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Nation branding and public diplomacy: Examining Japan's 2019 Rugby World Cup and 2020(21) Olympic Games in the midst of a global economic downturn and the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

For many superpowers sport mega events have become central to their political and financial ambitions within the global society. Over the last century Japan has established itself as a superpower both politically and economically. Even in the midst of a global economic downturn Japan has been successful in acquiring several globally significant sporting events, most notably the 2002 FIFA World Cup, and more recently the 2019 Rugby World Cup and 2020(21) summer Olympic Games. This paper examines how the latter two SMEs are perceived to present economic and political challenges in the midst of a global economic downturn and the COVID-19 pandemic through the context of public diplomacy and nation branding. The paper explores the perspectives of several relevant stakeholder demographics, including those working for various bodies relating to the staging and analysis of the events. Data were obtained through semi-structured interviews in order to frame the potential significance of sports mega events in Japan as a platform to showcase nation branding, public diplomacy, economic development and sport tourism.

Key Words: Nation-Branding, Public-Diplomacy, Olympics, COVID-19, Mega-Events

Introduction

During the last century Japan has established itself as a global superpower, one of the most developed and economically productive nations in the world with a significant metropolis as its capital city (Marshall, 2015). Japan's progress and current economic, political, social and cultural standing is particularly notable in the context of its recovery from devastating defeat in World War II (Easterly, 2013). As a metaphor for its recovery and reintroduction into peaceful international relations Tokyo hosted the Olympic Games in 1964, 19 years after the USA's atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the final stages of the War. This was particularly significant as the Japanese city of Sapporo was due to host the 1940 Winter Olympics, which was cancelled due to the global conflict.

As a legacy of the Tokyo Olympiad, sport and sporting events have occupied an important position in Japanese public consciousness, providing an important vehicle for promoting collaboration and communicating messages across political divides (Manzenreiter, 2014). Indeed, Japan stands as a critical case study for the impact that Sport Mega Events (SMEs) can have in the wake of a global crisis. This is particularly pertinent given that Japan stands to host the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic games now (re)scheduled to be held after the current coronavirus pandemic crisis (COVID-19¹). As such, it is perhaps surprising that relatively little has been written about Japan in relation to SMEs. Hence, this article looks to make a unique contribution to the literature around the Japanese economic, political, social-cultural and contextual approach to hosting mega-events. Japan also hosted the 2019 Rugby World Cup, which originally set the stage for the now (re)scheduled Tokyo games in 2020 - its year referred to here as '2020', '2021' or '2020(21)', depending on the context.

Japan's financial investment in staging two key events during a difficult economic period – aside from the unprecedented and unforeseen pandemic – demonstrates its commitment to

¹ COVID-19 identified in Wuhan, China in 2019. At the time of completing the final draft of this article (01 Oct 2020), over 34 million cases had been reported and over 1 million deaths had been attributed to the virus; such statistics continue to increase, and many have argued that 'accurate' figures are likely to be much higher. The pandemic has impacted upon sporting activities across the globe, many of which have been halted, cancelled and/or postponed, with the Tokyo Olympics a notable example.

and prioritisation of sporting events. Japan has previously hosted various other SMEs, including the 1972 and 1998 Winter Olympics in Sapporo and Nagano respectively, the 2001 East Asia Games in Osaka, and the 2002 FIFA Men's World Cup in partnership with South Korea (Horne and Manzenreiter, 2004). Matches were staged in 10 Japanese cities for the latter event, sharing hosting responsibilities and associated benefits across Japan. This World Cup revealed a significant shift in FIFA policy, as the first edition to be staged outside Europe and the Americas, and the first to be co-hosted (Moran, 2002), representing a strategy to 'grow the game' (Horne and Manzenreiter, 2004: 192). In some respects, the event showcased the potential of sport, bringing two nations together that had often been divided through conflict, contestation and control. During the middle of the last century, South Korea refused to establish diplomatic relations or trade agreements with Japan, which lasted until 1965 (Jackson, 2017).

Governing bodies such as FIFA and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) often deny the crossover of sport, economics and politics, whilst otherwise emphasising situations in which sport is perceived to positively contribute towards improvements in financial growth and international relations, for instance (Heere *et al.*, 2012). Differing governmental policies regarding sporting events in response to COVID-19 have demonstrated the prevalence of these connections. Italy cancelled Serie A matches, initially on a regionalised basis, from 23 February 2020, whilst fixtures in other countries continued for several weeks, with the postponement of matches in the transnational Champions League proving more complicated and subject to criticism (Conn, 2020). Following a two-month shutdown, Germany were the first major European football league to resume matches (played behind closed doors) on 16 May 2020, following a consultation process heavily reliant on governmental approval (Morris and Noack, 2020).

The respective footballing authorities of Japan and South Korea initially submitted separate proposals to host the 2002 World Cup, before FIFA officials brokered a united bid which was unanimously selected (Moran, 2002). FIFA had been concerned that the allocation of the event should not be interpreted as evidence of preferential treatment afforded to one nation over the other, given the legacy of antagonism that had defined elements of international relations in this context (Koga, 2016). As former colonisers, supporting Japan's bid might have

been construed as FIFA favouring the asymmetrical colonial reproductions which are often criticised within research on sport for social change (Mwaanga and Adeosun, 2017).

