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d’Ambrosio, Luigi; Cortsen, Kenneth Holm; Sasková, Zora

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More than a game: Football kicks off tourism in the case of SSC Napoli and the destination image of Naples among fans based in Denmark

Authors: Luigi D’Ambrosio, Kenneth Holm Cortsen and Zora Saskova
University College of Northern Denmark

Abstract

This qualitative study investigates why and how football is at the heart of destination image perceptions in the association between SSC Napoli and Naples among fans from Denmark. Moreover, the study explores how football is a vector for destination image improvement. Email-interviews with open-ended questions were conducted in order to gain understanding and perceptions of SSC Napoli fans from Denmark. Although the stable presence of SSC Napoli in European tournaments gives the club international attention, the city still suffers from bad reputation. This study illustrates that football fandom contributes with an opportunity for non-stereotypical knowledge and might lead to first-hand encounters with Naples, hence creating a more positive image about the destination among the Danish supporters of SSC Napoli.

Key Words Football tourism, Naples, SSC Napoli, destination image, Danish fans

Track Track 4: contributions at (inter)national level, the impacts of political, cultural and social context, and legislation

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Introduction

This study investigates the influence of football fandom on the tourism industry in the context of destination image of top football cities, i.e. the specific case of Naples and the club SSC from the perspective of fans from Denmark. Previous research shows that Naples as a tourism destination suffers from poor image internationally (Hills & Calaresu, 2013). This applies in a Danish context too (D’Ambrosio, 2008). The relevance of the case concerns football performances of SSC Napoli in relation to the perceived image of Naples among Danish fans. Although Italy ranks in the top five of international tourist destinations among Danes, research shows that the majority of Danes travels to Northern and Central Italy (D’Ambrosio, 2008). This strikes a chord with the general trend among international tourists travelling to Italy, where only less than 15% choose to travel to Southern Italy. Research illustrates that destination image affects travel behaviour. Danish tourists’ perceptions about Naples and Southern Italy are prevalingly negative due to their associations with organized crime, poverty and dullness (D’Ambrosio, 2008). The attention-grabbing nature of football as the most popular sport in the world transcends across international borders and the presence of football’s top clubs influences local and regional economies (Standeven & De Knop, 1999; Cherubini, 2007; VisitBritain, 2015). The high demand of football experiences opens an interesting market place for tourism. To illustrate the association between Italy, football, tourism and destination branding, influential tourism platforms (Italia, 2017) and scholars (Lago, 2006; Cherubini, 2007) emphasize the passionate texture of football in Italy. This supports the execution of commercial strategies to enhance destination image effects positively in relation to football events in Italy (Hamil, Morrow, Idle, Rossi & Faccendini, 2010). Supply of football travel packages helps to reinforce the
passionate image of Italian football and to attract visitors; e.g. “the bond between Italians and soccer is actually a great love story” (Italia, 2017). Despite times of financial crisis following right after the 1990-2000 decade of superiority for the Italian Serie A, Italian football accounts for an industry that considerably surpasses the €1 billion mark (Lago, 2006). A study about the estimated financial impact of Italian Serie A football clubs in the 2015/2016 season on hospitality and tourism in host cities shows that football tourism adds positively to local hospitality providers (Go Euro, 2015). Figure 1 highlights the estimated expenses of football tourists in accommodation and food and beverages in the major Serie A clubs and host cities:

Figure 1. Estimated expenses of football tourists in 2015-16 Serie A league

It is relevant to take a look at the Italian football context in general in order to gain a general view of the impact of football tourism in major Italian football destinations such as Milan (home to AC Milan and FC Internazionale), Rome (home to AS Roma and SS Lazio) and Turin (home to FC Torino and Juventus FC). The impact of football events on local hospitality providers is further illustrated in a recent report conducted by the Italian Football Association (FIGC) and PWC. The report illustrates the financial impact of football tourists on Milan’s local hospitality providers in occasion of the UEFA Europa League final hosted in Milan (Report Calcio, 2017).

