

# Digital image of sports mega-events in the media and social networks

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## Abstract

**Objective of the study** was to analyze the “digital trail” of the International University Sports Festival in Yekaterinburg to determine the factors that form a positive image of future sports mega-events.

**Methods and structure of the study.** During the study, mass interviews of volunteer candidates and content analysis of publications about the Festival in the media and on social networks were carried out. Basic indicators of interviewing: experience and resources for participation in volunteer projects, amount of knowledge about sports mega-events, motivation for participation. Basic indicators of content analysis: number of publications about the Festival, level of publications, tone of publications.

**Results and conclusions.** The effectiveness of a sports mega-event as a soft power largely depends on its presentation in the digital space. When assessing the digital image of a sporting mega-event, the problem is often that the positive tone of official government and official media assessments does not always match the tone of assessments given by non-state media and citizens on social networks. Along with the optimal number of official messages, the “tone” of the individual publications of the organizing participants is of great importance. One of the important transmitters of a positive image are sports volunteers.

**Keywords:** *sports mega-events, new media, digital image, volunteers.*

**Introduction.** Sports mega-events are, first of all, “media events”; it is the prevalence of information about them in the media and social networks that makes them “mega”.

In the 1990s, the philosopher and sociologist P. Bourdieu presented the Olympic Games, on the one hand, as a physical “giant sports spectacle” in which athletes from all over the world participate and compete, and on the other hand, as a “television show” broadcast throughout the world. to the world. And this image, “an ensemble of representations of the first performance” [6, p. 79], created by one of the traditional media, differs from reality.

In the digital society that has developed in our time, “the history of the Olympic movement, as a world-cultural event, also reflects the evolution of information technology” [3, p. 88]. Since the mid-1990s, the relationship between the Olympic Games and the media

has continued to be transformed by digital technology, and this has also affected other sporting mega-events. Their planning, production and consumption are becoming increasingly digital [7, p. 618], they are no longer perceived exclusively through television or visiting stadiums, their image is largely shaped by new media.

The International University Sports Festival (hereinafter referred to as the Festival), which took place in August 2023 in Yekaterinburg, received the status of a sports mega-event in the assessment of official authorities and the media [1, 2, 4]. Whether this status will be consolidated in the works of researchers remains to be assessed; some believe that only stable and repeating sporting events can be classified as mega-events. However, the analysis of the reflection of the Festival in interviews with volunteers and the media seems to us relevant for both the educational and sports communities.



**Objective of the study** was to analyze the “digital trail” of the Festival to determine the factors that form a positive image of future sports mega-events.

**Methods and structure of the study.** The research tasks included determining the image of the Festival in the mass consciousness of volunteers, identifying their socio-psychological positions, and the potential of the media in shaping the image during the Festival.

*Object* – technologies for forming a positive image of the International University Sports Festival.

*Subject* - factors of formation of a positive digital image - media, social networks, volunteer corps as an active actor in the event.

*Basic methods.* The sociological approach was chosen as the main theoretical platform. The empirical base is materials from a two-stage study. 1. Mass interviewing of Festival volunteer candidates (N=2701). Mathematical processing using Vortex.10 software. Basic interviewing indicators: experience and resources for participation in volunteer projects, the amount of knowledge about sports mega-events and the Festival, motivation for participation, socio-psychological characteristics, possible positions at the Festival. 2. Content analysis of publications of materials about the Festival in the media and on social networks. Basic indicators of content analysis: number of publications about the Festival by days, level of publication (regional, federal, international), tone of publications (positive, neutral, negative). The operator of the field stage is the UrFU volunteer center “Volunteers of the Urals”.

**Results of the study and discussion.** The new digital media environment is more pluralistic, and “digitalization” itself, as researchers note, is an integral characteristic of social reality [5, p. 267]. In the modern socio-cultural space, sports mega-events are capable of influencing the economic and social development of territories more strongly than in previous periods, positively influencing social processes

at various levels - from local to global, acting as “soft power”.

State and municipal authorities, large corporations, as well as large developers and representatives of the hospitality industry are primarily interested in holding mega-events. Higher educational institutions also see certain benefits from holding mega sports events in Russia.

But when assessing the digital image of a sports mega-event, the problem often lies in the fact that the positive tone of official assessments by the government and a narrow group of political and business elites does not always coincide with the tone of assessments given by non-state media and residents themselves on social networks.