For Japan, this event offered opportunities to stimulate economic growth and shape the standing and branding of the country (Tamari, 2019). This can be framed around public diplomacy and nation branding, the conceptual tenets on which this paper is based. The former can be understood as the efforts a nation state undertake to influence public behaviour, thoughts and knowledge through foreign policy (Nye, 2008). The latter relates to the activities a given state engages in to alter perceptions of the country by (re-)aligning its image through particular means or events in the interest of self-promotion to the world (Szondi, 2008). Japan considered the 2002 World Cup to offer significant 'brand-making' potential (Horne and Manzenreiter, 2004: 193), presenting opportunities in public diplomacy, regarding its relations with South Korea and other nations across Asia and the world (Butler, 2013). The event also provided a platform for the rebranding of Japan, given its historical closed door policy of "Sakoku", which was officially terminated in 1868 yet has since remained a perceived feature of the country in certain contexts (Robson, 2016). Therefore, the World Cup widened access to Japan metaphorically and literally, facilitating its promotion to a global audience. Subsequently (since 2003), tourism has featured centrally in Japanese policies, in a bid to build Japan's economy and brand the nation as a state accessible for tourists (Robson, 2016).

Japan has continued to invest in SMEs, having recently staged the 2019 Rugby World Cup (RWC 2019) with the Tokyo Olympics to follow in 2021. This paper explores perspectives of several relevant stakeholders, examining how both sporting events are perceived to present opportunities and challenges for Japan in the context of public diplomacy and nation branding, set in a climate of a global economic downturn. It is important to note that most of the data were collected prior to COVID-19, but also that the work includes data obtained in May 2020, in light of COVID-19. The article is divided into several sections beginning with an overview of Japan's contemporary political economy, followed by: our conceptual approach to public diplomacy and nation branding; the contextual relevance of these notions in relation to SMEs and Japan; the methods of data collection and analysis; and an examination of our findings pertaining to Japan's acquisition of both events, and the perceived approach to and

impact upon nation branding and public diplomacy. Given the significance of COVID-19, content relating to the pandemic is embedded throughout the article. The importance of this work is highlighted by the context of two major sporting events, the relative lack of international research conducted on SMEs in Japan, and the lack of published academic work on the evolving global health crisis.

Japan's contemporary political economy

In 2013 Japan's prime minister Shinzō Abe (2012-present) announced plans to revive the country's economy, a strategy often referred to as 'Abenomics' (Shibata, 2016 p.399). Critical reflective analysis has adopted three dominant positions: Firstly, a positive response highlighting increases in corporate profit, stock prices, public consumption and employment (Hausman and Wieland, 2014). Secondly, a cautiously optimistic analysis opposing planned consumption tax increases and proposing greater economic liberalisation and the establishment of funds to support small and medium enterprises (Krugman, 2014). Thirdly, a more critical reading which emphasises the growing inequalities within Japanese society and the precarity of the most vulnerable within Japan's labour market (Roberts, 2014).

Prior to this period, the institutions that helped shape Japan's economy – relating for instance to corporate governance, the labour and financial markets and trade relations – experienced considerable change. The neo-liberalisation and decline in economic growth, combined with institutional crises and inefficient connections between various organisations has characterised aspects of Japanese capitalism during the last three decades (Lechevalier, 2014). Previously, stable production and labour relations reduced variance in employment practices and the profitability of businesses, with established networks between firms enabling relations, information and risk to be shared, subsequently limiting some inequalities (Hall and Soskice, 2001). Enterprise unionism, long term employment and salary structures based on seniority also served to stabilise labour-capital relations (Lechevalier, 2014); whilst the relatively high level of state intervention in the market, support of core industries and high import tariffs protected domestic businesses (Rosenbluth and Thies, 2010).

Slow economic growth from the 1980s and stagnation and deindustrialisation from the 1990s – "Japan's lost decade" (Leigh, 2010, p.833) – saw a shift from manufacturing to service

industries (Tiberghien, 2014). Under the government of Yasuhiro Nakasone (1982-1987), a growth of flexible labour weakened economic stability, enabled by the 1985 Worker Dispatching Law, which increased labour casualization. During the Junichiro Koizumi administration (2001-2006), neo-liberalisation accelerated. In the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008 and the Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011, Japan's unemployment reached 38 per cent (Shibata, 2016), causing a period of economic stagnation. Shinzō Abe's government have since attempted to stimulate economic growth by introducing Keynesian monetary coordination and investing in infrastructural projects and the hosting of significant events (ibid).

The first twenty years of this century have been bookended by the staging of the aforementioned SMEs in Japan. Co-hosting the 2002 FIFA World Cup and then staging RWC 2019 and subsequently Tokyo 2021 embody a significant portfolio of what Brannagan and Rookwood (2016) term "first order events" (p.176). The prioritisation of sporting events to enhance a country's standing, branding, diplomacy and economy is a pattern common to various modern states, of which Japan is a notable example. The following sections outline key terms, literature and arguments pertaining to the concepts of public diplomacy and nation branding, before relating them to Japan's sporting and economic context.

Public diplomacy and nation branding

The process of globalisation and related research has enhanced the prominence of the concepts of public diplomacy and nation branding within international relations (Rookwood, 2019). Public diplomacy is perceived to play an important role in directing and influencing the international community, often in conjunction with traditional forms of diplomacy (Kalin, 2011). As a subset of branding, nation branding – a term which Simon Anholt is credited with coining in the mid 1990s – bears relevance to the reputation of a nation's image through branding and marketing (Fan, 2006). The concept has since amassed various definitions, applications and criticisms within related literature, with some elements central to this paper. This article adopts the definition offered by Kaneva (2011) whereby nation branding is viewed as: "a compendium of discourses and practices aimed at reconstituting nationhood through marketing and branding paradigms" (p. 118). Nation branding as a discourse can be linked to the work of Michel Foucault, and viewed as an attempt to structure the way we think about

a particular country and the way we act based on that thinking (Widler, 2007). Therefore, nation branding can be linked to public diplomacy in that the 'brand' of a nation must be attractive enough if its public diplomacy policies are to take root. Other linkages can be seen in relation to the processes of disseminating ideas and ideologies across borders, fostering intently positive perceptions and encouraging others to view it as an attractive destination for tourism and business.

