

Session: **New trends in management and marketing V.**  
Abstract nr: **EASM-0207**

## **Innovative Place Branding during Olympic Games - Case Studies from Turin 2006, Beijing 2008 and Vancouver 2010**

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### **Background**

During the last decades the global competition among countries for investors, skilled workforce and tourists increased decisively. Hence countries want to create unique identities in order to differentiate themselves from competitors. Successful destination branding offers a good possibility to reduce substitutability (Hudson/Ritchie 2009; Hanna/Rowley 2008). In this regard destinations try to transform places into brands in order to benefit in economic, cultural and social ways (Hankinson 2007). Many destinations use sport in particular to position its brand in the mind of tourists (Smith 2005). In general there are different ways of using sport for branding purposes, but a very prominent one is to present its brand in association with a mega event such as the Olympic Games. In that sense not only the hosting city/country pursues positive brand effects, but also all other participating nations that send athletes. Besides the presentation at the field of play more and more countries installed so-called “national houses” during the past Olympics.

Originally they were installed to provide service for athletes, their relatives and sponsors but often they are additionally used as places for national representation, networking platforms, hospitality centres or exhibition areas. By deeper analysis one realizes that the appropriate concepts vary tremendously, but nevertheless those national houses pursue more or less the same goal: Bringing a piece of home to the Olympics. Every country or according national federation refers to typical peculiarities of the country. Most national houses have two areas, an exclusive and a public one. The exclusive area is reserved for athletes, officials, sponsors, media representatives and special guests, like celebrities or politicians. The public levels are open to everybody and mostly designed as exhibition centres with entertainment areas.

Several theoretical approaches can help to explain the phenomenon of national houses. Here we will focus on those that explain the houses as branding tool for countries. First, the houses provide information about the country in order to reduce information asymmetry between visitor and destination. Second, the houses are used to build up symbolic capital by showing extravagant places and buildings. Third, the houses provide hospitality and positive experiences to their foreign guests in order to impact their perception of the country brand.

## **Research Question and Design**

This initial situation leads to our main question: Are “national houses” at mega sport events a tool for innovative place branding strategies of country brands?

Therefore we first provide a terminological overview of place branding and its application in literature and research. During the last few years there has been a significant increase in research contributions (Moilanen/Rainisto 2009), which also led to quite diverse approaches (Hanna/Rowley 2008). Then we present the status quo of nation branding before we go deeper into case study research on more than 20 houses at the Turin 2006, Beijing 2008 and Vancouver 2010 Olympic Games. The investigation of the houses started with qualitative research by conducting interviews with responsible managers. The case studies refer to selected concepts of national houses regarding the aim to brand the country.

## **Conclusion / Application to practice**

From a practical point of view the use of national houses as a place branding tool for countries is very innovative. It offers a lot of opportunities to promote the identity of the country brand to tourists, potential investors, politicians or skilled professionals. The national houses present location factors of regions, tourist destinations, business partners, employers and peculiarities like inventions or lifestyles in a much more comprehensive way than most other promotional campaigns could do. Visitors see, feel, taste and touch various aspects of the country and culture presenting itself. Furthermore, the visitors have the opportunity to meet people and to get authentic information about the country. This intensive brand experience cannot be achieved by any TV commercial or journal article limited to a few seconds of attention.

To sum it up, a visit of a national house during the Olympic Games can be seen as a multi-faceted emotional brand experience trying to create and/or influence a certain brand image of the country in the mind of the visitors.

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