



Mega-Events and the International Communication of City Image: The Case of the Major Sport Events Hosted by Guangzhou

JIANG Xi^{[a],*}

^[a]Lecturer, School of Journalism and Communication, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

Mega-events represented by major sport events are increasingly becoming an important means for the communication of the city image, and the role of those events in the development of the city is gaining more and more appreciation and highlight as well. Therefore, hosting those events have gradually become a trump card for various major cities in their external communication and publicity. As an international metropolis, Guangzhou has hosted many big sport events over the past few years and succeeded to utilize them as the opportunities and carriers to promoting the international communication of Guangzhou and establish its city image. This paper, based on the perspective of hosting major events, is set to discuss the relationship, means and strategies between major sport events and the international communication of city image.

Key words: Mega-event; City image; Sport event; Guangzhou

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INTRODUCTION

City image, as a subsystem and component of the national image, refers to people’s subjective views and concepts

towards the city and the ensuing visual representation or mirror image. Western scholars think that the establishment of city image is a process of outbound communication and spread: City image comes into being as a result of the joint force of numerous factors such as mass media, personal experience, interpersonal communication, memory and environment (He, 2010).

1. MEGA-EVENTS AND CITY IMAGE

A city’s international image is the overall impression of its historical and cultural profundities, and the level of economic development and social progress from the perspective of the international community. As a highly important intangible asset, a city’s international image comprises one of the indispensable elements in the system of a city’s overall competitiveness against the backdrop of globalization. The reason is that a good international image will not only reflect a city’s charm and charisma but also serve as a powerful centripetal yet radioactive force at the disposal of the city. Thus it is a viable and powerful means for a city to expand and intensify its interaction with the outside world, attract more international resources for its own development and promote its own international influence in the long run.

The term *mega-event* first originated in the western academia on tourism. Roche made the definition that a mega-event, deemed as a grand “carnival” of our modern society, refers to a large-scale cultural, commercial or sport event embodying some theatrical characteristics, reflecting the popular pursuits and casting great international significance. The features of a mega-event encompass national or even international impact, direct government initiation or indirect government guidance, high input of capital and resources, wide social recognition and participation, positive and far-reaching social resonance and the consequential effect (Roche, 2000; Liu, 2008).

In China, along with the development of the cities and urbanization, more and more cities have set out to host and plan some major events of great influence. They integrate local cultural elements into those mega-events, making it an important means for the communication of the city image. Among those, hosting major sport events has become an optimal choice, exemplified by the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and 2010 Guangzhou Asian Games. Other than those big sport events of international scale, there are also some examples of hosting sport events of regional influence, which is also conducive to the communication and publicity of the city image. Of course, in the future we will see more and more Chinese cities showing interest or contending to host other important sport events.

These sport events are characterized by wide range of participation and high level of entertainment. They will encourage citizens to love sports and lead a healthy life. It is undoubted to say that their influence and impetus for the construction of modern cities are extensive and immense. Since hosting major sport events can draw the attention of media and people across the whole world, it is an excellent opportunity for a city to polish its city image and strengthen its competitiveness in all dimensions. This is the very essence and reason why sport events and the development of the cities can be compatible and reinforce each other in a sense. Apart from improving the city image, sport events can also help create and convey the brand values of the city. Sheffield is a typical example of transforming itself from a traditional industrial city in the UK into a cultural and tourism hub by hosting major sport events (Liu, 2011). Of course, we can find many such examples in the world. Therefore, under the economic globalization, today major cities in various countries have placed more and more emphasis and importance in hosting cross-border mega-events with temporary flow of such resources as humans, capital and material to promote their public awareness and overall competitiveness.

2. PROMOTE A CITY'S INTERNATIONAL IMAGE BY HOSTING SPORT EVENTS

2.1 Attract Public Attention to Promote the City's Public Awareness

The most immediate and direct influence of hosting a major sport event for a city lies in its function of attracting public attention. In this era teemed with superfluous information, dubbed "information explosion", the resource of attention from others is undoubtedly very important for the development of a city. A major sport event can attract the attention from both home and abroad, and promote and publicize the city image. On the one hand, it can enhance the city's internal social coherence, as the whole city is wholeheartedly hosting a major sport event to show

its culture and hospitality; on the other, it is conducive to promoting the city's international awareness and overall competitiveness, as the information of the city and the major sport event keeps feeding more and more people across the world by means of the media during a relatively very short span of period. Case studies show that the sport events like the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games and London Marathon have contributed to the city's renewal and development. It can be said that they are among the typical cases of creating mutual complementarity and virtuous cycle between the mega-events and the city's international image.