During the last decade Japan has focused on developing effective public diplomacy tools and techniques (Iwabuchi, 2015). For instance, in 2015 the Japanese government invested in its strategic international communications to engage more effectively on a global scale (Stanislas, 2017). Such developments can adopt broader connotations with Japan keen to shape narratives of international relations, particularly in light of competing projections from other Asian states (Marshall, 2015). Combined with this, Japan hired its first foreign policy speech writer for Shinzō Abe (Pugliese, 2017), and intensified efforts to effectively communicate Japanese culture, standards and values to the world through public diplomacy techniques (Stanislas, 2017). Public diplomacy can be framed as a dynamic and multifaceted communication approach used to project persuasive positive images, which is dependent on developing communicative ties and shaping public opinion (Kalin, 2011). Effective public diplomacy requires long-term relationships to be built with strategic partner nations, developing communication techniques that facilitate the delivery of subtle but influential messages (Rookwood, 2019).

According to Fan (2006, p.3) the aim of nation branding is to "create a clear, simple, differentiating idea built around emotional qualities which can be symbolised both verbally and visually and understood by diverse audiences in a variety of situations." Anholt (2008) suggests that effective nation branding requires the mobilisation of various interconnected components. Kaneva (2011) details specific aspects including cultural, political, technical, economic and cultural approaches. With respect to culture for instance, Both Aronczyk (2008) and Volkering (2001) argue that nation branding can involve the promotion of a particular ideology, knowledge, power and/or form of exchange whereby the central aim is to generate capital. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent rise of neo-liberalism, capitalist nation branding strategies connected to popular culture have become key

components of the modern globalised world order (Jansen, 2008). Within this framework the USA's culture for instance, is often presented as superior and more attractive than that of other countries through its approach to mass entertainment, generating immense capital through the exchange of tourism and economic expenditure (Nye, 2004; Roy, 2007). However, such positions can potentially be undermined by perceptions of differential responses to shared experiences and challenges for instance, as is the case with COVID-19 (Cull and Magnier, 2020).

Framing a country as exciting, progressive and attractive can contribute to international exchanges and tourism, with one ultimate aim being to increase tourist expenditure in a competitive marketplace, as has been demonstrated in a Japanese context (Murakami, 2017). The forms of positive branding which link USA to mass entertainment, can in the case of Japan connect the country with technology and gaming, for instance (Henderson, 2017). This depends on adopting efficient collaborations within tourist sectors, promoting the country to build inbound tourism and economic growth (Murakami, 2017). A nation's brand image can be acquired partly through stereotypical associations depicted through mass media (Fan, 2006). Japan has attempted to promote particular stereotypical brands, and the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs established the 'Japan Brand Program' in 2014 to advance some of these messages on a global scale. The targeting of particular markets through advertising has economic motives (Henderson, 2017). Specific programmes in related fields have subsequently been developed to be administered internationally, including the advanced robotics programme in Croatia and Spain as well as the Manga seminar workshops in Panama and the USA (mofa.go.jp).

Nation branding can be perceived as the means of promoting a nation through its iconic locations and experiences, using them as unique selling points to promote tourism expenditure and enhance the country's international reputation (Fan, 2006). Such forms of nation branding are sometimes manifest through promotional tourist videos from a particular nation state, showcasing idyllic or interesting locations to attract global attention. Nation branding is understood by some as a blanket term, which includes public diplomacy (Fan, 2009). However, others have argued that public diplomacy and nation branding are aspects of the broader concept of soft power, which refers to effective forms of attraction and

cooperation, in contrast to traditional hard power techniques which essentially involve aspects of manipulation and coercion (Kaneva, 2011; Nye, 2008). Such overlapping and at times contradicting conceptual approaches demonstrate the range of understandings prevalent between and within academic disciplines and related research (Rookwood, 2019). Attempts to acquire soft power do not always have desired outcomes, and in some cases can actually produce soft disempowerment, whereby international audiences are alienated or offended by a particular country and dissuaded from visiting. Qatar's acquisition of the 2022 World Cup, and the associated corruption allegations pertaining to the award of the event, the diplomatic crisis concerning relations with neighbouring states, and the response to the treatment of migrant workers helping construct infrastructure for the event are notable examples (Brannagan and Rookwood, 2016). Similarly, financial investment in activities relating to public diplomacy and nation branding can have negative consequences (Rookwood, 2019).

Diverse conceptual understandings of nation branding and public diplomacy have contributed to criticism of the application of such terms. For instance, Roy (2007: p.571) associates nation branding with a "fetishistic construction of national identity" through the promotion of positive stereotypes and the omission of negative alternatives. Jansen (2008) criticises nation branding as a commercially driven enterprise transforming civic spaces into market oriented places devoid of social, communal and national connections. Such critiques are evidence of the pervading collisions between those with commercial and cultural interests and perspectives. Given the aforementioned evolution of the Japanese economy (notably pertaining to the casualization of labour), some argue that public expenditure on nation branding represents socially irresponsible economic policy (Kaneva, 2016); others see such investment as crucial to drive future economic growth (Shibata, 2016). Globally, COVID-19 is likely to play a key role in forming public perception in such contexts (Cull and Magnier, 2020). Public diplomacy has received fewer criticisms, perhaps connected to relative funding allocations. However, Snow (1998) frames the term as a synonym for propaganda, and Melingen and Mujic (2003) claim the notion can potentially be used to hide the realities of inadequate infrastructure affecting citizens. As a contemporary example, differing national health infrastructures and crisis preparedness have largely been laid bare during COVID-19, despite attempts to control associated media narratives (Thompson, 2020). Despite such

criticisms both concepts remain important to the social, political and economic strategies of countries hosting and attempting to host SMEs, and associated academic analysis (Rookwood, 2019).