SSC Napoli forms an essential case given its role as an Italian football powerhouse in the region south of Rome with two domestic championship titles, a solid international presence, the influence of the Argentinian superstar Diego Maradona and the role of the club in the wider social and economic reality in the region (Hamil et al., 2010).
**Football tourism**

People have engaged in sport tourism for decades (Weed, 2009) and also the increasing development of sport tourism as an academic field of interest intensified from the early 1990s (Weed, 2009). Nevertheless, narrowing the field down to football tourism, the body of literature is rather scarce and raises more questions and interesting research gaps to be filled. According to Gibson (1998) the concept of sport tourism can be divided into three categories: 1) active sport tourism in which the tourist actively participates in a sport activity, 2) event sport tourism in which the tourist attends and watches a sport event and 3) nostalgia sport tourism in which the tourist visits sport museums or famous sport venues, e.g. the ‘Camp Nou Experience’ in Barcelona (FC Barcelona, 2017). Yet, it is important to acknowledge that most studies in the sport tourism area focus on mega or hallmark events (Gibson, Willming & Holdnak, 2003). Although there is a great body of research on mega sport events, not many have examined the event sport tourism in relation to small sport events. According to Higham (1999), a small sport event encompasses “regular season sporting competitions (ice hockey, basketball, soccer, rugby leagues), international sporting fixtures, domestic competitions, Masters or disabled sports, and the like” (p. 87). Both mega and small scale events may have a positive influence on the destination, such as the capability to promote the destination attractiveness beyond the sport event as the image of the city, region or country may motivate tourists to come back (Gibson, 1998). Scholars (Roche, 1994; Gibson et al., 2003) argue that the duration of mega events is usually short-term, e.g. the UEFA Champions League Final or the Super Bowl compared to the FIFA World Cup, but the impact may have significant long-term consequences for the community and cannot always be considered positive. Smaller events, e.g. football matches of SSC Napoli, may have better impact on the several stakeholders (Walo, Bull & Breen, 1996). Moreover, these events do usually not require additional infrastructural changes or public investments and the host does not have as many obligations to external stakeholders as during the mega sport events. Fandom studies in sports and football mostly investigate the meanings and identities associated with being a fan (Wann & Branscombe, 1993; Gibson, Willming, & Holdnak, 2003). However, there is a research bridge given that few studies have considered the intersection between meanings and identities of fandom, and sport event tourism, which it is an important area of sport tourism. Irwin and Sandler (1998) propose that the degree of a fan’s affiliation with a sport team has an influence on the length of the fan’s visit and spending patterns; the more devoted fans stay usually a day longer and spend more money at the destination. Moreover, sport is being increasingly used as a tool for strategic development of a destination (Hinch & Higham, 2005). The concept of destination image or “the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person has of a destination” (Crompton, 1979, p.18), strongly influences consumer behaviour and shapes the expectations of a tourist (Mikalauskas, Strunz, & Afifi, 2014). Despite the fact that a person might not have visited the destination yet, the image makes a crucial impact on the decision whether one will go or will not go there. In relation to sport tourism, sport events are perceived to have potential to create an emotional bond between the tourist and the destination (Mikalauskas, Strunz, & Afifi, 2014), and thus also influence fan's perception of the destination. However, it is important to acknowledge that “the unique context of each sport tourism attraction needs to be considered when assessing the authenticity of sport tourism attractions (Hinch & Higham, 2005, p.245), which this research, examining Danish fans of SSC Napoli, aims to do.

**Methodology**

This study is qualitative, exploratory and interpretative in nature. The qualitative data were collected via e-mail interviews founded on a structured interview schedule consisting of open-ended questions. The questions addressed the appeal of Naples as a tourism destination for Danish SSC Napoli fans. Additionally, the study aimed to investigate the affiliation between Naples and SSC Napoli as a reason to travel to Naples. The study uncovers the perceived image of Naples and also placed this subject matter according to the football performances and experiences regarding SSC Napoli. A purposive sampling method was chosen to select respondents who are fans of SSC Napoli from Denmark. These respondents were asked to participate in this study through the Facebook page Forza Napoli Danmark, which is the main virtual meeting room for fans of the club in Denmark. Besides being SSC Napoli-fans, no other criteria have been taken into consideration for their selection. All nine respondents were males and between the age of 30 and 52. Seven out of nine respondents have visited Naples at least once. Thematic and open coding was applied to analyse the data from a qualitative perspective to accommodate the interrelationship between themes in this tourism destination.
image and football context (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2009). Covering the destination image perceptions of respondents in the context of Naples and SSC Napoli, one limitation of this study is that the limited number of respondents from these structured e-mail interviews serves as a preliminary data collection for a wider research project focused on identity, fan identification and football tourism in Naples.

