

Polysemy and Olympic Audiences: lessons for sport marketing

Laurence Chalip

Griffith University



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One of the most commented upon features of the Olympic Games is the scope and magnitude of the audience they obtain. Simply put, the Olympic Games attract an audience that is larger and more inclusive than any other sport event. Consequently, there has been substantial effort to learn from the Games in order to market other events more effectively.

During the 1980s and 1990s, that effort generated a substantial body of research by anthropologists and communications researchers. The core findings of that research were synthesised into a general theory: the theory of polysemic structures. The theory holds that the Olympic Games attract the attention they do because the Games offer a array of potential meanings to audiences. Thus, there are multiple pathways into Olympic interest, each of which may be particularly appealing to one or more audience segments. As the viewer becomes interested through one of these pathways, other sources of meaning become more salient, and interest can be enhanced.

The theory holds that the polysemic character of the Olympic Games is made possible by: (1) multiple narratives, (2) embedded genres, and (3) layered symbols. It is argued that these three elements can be built into other (i.e., non-Olympic) events. Recent research suggests that doing so can enhance their appeal.

This contribution begins by briefly reviewing the elements of narrative, genre, and symbol. It then summarises an empirical test of the theory. It goes on to give an example of a practical application. The contribution concludes by suggesting directions for future research and practice.

Multiple narratives

The concept of multiple narratives recommends providing an array of different stories, each of which can act as a “hook” into a sport event. Too often event promoters (including media) put forward too small an array of stories – sometimes focusing on a single story about a rivalry or an outcome. However, examination of Olympic narratives reveals that many different stories are told, each capable of appealing to a particular market segment. What characterises these stories is that they are structured in ways that symbolise existentially important concerns of the target markets. This may include symbolic linkages of athlete personality to achievement, retellings in the sport context of classic myths (e.g., David vs. Goliath), or the framing of symbolic oppositions (e.g., heroism vs. prudence, honour vs. safety, strength vs. intelligence, nature vs. nurture). The challenge for sport marketers (and sport media) is to develop and promote a broad array of stories that can be associated with the event – each of which carries with it subtle (but significant to the target market segment) symbolic content.

Embedded genres

The concept of embedded genres notes that a sport event can be much more than merely the sport competition itself. In addition to sport, two other genres need to be provided: festival and spectacle. Too often, event organisers focus entirely on providing “good sport”, and consequently pay inadequate attention to these two additional genres. Research demonstrates that successful events provide substantial opportunity for social interaction and ancillary (non-sport) entertainment (i.e., festival and spectacle).

There has been a growing research interest in the role of festival. For example, at events designed to attract participants, the opportunity to parade and celebrate the subculture that participants share has been found to be important. This can also be true in spectator events, where a shared subculture of interest (e.g., motorcycling) or fandom may be a significant source of attraction for attendees, as well as for viewers of telecasts. (It has also been suggested that this is a vital source of attraction for sport volunteers!) Thus, it is important to provide opportunities for social interaction, particularly through a festival atmosphere.

Spectacular entertainment is provided as an adjunct to some events – such as, half-time shows or fireworks displays. Olympics research suggests that these can be useful. The research also suggests the value of spectacular opening and/or closing ceremonies.

Layered symbols

Outside the Olympic context, there has been only limited interest in the role that symbols play in audience interest. However, there has been substantial work showing that the meanings obtained through sport are vital sources of audience interest. Meanings are made significant to audiences through symbols.

The Olympic Movement makes substantial (and intentional) use of symbols to generate meanings for its audiences. Olympic symbols include logos, colours, awards, banners, flags, uniforms, and anthems. What is important about these symbols is that they are not merely present; each is juxtaposed with others – layered – to engender a sense of the sacred.

Although sports marketers outside the Olympic context make some use of symbols (particularly logos and colours), there has been inadequate attention to the elaboration of symbols, and very little thought given to their syntactical placement into events. This is something the Olympic Games have done very well; it is a new frontier for most other sport events.

Empirical Evidence

Although there has been substantial research over the past decade into each of the three elements (i.e., narratives, genres, and symbols) singly, there has been scant research into all three simultaneously. Further, most of the work that has been undertaken has been sociological in nature, and has therefore not tested the marketing relevance of the theory. Consequently, the theory was tested on two samples of the American television audience for the Olympic Games – 491 following the 1994 Winter Olympic Games, and 353 following the 1996 Summer Olympic Games.