Public diplomacy, nation branding and sport in Japan

Various SMEs have been framed as potentially significant platforms for public diplomacy and nation branding. Ribiero, Biscaia and Figueredo (2017) examine these connections in relation to the 2016 Rio Olympics, whilst Rookwood (2019) has done so in the context of Qatar's preparations for the 2022 FIFA Men's World Cup. Research on Japan's hosting of two mega events has been relatively light in comparison. At the time of writing, a meta-analysis search for scholarly articles on the predominantly western literature database SPORTDiscus using key terms "Tokyo 2020(21)" and "Rugby World Cup 2019" generated 174 articles combined. A similar search of the key term "Qatar 2022" produced 156 articles alone.

This relative lack of research could reflect perceived access issues, possibly connected to Japan's historical disengagement with the outside world, and the West in particular (Botsman, 2012). Some consider the Japanese policy of seclusion known as Sakoku, enacted during the Edo period of the Tokugawa Hegemony (1600-1868) to have shaped national culture and resultant perceptions of Japan as a closed nation (Laver, 2011; Ito and Crutcher, 2014). When Ieyasu Tokugawa claimed power in the early 17th Century, his primary objectives were to ensure social order, secure his lineage and protect his power from internal and external threats (Kitchell, 1994). To achieve these ends, the Sakoku policy was enacted, banning foreigners from entering Japan (Takao, 2009). Even though Sakoku was officially discontinued in 1868 with the end of the Tokugawa shogunate, remnants of this historical policy are visible in contemporary Japan, such as within the sometimes xenophobic tones adopted in political discourse when referencing immigration (Robson, 2016).

Japan faces longstanding socio-economic challenges in the contemporary era. A population decline through a reduced birth-rate is evident, often linked to the lack of available space and the spiralling costs of raising children (Izuhara, 2017). It is estimated that Japan's current population of approximately 127 million could decrease significantly by 2050 (Wilkinson, 2015). Conversely, two of Japan's closest neighbours, Russia and China have growing

economies but with simultaneously growing populations, and some scholars argue that Japan needs to address this issue in order to avoid seeing its economy surpassed by that of other nations (Marshall, 2015).

The Japanese state enacted the open door policy of *Kokusaika* in the mid 1980s under pressure from the USA and Europe, following claims that the Japanese system and society were discriminatory against foreigners and foreign goods (Itoh, 1996). The subsequent progress towards internationalisation, multiculturalism, globalisation and rebranding has been slow (Karan 2010). Hosting the 2002 FIFA World Cup did however serve as a springboard, helping to increase tourism, trade and political dialogue, especially with South Korea (Horne and Manzenreiter, 2004). In addition, changes occurred in the perception of foreign nationals, notably amongst the youth population of Japan (Heere *et al.*, 2012). Much has changed in the intervening period with respect to hosting SMEs, the contemporary competition for which has arguably peaked, at least outside the BRICS economies (Rookwood, 2019). The Japanese state however intends to build on the foundations that were laid in staging the 2002 FIFA World Cup, aligned to various foreign policies (Horne, 2005). This research examines the extent to which the 2019 Rugby World Cup and 2021 Olympics are perceived as opportunities for progress in this respect notably concerning public diplomacy and nation branding initiatives.

Public diplomacy can include international outreach programmes, domestic and foreign policy writing and developing exchanges for educational, professional and cultural purposes (Nakamura and Weed, 2010). This latter area can be seen notably in Japan's preparations for the Olympics. As Director General of the Office for the Promotion of the Tokyo Games, Takeo Hirata argued:

“It is expected that this initiative [Olympics] will accelerate human, economic, and cultural exchanges between prefectures and municipalities nationwide and the participating countries and regions, generating enthusiasm towards the Tokyo Games, and that these international exchanges will not be one-off events but will be continued after the Games, promoting Japan's globalization, regional revitalization, and tourism that will lead to the further overall development of Japan” (Hirata, 2014, p. 6).

Although framed in different language, this rhetoric can be interpreted as a framing of the Olympics as a tool for public diplomacy, to encourage tourism, international exchange and economic development – all set against the context of a global economic downturn. In light of COVID-19 – admittedly an unprecedented pandemic, and one impossible to predict – such ‘expectations’ are now cast into doubt.

Since enacting a more open-door policy, the notion of *exchange* has repeatedly been emphasised within Japan’s public diplomacy (Cull, 2008). This refers particularly to tourism and international exchange, whereby foreigners visit Japan to experience the culture, and offer different perspectives (ibid). Japan developed a comprehensive exchange programme, in which more than 6,000 young foreigners from 40 countries visit Japan each year to teach their respective language in Japanese schools (Nye, 2008). More recently, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), announced that by 2020, English will be taught in Japanese schools as an official language from the third grade, hence the requirement for English foreign language teachers, building on the renowned Japanese English Teaching (JET) programme initiated in 1987 (Wilkinson, 2015). The increasing use of public diplomacy strategies in East Asia reflects the region’s growing influence in international politics and the global economy over the last two decades, which shapes the demand for a greater alignment with western social values in many cases (Melissen and Lee, 2011).