Results

Destination image of Naples among SSC Napoli fans living in Denmark

Investigating the destination image of Naples among a group of SSC Napoli fans living in Denmark, this study revealed a plurality of perceptions. This finding is aligned with research (Ashworth & Goodall, 1988; Lee, Lee & Lee, 2005) indicating that destination image in a context of sport tourism behavior is a dynamic phenomenon in which tourists engage in ongoing negotiations of meaning concerning onsite experiences. All of the respondents are SSC Napoli fans, therefore it is not surprising that they associate the city of Naples with football and its legend Diego Maradona. For instance, one respondent associates Naples with “Calcio, pizza, Vesuvius, the Amalfi Coast, the underground of Naples. And Maradona of course.” As most of the respondents have visited Naples and are influenced by the onsite experiences, a pattern of responses emerged revealing that football is a clear destination image influencer. All of the respondents have positive associations about Naples such as: “I associate Naples with joy of life, generosity, hospitality, fantastic food, good music, and a nice unpretentious straightforwardness”. However, when asked about how other Danes might perceive Naples, all the respondents recognized a dominantly negative picture of Naples. According to the respondents, the general picture of Naples in Denmark is aligned with the international stereotypes such as “shady reputation due to prejudice regarding mafia crime”. Furthermore, the data show that the accepted picture of Naples in Denmark is characterized by lack of knowledge about the city “there aren’t many [Danes] who know much about the city”; and thus the stereotypes such as “crime, mafia and, corruption” are due to a dominantly negative portrayal by the media.

Identity reflection in the association between SSC Napoli and the city of Naples

The respondents were asked to answer how they experience the interrelationship between SSC Napoli and Naples. The association between SSC Napoli and Naples highlights an interesting interrelationship between the club and the city focused on ‘unity’ in that respondents voice that “the club has become a part of the Neapolitan culture. The club keeps Neapolitans united despite political and social differences”, which is supported by the perception of another respondent that “I perceive the city as link and a gathering point between Neapolitans and SSC Napoli. Neapolitans view the club as their fixed reference point and feel a strong identification with the club.”. From a tourism perspective, the interrelationship between the club and the city makes an interesting platform for tourists to experience. The passionate texture of the city and its expression of the importance of football mentioned by current SSC Napoli’s captain Marek Hamsik: “‘Napoli fan’ is almost meaningless in Naples. If you’re from Naples, you are a Napoli fan” (The Player’s Tribune, 2017) blends with one respondent’s experience that “visiting the city a couple of times sparked my appetite to more journeys to Naples.”. There are strong emotions connected with fandom Porat (2010); SSC Napoli fans are no exception to this. Moreover, this strong affiliation is reflected in our respondents’ answers. As one of them puts it: “I love the club. I think about it every day ... it is pure love. Almost the same kind of love I feel for my girlfriend.”. Furthermore, football in Naples is ‘more than a game’; this can be illustrated through the social and political gaps between the southern part of Italy and the affluent northern part of the country. One respondent mentions the feeling of Neapolitans being “suppressed by the establishment in the northern part” and that “many Neapolitans may not have many opportunities in life and because of this the city’s identity and SSC Napoli become very important to them. This gives them pride.” Another respondent adds the significance of psychological fan impact in that “football is their religion. Despite poverty, the club gives them bright spots and a lot to be proud of.”. The affiliation with SSC Napoli is everywhere in the city as a symbolic expression of football fandom and the omnipresence of SSC Napoli’s identity in Naples and as an echo integrated in the identity of the city. A respondent pronounces that “football is everywhere. You cannot go into cafes or bars without finding something from the club like flags or scarves, etc.” The articulation of football helps to showcase the close cohesion between club and city in this case in that “Neapolitans live and breathe for the club and football. If the club does well, so does the city” as stated by one respondent. This is backed by another
respondent who mentions that “Italian football fans are very dedicated and very local patriotic. It may also mean something that there are not two big teams in the city as in Milan, Turin or Rome and that the entire city can get together regarding the club. That gives a very strong affiliation.” Football’s ability to shape the destination image of Naples is thus symbolized in the city’s and SSC Napoli’s opposition to big and rich clubs in Northern Italy or Rome. Football becomes a sign of strength as displayed in a respondent’s statement that “the football club is a concrete squad that can challenge Northern Italy.” This could be associated with the role of underdogs in sports (Vandello, Goldschmied and Michniewicz, 2016).