Respondents indicated the amount of time they spent watching Olympic telecasts (an indication of volume of watching). They also indicated whether they organised their free time in order to watch the Games (an indication of effort), and the number of sources of information (radio, newspaper, friends, etc.) that they used to follow the Games. In addition, they were asked to specify their interest in two forms of narrative, the genres of sport and of spectacle, and two sources of symbols.

Results are summarised below in terms of the three dependent variables: hours of viewing, effort to view, and number of sources of information used. All reported results are statistically significant at the .05 level or better.

Hours of viewing

For the Summer Olympics, an interest in sport and an interest in symbols generated substantially more viewing. Respondents who were interested in sports not typically shown on television reported watching 8 hours more of the Summer Olympics than were watched by those who did not share in interest in sports from outside the media mainstream. Similarly respondents with an interest in layered symbols (as represented in the victory ceremonies) reported watching 5½ more hours of the Summer Games than were watched by those who did not share that interest.

For the Winter Olympics, the impacts were more complex. Interest in the sport genre, symbols (as layered in the victory ceremonies), and narratives about the personal lives of athletes worked synergistically to increase viewing. An interest in any one of these increased viewing by 4½ hours. However, an interest in any two or all three of these elements increased viewing by an additional 8 hours.

In the case of the Winter Olympics, the sport genre and the spectacle genre also worked synergistically. An interest in spectacle increased females' viewing by 7½ hours and men's viewing by 8½ hours. An interest in both genres increased men's viewing by another 6½ hours.

Effort made to watch the Games

During the Summer Olympics, an interest in narratives about athletes with a chance to win a medal increased the effort that respondents made to watch. An interest in narratives about the personal lives of athletes increased the effort that women made to watch, but not the effort made by men. On the other hand, an interest in the sport genre and interest in narratives about the personal lives of athletes worked synergistically for men; when both were present, men made significantly more effort to watch than when they were interested in only one of the two.

In the Winter Olympics, an interest in the sport genre, in narratives about the personal lives of athletes, and in symbols (as layered in the victory ceremonies) acted synergistically. An interest in any one of these increased the effort made to watch. An interest in two or three of these substantially increased the effort made to watch.

Sources of information

For the Summer Games, respondents who reported an interest in sports not typically shown on television used one more source of information on average than was used by respondents not reporting that interest. Further, an interest in narratives about the personal lives of athletes and the layering of symbols (in the victory ceremonies) worked synergistically, such that when both were present there was a substantial increase in the number of sources of information used to follow the Games.

During the Winter Olympics, interest in the sport genre and in the spectacle genre worked synergistically.

Men who reported no interest in the sport or spectacle genres reported use of 3.7 sources of information on average. However, when they were interested in either or both, they reported use of 4.4 sources of information. Women with an interest in neither reported use of 3.4 sources of media. If they reported an interest in sport or spectacle (but not both), the number of sources used was only 3.6. However women who reported an interest in both used an average of 4.6 sources of media.

Discussion

These findings are consistent with the polysemic model. Interest in narratives, genres, and symbols increased viewing, effort to watch, and/or the number of sources of media used to follow the Games. Further, much of the impact was synergistic such that combinations of these had an impact that was more than merely additive. Nevertheless, the pattern of effects was somewhat different for men than for women, and was somewhat different for the Winter Olympics than for the Summer Olympics. This suggests the need to map sources of impact for different events and for different market segments.

Example of Application

One of the concerns that is most commonly voiced about the theory of polysemic structures is that it is somewhat abstract. Applications are not derived through simple exercise of the formula; rather they require creative reasoning. This is illustrated by the effort to obtain public support in Australia for Syd Fischer's America's Cup entry – a yacht that was initially named "Sunshine".

The syndicate behind the yacht needed to raise AUS\$3 million in order to mount the America's cup campaign. They had two months to do it, but could not interest Australian corporations. The boat's marketing consultants re-launched the boat using tactics that blended narratives, genres, and symbols in the manner prescribed by the theory.