In addition, MEXT has signalled its intention to use the Olympics to promote lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights in Japan (Japantimes, 2015). The lead minister for MEXT, Hiroshi Hase outlined this intention saying: “as it hosts the Olympic Games, there is no doubt that Japanese society will be questioned on how it treats its sexual minorities. We must substantiate the principles described in the basic plan of the Games” (ibid). In this respect tournament organisers will hope to avoid some of the criticisms labelled at Russia and Qatar in this respect, whilst capitalising on an important segment of the economic market (Rookwood, 2019). Therefore, Japan intends to use the Olympics in particular to showcase a realignment of its national values, social constructs and policies on sexual discrimination to an international audience (Murakami, 2017). Prior to COVID-19 it was argued that the Tokyo Olympics would be used as a political communication tool, in which Japan will seek to share

a convincing, coherent and intelligible national narrative through its public diplomacy (Wilkinson, 2015). However, Japan's decision making and communication has been criticised by some regarding the postponement of the Tokyo Games, which Shinzo Abe announced is to be staged "no later than next summer" (2021) (McCurry, 2020).

For nation branding to have the desired impact, using a blend of complimentary activities often proves effective, including cultural and sporting activities (Grix, Brannagan and Lee, 2019). Japan has developed a unique form of popular high context culture in which literature, art and animation are prevalent (Ito, 2005; Kotabe, 2019). In respect to the promotion of the RWC 2019, one of its first advertising videos (showcased towards the end of the previous edition in England) demonstrated the use of animated characters in the Japanese style of Manga (BBC, 2015). Characters were taken from the popular cartoon, 'Fist of the North Star' (BBC, 2015) showing Japan's unique popular cultural references and their application in sporting contexts (Wise, 2017). The RWC 2019 organising committee have also attempted to use the event to showcase iconic Japanese locations, and the draw was staged in Kyoto, one of Japan's most historic and iconic cities (Hinch, Higham and Doering, 2017). As the CEO of the Organising Committee Akira Shimazu noted: 'I am very pleased that the pool draw for Rugby World Cup 2019 will be held in Kyoto, a symbolic city of Japanese culture, with people watching from all over the world' (rugbyworldcup.com). Given that the RWC 2019 was held across twelve host cities in Japan, this offered branding potential for many of Japan's iconic locations.

Methods and analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to investigate perspectives of the socio-economic and political concerns connecting public diplomacy and nation branding in the context of Japan's SMEs. Questions focused on the economic landscape of Japan and public perceptions towards hosting the SMEs, the publicity of the events in Japan (and internationally), and the meaning of hosting events within the Japanese political economy. This approach facilitated an in-depth examination of perspectives pertaining to sporting events and their broader significance in Japan, offering space for reflexivity which contributes to social discourse (Brannagan and Rookwood, 2016). 14 interviews were conducted, 11 of which were prior to COVID-19. The interviewees included: three academics from the

University of Tsukuba (TIAS), which is expected to play a central role in delivering and analysing Japan's legacy aims for hosting SMEs; four European sports journalists living in Japan; two from both the Japan Sports Agency (JSA) and Japan Sport Council (JPC), both divisions being integral to delivering Japan's long-term sporting ambitions notably through the RWC 2019 and Tokyo 2020(21); and one from the RWC 2019 organising committee. In light of COVID-19, subsequent interviews were conducted in May 2020, with a sports writer based in Japan and two European editors of Japanese sport websites. The participants were selected based on their job roles and knowledge of Japan's sport industry.

Given the location of the participants interviews took place via telephone, videophone, Zoom and Skype in English between 01/01/2019 and 22/05/2020. After collecting and transcribing data, transcripts were subjected to a thematic analysis, similar to that adopted by Schinke, McGannon, Battocchio and Wells (2013) and Rookwood (2019). Ethical consideration and approval were gained through Solent University, with all participants protected by a confidentiality clause. A coding system is used to protect the anonymity but reveal the gender of participants, presented in the thematic discussion below.

SMEs and the Japanese economy

Research respondents offered a range of perspectives on the potential benefits of staging SMEs, often qualified by reference to the degree of associated projected or expected expenditure. For instance: "Japan doesn't need sport to get itself on the map. It's firmly on the map. But this [hosting Tokyo 2020(21)] is about status and growth. Investment in facilities, changing the public face of Japan, giving citizens role models to aspire to. But all set against spiralling costs in an economy that's struggled. The Japanese are not usually defiant against their government, but still, it's not always an easy sell" (Interview 9 – male, 18/12/19). One respondent referred to the "growing inequalities in major countries around the world, including Japan", arguing that: "many ordinary Japanese people struggle financially and for consistent work, so some feel that they'd rather see taxes spent on services and education" (Interview 10 – male, 19/12/19). However, another participant suggested that "It's about a longer term vision, this investment for the Olympics and Rugby World Cup. And more than that, it sells the image of Japan. Every tourist I've spoken to here [the Rugby World Cup] has loved it, but also says how expensive it is" (Interview 8 – male, 03/11/19). COVID-19 has since

produced an “inescapable layer” for such events according to one respondent, who also argued: “Inevitably, the pandemic has shifted the entire emphasis and meaning of the Tokyo Olympics” (Interview 14 – male, 22/05/20).

