

## IDENTITY OF CITIES AND EVENT SPORT TOURISM: THE GRAND DEPART TOUR DE FRANCE 2015

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In a highly competitive international tourist market, sport tourism has emerged to become a growing segment of the tourism sector as the World Tourism Organization recognizes. As part of the sport tourism sector, 'event sport tourism' has recently become a niche market playing an important role in the tourist and sport industry worldwide. Although the use of sport events to draw attention to a city is not a contemporary phenomenon, many countries and cities around the world, including Spain, are at the forefront in staging major sports events as part of wider urban processes, since these events may have a central role in the tourist development and in the enhancement of the images held by tourists of host destinations, a trend that is likely to continue in coming years.

Generally speaking, there is also an intense globalized inter-urban competition between cities to reinvent themselves as 'centers of consumption and entertainment', as Harvey (1990) has described, with an emphasis on attracting and organizing sport events. In this process, urban leaders recognize, however, the need to promote the comparative advantages of their cities and to differentiate them from others by using particular sports events, either alone or in combination with other infrastructures or projects. The issue is essentially one of place marketing, with image enhancement being at the core of most of strategies as a major point of differentiation. Zukin et al., (1998:647) highlight the importance of image as a major component of postmodern urban strategies that rely on the production of symbols and space by saying "urban design no longer delineates separate zones for work and leisure; all become one in the consumption of an image that is the city's primary product".

In this complex process of image building, 'event sport tourism' is valued by different public and private stakeholders as a major catalyst to the economic development and to the tourism strategy. Cities such as Indianapolis, Fukuoka, London, Madrid, Seville, Sheffield,

Melbourne, Toronto, Vancouver and especially Barcelona have been cited as examples of the strategic use of 'event sport tourism' to rebrand them as 'cities of sport'. In the case of Barcelona, after the 1992 Olympic Games, city leaders started to develop the concept of Barcelona as a 'sport city and tourist attraction', which was part of a much longer term program of transformations in the city. One of the elements on which the city of Barcelona has focused is the staging of a wide portfolio of national and international events, which has been valued as a major catalyst to the tourism strategy of the city.

Although most of the attention focuses on hosting the four mega events, i.e. the Olympic games, the Football and Rugby World Cup and the America's Cup, cities are also trying to host other hallmark sport events, in principle less important than the mega-events but which provide huge global exposure, such as the Tour de France. With regard to the Tour de France, there is a growing interest of not only French cities but cities from other countries to host a stage of the Tour de France. This interest emerged as the potential role that one of the largest annual global sporting event and the most iconic cycle race in the world the Tour de France has as a major touristic product. In addition, the Tour de France has the potential to bring a special status to any city as the case of Utrecht seeks to illustrate.

The strategic use of the Tour de France by numerous cities and its impacts on cities and their inhabitants are increasingly attracting the attention of academics and industry researchers who have extensively analyzed this major sporting event from the supply perspective, including the perceptions of the inhabitants of the host cities. However, there are limited studies that examines the event from the demand perspective. To this end, this exploratory research investigation, which is part of an international research project involving nine countries both in Europe and outside, including Spain, examines this hallmark sport event from the demand perspective. The primary thrust of this paper is therefore to analyze the effects of advertising the Grand Depart Tour de France 2015 (GDTF 2015), prior to the event, on the brand image of Utrecht, coupled with an examination of the critical factors that might facilitate or constrain the intention by Spanish citizens to travel to the destination to watch the event.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. The second section provides compelling evidence that contributes to value the economic, social, sporting and symbolic effects of the event sport tourism sector at international level and in Spain. It includes data mainly from four countries, the UK, Canada, the US and Spain which are at the forefront in bidding and organizing different types of sport events. This strategy has also been emulated (a serial reproduction of strategies as Harvey (1990) claims) by more cities in developing countries, which represents an emerging trend. Next, it focuses on the strategic use of event sport tourism by urban leaders as an economic strategy as part of the city's marketing program and also to attract more visitors to their cities. Fourth, it examines the issues raised with reference to the case of Utrecht, the fourth largest city in the Netherlands and one of the leading destinations for national and international visitors, by exploring the origin and reasons behind the strategy of bidding for and organizing the first three stages of the Tour de France 2015, known as the Grand Depart Tour de France 2015. Fifth, the methodology followed in the exploratory study is explained in detail. This study draws on both primary and secondary sources. Primary data was collected by means of 488