The marketing firm began by creating a spectacle and a festival to capture media attention and public interest. The boat's launch took place on dry land at an official unveiling in the middle of Sydney. In the weeks leading up to the launch, the boat was placed on public display in a high traffic plaza in the middle of the city. The spectacle was created largely by the size of the boat (16 stories tall and 30 tons). On the day of the official unveiling, a festival was added by including cheerleaders, bands, balloons, ribbons, and celebrities. Tens of thousands of people came to watch.

In the build-up to the launch/unveiling, two narratives were fostered. First, since the technology of the keel was thought to be vital to the speed of an America's Cup yacht, the keel became a core symbol around which the launch was constructed. While the boat was on display prior to the official launch, the keel was hidden behind a skirt on which the words "Sydney's Secret Weapon" were painted. To fuel speculation and enhance the resulting narrative, armed guards and guard dogs were placed on duty around the boat's keel. This did more than foster the melodramatic narrative; it also enhanced the spectacle.

Second, the marketing firm dropped the boat's original name, "Sunshine." The boat would now be named at the time of the launch/unveiling. Media throughout Australia were targeted to fuel speculation about the

name. At the same time, substantial market research was done to determine the symbols associated with America's Cup yachting. The research found that Australians felt that America's Cup yachts are toys of the rich. This stood as a barrier to public support. Various names were tested to determine which might symbolise the boat as a yacht of the people.

At the launch, there was an audible gasp when the new name, "Steak 'n Kidney," was unveiled – a name popularly associated with a pie that has working class origins. The yachting establishment denounced the name, but the public loved it. The resulting debates generated additional media and, symbolically, the yacht became the entry of average Australians, who proceeded to donate the funds necessary to support the yacht's campaign.

This example illustrates the ways in which narratives, genres, and symbols can be made to work together to generate audience interest (and purchase behaviours). The re-launch of Syd Fischer's yacht combined the genres of spectacle and festival. These were associated with two associated narratives – one about the yacht's "secret" technology and one about the yacht's name. The narratives were supported by two key symbols: the yacht's keel and the yacht's name. It is instructive to note that these elements were blended together into a seamless whole. The spectacle and the festival were made meaningful by the narratives; the narratives depended on the symbolisms of keel and name, the symbols and narratives were made tangible by the spectacle and the festival.

Concluding Observations

The theory of polysemic structures provides a coherent synthesis of what is known about the fascination that audiences from different cultures, different social classes, and of different genders have for the Olympic Games. Although the theory is abstract, the tools it suggests provide useful bases from which to apply some marketing imagination – as the example of the re-launch of Syd Fischer's yacht aptly illustrates. Nevertheless, it is also clear that the choice of narrative, the uses of symbol, and the construction of genres must depend to some degree on the nature of the target market, and the knowledge, values, and beliefs they bring to the event.

Clearly, the marketing imagination that is applied when using the theory needs to be informed by well-grounded marketing research (as in the case of the re-launch of the yacht). All-too-often, marketing research focuses merely on standard demographics and psychographics. The formulation of marketing research needs, itself, to be more creative – providing an opportunity to explore the background audiences bring to an event, and to test audience reactions to particular symbols or narratives.

The ubiquity of interactions in the empirical study is important. Nearly all of the current work on narratives, genres, and symbols has examined each in isolation from the other. Yet, narratives, genres, and symbols seem to work jointly. More work is needed to identify effective means to blend the three together, and to identify how each target market segment's values, beliefs, expectations, and knowledge may condition the impact that particular combinations have.

There is also room for work examining the ways that narratives, genres, and symbols can be used by sponsors to leverage their sponsorship investment. In what ways can narratives be blended into promotions or sponsor advertising associated with an event? How can genres be used more effectively by sponsors, for example through hospitality, product trial, or added exposure through media? How can symbols be used more effectively in sponsors' advertising campaigns – particularly through layering? How can these elements be blended?

Sport marketing research and practice have, so far, been too superficial in their orientation. The important symbolic role of sport – the meanings that sport conveys to different audiences in different ways – has not been taken seriously enough. The theory of polysemic structures challenges sport marketers to make use of the well-established insight that sport obtains its power through the emotional associations it facilitates. Sport marketers need to become more creative at tapping that emotion. Multiple narratives, embedded genres, and layered symbols provide useful pathways .