QATAR WORLD CUP 2022: AWARENESS OF THE EVENT AND ITS IMPACT ON DESTINATION AND COUNTRY CHARACTER PERCEPTIONS IN THE US TOURISM MARKET

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This study examined how awareness levels of hosting the 2022 World Cup in Qatar changed perceptions of Qatar's destination image, country character, and neighboring destinations' images. Data were collected through Amazon Mechanical Turk, an online consumer panel comprised of people residing in the US with an Amazon.com account and willing to participate in the surveys. The results revealed that higher awareness of the 2022 World Cup being hosted in Qatar improved host destination image perceptions, selective regional country perceptions, country character and relevant behaviors to either travel to Qatar for vacation, for interest to travel to attend the event, or to watch the event on TV. Implications involve strategies to create higher awareness for the destination using the mega-sport event platform for promotions.

Key words: 2022 Qatar; World Cup; Country character; Destination image; Tourism

Introduction

Mega-sport events such as the World Cup and the Olympic Games are frequently cited as the main ingredient of development in terms of infrastructure, destination image perceptions, and intangible impacts for the city and nation that hosts the event (Fredline, Jago, & Deery 2003; Kaplanidou & Karadakis, 2010; Lee, Lee, & Lee, 2005; Swart & Bob, 2007). Qatar has the opportunity to host such a mega-sport event for the first time in the Middle

East Region as announced by FIFA in December 2010. The bid for the 2022 World Cup specifically targeted destination and regional image changes. This claim was stated by the Chairman of the Qatar 2022 Bid Committee Sheikh Mohammed bin Hamad Al Thani who said:

> The economic benefit will be substantial for every country in the Middle East. It will be a huge platform towards changing the Islamic and Middle East's perception of the outside world. I truly

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believe that football—and people might think it's an extravagant claim—plants the seeds for an open, more accepting world towards other cultures, and that in itself will create and pave the way for the future. (Time Out Doha, 2010)

From the other side, FIFA suggests the importance of the event for the Middle East. Specifically, it was noted that: "It will come for the first time to a region brimming with sporting potential and passion. More than 435 million Middle Easterners will be waiting for the Game in 2022" (FIFA, n.d.). Additionally, these mega-sport events can also be viewed as political and social mechanisms where cohesion and pride for the nation are claimed to manifest (Hiller, 2000; Waitt, 2003; Zhou & Ap, 2009) many times through the exposure of the country's image to the world (Kaplanidou, Jordan, Funk, & Ridinger, 2012). A study by Teed (2006) discussed the relationship between sport tourism and mega-events in more detail providing thoughts on how these events can connect to tourism development. Many times, the primary hope of event organizers is putting the country on the map and creating an awareness of the destination (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007). Based on a study by Milman and Pizam (1995), awareness about a destination and its tourism product is a critical step for future tourism interest and behavior. When it comes to mega-events, many times awareness of the host place is low. A study by Ritchie and Smith (1991) on the impact of awareness of the Olympic Games on destination image showed that the closer to the event date (e.g., Olympic Games) people were asked about the destination, the higher the awareness of the host destination. Other variables such as interest in watching the Olympic Games create higher saliency of certain image perceptions of the host country (Li & Kaplanidou, 2013) among leisure travelers and they need to be considered when assessing destination image perceptions. Although the Li and Kaplanidou (2013) study was quite informative about the destination image perceptions from the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games it did not examine how awareness of the mega-sport event impacted perceptions related not only to the host city image, but also the region (e.g., Asia) before the Olympic Games took place.

Besides destination image, perceptions about the country's character is an important variable to consider given the potential of this variable to influence a decision to travel to that country or include the country in the consideration set of consumers for future travel (Nadeau, Heslpo, O'Reilly, & Luk, 2008). Taken together, this study aims to explore the importance of awareness of a mega-sport event for the host country and the region especially among long haul tourism markets such as the US, where familiarity levels about the country of Qatar can be low. Specifically, this study explores how different levels of awareness of hosting the 2022 World Cup in Qatar influence host country destination image perceptions, host country character perceptions, and destination image perceptions of the regionally close countries in the Middle East region among international leisure travelers. Furthermore, the study examines the influence of awareness levels on tourism behaviors among people from a long haul tourism market for Qatar: the US. Accordingly, the study's research questions (RQs) are the following:

RQ1: How do different levels of awareness of the Qatar 2022 World Cup change Qatar's destination image perceptions, country character perceptions, and relevant sport and tourism behaviors among people from long haul tourism markets such as the US?