2.2 Demonstrate the City's Trademark and Elevate Humanistic Taste

Hosting mega-events can help forge the city's trademark in all dimensions and promote the city's local culture and humanistic features. Availing itself of the opportunity of hosting a major sport event, the city can create and construct sport venues, sport themes, architectures and landscapes with its own characteristics, shape the city's visual stunts and identity and contribute to the wholesome humanistic environment of the city. Thus they can help publicize the city's culture and elevate the city's humanistic taste.

2.3 Galvanize the City's Infrastructure Construction

Hosting a major sport event has become the catalyst of inner city transformation and new city construction. It provides a golden opportunity of the integration and planning for the city and stimulates the internal vitalities for the city's sustainable development from the two tiers of social culture and economic development. Many host cities of major sport events have taken the opportunity of hosting major sport events to promote their infrastructure construction like airports, roads and railways, renovate or transform their inner cities, and improve the living environment and urban amenities of various communities and blocks, so as to advance their progress of urbanization. The 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing is the epitome of this effect. During the organization and preparation period, we have witnessed many world-famous architectures which have kept erecting in the city, such as the Bird Nest (the Olympic Stadium), and the Water Cube (National Swimming Center). Those architectures have become the symbols of the city, attracting millions of visitor each year. Guangzhou, as an ancient city with a history of more than 2000 years, once harbored many inner cities. Thanks to the 2010 Guangzhou Asian Games, the municipal government has demolished 9 inner cities, renovated the dilapidated houses in other inner cities, dissolved the population density of the concentrated areas within the city, improved the living environment of the old districts, and improved and advanced the construction of the city's infrastructure and public facilities.

2.4 Increase the City's Exposure and International Influence

Media coverage and publicity cannot be alienated from major sport events. They always go hand in hand. The influence of the sport events without or with insufficient media intervention is limited, which is also detrimental to the publicity of city image. Media have played an important role in promoting the global spread of the sport culture, be it the conventional media like newspaper, TV and radio, or new internet media, especially the social media. Because of the media, the bond of sport events and cities has become closer and closer, which has never been seen before. It can be manifested in the fact that the success of hosting a major sport event cannot be separated from the all-out support and coverage from the media. After the success of the interaction is achieved, the sport event and host city will inevitably enjoy immense social and economic benefits in the years or even decades to come, which in turn will give further spur to the city's development and help shape the city's trademark.

3. MEANS AND STRATEGIES OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION OF THE CITY IMAGE BY HOSTING MAJOR SPORT EVENTS

3.1 Reinforce the Support From the Government and Adhere to a Joint Strategy Combining Hosting Major Sport Events With the International Communication of City Image

In the organization, planning, preparation, publicity and marketing of a major sport event, the rational and organic integration of the sport event and city image and brand can effectively promote the lasting development of the sport endeavor in that city and the widespread publicity of city image and brand.

Take the Guangzhou Tennis Open Tournament for an example: Compared with the support to the industry of tennis matches poured by the municipal governments of Beijing and Shanghai, the support by the Guangzhou municipal government is evidently inadequate. This argument can be underpinned and manifested in the following aspects. First, in terms of resource integration, for the two government departments, namely the Administration of Sports of Guangdong Province and the Administration of Sports of Guangzhou Municipality, the levels of the importance they attach to the tennis competitive games are obviously different. From the angle of the Administration of Sports of Guangdong Province, the Guangzhou Tennis Open Tournament may fall into the ambit of the municipal level of government. Therefore, the main drive and support behind the organization and hosting of the Guangzhou Tennis Open Tournament only comes from the Administration of Sports of Guangzhou

Municipality. Consequently the support to this sport event is characterized as from a relatively lower level of government department, dispersed and scattered resources, and insufficient and limited force. Second, in terms of capital investment, the input from the Guangzhou municipal government to the Guangzhou Tennis Open Tournament has always been relatively limited, confining the development of the sport event in the aspects of talent, venue, publicity and promotion. As a result, the influence of the Guangzhou Tennis Open Tournament has been contained and restrained for a considerably long time. Third, in terms of hardware investment, although Guangzhou municipality boasts several large-sized tennis gymnasiums, which fall under the administration and supervision of different levels of the government, unfortunately they are not given effective and full play and the most suitable tennis gymnasiums for the Guangzhou Tennis Open Tournament, on the contrary, has failed to be renovated and expanded in a timely manner (Wang & Zhu, 2014).

