

# **Sport events and destination image: running under the midnight sun in northern Norway**

## **Abstract**

This study concerns sport events and their potential contributions in terms of destination image. The aim is to identify critical factors for a strategic use of sport events in the development and reinforcement of a destination image.

The case of the Midnight-Sun-Marathon of Tromsø (northern Norway) is investigated through the collection of primary and secondary data. The findings show that both the athletes and the other participants relate the attractiveness of the event to the exotic aspect of the context, and suggest that a branding extension strategy could be a feasible strategy to strength the specific destination.

On the base of the case study some critical factors for a branding extension strategy are identified. Among these the following can be listed: the investigation of the perception of the area where the event takes place as a destination and the evaluation of a two-level (regional and local) strategy, the identification of sport clubs as relevant segments, the development of an activities portfolio, the cooperation between relevant actors operating in the area identified as the destination.

Keywords: sport events, destination image, destination branding

## **1. Introduction**

This study investigates the case of sport events and their potential contribution in terms of destination image. The research question is: what are the critical factors relative to the strategic use of sport events in the development and reinforcement of a destination image?

The research question is investigated with particular attention paid to destination competitiveness and sustainability. Such concepts are here viewed as strictly related. Competitiveness is understood as the ability to use a destination's resources effectively to differentiate the destination tourism offer from offers by similar destination, both in the short and long time and without compromising the specific natural and socio-cultural environment (Buhalis, 2000; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003).

This paper is organized as followed. First, the theoretical background is presented. This is done in regard to two main topics: destination image and branding, and the relation between destination image and sport events. Secondly, the theoretical and empirical approach of this study is described. The empirical findings are then presented and discussed. The paper concludes reflecting on the critical factors relative to the exploitation of the potential of a sport event in terms of destination image.

## **2. Theoretical background**

### **2.1. Destination image and branding**

Destination image has been studied for over three decades, with scholars focusing on different aspects of the concept (Gallarza, Saura, & Calderon Garcia, 2002; Pike, 2002; Tasci & Gartner,

2007). Among the various definitions that have been proposed in the literature, the following is broadly accepted and is adopted in this study: a destination image is “the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person has of a destination” (Crompton, 1979: 18).

Already from the ‘70s, several scholars have argued that a destination image influences the tourist’s destination choice, suggesting that the destinations with positive strong images are more likely to be chosen (e.g. Hunt, 1975). This implies that a destination image is relevant for a destination promotion. Both the concepts of destination image and destination promotion can be related to a destination attractiveness, the tourists’ positive perception and impression about a specific destination as a whole or/and in regard to some specific attributes (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Um & Crompton, 1992; Hu & Ritchie, 1993; Balogou & Brinberg, 1997; Tasci & Gartner, 2007).

In line with these considerations, the concept of destination image has been studied from the perspective of destination branding, the process of development of a memorable bond and an emotional link between the tourist and the destination (Cai, 2002; Williams, Gill, & Chura, 2004).

Events, broadly recognized to have a relevant role in tourism, are intrinsically linked to destination image and branding (Getz, 2008; Brown, Chali, Jago, & Mules, 2010). Moreover, it has been indicated that events can contribute to both the competitiveness and the sustainability of a destination (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003).

The use of events to strength a destination image in a competitive and sustainable way is based on the presence of some spillovers from the image of the events onto the image of the destination (Brown et al., 2010). One important aspect is then to identify a strategy that can take

advantage of the link between the events and the destination image. The literature identifies some key factors in this context: the development of a events portfolio, the selection of the appropriate types of events and the investigation of how the destination is perceived in the marketplace (Brown et al., 2010).

It is on the basis of the considerations presented in this section that this study is developed with a focus on sport events. The relation between destination image and sport events is described in the next section.

## **2.2. Destination image and sport events**

A sport event can be viewed as the context where a particular type of experience takes place. Such an experience can be described along various dimensions. This study focuses on the following: the physical dimension of the sport itself and the related embodied experience, the competitive dimensions relative to the participants' achievement orientation, the social dimension relative to the social setting of the event, and the affective dimension relative to the participants' destination involvement. The following sections present the relation between a destination image and the identified dimensions.