RQ2: How do different levels of awareness of Qatar hosting the 2022 World Cup influence regional and neighboring countries destination image perceptions (spillover effects)?

Literature Review

The Role of Awareness in Tourism Behaviors

Consumers go through various stages when it comes to decision making about a product or experience. These stages can be summarized as awareness, interest, desire, and action, which is known as the AIDA model (Kotler, 2002). Obviously, awareness is a key step in establishing and further processing information related to a consumption decision. Similarly, the importance of product awareness was underlined by Russ and Kirkpatrich (1982), who suggested a similar model of consumer behavior to that of AIDA. This similar model consisted of five elements that consumers go through when they are

buying new products. These included the four elements in AIDA and "reaction" as the last element. Ehrenberg and Goodhart (1989) suggested a model of consumer behavior that has three stages of consuming: awareness, trial, and repeat buying (ATR). In all models awareness is the key first step for further deliberations in decision making.

Most importantly and relevant to this study, research by Ritchie and Smith (1991) explored the impact of a mega-event on the awareness levels and perceptions of the host city in global markets and how these awareness levels and perceptions changed 3 years prior to the event, and 1 year after. The researchers found that the awareness levels for the mega-sport event was lower 3 years before the event, compared to higher regional image perceptions during the event, and declining image perceptions after a short period of time postevent. Another outcome of this study was that any increased awareness was relevant to the improvement of the overall socioeconomic level of the host city (Ritchie & Smith, 1991). Interestingly, in a study by Milman and Pizam (1995), awareness of a destination and its characteristics did not play a role in forming positive tourist intentions. In summary, based on the literature reviewed so far the role of awareness in destination image perceptions is very important. However, it is unclear how awareness of a tourism attraction such as a mega-sport event can impact the images of the destination and neighboring countries as well as tourists' interest and intentions.

Destination Image and its Influence by Mega-Sport Event Hosting

One of the main promises of a mega-sport event is that it will improve the destination image of the host country (Li & Kaplanidou, 2013). The destination image definition includes the sum of beliefs and impressions a person has of a destination (Crompton, 1979). Crompton's (1979) definition focused primarily on people's cognition about a place. Many studies discuss another type of image—the affective image. Affective image reflects one's emotion or feelings toward the destination (e.g., Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997; Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Walmsley & Young, 1998). Also, a number of researchers mentioned one more type of image—the conative image—which captures the behavioral dimension

of the destination image (Dann, 1996; Gartner, 1996; Pike & Ryan, 2004). The studies above reflect early literature on destination image and its impacts and antecedents. There are more recent studies that have examined how destination image forms and its influence and interrelationship with relevant tourist behaviors (e.g., revisit intentions of tourists), satisfaction, and word of mouth (Chi & Qu, 2008; Hallmann & Breuer, 2010; Kaplanidou, 2009; Li & Kaplanidou, 2013; San Martín & Rodríguez del Bosque, 2008; Stepchenkova & Morrison, 2008; Tasci & Gartner, 2007). Based on the tourism and sports marketing literature, researchers have highlighted that mega-sport events such as the Olympic Games, the FIFA World cup, and the Super Bowl, can generate worldwide awareness (Gibson, Qi, & Zhang, 2008; Lee et al., 2005; Ritchie & Smith, 2005). Chalip and Costa (2005) found that these mega-sport events can evoke some unique images associated with each event by sports consumers.

This idea of unique images was further reinforced by Kaplanidou (2010), who found that active sport event participants processed the imagery of the sport event around a number of image dimensions related to the event and destination, as well as social, emotional, physical (e.g., activity related), and organizational aspects. The importance of the destination image for recurring sport events in a destination is also evident in a recent study by Kaplanidou et al. (2012), where event characteristics become part of the destination image profile. Taken together, the literature above suggests that destination image perceptions can be influenced by hosting sport events, especially when these are mega-sport events. However, the way in which different levels of awareness of a mega-event at the host destination country influence the host destination image perceptions, travel interests, and behaviors of international leisure travelers is lacking in the literature.

