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Using Hallmark Sport Events to Internationally Brand Your City: Measuring the Effects of the 
Tour de France on the Brand of the City of Utrecht in Nine Different Nations

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Over the last few decades, the international tourist market has become a hyper-competitive market with many new entrants, such as cities, regions or nations, bidding for the attention of the potential tourist. Within this convoluted tourist market, cities and nations have developed elaborate marketing campaigns that should make potential tourists aware of the attractiveness of their particular destination. In a quest to understand how consumers view these destinations, tourism scholars have undertaken extensive research around destination images (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martin, 2004; Gallarza, Saura, & Calderon Garcia, 2002; Gartner, 1989), yet less is known about how a city could change or improve its existing international image through marketing strategies, and what role hallmark sport events can play in this process.

Those scholars that have examined the effect sport events on destination brands, have predominantly focused on the effects of mega sport events. It is unclear if these findings extend to smaller sport events, and thus to smaller cities, who without exception do not have the capacity or resources to host a mega sport event, yet still want to compete with other destinations in their nation for the international tourist (Taks, Chalip, & Green, 2015). Finally, most scholars employed a de post facto approach to understand how these events changed people’s perception (Taks, Chalip, Green, Kesenne, & Martyn, 2009), yet research on how these events can be used by city marketers, prior to the event, and whether the promotion of these events changes how people view the city is unclear.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the effects of advertising a hallmark sport event on the brand image of a midsize city within a competitive tourist market among international non-visitors, prior to the event, through a multi-method research design that included a 2 X 2 quasi experimental research design (Phase 1) and focus groups (Phase 2), which were conducted to better understand the findings. The hallmark event chosen for this event was the first stage, commonly referred to as the Grande Depart, of the 2015 Tour de France, which was held in the city of Utrecht, the Netherlands, a midsize city (311,000 residents) in the center of the nation. To examine this effect among international non-visitors survey data was collected four months prior to the event among respondents in nine different nations, both in Europe (Germany, Belgium, United Kingdom, France, Spain and Italy) and outside Europe (the United States, China and Japan). In each a minimum of 400 responses was collected, bringing the overall sample to 4055 respondents. Prior to responding to items on the destination image and brand associations of the city of Utrecht, the respondents were either shown a brochure promoting the city containing information of the Tour de France’s start in the city (treatment group), or a brochure without such information (control group). MANOVA’s were then conducted to compare the mean scores between the treatment group and control group overall, and for each nation individually. Preliminary analysis demonstrates that the effects of using the Tour de France as a promotion tool within their city branding were not significant overall. However, when the authors examined the findings per nation, they found a significant negative effect in certain nations (France, China, and Italy), while in other nations it had a significant positive effect (Germany, United Kingdom, Spain, the USA, and Japan).

Consequent focus groups in each nation were then conducted to better understand the results, which validated some of the surprising and contradictory results. Based on the findings the authors suggest that sport events such as the Tour de France are cultural products that do not allow a city to reach a global audience, instead they give access to more specific international audiences and city marketers should be very careful how they engage with and market
such events to different nations. For instance, in France the population had a negative response to Utrecht hosting the event as it regarded it as if their own event that was stolen by a foreign city that paid more than their own cities were willing to pay. Thus, if Utrecht would market this event to a French audience, they would have made a worse impression on the French population than if they would have marketed the city without including the Tour de France. City managers of midsize cities that do not have the resources to bid for mega sport events such as the Olympics and the World Cup of Football, and consequently focus on smaller hallmark sport events are well advised of the challenges that such an approach offers and design marketing strategies for specific nations that might respond well to the event.