the telecasted national image of a host country. This research is one of the first attempts to adopt the richness of national image in the field of agenda-setting theory to study the change of telecasted national image before and after mega-event staging. It is in contrast to many previous studies which focus on either the national image during the mega-event or the change of tourist image with mega-event staging.

The function of mega-event staging to a host country is mainly to raise the awareness of audiences around the world about that country. While feasibility and financial studies associated with the hosting of
mega-events are important, understanding international media coverage has become imperative for any host country government wishing to improve its destination image.

More often than not, special events, such as sports mega-events, will cast a spotlight on a country without creating a sustainable image. Therefore, host country communications departments need to provide a variety of topics during these ‘good’ times so as to continuously find the media’s ear. The time lag between mega-event staging and media coverage should also be taken into account. News coverage of a host country rises sharply before the mega-event staging only to decline afterwards. It is extremely important to consider this issue in the early stages of event preparation so that strategies can be put in place to harness the benefits of mega-event staging for a host country.

Limitations and future research

This study uses the construct of national image richness based on four component concepts: Image, Visibility, Valence, Breadth and Attribution (Rivenburgh, 1992). Nonetheless, it begs the question whether it is possible to derive any sense or real understanding of the nation in question from the image constructed in the international media. Although the stated intent of the Chinese government was to reveal to audiences positive facets of China, during the 2008 Olympics the attempt to do so was both limited and shallow. The results of this study, therefore, partially reveal how international media coverage of the Olympics impacted the televised image of China, but they also raise some critical issues and barriers.

The results presented in this paper are based on just one case study. Therefore, generalisation of the findings is not possible (although they do provide insights into the contemporary phenomenon of event-related media and destination image). Furthermore, from this study we cannot determine whether the relationship between event-related media and change of national image of a host country is a causal one. This study was not an experiment, and it must be remembered that other variables may have come into play within this context. That is to say, it is necessary to separate the influence of mega-events on national image because of the complexity of influence factors in any future study.

There is no doubt that the Beijing Olympics 2008 enhanced the visibility of China in international TV media before the opening ceremony. But further study is worthwhile, particularly of how news coverage of mega-event staging might contribute to improving the destination country image – and under which conditions news coverage of mega-events is unable to contribute. In fact, such information would be most valuable as it responds to the goal of most any host country – namely to improve, through mega-event staging, their national image.

Constraints on data, time and participant availability determined that this study only discusses media in nine media lands. TV news in several other countries – such as Japan, Australia and India – should also be taken into account in content analysis, as these countries are important internationally as well as being neighbouring countries to China. Further research on the changes for national image, with data from more countries (especially neighbouring countries) and with more comprehensive techniques, is therefore recommended. In addition, because TV channels were selected by Media Tenor, there may be a bias in the method. Some media lands’ coverage included several channels (USA, Germany) and others only one (France, Spain, Italy), and some TV channels selected were not the official broadcaster of the 2008 Olympics, which could also have an impact on China’s image in countries such as France. This could be improved by assessing coverage from only the most important TV channel in a country. In addition, other kinds of media, besides television, should be taken into account, along with the potential influence of the Olympic Games Organising Committee (OGOC). By giving, or not, the media access to strategic places or...
people, the OGOC can influence messages conveyed. The potential influence of the OGOC on international TV coverage was not taken into account in this study.

This paper is not a test of an actual change of China’s image, but rather an assessment of televised national images that might have impacted upon China’s image. A further study, similar to that by Hede (2005), could be carried out to compare the difference in image change between the host countries for both the Athens and the Beijing Olympics. Examination on the construction of televised national images and their interrelationship with people’s image would tell us more about the effects of mega-events on the change of national image. A continued study of place image with agenda-setting theory is also suggested. There is particular need to do research on how a host country could use public relations to improve its image worldwide.

This paper is a study of media agenda-setting, and does not include the role of public agenda-setting or policy agenda-setting. In addition, there is a lack of knowledge about the connection between the media image of countries and the perception of them among the international general public. It is necessary to investigate the relation of media agenda and public agenda when considering the impact of mega-events on national image. It is also necessary to look at to what extent a media image affects the decisions of multinational corporations and governments around the world. The answers to these questions are likely to further advance the study of national image in the international media.

References


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