As Gibson et al. (2008) found, mega-events can attract many tourists from different parts of the world to the region of the event, and this can influence their perception of the image of the destination. Specifically, it has been mentioned that sport events are tourist attractions (Chalip & Costa, 2005; Kaplanidou, 2007, 2009). A study by Kaplanidou (2010) found that sport event image perceptions among sport event tourists interrelate

with destination image perceptions. Therefore, destinations can use sport events as tourism product boosters through the promotion of organizational, social, emotional, physical, and environmental event elements to construct relevant branding images for their destination. The latter results further reinforce the idea that there is an interrelationship between the destination image and the sport event image. Specifically, Kaplanidou and Vogt (2007) found that there was a positive impact of sport event image on destination image and subsequently on sport event tourists' travel intentions. Given that the World Cup is often considered a tourism attraction for the country that hosts it, there is high probability that awareness of the sport event being hosted in country could influence positively the host destination image.

Perceptions About Destination and Distance From the Country

The tourism literature discusses the differences in cognitive destination image perceptions among tourists who came from different parts of the world (Hunt, 1975; Nicolau & Mas, 2006). It would be important to mention that Scott, Schewe, and Frederick (1978) found that people who lived in a different geographic area other than the place of study perceived certain destination image attributes differently. For instance, they perceived the people were friendlier, there were more cultural opportunities, less commercialization, and it was a more relaxing place. Likewise, Crompton (1979) found that respondents from distant geographic areas had more positive images of the destination under study.

From an international market perspective, Hui and Wan (2003) found that tourists from different countries and continents had significantly different image perceptions about local residents, nightlife, and local culture of the country under study. As Kaplanidou (2009) discussed certain aspects of a mega-sport event and host destination image are different among sport event tourists from different geographic areas. The literature above suggests that perceptions from long-haul tourism markets may be less positive toward distant destinations that host mega-events. However, with the presence of a mega-event at the destination and high awareness of the event taking place there the

destination image perceptions can be improved (Li & Kaplanidou, 2013). Thus, we suggest that awareness of a mega-event being hosted in a distanced country can change these perceptions among long-haul tourism markets.

Country Character

Many times, country of origin is important for the evaluation of a "product" (Nadeau et al., 2008). This evaluation of the country can affect a person's values, behavioral intentions, and attitudes (Nadeau et al., 2008). Triandis (1972) discussed that political, social institutions, language, religion, history, and many other ideals become part of a cultural profile. The cultural profile of either the tourist or the host country of a mega-event can interact with destination image perceptions as well (Kaplanidou, 2009). Several scholars found that perceptions about the country can influence familiar destination cognitive image traits (Govers, Go, & Kumar, 2007; MacKay & Fesenmaier, 2000).

The notion of country image has recently become of relevance in the tourism literature (Nadeau et al., 2008). The very first study that defined the country image was by Nagashima (1970). Nagashima defined country image as the "picture, the reputation, the stereotype that businessmen and consumers attach to the products of a specific country. This image is created by such variables as representative products, national characteristics, economic and political background, history and traditions" (p. 68). A critical component of a country's image is its country character given its direct predictive ability of tourists' destination evaluations and its indirect impact on travel intentions (Nadeau et al., 2008). Studies by a few scholars have found that the power of country of origin on consumption behavior has been linked to establishing country characteristics in consumers' mindsets. Specifically, the country character is related to political, economic, and cultural characteristics of the products' country (Baughn & Yaprak, 1993; Ozsomer & Cavusgil, 1991; Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999).

A study by Nadeau et al. (2008) suggested a country image model that built on the field of tourism destination image based on the three components of attitude theory—the cognitive, the affective, and the conative. Within the cognitive

component nests the country character concept. The key elements of the country character as applied in the Nadeau (2008) study were the quality of life, the rights and freedoms, the wealth, the environmental pollution controls, the role of the country in world politics, and its political stability. Moreover, Roth and Diamantopoulos (2009) found that the country beliefs can be shaped based on some dimensions. Specifically, these dimensions cover a country facet (e.g., politics, economy, technology, culture, and environment) and a people side (e.g., creativity, standard of living, training, labor, and competence). Min Han (2009) found that consumers who are familiar with a country's products may use the country image as a summary construct that sums up consumers' opinion about the product traits. Taken together, we believe that there is higher probability that country character perceptions will be influenced by higher levels of awareness about the country that hosts a mega-event such as the World Cup. Taken together the previous literature leads us to the following hypotheses:

H1: Higher awareness of the hosting of the 2022 World Cup in Qatar will create higher destination image perceptions than lower awareness among long-haul tourism markets (US).