When questioned on perceptions of tourism and affordability, another interviewee stated: “Japan isn’t really on the backpacker trail. It is expensive. But it does cater for a certain demographic, a smaller number of more wealthy tourists. And by hosting an event [RWC 2019] perhaps associated with, let’s say, particular social classes and economic status, it’s selective, but that helps advertising and branding to be more focused” (Interview 11 – male, 11/01/20). This selective targeting of particular demographics and market segmentation is a familiar approach for brand management and marketing professionals, connecting with the aforementioned work of Henderson (2017). Other respondents commented on their pride in seeing Japan hosting RWC 2019 and Tokyo 2020(21), whilst eluding to some significant financial concerns given the country’s recent history, notably the 2008 financial crisis, which caused an economic downturn and decreased employment rate within the country. For instance: “It wasn’t that long before bidding to host these events that Japan had that big financial crash which put the country in a real state and unemployment was at its peak for years” (Interview 1 – female, 27/08/19). The financial crisis triggered a national recession, coupled with the Great East Japan Earthquake, and the nuclear power plant disaster at Fukushima. Bidding to host SMEs may not have seemed like a prudent policy at the time. However, after the challenges of the previous decade it was argued by some in the Japanese political stratum that hosting SMEs would prove a welcome stimulant for the nation. As one participant argued: “Some of the leaders back then were really pushing the positives of bidding for the Olympics and saying how it would help us economically after the issues we have just been facing” (Interview 3 – male, 22/09/19). Again, related perspectives obtained in May 2020 are coloured with references to COVID-19: “The Olympics may offer potential, time will tell. But it looks at this stage like uncertainty, thanks to Corona. The expense remains, but much of the projected income mightn’t materialise, especially tourism” (Interview 14 – male, 22/05/20).

On a national level, other frames of reference with significant human, social and financial consequences have impacted public consciousness. The 2011 Tōhoku Earthquake was the

most powerful ever recorded in Japan with a magnitude of 9.1, triggering a massive tsunami leading to 21,915 casualties and widespread destruction, including the Fukushima nuclear disaster (Shibata, 2016). One respondent stated: “Some people are really excited and really happy to have the events, but some people have a negative perspective of them... Especially the Olympic Games. In 2013 when the Olympics bidding was finalised and there was public debate, some people, especially in some areas affected by the earthquake in 2011 were unhappy because it was only two years after the disaster” (Interview 2 – female, 01/09/19). As another respondent noted: “These people affected by the nuclear plant meltdown, they just abandoned their houses... There is still so many people living in that kind of temporary accommodation provided by the government. The recovery process is still not finished”. (Interview 4 – male, 01/10/19).

The perceived prioritisation of first order SMEs over the provision of basic services was discussed by another participant, who also claimed: “Inequalities effect Japanese people but not tourists... Sports Events are shiny presentations of the best of a country, with any problems brushed under the carpet, temporarily at least” (Interview 10 – male, 19/12/19). Interestingly, such critical sentiment was not expressed in response to COVID-19: “This pandemic is the third one this century after SARS and Ebola, so, not totally unexpected, but certainly the scale is unprecedented. And Japanese people aren’t judging their politicians for not anticipating what no one could have done... Most still want the Olympics to go ahead, perhaps even more than before. It represents hope” (Interview 12 – male, 21/05/20).

Japan’s recession made many citizens wary of public spending, and SMEs are often considered luxury events which rarely fulfil their economical promises (Marshall, 2015). However, as a senior employee in the RWC 2019 organising committee alluded to, many see the economic potential of such events: “For Rugby World Cup 2019, one of the major aspects is the positive economic impact which the tournament will bring. We expect to welcome over 400,000 foreign visitors and will send them out across Japan to twelve host cities that stretch from Hokkaido in the north, to Kyushu in the south... We need these events to boost the economy really and we need to communicate these events properly” (Interview 4 – male, 01/10/2019). This last point relates directly to the essence of both effective nation branding and public

diplomacy, and the associated dependence on effective communication designed to shape public opinion (Kalin, 2011).

Nation branding, public diplomacy and SMEs in Japan

Public diplomacy refers to a form of political persuasion which relies on the mobilisation of strategic communication techniques (Nye, 2008). Nation branding involves adopting strategies to convey a compelling vision for a given nation (Anholt, 1998). In practice, both mechanisms necessitate emphasis on efficient communication and positive manipulation and commodification of specific characteristics (Rookwood, 2019). This includes a country's unique cultural and natural features, and what MacCannell terms from the perspective of tourist motivations "the experience of otherness" (2001, p.380). A contextualisation was offered by the following respondent: "Mount Fuji is the essence of Japan. Its image and outline is everywhere. And so tourists go there to see something recognisable, but different... Its height is challenging but also accessible to climb too" (Interview 9 – male, 18/12/19).

This ties in with nation branding in that the RWC 2019 logo featured "Japanese symbols of Mount Fuji and the flag" (Interview 8 – male, 03/11/19). This respondent suggested that clarity, consistency and simplicity are important components of effective nation branding, creating and communicating symbolism that is "immediately recognisable" (ibid). This corresponds with the work of Fan (2006). As well as the unique characteristics of a country, one interviewee claimed: "It's also important visitors have things that are familiar. Globalisation has created that. Some want to have their favourite coffee in Starbucks, wherever they are. It's about giving the consumer what they want. A combination of things, different and the same to what they're used to" (Interview 9 – male, 18/12/19).

