

## Mega Sporting Events and Branding: Marketing Implications for the Host Country's Image

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**Abstract :** Qatar will spend billions of dollars to host the 2022 World Cup. While football fans around the globe get excited to cheer on their favorite team every four years, critics debate the merits of a country hosting such an expensive and large-scale event. That is, the host countries spend billions of dollars on stadiums and infrastructure to attract these mega sporting events with the hope of equitable returns in economic impact and creating jobs. Yet, in many cases, the host countries are left in debt with decaying venues. There are benefits beyond the economic impact of hosting mega-events. For example, citizens are often proud of their city/country to host these famous events. Yet, often overlooked in the literature is the proposition that serving as the host for a mega-event may enhance the country's brand image, not only as a tourist destination but for the products made in that country of origin. This research aims to explore this phenomenon by taking an exploratory look at consumer perceptions of three host countries of a mega-event in sports. In 2014, the U.S., Chinese and Finn (Finland) consumer attitudes toward Brazil and its products were measured before and after the World Cup via surveys (n=89). An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) revealed that there were no statistically significant differences in the pre-and post-World Cup perceptions of Brazil's brand personality or country-of-origin image. After the World Cup in 2018, qualitative interviews were held with U.S. sports fans (n=17) in an effort to further explore consumer perceptions of products made in the host country: Russia. A consistent theme of distrust and corruption with Russian products emerged despite their hosting of this prestigious global event. In late 2021, U.S. football (soccer) fans (n=42) and non-fans (n=37) were surveyed about the upcoming 2022 World Cup. A regression analysis revealed that how much an individual indicated that they were a soccer fan did not significantly influence their desire to visit Qatar or try products from Qatar in the future even though the country was hosting the World Cup—in the end, hosting a mega-event as grand as the World Cup showcases the country to the world. However, it seems to have little impact on consumer perceptions of the country, as a whole, or its brands. That is, the World Cup appeared to enhance already pre-existing stereotypes about Brazil (e.g., beaches, partying and fun, yet with crime and poverty), Russia (e.g., cold weather, vodka and business corruption) and Qatar (desert and oil). Moreover, across all three countries, respondents could rarely name a brand from the host country. Because mega-events cost a lot of time and money, countries need to do more to market their country and its brands when hosting. In addition, these countries would be wise to measure the impact of the event from different perspectives. Hence, we put forth a comprehensive future research agenda to further the understanding of how countries, and their brands, can benefit from hosting a mega sporting event.

**Keywords :** branding, country-of-origin effects, mega sporting events, return on investment

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