### **2.2.1. The dimension of the physical activity**

The dimension relative to the physical activity around which a sport event develops has a multi-sensorial connotation. This is particularly true for sport activities that take place outdoor. In these

cases, it is plausible to assume that the participants' senses of touch, smell, sight and sound are stimulated.

Based on such a consideration, the activity dimension of sport events can be viewed adopting the concept of embodiment, i.e. "a process of experiencing, making sense, knowing through practices as a sensual human subject in the world" (Crouch, 2000: 68). According to this view, the tourists' perception and understanding of the destination are strictly correlated processes that are triggered by sensual stimuli (Rakić & Chambers, 2012). In this sense, tourists engaged in a physical and often challenging activity perceive and understand the destination both on the physical and cognitive level (Bertella, 2013).

The understanding of the sport experience as an embodied experience can be related to the fundamental level of destination image identified in the literature and consisting in the imagery, i.e. "a distinct way of processing and storing multisensory information in a way that tend to incorporate all the senses - smell, taste, sight, sound and touch (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991).

### **2.2.2. The social and competitive dimensions**

Other relevant dimensions of the sport event can be identified in relation to the social setting where the event takes place and the achievement orientation of the participants (Williams, 2004; Klaus & Maklan, 2011). The social dimension includes the interactions among all the participants, between the athletes, the spectators, the event's organizers and the local population. In regard to the achievement orientation dimension, the variation among the participants can be quite broad. It is quite common that the athletes participating to an event are at different points of their sport carrier and, more in general, have different ambitions and expectations.

It has been suggested that, combining the social dimension of sport events with the dimension relative to the participants' achievement orientation, the event participants can be classified in: enthusiasts, serious competitors, novices and spectators (Walker, Hinch, & Higham, 2010).

The latter considerations can be related to destination image in the sense of the possibility that different types of event participants value different aspects of the event, for example the social one or the competitive one, and perceive the destination image in different ways. This is in part confirmed by a recent study that has investigated active and passive sport event participants and concluded that there are both similarities and differences among how these two groups perceive a destination image (Chen & Funk, 2010).

### **2.2.3. The affective dimension**

Another relevant dimension of the experience of participating to a sport event is the affective one. This dimension can be related to the concept of destination involvement. The concept of destination involvement describes the different attitudes a tourist can have towards a destination: from a limited involvement qualified as awareness, to deeper types of involvement, indicated as attraction, attachment and, finally, allegiance (Beaton, Funk, Ridinger, & Jordan, 2011).

As presented in the previous section, the concept of destination image has been mainly related to the attractiveness of the destination, considered here as the second stage of the destination involvement process. Some studies concerning sport tourism indicate that sport tourists can develop a connection to the destination that not only goes beyond the event but that is also particularly deep (Filo, Chen, King, & Funk, 2013; Klaus & Maklan, 2011). This suggests

that sport events can have a considerable potential in the creation of an emotional bond between the tourist and the destination. The latter element is clearly relevant in terms of destination branding.

The affective dimension and the destination involvement can also be related to the previously mentioned social dimension of the sport event, meaning with that the potential affective bond among the tourists and the people met during their stay at a specific destination, and also to the place itself (Ryan & Trauer, 2005).

### **3. This study's theoretical and empirical approach**

The considerations presented above support the idea that sport events have the potential to contribute to a destination image, involving the participants at different levels and along different dimensions.

Some studies have identified a form of synergy between sport events and destination and destination image so that different branding strategies can be identified (Chaplin & McGuirty, 2004; Harrison-Hill & Chaplin, 2005). In particular, three strategies have been proposed in the literature on the base of the distinctiveness of the sport event brand and the destination brand: co-branding, brand extension strategy and brand features strategy (Chaplin & Costa, 2005). The first strategy is considered suitable for those cases where the link between the event and the host destination is inextricably strong, and the event has a distinct brand. A brand-extension strategy is indicated for the cases where the link between the event brand and the destination brand is strong and the event that does not have a particularly distinct brand. Finally, a brand features strategy is

indicated for the cases when the event is not particularly well known and has some features that are linked to some of the attributes of the destination image.