H2: Higher awareness of the hosting of the 2022 World Cup in Qatar will create higher country character perceptions than lower awareness among long-haul tourism markets (US).

H3: Higher awareness of the hosting of the 2022 World Cup in Qatar will create higher intentions to travel to the area than lower awareness among long-haul tourism markets (US).

H4: Higher awareness of the hosting of the 2022 World Cup in Qatar will create higher destination image perceptions of neighboring countries than lower awareness among long-haul tourism markets (US).

H5: Higher awareness of the hosting of the 2022 World Cup in Qatar will create higher intentions to watch the event on TV than lower awareness among long-haul tourism markets (US).

H6: Higher awareness of the hosting of the 2022 World Cup in Qatar will create higher intentions to travel to Qatar to attend the 2022 World Cup than lower awareness among long-haul tourism markets (US).

Method

The data for this study were collected in September 2013 through Amazon Mechanical Turk, an online consumer panel comprised of people that maintain an amazon.com account and are willing to complete online surveys for compensation that credits their amazon.com account. Although this panel in its entirety has been discussed to resemble the US population profile (Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012), respondent sample profiles that complete specific online surveys may not resemble the US population, thus creating a more purposive sample. A web survey was used to collect the data and rewarded participants 75 cents for their complete responses to all the survey questions. The number of respondents was set to 300, which allowed for the first 300 people who saw the web survey link and were willing to participate to complete the survey. A number of screening questions were used to evaluate the respondents' profile. The respondents had to be leisure travelers with some international travel experience. Thus, screening questions such as "have you ever traveled outside the US, and have you taken a leisure trip in the past 12 months?" were asked in the front part of the survey. In addition, a screening question was included to assess respondents' attention to the question wording to assure data validity. The respondents had to select a specific answer after given the instruction in the question to make sure they were paying attention and to eliminate acquiescence bias (Dolnicar, 2013). After data cleaning for the erroneous responses documented in the attention question survey, 297 respondents were kept for further analysis.

Measures

The independent variable of the study was level of awareness that the Qatar is hosting the 2022 World cup. One item evaluated the awareness levels of Qatar hosting the World Cup (1 = *not at all aware*, 7 = *extremely aware*). For the dependent variables of the study there were destination image items for Qatar and the neighboring countries, Qatar country character perceptions, and travel interest and intentions items to Qatar described below. The Qatar destination image items included cognitive (14 items) that were evaluated on a 7-point scale (1 = *offers*

very little, 7 = *offer very much*), affective (5 items) that were evaluated on a 7-point semantic differential scale (e.g., 1 = *unpleasant* and 7 = *pleasant*), and 1 item for the overall destination image of Qatar. Overall destination image questions (one question for each of the eight countries in the Middle East region evaluated on a 7-point scale where 1 = *extremely negative*, 7 = *extremely positive*) (Kaplanidou, 2007, 2009). Specifically, the overall destination image perception questions included the following eight countries neighboring or close to Qatar: Egypt, United Arab Emirates, Cyprus, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, and Bahrain. All these destination image items were used to assess the regional (e.g., Middle East) destination image perceptions.

Country character for Qatar was measured with 6 items (e.g., quality of life, rights and freedoms, wealth, environment pollution controls, role in world politics, political stability) that were anchored on a 5-point scale (1 = *very low performance*, 5 = *very high performance*) (Nadeau et al., 2008). The latter items were anchored on 7-point scales where 1 = *extremely negative* and 7 = *extremely positive*. Other items were the traveling intentions to Middle East and Qatar in the next 5 years (1 = *very unlikely*, 5 = *very likely*) and the interest to attend the 2022 World Cup and watch it on TV (1 = *not at all interested*, 5 = *extremely interested*).

Data Analysis

Creation of the Independent Variable

To create a high and a low awareness group we conducted a median split of the responses to a question that asked the respondents how aware they were that Qatar was hosting the 2022 World Cup. The median split involved removing from the grouping those respondents who selected the middle of the scale as their awareness levels. This resulted in the low awareness group to have 219 respondents and the high group 60 respondents. Independent sample *t* tests were estimated to test the hypotheses of the study ($p = 0.05$) with awareness levels being the independent variable and the host and neighboring country destination image, country character, travel intentions, and interest intentions to watch on the event on TV and attend the event as the dependent variables.