Japan's unique cultural features were utilised for nation branding purposes prior to and during the RWC 2019, including manga art (Kotabe, 2019). As one respondent stated: "I went to Australia before the World Cup and I saw some poster designs of the World Cup which was done in cartoon manga form, which I thought was cool and I thought, yes, it's the best way for us to make people aware of Japanese manga" (Interview 5 – Female, 03/10/19). The following respondents also referred to this connection:

“Sports and manga have a history for generations to promote sport or the culture of sport... Many years ago there was a popular manga about basketball and the number of students wanting to play basketball really increased during that time. I think the World Cup committee knew this and used a lot of manga linked to rugby to try to promote it in like a Japanese way” (Interview 1 – female, 27/08/19). Another respondent noted:

“The Japanese government have been really working to promote this tradition... blending manga together with the Olympic and Paralympic games they are trying to demonstrate this as well. Within the organising committees they have also hired lots of artists... like traditional culture artists and some experts in traditional art and culture, so that they will create some special events... They try to demonstrate some unique culture of Japan during the games” (Interview 3 – male, 22/09/19).

SMEs therefore are important platforms to communicate cultural forms to wider audiences. However, as one respondent contended: “From politicians or those with commercial interests, the point is for this culture to have currency. How does it translate to consumption? How do you know? Can you measure that? These are key questions” (Interview 9 – male, 18/12/19). The same respondent also claimed: “For people that travel to multiple events, you want yours to stand out. For it to be memorable. I think a key part of this branding is just that. Is it memorable?” (ibid). When questioned in the context of COVID-19, one interviewee argued: “In the way that football fans are now watching German football on TV, sports fans will watch the Tokyo Olympics. It’s a challenge, sure, but also an opportunity to show you can organise sport safely, within necessary confinements” (Interview 12 – male, 21/05/20).

Public diplomacy requires listening to the desires and needs of a broad population before enacting specific policies to influence perceptions and relations accordingly (Kalin, 2011). In relation to the 2020(21) Olympics, one respondent referenced changes in language policies in Tokyo to promote and prioritise tourism:

“While Japan has seen tremendous growth in tourism in recent years, 85 per cent of these visitors come from our close neighbours like China, South Korea, Hong Kong. So for decades since the more open door policy, Kokusaika as you mentioned, there has been a strong push towards increasing levels of Japanese people with English speaking abilities, and this has been driven by the government. And in fact they used the Olympic success to

communicate to the public about the need for English, and now you see so many individual Japanese wanting to learn English... They have been putting more and more English signs around Tokyo to help tourists” (Interview 7 – female, 18/10/19).

Similarly, the RWC 2019 organising committee engaged in numerous activities that could be framed as public diplomacy exercises. One respondent referenced a speech given by Akira Shimazu, CEO of the RWC 2019 organising committee, in relation to gay rights: “He [Shimazu] said something like: this is our chance to show that Japan is not intolerant of minority groups, and that bringing the Rugby World Cup to Japan shows how tolerant we are as a nation to all minority groups, be it foreigners or minority sexual groups” (Interview 6 – male, 11/10/19). According to one respondent, such expressive commitment to equality functions to position this event in contrast to recent equivalent SMEs, where the frame of reference can be notable: “If you look at the [football] World Cup, at a state level, the last one [Russia 2018] and the next [Qatar 2022] aren’t exactly associated with tolerance and equality. The diplomacy game is played, but substance is lacking and people see through that. Japan has the chance to be different” (Interview 10 – male, 19/12/19).

Another participant argued that “a key issue is not simply stressing the positive but avoiding the negative” (Interview 9 – male, 18/12/19). This connects with the aforementioned argument about the potential for a host nation to experience soft disempowerment in the pursuit of soft power; in public diplomacy terms this can potentially be manifest in the unwelcome experience of high profile incidents. The possibility of such occurrences was described as “unlikely, but difficult to predict” (Interview 10 – male, 19/12/19). As Rookwood (2019) argues, this could be shaped by broader international relations and their impact on the diplomatic character of SMEs, as Qatar has discovered in relation to the diplomatic crisis in the Gulf region.

A diplomatic incident developed during the RWC 2019 due to the adverse weather conditions, as Typhoon Hagibis threatened to force match cancellations. For the first time in World Cup history, two matches (New Zealand v Italy and England v France) were cancelled on safety grounds. The possibility of Japan’s pivotal pool match against Scotland suffering the same fate led to Scottish Rugby’s chief executive Mark Dodson insisting they would not become

“collateral damage”, claiming he was prepared to take legal action if the match was called off (France 24, 2019). One interviewee stated that this was an example of a “diplomatic incident with financial implications” (Interview 10 – male, 19/12/19). However, he also argued: “This issue was really about rugby executives arguing and didn’t really reflect badly on the Japanese. But the typhoon might put tourists off in future” (ibid).

As alluded to throughout the article, the more pressing concern that has developed since the original 11 interviews were conducted is that of COVID-19. This pandemic has seen individual governmental responses taking precedent over many international bodies such as sport organisations, as highlighted in the examples alluded to in the introduction. Several forthcoming first order sports mega events have been postponed, including the UEFA European Championships (originally due to be staged across 12 cities in June and July 2020) and of course the Tokyo Olympics. Although a fluid situation, at the time of writing both events are tentatively planned for the summer of 2021, with the situation constantly changing and organisational alterations likely (Parnell, Widdop, Bond and Wilson, 2020). On 24 March 2020 the Tokyo 2020 countdown clock showed there were 122 days to go until the opening ceremony. As of the following day, the clock switched to simply display the current date and time (McCurry, 2020).