Studying sport events and destination image, it can be asked which other elements can be critically important in order to develop or reinforce a destination image. What are the critical factors relative to the strategic use of sport events in the development and reinforcement of a destination image?

In order to answer this question the case of the Midnight-Sun-Marathon (MSM) event arranged in Tromsø (northern Norway) is investigated. The case is exploratory and its objective is to indicate directions for further research concerning the relation between events and destination image and branding.

The case is studied through the collection and analysis of primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected in spring 2012, through semi-structured interviews with the event leader and one of the local destination managers. Additional primary data were collected through observation, more specifically through informal conversations conducted by the researcher while volunteering at the information-desk of the event in June 2012. Such informal conversations concerned 64 participants, including spectators, athletes and followers (athletes' families and friends), and run clubs leaders. During the observation conversations were also performed with 4 experienced volunteers and a tourist information employee.

Secondary data in the form of marketing material relative to the local tourism offer and the specific event were collected.



#### **4. The Midnight Sun Marathon**

The Midnight Sun Marathon (MSM) is an event that includes as main activities a marathon, a half marathon and a shorter running competition (10 km). The day of the event, some activities dedicated to children and a market are arranged.

The competitions take place in June in Tromsø. Tromsø is located at latitude 69° N and counts approximately 68 000 inhabitants. It is the capital of the municipality of Troms and the main urban center of the northern part of Norway that also includes the municipalities of Finmark and Nordland.

As shown in the regional marketing material, the nature is a major tourist attraction of northern Norway. The natural environment can be considered as an important element of the image of northern Norway as a tourism destination. It has been suggested that the association of cognitive elements about the region, in particular the local natural environment, with positive attitudes and particular activities can contribute to a strong image (Prebensen, 2007).

The MSM was arranged for the first time in 1989. Already from the first edition the event has used its location to profile itself as the northern most certified marathon. The marathon was originated on the initiative of some local runners who sought and obtained the support of some sponsors, first of all the Scandinavian airline company. The touristic aspect of the event was explicit from the beginning. One of the main objectives of the event was to attract international participants to Tromsø, and, in this way, to attract customers for the airline company and contribute to the local tourism industry.

The owner of the event is a foundation that includes, in addition to the mentioned airline company, a local sport club, a few private local firms, the local branch of a national bank, the

local newspaper, and the municipality of Tromsø. The MSM foundation employs many volunteers (ca. 350 in 2012) that are recruited through local sport clubs. Such a structure is coordinated by one person who acts as the leader of the foundation.

The MSM foundation also arranges a spring event that is dedicated to the Sami culture. More recently, other running competitions have been added to the foundation's event portfolio: three extreme running competitions arranged as trails in the area nearby the town, and an half marathon that takes place in January and is named after the specific season of the year, Mørketidsløp (literally "the dark time run competition", translated in English as the Polar Light half marathon).

According to the leader of the foundation, the MSM and the Polar Light half marathon well illustrate one of the most attractive elements of the local area: the contrasts that can be observed in the nature. The MSM is arranged in the late evening, so that the goal is reached by most of the athletes around midnight, when the sky is still light and, if the weather conditions are favorable, the sun shines. On the other hand, the Polar Light half marathon is arranged during the day, when the sun is under the horizon and the sky is dark bluish. The MSM leader's comment about northern Norway being "a land of contrasts" was done also by the DMO employee.

When asked about the sustainability of the event, the MSM leader commented saying that because of the location, the vast majority of the international participants fly to Tromsø. As noted by the MSM leader, the event has some limits in regard to an environmentally friendly contribution, even though the best efforts are done trying to minimize the production of rubbish during the event. On the other hand, the event was indicated by the MSM leader as contributing

positively to the local socio-cultural life, and also to tourism, as it creates a quite loyal group of tourists attracted using specialized communication channels, as sport magazines.