Creation of Dependent Variables

To assess the dimensionality of the dependent variables, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using principal component extraction and eigenvalues set to 1 with varimax rotation was undertaken for the 5 affective destination image items, 6 country character items, and 14 cognitive destination image items. The EFA revealed one factor structure for the affective destination image that explained about 75% of the variance and Cronbach's alpha was 0.91. Given the acceptable Cronbach's alpha value, one new variable was created to represent the affective factor by taking the mean of the affective image items in order to include in further analysis. Also, one factor structure was revealed for the country character construct that explained about 57% of the variance and its Cronbach's alpha was 0.85. Given the acceptable Cronbach's alpha value, one new variable was created to represent the country character factor by taking the mean of the country character items in order to include in further analysis. Finally, the cognitive destination image revealed a two-factor structure namely, (a) safety hygiene and tourism product quality, and (b) attractions and value. The results of the EFA are presented in detail in Table 1. From these two cognitive factors two new variables were created by averaging the items for each factor to create one item that represented the cognitive destination image dependent variables.

Hypotheses Testing

To test the hypotheses of the study, the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23 software was used. Independent sample *t* tests were used to examine the differences between awareness levels of the destination groups and the dependent variables of the study. The homogeneity of variance for each of the two groups was assessed through the Levene's test and wherever the homogeneity of variance assumption was not met, the pertinent *p* value (estimated for nonequality of variance) was used.

Results

Demographics

The results of the demographic analysis showed that most of the participants were males (60.8%).

Table 1

Destination Image and Country Character Factor Analysis

Destination Image			M	SD
Affective	**Factor Loadings (Factor M = 3.65, SD = 1.33, Cronbach's = 0.91)**			
Unpleasant–pleasant	0.93		3.65	1.59
Gloomy–cheerful	0.91		3.62	1.48
Unfriendly–friendly	0.89		3.52	1.51
Relaxing–distressing	0.86		4.14	1.67
Exciting–dull	0.70		3.35	1.51
Cognitive	**Safety, hygiene, and tourism product quality (Factor M = 3.79, SD = 1.32, Cronbach's = 0.91)**	**Attractions and value (Factor M = 4.56, SD = 1.39, Cronbach's = 0.80)**		
Personal safety	0.85		3.36	1.75
Standard hygiene & cleanliness	0.84		4.18	1.69
Suitable accommodations	0.82		4.57	1.71
Quality of tourism infrastructure	0.81		3.92	1.68
Good nightlife & entertainment	0.66		3.52	1.65
Great beaches & water sports	0.63		4.09	1.80
Great sport competitions	0.60		3.34	1.63
Unpolluted & unspoiled environment	0.56		3.92	1.51
Beautiful scenery & natural attractions		0.86	4.85	1.71
Interesting cultural & historical attractions		0.84	4.91	1.74
Good value for money		0.71	4.06	1.55
Friendly & interesting people[a]	0.54	0.57	4.14	1.66
Appealing local food (cuisine)[a]	0.50	0.52	4.80	1.66
Good climate[a]	0.44	0.50	3.75	1.75
Country character	**(Factor M = 2.64, SD = 0.80)**			
Quality of life	0.84		2.84	1.15
Political stability	0.82		2.11	0.92
Rights & freedoms	0.76		3.50	1.32
Environment pollution controls	0.75		2.57	1.03
Wealth	0.69		2.35	1.00
Role in world politics	0.64		2.75	1.11

[a]Cross-loaded and dropped.

About a quarter of the sample (25.8%) had income between $40,000 and $59,999 and only 2% had income from $150,000 to $200,000 or more. As far as the educational status of the respondents, the majority of the participants (78%) attended some college or university. Last but not least, most of the participants (76.8%) were White/Caucasian. Table 2 presents the demographic profile of the respondents in more detail.

Hypotheses Testing Results

All results are presented in detail in Table 3 along with the hypotheses numbers representing each dependent variable. The results showed that respondents who had higher awareness of the location of host country of the 2022 World Cup had higher perceptions in most of the dependent variables we tested in this study. These variables were safety, hygiene, and tourism product quality (M_{high} = 4.39, M_{low} = 3.61), affective destination image (M_{high} = 4.01, M_{low} = 3.51), overall Qatar destination image (M_{high} = 4.22, M_{low} = 3.72). Therefore, H1, which hypothesized that all destination images will benefit from higher awareness of the event hosting was mostly supported except for the attractions and value cognitive image perceptions. The respondents in the higher awareness group had higher country character perceptions, which means that H2 was supported (M_{high} = 2.94, M_{low} = 2.52). The H3 stated that higher awareness of the event taking place at the host destination created higher