3.2 Improve the City's Basic Hardware Facilities

Hardware facilities lay the basic foundation for the hosting of sport events and the development of sport industry. During the organization and preparation period of major sport events, good transport conditions, complete communication facilities and quality environment and sanitation are the underlying prerequisites for the smooth running of the sport events. More importantly, only by constructing classic and complete large-sized gymnasiums and equipping complementary facilities can we ensure the smooth and high-quality running of the sport events.

Before hosting the 2010 Guangzhou Asian Games, the municipal government of Guangzhou had constructed many matching sport gymnasiums including the Olympic Sport Center, which have not only been used during the 2010 Guangzhou Asian Games but also continued to play their due roles after the Asian Games. In the post-Games era, these gymnasiums can serve as the attraction for more sport events and quality sport venues and exercising environment for Guangzhou citizens. The gymnasiums in Fangcun village area and the Mega-center of Higher Education inside Guangzhou city are the outstanding examples. Asian Games also provided an excellent opportunity for the city to improve its transport infrastructure. The system of the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) in Tianhe District of Guangzhou was completed during the organization and preparation period of the 2010 Asian Games. During the period from bidding and preparation for the Asian Games, the municipal government of Guangzhou city has also made enormous labor and capital investments to improve the city's overall environment. Since the successful bidding to host the Asian Games in 2004, Guangzhou has set out the development path and aspiration of marching towards an international metropolis. By implementing the project of Green

Mountain and Grass Land, Azure Sky and Clean Water, an environmentally-friendly project to improve the livability of the city initiated by the municipal government which has achieved astounding progress, Guangzhou has made another solid step of promoting its city image featuring the construction of an ecological and livable Garden City and Prime Land, a solemn pledge to the Guangzhou citizens to eradicate the stereotypical impressions of the city.

By contrast, the Guangzhou Tennis Open Tournament is held in Tianhe Sport Center. Although this gymnasium is located in the bustling downtown and central area of the city, enjoying high accessibility by various traffic means such as bus, taxi, metro and car, for the tennis courts to be used to host the Open Tournament, they are small in land area and size, and incomplete in facility. Not only do they accommodate limited number of spectators, but also they cannot meet the operational requirements of themed activities and commodity sale related with the Guangzhou Tennis Open Tournament. All these disadvantages have severely refrained this sport event from fulfilling its maximum commercial potential. In response to the current state of underinvestment of hardware facilities for the Guangzhou Tennis Open Tournament, we can adopt two approaches to make improvement: first, the sport venue of the Guangzhou Tennis Open Tournament should be relocated to the Guangdong Olympic Tennis Center; second, alternatively we should build a new tennis gymnasium in line with the various requirements of the Guangzhou Tennis Open Tournament.

3.3 Integrate the Communication Channels to Make an “All-Round” Coverage

Hosting a major sport event can attract the attention of many city visitors. Meanwhile, when the host city manages to bombard others with a series of issues, demonstrating the city image and collected before, during and after the game, by means of the media like TV stations, magazines, newspapers, radio and internet, it will surely cause a sensation across the society and shape its city brand image.

Nowadays, the media industry is undergoing ever-growing development. If a major sport event can be promoted by the organizer with across-the-board, long and frequent publicity and coverage via the mass media such as TV, internet and paper media, it will create in-depth publicizing effect for the shaping and establishment of the city brand image so that the public awareness and overall competitiveness of the city will be exponentially enhanced.