The MSM has grown since 1989 constantly, with the 2012 edition counting 2 023 participants from 53 countries, with Norway, the United Kingdom and Italy being the most represented. The event is quite known among runners. Participants attend the event individually or, in many cases, in groups. In the latter case, it is quite common that run clubs arrange collective tours to Tromsø. As observed by the leader of the MSM foundation, the contact between the MSM and the different tour operators in the various countries is viewed as particularly important in order to promote the event among potential participants and also to disseminate the necessary information in order to join the competition. Such information concerns mainly the weather conditions that can be expected and the sport equipment that is recommended.

The day before the event and the day of the event, an information desk is arranged in the town center. The experience of the past years have shown that the volunteers working at this desk are often asked questions that do not regard the event itself but that are related to the local tourist attractions. A few participants ask questions about information strictly related to the competition, as the slope of some specific parts of the race, while several are those who ask questions concerning tourist activities.

Due to such a broad spectrum of possible questions, an employee from the local DMO has joined the team of MSM volunteers in the last editions of the event. The cooperation between the local DMO and the MSM foundation is viewed by both parties as crucially important. The event attracts many athletes who quite often are accompanied by family and friends. Both active and

passive participants expect to be provided with all the information they need in order to enjoy what the local area has to offer, including sightseeing, visits to museums and restaurants. As the foundation leader commented, it is important that this is done as professionally as possible, so that the practical help of the DMO is very relevant.

During the observation, most of the asked questions concerned the weather forecast for the evening and night of the event. Among the topics of the conversations the phenomenon of the midnight sun, the typical arctic summer temperature and the location of Tromsø were the most common. The athletes seemed to be fascinated by the idea of running under the midnight sun. Several athletes mentioned the expectations they had in terms of the light, qualified often as “golden”. Some runners commented also on the tactile sensations relative to the low temperature and the possible light rain that were expected. Runners from countries with warmer climatic conditions than northern Norway commented about the expected sensual pleasure to run, mentioning the difficulties that they have when performing a sport in their own countries during the summer months. No particular difference concerning such topics was noticed in regard to the different level of the athletes (novices or competitors).

Not differently from the athletes, the spectators seemed to be quite excited about the light conditions expected during the competition, with some of them mentioning explicitly the possibility to take good pictures of the runners under the midnight sun. This was noticed in particular for those cases of the followers (family and friends) who wanted to take pictures of their relative/ friend who was competing.

In regard to the location of Tromsø, several were the comments about the adventurous feeling of being above the Arctic Circle and the surprise in finding such a modern town as

Tromsø so up north. Some comments showed that there was a quite limited knowledge about some facts concerning the area, in particular the location of Tromsø and the distance between Tromsø and some traditional tourist attractions, in particular North Cape (in the municipality of Finmark), the Lofoten islands (in the municipality of Nordland) and the village of Santa Claus (in Finland). Still in regard to the tourists' knowledge of the local area, during several conversations it seemed that there was some confusion relative to the possibility to come in contact with the Sami culture and also in regard to identification of the geographical area indicated as Lapland. It seems that Lapland was understood by several tourists as the geographical area where the Sami live and was in several cases attributed to northern Finland. Some tourists showed surprise when informed about the actual geographical location of Lapland and the presence in Tromsø of a relatively big community of Sami.

Another topic of the conversations was relative to the activities that both the athletes and the followers could have done after the competition. Several seemed to have already planned the days following the competition. Some of them were heading north, to North Cape, and others were heading south, to the Lofoten islands. In both cases, it seemed that the majority had booked in advance only the accommodation and the transport. A minority said to be in Tromsø just for the event. In both cases most of the questions were related to activities that could “bring them closer to the nature”, and shown them “the history of the area and the way people live up here in the North”. These questions concerned mainly activities of a few hours or one-day trips.

Only in a minority of cases the conversations were focused on the expected achievement relative to the competition and technical information about the competition.