Table 2

Demographic Statistics of the US Sample Respondents

Demographics	Frequency (n)	%
Gender		
Male	180	60.8
Female	116	39.2
Total	296	100.0
Income		
Less than 20,000	48	16.3
20,000–39,999	82	27.8
40,000–59,999	76	25.8
60,000–79,999	49	16.6
80,000–99,999	21	7.1
100,000–149,999	13	4.4
150,000–199,999	3	1.0
200,000 or more	3	1.0
Total	295	100.0
Education		
Less than high school graduate	3	1.0
High school graduate	35	11.8
Technical college	13	4.4
Some college (no degree)	103	34.7
University	129	43.4
Post graduate	14	4.7
Ethnicity		
White/Caucasian	228	76.8
Black/African American	17	5.7
Asian	24	8.1
Hispanic/Latino	19	6.4
Pacific Islander	1	0.3
Other (please specify)	8	2.7
Total	297	100.0

intentions for travel in Qatar in the next 5 years ($M_{high} = 1.73$, $M_{low} = 1.32$), and in the Middle East in the next 5 years ($M_{high} = 2.22$, $M_{low} = 1.62$). These results suggest that H3 was supported. The H4 suggested that the overall destination images of neighboring countries will be higher for people with higher awareness that Qatar is hosting the 2022 World Cup. Only Kuwait ($M_{high} = 3.97$, $M_{low} = 3.39$) and Turkey ($M_{high} = 4.78$, $M_{low} = 4.19$) saw benefits from the higher awareness of the event being hosted in Qatar (H4 supported only for these two countries). Interest to watch the Qatar World Cup on TV was higher among the high awareness group ($M_{high} = 3.76$, $M_{low} = 2.30$) (thus H5 was supported) and the same held for interest in attending the 2022 Qatar World Cup ($M_{high} = 2.10$, $M_{low} = 1.42$) (thus H6 was supported). No differences were observed in the destination image perceptions of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria, and Bahrain. Table 3 portrays the results of the t tests for all dependent variables

showing clearly the impact of event awareness on most of the variables.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how the awareness of a country hosting a mega-event such as the World Cup influences destination image and country character perceptions, as well as intentions to travel there or follow the event on TV. The results of this study provide empirical support that awareness of a mega-event associated with the host country improves the host destination image perceptions and creates higher destination image perceptions of certain countries in the Middle East region where the event is held. Thus, spillover effects from event hosting on other countries' destination images is not a straight forward benefit based on the data from this study. Furthermore, perceptions about the country character were higher among the high awareness group, which theoretically, based on the data of this study, establishes a connection between high awareness and improvement of country character perceptions.

Most importantly, relevant tourism behaviors to travel there or event-related behaviors such as intentions to watch the event on TV and interest to travel to attend the event were higher in the higher awareness group. Despite differences on the dependent variables based on awareness levels of the 2022 World Cup taking place in Qatar, the results of this study show that there is room for improvement in all variables measured here. The mean scores for the destination image, country character, and intentions were low, which suggests that awareness about the 2022 World Cup can be improved to extract the benefits from such improvement.

Our results contribute to the literature by showing the effect of awareness of a mega-event hosting on a number of dependent variables relevant to perceptions and behavioral intentions among long-haul tourism markets for an emerging tourism destination: The Middle East. To our knowledge, this is the first study that empirically tests how awareness levels before the event takes place influence regional destination image perceptions and also relevant sport event tourist behaviors. Our study not only showed perceptions about destination image elements, but also country character, which

Table 3

Independent *t* Test Results for the Variables of the Study Among High and Low Awareness Groups of US Respondents