Of particular importance are technologies for forming a positive image of a sporting event, methods of suppressing negative information in conditions of information confrontation and ideological inconsistency of various social systems. The image of a sporting event is formed on the basis of both subjective and objective factors. Initially, the image is formed spontaneously on the basis of subjective impressions, develops as an emotional construct of individual perception, then is supplemented by the rational component of managing communications of the sporting event and social institutions participating in the event, but the final image is constructed on the basis of the synergistic effect of the combined perceptions of the participants of the mega-event and reflection in the media.

Volunteers are important transmitters of the positive image of sporting events. The operator of the Festival’s volunteer program was the Ural Volunteers Center of the Ural Federal University. Based on the program for selecting volunteers, he carried out the function of promoting the Festival among the youth of Yekaterinburg and attracting university and college students to participate in the volunteer program of the Festival. The selection of volunteers was carried out from March 16 to August 10, 2023.

Table 1. Volunteer recruitment statistics

Informing	01.06.2023	01.07.2023	01.08.2023
Applications received	1103	1700	4751
Interview conducted	454	1155	3411
Opting out	152	247	967
Waiver based on age	46	139	373



It can be noted that during the application campaign it was possible to obtain the required minimum for the formation of a volunteer corps only in the last month. Competitive selection and compliance with the deadlines for the implementation of the volunteer program were hampered by the lack of interaction between the Festival organizing committee and executive authorities, public organizations and volunteer associations to inform the target group about the selection process.

The dynamics of selection can be judged from the data in Table 1.

During the selection process, candidates underwent an interview, during which their level of awareness about the Festival was assessed: types of sports and the facility, knowledge of the place and timing of its holding, as well as their attitude towards the Festival and the motivation of future volunteers. In general, respondents positioned the Festival as a large-scale sporting event for Yekaterinburg, Russia as a whole and friendly countries, calling it “student games”, “the former Universiade” and a significant event for themselves personally.

Excerpts from typical interviews explaining the motivation of volunteer candidates:

*“This will be my first international event, the Festival is a large multi-sports event in 14 sports at 6 sports facilities for students from 17 to 25 years old”* (young man, 24 years old, St. Petersburg);

*“It’s interesting to take part, to meet volunteers*

*from other regions, this is a major international event, in which university students from the SCO, BRICS, and CIS countries will participate, and is the starting point for many athletes”* (young man, 21 years old, Novosibirsk);

*“Participation in the Festival will allow you to develop communication skills and interaction with foreigners, the event itself will be held in August, during the 300th anniversary of Yekaterinburg, 14 sports will be presented”* (girl, 19 years old, Yekaterinburg);

*“I have been involved in sports since childhood, it will be interesting to see how major sports competitions are held, the event will include competitions in swimming, volleyball, athletics, the Universiade Village, EXPO center, Aquatic Sports Palace will be involved”* (girl, 28 years old, Nizhny Tagil).

Motivation was measured as an integrated indicator on a scale of 0 (min) – 3 (max), which, in addition to awareness of the event, included an indicator of a clear understanding of the applicant’s role in the volunteer program and willingness to participate in it for free. A score of 3 was given by interviewers in 55% of cases, 2 – 36%, 1 – 8%, 0 – less than 1%.

We also analyzed the quantity and quality (tone) of publications about the Festival in international, federal and regional media. The results of the analysis are presented below (Tables 2, 3).

The peak of activity, as expected, was immediately before and during the Festival; the maximum publications at this time were of a regional nature, for the en-

Table 2. Distribution of publications about the Festival by level (regional, federal, international)

Publication period	Level			Total
	Regional	Federal	International	
July 2023	535	1363	40	1938
August 2023	3947	3751	256	7954
Total	4482	5114	296	989

Table 3. Distribution of media publications about the Festival by tone of publications (positive, neutral, negative)

Publication period	Tonality			Total
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	
July 2023	119	1821	0	1938
August 2023	648	7297	7	7954
Total	765	9118	7	9892



tire period - federal. The predominant tonality is neutral.

**Conclusions.** The effectiveness of a sports mega-event as a soft power largely depends on its presentation in the digital space. When assessing the digital image of a sporting mega-event, the problem is often that the positive tone of official government and official media assessments does not always match the tone of assessments given by non-state media and citizens on social networks.

Along with the optimal number of official messages, the “tone” of the individual publications of the organizing participants is of great importance. One of the important transmitters of a positive image are sports volunteers.

In addition, it is necessary to take into account the so-called “spiral of silence” - opinions unspoken for various reasons, possibly negative. Identifying the causes of a negative impression involves monitoring using various qualitative techniques to determine the necessary factors in the preparation and conduct of sports mega-events.

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