During the observations, two conversations were carried on with two leaders of groups that were in Tromsø respectively for the second and third time. They both had run the MSM before and they were now accompanying a group of athletes. In both cases the leaders themselves knew relatively well the characteristics of the competition and the area. They commented saying that they had nice memories about the event. They mentioned the relaxed atmosphere of the event in town, especially the children activities, and also the excitement about the competition and the feeling of running surrounded by a beautiful landscape lighted by the midnight sun. They said that at the moment of the conversation (the day before the competition) they were enjoying the social dimension of the event, especially meeting other runners and spending time with their groups. In regard to the latter comment, they mentioned the importance to organize group activities before and after the event.

During the conversations, the tourists were asked whether they knew about the Polar Light half marathon. Several answered positively, and the vast majority showed curiosity in the possibility to experience the “dark time” and mentioned the challenges that such a competition could have in terms of weather conditions, in particular iced-streets.

#### **4. Conclusions**

The case study shows that the event participants chose to join the MSM not only for the event itself but also, and in some cases mainly, for the possibility to visit the host area and engage in quite traditional tourist activities.

The findings suggest that both the athletes and the other participants relate the attractiveness of the event to the exotic features of the context. The event is perceived as being

strictly linked to the peculiarities of the area, in particular the phenomenon of the midnight sun and the location of the host town above the Arctic Circle. The dimension of the event that seems to be more attractive is relative to the visual experience, followed by the tactile dimension, for the athletes, and the social dimension. The affective dimension of the event, indicated by the revisits, seems to concern mainly the leaders of run clubs.

As outlined in the literature, a premise for any branding strategy is the investigation of the understanding of the destination by the tourists. Such an understanding in terms of geographical area seems to be characterized by some confusion. It seems that the participants were not particularly aware of the geography of the region, especially for what concerns, the urbanization of the specific area, the location of some famous tourist attractions and the relative distances, and the national borders. This limited geographical knowledge might be related to the fact that the vast majority of the event participants use the plane to reach Tromsø.

The host town Tromsø is associated by some participants to northern Norway, while others tend to associate it more generally to northern Scandinavia, without particular focus on the national belonging of the town. A minority associate the Tromsø area to Lapland.

These results indicate that cooperation among the event organizers and the local destination managers, including the Tromsø area, but also other DMOs of the region, could be important. Such cooperation could be part of a broad branding strategy that includes the nearby areas across the national borders. Moreover, such cooperation could include, in addition to a strategy concerning the image of the region, the development of common packages of activities that aim to show the tourists the area. In this context, an interesting segment to focus on could be relative to sport clubs. This segment seems to be particularly attractive in terms of revisit

possibilities and the consequent creation of loyal relations. In this context the development of packages of group activities could be strategically important.

The findings suggest that a branding extension strategy could be a feasible strategy to strength the image of northern Norway. The event is relatively well-known and has profile that is consistent with some of the images usually associated with northern Norway, and more in general, northern Scandinavia. It can be noted that there are some signs that indicate the possibility to profile the Tromsø area in a way that could differentiate it from other northern Scandinavian destinations. An example can be a profile centered on northern Norway as “the land of the contrasts”. Such a strategy could include the two running competitions arranged in Tromsø and also other contrasts that can be experienced in the area. One could be relative to the co-existence of experiences that can be qualifies as urban, and experiences focused on the Arctic wilderness.

Based on the results from the case study, the following critical factors for a possible brand extension strategy including sport events are identified:

- The investigation of the perception of the host area as a destination
- The identification of the characteristics of the sport event that can contribute to a consistent and unique destination image
- The identification of sport clubs as relevant segments and the related creation of relations
- The development of tourism products, and in particular group activities, targeted to the event participants



- The identification of several events and products that can be included in an activities portfolio
- The cooperation between relevant actors operating in the area identified as the destination
- The identification of possible attractive features within the regional destination and peculiar of the local area

Such elements can be relevant in terms of competitiveness and, in particular in regard to the selection of relevant segments that can contribute to develop a form of loyal basis of tourists, also sustainability.

Being exploratory in nature, this study is based on a limited empirical investigation. Further studies could be implemented adopting a quantitative and qualitative approach that investigates several events as possible candidates for a portfolio that includes also packages of products developed around the individual events.

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