| Dependent Variables of the Study | Awareness of Qatar Hosting the 2022 World Cup | | | |
	Lower Awareness *M* (*SD*)	Higher Awareness *M* (*SD*)	*p*	Hypotheses
Cognitive destination image: Safety, hygiene, and tourism product quality[a]	3.61 (1.29)	4.39 (1.27)	<0.001	H1
Cognitive destination image: attractions and value[a]	4.59 (1.37)	4.58 (1.51)	0.96	H1
Affective destination image[a]	3.51 (1.24)	4.01 (1.57)	0.02	H1
Country character perceptions[b]	2.52 (0.76)	2.94 (0.9)	<0.001	H2
Travel to Qatar in the next 5 years[b]	1.32 (0.72)	1.73 (1.27)	<0.001	H3
Travel to the Middle East in the next 5 years[b]	1.62 (0.96)	2.22 (1.30)	<0.001	H3
Destination image perceptions of Egypt[a]	3.85 (1.49)	3.65 (1.69)	0.11	H4
Destination image perceptions of United Arab Emirates[a]	4.03 (1.29)	4.45 (1.69)	<0.001	H4
Destination image perceptions of Cyprus[a]	4.22 (1.08)	4.52 (1.28)	0.02	H4
Destination image perceptions of Qatar[a]	3.72 (1.05)	4.22 (1.66)	<0.001	H4
Destination image perceptions of Kuwait[a]	3.39 (1.30)	3.97 (1.50)	0.37	H4
Destination image perceptions of Saudi Arabia[a]	3.00 (1.36)	3.40 (1.80)	<0.001	H4
Destination image perceptions of Syria[a]	2.16 (1.14)	2.34 (1.50)	<0.001	H4
Destination image perceptions of Turkey[a]	4.19 (1.38)	4.78 (1.49)	0.28	H4
Destination image perceptions of Bahrain[a]	3.61 (1.04)	3.88 (1.50)	<0.001	H4
How interested are you to watch the Qatar World Cup on TV[b]	2.30 (1.48)	3.76 (1.43)	<0.001	H5
How interested are you in attending the 2022 upcoming FIFA QATAR 2022 World Cup?[b]	1.42 (0.82)	2.10 (1.53)	<0.001	H6

Note. [a]7-point scales; [b]5-point scales.

is another emerging construct connected with tourism perceptions. Past literature showed destination image changes from having hosted the event after the event is completed (e.g., Li & Kaplanidou, 2013) and enhanced destination image perceptions during attending the mega-event experience (Kaplanidou, 2007, 2009). This study shows how perceptions about the host destination change based on awareness levels of the event hosting 9 years before the event (when the data were collected). In addition, this is the first study to our knowledge that examines how country character perceptions are influenced by the awareness of the hosting of the mega-sport event in the destination. Country character was significantly influenced from the event awareness suggesting that there is an opportunity to promote political stability, and any issues related to rights and freedoms, the environment, and the wealth Qatar has. Given the country character variable including measures related to perceived rights and freedoms of the country, and given that when it comes to rights and freedoms Qatar has faced criticism about the blue collar worker conditions (Kinninmont, 2013), the World Cup can provide

opportunity to create a communication platform to change perceptions. Similarly, the results from the country character variable suggest that Qatar can leverage the hosting of the World Cup to occupy a more prominent position and role in world politics. Such actions need to be strategically designed to improve the Qatar's country character perceptions in conjunction with the 2022 World Cup.

Practical Implications

This article provides value for sport and tourism industries for countries hosting mega-events and specifically for Qatar. Qatar is planning to invest $20 billion through 2022 (Doherty, 2011). With this budget in mind, awareness campaigns can be designed to target specific destination image and country perceptions. For example, an advertisement campaign in the US about the quality of life in Qatar as experienced by the diverse socioeconomic groups present in the country could further improve perceptions about the country's character. In addition, campaigns about the business development that happens with mega-events can further

boost the country character. Additionally, targeting people who are more aware about the event taking place in a host country with specific destination image messages can assist toward making decisions to actually travel to the country. In addition, the cognitive destination images were not as high in the low awareness group, which suggests that more work is needed to spread awareness to similar markets unaware of the World Cup taking place in Qatar but being interested in leisure travel.

Limitations and Future Research

There are some limitations to be noted for this study. The first one relates to the online sample the respondents were generated from. Although approximating the US population, there should still be concerns about the generalizability of the results from this sample. Thus, caution should be exercised when attempting to project these results in the US population as the sample of this study was not a random sample of the US population. In addition, this study was delimited only to the destination image, country character, and various behaviors. A more holistic approach that includes destination brand personality could also be included in a future research study. Future research can also examine the interplay of country character and destination image to identify the dominant factors in the formation of psychologically and geographically distant sport tourism markets for mega-sport event host countries. Further, future research should compare the perceptions of short-distance tourism markets and long-haul tourism markets to see how distance influences destination image and country character perceptions. In conclusion, this article is showing that awareness mega-sport event hosting can have a significant influence on tourism markets that are not close to emerging tourist destinations.

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