questionnaires undertaken in different parts of Spain from January to April 2015, coupled with a focus group, which brought together six participants, conducted on April 16, 2015 at a public university in Madrid with the aim of finding out the perceptions and opinions of the participants of an event like the GDTF 2015 and their intentions to visit the city of Utrecht. Parallel to this, documentary analysis was conducted using official statistics data produced by international and national institutions coupled with reports produced by the Utrecht City Council and so on. The paper concludes by incorporating the main results that emerge from the perceptions of Spanish citizens of Utrecht and their relation to the GDTF 2015 as well as the implications of this study, an issue that has received less attention in Spanish literature than it deserves.

The results of this study showed that sports events can help in the process of rebranding cities, or, in our case, in enhancing the image itself of the city of Utrecht by linking it to one of the largest annual global sporting event such as the Tour de France. Despite the fact that staging the GDTF 2015 in Utrecht was valued as a good marketing strategy to promote the image of Utrecht, some of the participants in the focus group expressed certain doubts about the effectiveness of this sport event strategy on the city of Utrecht. To assess the impact that sport events might have on the image and identity of cities, different factors might help to promote the destination as well as enhancing the city's image. Without any preference, some of those factors that might contribute either to the promotion of the destination or in other cases to the enhancement of the destination are existing infrastructures, the primary elements (cultural and sport facilities, historical buildings and so on) secondary (hotels, shopping areas, markets...) and additional elements (tourist information, transport, parking facilities...) of the city itself, its quality of life and its own inhabitants. In the case of Utrecht, the city has already offered a wide range of culture, social and sporting services, including a high level of sporting and non-sporting infrastructures for the daily use of cycling, regarded as one of the most popular sports in the city and in The Netherlands. From the research it was found that a global sporting event such as the GDTF 2015 is not only totally coherent with the image and identity of the city but also it would help to encourage more visitors to the city. In this aim, the event could be beneficial in the medium and long term to enforce Utrecht's position as a 'bicycle city'. The marketing of the city should not only focus on international and national visitors to the city, but should also include the needs of its inhabitants.

One of the indicators of the economic and social success of this event strategy relies on the number of international and national visitors to the city, which can also contribute to increase their expenditure in the city. Prior to the event, the most optimistic figures estimated at between 500,000 and 800,000 the number of visitors due to the GDTF 2015, according to local sources the number of visitors that attended the event was slightly lower, around 350,000. Considering the complexity of planning, hosting and evaluation of the impacts of any sport event, the case of Utrecht also serves to illustrate the need to undertake studies prior to the event which are useful for urban leaders to have reliable data that allows them to know if an event as the GDTF 2015 has the potential to enhance the destination as a tourist destination as well as the capacity to attract visitors from those countries considered as potential markets, either because of their cycling tradition or because they are emerging markets for cycling. Considering sporting events as a touristic

product, it is valued as one of the main strategies to promote marketing campaigns specifically targeting countries with long-standing cycling tradition as in Spain but mainly for those countries with a low-profile cycling tradition. From the focus group, most of the participants valued positively the promotional video of Utrecht to raise awareness of the city. An overwhelming majority openly stated that they would travel to Utrecht if they were in The Netherlands. However, if the organizers want to attract Spanish people to the city, the video should include not only the primary, secondary and additional elements as was mentioned earlier, but it should also include more images of local people cycling, street festivals and other appealing features. As the article highlights, the study of event sport tourism has gained great relevance globally for more academics. However, there are limited studies in Spanish as Jiménez Martín (2011) recognizes. To fill this research gap, this article seeks to expand the limited number of studies carried out in Spain on the event sport tourism sector.