Drawing upon the experience in the publicity for the Guangzhou 2010 Asian Games, Guangzhou can publicize from three aspects in the coverage and communication of its major sport events. Firstly, with the advent of the all-round coverage by the omnimedia, we must combine the conventional forms of media with new media, emphatically covering and publicizing the

events with various forms on various media platforms including newspapers, radio, TV stations, internet and mobile phones. Secondly, we must conduct the all-round coverage of the sport events across the society as well as the featured coverage targeting specific demographics. It is fragmented but effective. Thirdly, we must conduct the all-round coverage in terms of content. The news release and the broadcasting of game information should be quick, inclusive, comprehensive and quality.

To people’s regret, although Guangzhou can do a better job using the conventional media like TV and newspapers in the process of hosting a major sport event, the coverage forms of which highly center on the conventional carriers like graphs and words, it still shows low utilization rate of smart phones and internet. Against the backdrop of the flourishing development of the new media, the organizers may as well establish a live broadcasting platform such as internet video stream for the sport events, or conduct real-time interaction with the audience on various social media, so that the communication channels of the game and city image can be multiplied.

3.4 Internet Marketing Strategies for Sports

The 21st century is an information-based economy. Internet, as a superconductor of information, has become more and more integrated into people’s life and thus been highly appreciated by all walks of life and the whole society as time goes by. To better host a major sport event, the organizer can adopt internet marketing models like podcast marketing, innovation marketing, interest marketing, integrated marketing, knowledge marketing and event marketing to publicize the major sport event, convey the city’s information and influence public opinions, so as to better promote the city image and brand.

At the same time, the organizer can set up a featured or special website in relation with the sport event and the website of the host city so that we can take the opportunity to use the internet to conduct various publicizing and consultative activities as public relation to cover and publicize the whole process of the sport event and the new development of the city. What’s more, the organizer can even plan some focal events relevant with the major sport event to attract online attention, and conduct interaction with the incoming sportsmen and visitors on internet communities and forums during the game. Therefore, a good city brand image will be shaped (Chen, 2014).

3.5 Publicize the Local Characteristics of the City to Manifest Guangzhou’s Historical Profundities and Economic Edges

As a representative city of the Lingnan Culture, a distinct branch of culture in south China, Guangzhou should fully seize the opportunity for cultural communication and publicity brought by the 2010 Asian Games to promote its own Culture, excavate the representative cultural heritage

and conduct systematic introduction, communication and publicity.

Guangzhou has a relatively clear positioning of its own image and place, namely “the city of ram with a history of thousands of years, a luminous pearl located in south China”. Guangzhou came into being and flourished because of five rams carried with crops according to the ancient mythology. So the city of ram is Guangzhou’s nickname. The river which goes through the city is called the Pearl River, deemed as the mother river of the city. Because of the river, Guangzhou has been a commercial port of all the times and gained even greater momentum of economic development in the last few decades. Therefore, the starting point and highlights of the Guangzhou International Marathon each year are fixed in the Flower City Plaza of the city, with communities like Zhujiang New Town, Liede village area and Liwan old district showcasing Guangzhou’s history, modernity and characteristics along the route. In this way, Guangzhou’s beauty of the “Pearl River and its banks” landscape is fully presented to the athletes, TV audience and internet users.

3.6 Precise Positioning

On the international stage, the successful cases of shaping the city brand by hosting sport events are by no means rare or scarce. For example, Boston has leapt to international fame thanks to the marathon event and Melbourne’s city brand can be attributed to the Australia Open Tennis championships. In addition, those cases also include some small towns unknown to the outside world previously. For example, Wimbledon in the UK makes people associate with tennis games. Those towns, big or small, along the route of Le Tour de France staged annually have greatly promoted their fame across the world due to the global quality and impact of the sport event.

When choosing the sport events to host, Guangzhou must consider the following aspects: Whether they are compatible with the culture of the city, whether they are in line with the needs of its economic and social progress, and whether they meet the citizens’ requirements for

sport events. Only by opting for the most suitable major sport events can Guangzhou maximize the interests of the investment of hosting the games. Meanwhile, it is not a sustainable and long-term solution for Guangzhou to only import those well-known sport events from foreign countries. Publicizing the advantages of the indigenous sport events and home-grown athletes and forging some world-renowned sport events’ belonging to Guangzhou is where the path to the future lies for the communication of the city image of Guangzhou.

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