Football experiences and destination image

Research (Cortsen, 2016) shows that in professional football there are not many good substitutions for winning and high quality football performances. In contrast, this study suggests that SSC Napoli goes beyond the experience of winning. This is supported by a respondent saying that “If you are not a fan of Napoli but football fan of the kind that takes what is shown on the screen then you probably only remember number one unfortunately”. However, respondents reveal varying perceptions of whether or not the football success of SSC Napoli has influenced the destination image of Naples. Some respondents are in favour that the success of SSC Napoli has had a positive influence. For instance, attention leads to interest and desire to go to Naples, which is mirrored in one respondent’s comment that “I will always be biased. But it is clear that the more Napoli is exposed on television the higher the desire to talk about the city and the football team. And in that way you get even more positive thoughts about Naples.” In contradiction, other respondents do not see a clear link between sporting success and the destination image of Naples and states: “You can only be happy when it goes well for the club but my picture of the city is not influenced by the team's international success. It has just become more fun to be Napoli fan when they play the big matches” while another respondent highlights that “No not really because my view on the city is fantastic and that has nothing to do with European success. My view on the city and the team would be the same if they were in Serie C.”

Among these SSC Napoli fans living in Denmark, there is a clear pattern that while a few respondents strive to consume ‘comprehensive experiences’, most of the respondents evidently mention football as ‘the’ reason to go or as part of the reason to go in combination with other tourism experiences. One respondent answers the question of whether football was the reason to go by mentioning that “Almost. The trip with my football buddies was designed with the intent to experience Naples and visit San Paolo but it was also important that we played football ourselves.” Others have already planned to go on their next trip, cf. “I am going to Naples on March 30 where I will watch Napoli vs. Juventus with my brother”, “I am most likely going there again during the year”. Therefore, the city of Naples can be considered as a tourism destination with big potential to improve its international reputation through football tourism.

Conclusion

The investigation of the influence of SSC Napoli fandom on the tourism industry in the context of destination image of Naples from the perspective of Danish fans has contributed with new insights into the topic of football tourism and destination image. Although Naples has a history of bad reputation internationally, this study illustrates that football fandom contributes with an opportunity for non-stereotypical knowledge and might lead to first-hand encounters with Naples, hence creating a more positive image about the destination among the Danish supporters of SSC Napoli. Most of the respondents became interested in the city and have actually visited Naples due to football. Moreover, their positive view on the city clearly contrasts with the general negative perception of Naples in Denmark. On top of that, although the respondents see Naples as an attractive tourist destination, they still mention football as ‘the reason to go’ or as part of the reason to go in combination with other tourism experiences.

Besides the clear change in the destination image perception, what emerged from the data was the importance of fan identification and the role that the local fans’ passion plays in attracting foreign Napoli fans to experience the football atmosphere in the city. The Danish fans perceive SSC Napoli and the city of Naples

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1 Third division in Italian football
as inseparable, complementary parts that create the unique Neapolitan identity which can be characterized by unity and pride. Although the club has had a solid position in Italy’s top five since 2010 and despite winning three national cups, the club has not won a Serie A or a European title since 1990. Despite of this, our respondents indicated that the fan identification with the club goes beyond the football performance and is deeply rooted in their social identity. Thus, it became clear that in the case of SSC Napoli the concept of fan identification lies in the heart of any further research and therefore has become the author’s future object of investigation. Other topics that emerged from this study and that might need further investigation is the destination marketing perspective; in particular an area that needs attention is how sport tourism can contribute to creating a positive destination image in the context of destinations that suffer from poor image.

List of references