Experts have warned that COVID-19 is potentially dangerous to all people, but particularly those with underlying health conditions and elderly populations (Parnell, Widdop, Bond and Wilson, 2020). As previously discussed, Japan faces longstanding socio-economic issues of population decline and ageing. Hence, as with many countries, Japan’s health system has been severely tested in its attempts to manage the health crisis effectively (BBC, 2020). Shinzo Abe has been criticised for Japan’s response to the pandemic, with many feeling that the strain now put on the Japanese healthcare system could cripple the already fragile economy, stretched by hosting two SMEs in as many years (Mark, 2020). However, two of the respondents interviewed in May 2020 argued that the Olympics offers ‘opportunity’ as well as ‘challenges’:

“The world will be looking for creative and effective solutions to the massive problems presented by Corona. Incredible challenge. But imagine showing the world how to respond. How to do normal life, sport, tourism. Japan has the opportunity to lead the way, and

everyone will be watching. In the meantime, it can learn from the tentative experience of other domestic and international competitions” (Interview 13 – male, 22/05/20).

There may be opportunities for a new form of public diplomacy and nation branding in light of COVID-19, an aside from the “global obsession with finding a vaccine” (Interview 12 – male, 21/05/20). The 2020 Tokyo Marathon took place on 1 March, albeit without the expected 38,000 runners and many more spectators, but with approximately 200 elite runners and wheelchair athletes (McCarthy, 2020). As one respondent argued, the Japanese authorities therefore “already have some experience of hosting a modified sporting event in a crisis, albeit on a much smaller scale. And they were quite clever in how this was portrayed on social media” (Interview 12 – male, 21/05/20).

Kihara (2020) argues that Abenomics is under threat, that as COVID-19 continues to spread, so too does the uncertainty facing Japan’s economy. He calls for a reversal of the tax rise introduced by Shinzo Abe as part of his plan to revive the Japanese economy in the first place. The economic situation is compounded by the expectation to still deliver the Olympic Games, which is likely to be a modified version, incurring previously unforeseen expenditure in terms of health protection, with reduced income compared to what was projected in relation to tourism, for instance. One interviewee contextualised the current dilemma: “Japan held a World Cup nine months after 9/11, when people thought travel would change forever. Now it must host the Olympics in the shadow of Corona. People went to the World Cup. As for the Olympics, time will tell. Maybe it will come too soon, but Japan will recover” (Interview 13 – male, 22/05/20).

The “evolving Corona situation” as one interviewee framed it, will depend on “how governments act, how the virus behaves and how people behave” (Interview 12 – male, 21/05/20). However, it is likely that COVID-19 will still present serious challenges to global economies in the summer of 2021, and beyond. The slow economic growth which Shinzo Abe’s government have attempted to manage may have fallen into sharp decline by the time the Tokyo Olympics is eventually staged. As Szerovay and Adeosun (2020) argue however, in any wreckage there is often salvage. Early signs of salvage can be seen in the form of the Tokyo Organising committee’s commitment to continue with their public diplomacy and

branding messages, avoiding the costs of significantly amending branding for the event, striving to maintain control of the narrative mediated in the press and on social media, and continuing to encourage positive reflections of SMEs in Japan.

Conclusion

By hosting two SMEs in quick succession – the 2019 Rugby World Cup and the Tokyo Olympics now planned for 2021 – Japan has positioned sport as a central focus of its political, cultural and economic development. The infrastructural investment required in staging such high profile events – although not a feature of this article – is evidence of a clear prioritisation in policy. Some analysts and commentators have been critical of the expenditure of public money for SMEs, particularly in light of a global financial crisis and economic downturn (He, Zhu, Cai and Li 2020), not to mention an unprecedented health crisis. As the findings of this paper suggest, ‘currency’ potential is an important feature, and the manner in which a given host nation engages in public diplomacy and nation branding may shape the extent to which such engagements are considered profitable and otherwise successful. Post-2021, applying metrics such as income generated, sponsorship revenues and increases in tourism rates and expenditure may prove useful means of analysing the impact of such events. In the case of Japan, and this paper written in the gap between two SMEs therein, the impact remains to be seen. Data from key individuals within TIAS, JSA and JPC as well as sports journalists have proven useful in highlighting perspectives of the relationship between RWC 2019, Tokyo 2020(21), public diplomacy and nation branding. The economic climate remains a key lens through which SMEs can be examined, given the extent of financial investment involved.

Academic research on SMEs in Japan remains relatively limited, with much of the existing body of work focusing on mass media, for instance (Horne 2005). Some of this research is now somewhat dated, understandably so as it reflected upon the 2002 FIFA Men’s World Cup, and the economics and politics of managing SMEs has altered significantly since. Our paper demonstrates the importance of contingency planning for unforeseen circumstances, including the potential to modify events if required. It also highlights the significance of communication and collaboration between key agencies, and the relevance of social media platforms in shaping public perception of those who consume and understand a given SME through a screen rather than in person. Given that organised elite sport is likely to occur

without large groups of spectators for some time, the former will be the rule and the latter the exception, at least for the short term future. As Guajardo (2016) notes, SMEs create opportunities for a new cultural narrative for Japan, which can only be effectively measured post-2021. This might include the extent of any significant shift in public perception of people who might be perceived as outsiders, including minority sexual groups, women and foreign nationals. Therefore, whether the public diplomacy and nation branding strategies employed by Japan prove successful will partly depend on the accumulative perceptions outsiders retain after these events.

Given the current circumstances, future research into sporting contexts in Japan and elsewhere should consider the economic and political implications of COVID-19 in shaping future events and their legacies thereafter. Of particular concern will be associated public health and safety, and the analysis and mitigation of risk, for athletes, volunteers, organisers, media personnel and other demographics involved. As many of those borders currently close begin to open, access to and travel between countries may prove cautionary, selective and politicised, which in turn could inhibit the equality of access to international sporting competition, and future work should examine how these processes and relations take shape.

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