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Sport Tourism, Destination Image and Branding: What Contribution to Tourism Sustainability? A Literature Review Applied to the Case of Morocco

Tourisme sportif, image et marque de destination : Quelle contribution à la durabilité du tourisme ? Une revue de littérature appliquée au cas du Maroc

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Abstract

Sport tourism is currently one of the most dynamic segments of the global tourism economy, at the crossroads of territorial marketing, event management, and sustainable development policies. The present article provides a narrative literature review on the relationships between sport tourism, destination image, territorial branding, and sustainability, with a focus on the Moroccan context. By mobilizing the foundational theoretical frameworks of destination image and destination branding, as well as specialized work in sustainable sport tourism predominantly undertaken by the International Research Network in Sport Tourism (IRNIST), the article demonstrates that the destination image is not only a consequence of sport tourism but also a condition of its sustainability.

The chosen method is documentary: it relies on a thematic analysis of existing scientific literature, which corresponds to a legitimate conceptual synthesis approach for exploratory research. The case of Morocco, used as an illustration, demonstrates how a country builds a sports destination brand based on geographical diversity and a portfolio of international events, while simultaneously addressing environmental, social, and governance sustainability challenges. The article concludes by proposing an integrative model linking sports event capital, perceived image, brand capital, and territorial sustainability, and opens avenues for future empirical research.

Keywords: sport tourism; destination image; territorial branding; sustainability; sustainable territorial development; Morocco.

Résumé

Le tourisme sportif constitue un segment dynamique de l'économie touristique mondiale, à la croisée du marketing territorial, de l'événementiel et du développement durable. L'article propose une revue narrative de la littérature sur les relations entre le tourisme sportif, l'image de destination, l'image de marque territoriale et la durabilité, en mettant l'accent sur le contexte marocain. En mobilisant les cadres théoriques fondamentaux, ainsi que sur des travaux spécialisés en matière de tourisme sportif durable notamment ceux du réseau international de recherche sur le tourisme sportif (IRNIST). L'article démontre que l'image de destination n'est pas seulement une conséquence du tourisme sportif, mais aussi une condition de sa durabilité.

Cette méthode documentaire repose sur une analyse thématique de la littérature scientifique existante, ce qui correspond à une approche de synthèse conceptuelle pour la recherche exploratoire. Le cas du Maroc, utilisé à titre d'illustration, montre comment un pays construit une marque de destination sportive fondée sur la diversité géographique et un portefeuille d'événements internationaux, tout en relevant les défis de durabilité environnementale, sociale et de gouvernance. L'article conclut en proposant un modèle intégratif reliant l'ensemble des capitaux, et ouvre des perspectives pour de futures recherches empiriques.

Mots-clés: sport tourism; destination image; territorial branding; sustainability; sustainable territorial development; Morocco.

Introduction

For the past thirty years, sport tourism has established itself as a field of research and a distinct economic sector, driven by the proliferation of major sporting events, the spread of nature and adventure activities, and the search by regions for levers of differentiation in a globalized and competitive tourism market. Long treated as a mere subcategory of leisure tourism, sport tourism is now recognized as an autonomous scientific object, with its own journals, its own research networks such as International Research Network in Sport Tourism (IRNIST), and its own specific conceptual frameworks (Gibson, 1998; Hinch & Higham, 2001; Weed & Bull, 2004).

In parallel, the literature on territorial marketing has highlighted the central role of image and brand in the attractiveness of tourist destinations, from Gunn's pioneering work (1972) on the formation of tourist image to contemporary models of brand capital. In studies of branding applied to territories, destination image is considered a major determinant of traveler choice, satisfaction, and loyalty. However, these two areas—sport tourism on the one hand, and destination image and branding on the other—have long developed in relatively separate ways, even though sporting events are among the most powerful tools for building and disseminating a territorial brand image (Richelieu, 2018).

This article aims to intersect these two fields through a central question: *to what extent do destination image and branding constitute a condition for the sustainability of sport tourism, and vice versa?* This question takes on particular significance when applied to a country like Morocco, which has made sport an explicit pillar of its national tourism promotion strategy, through the organization of major events such as Marathon des Sables, Mohammed VI International Athletics Meeting, Hassan II Golf Trophy, 10 km International by WeCasablanca, Africa Cup of Nations 2025 and preparations for the 2030 World Cup co-organised by Morocco, Spain and Portugal. The kingdom of Morocco is also working on the promotion of a highly diversified range of outdoor sports like skiing in the High Atlas Mountains and surfing on the Atlantic coast.

Thus, this contribution adopts a deliberate approach of reviewing existing literature. This approach allows for the structuring of a still fragmented field, the identification of convergences and tensions between the theoretical frameworks used, and the laying of the conceptual foundations for subsequent empirical research. After specifying the chosen methodological approach, the article presents theoretical foundations of sport tourism, then those of destination

image and branding. It also analyzes the interactions between two fields before specifically examining the relationship between brand image and territorial sustainability in Morocco.

1. Conceptual framework and methodological approach

A narrative and integrative literature review is chosen as the methodological foundation of this article, which differs from the systematic review by a more conceptual than exhaustive aim: it is not a question of listing all the scientific production on the subject according to a quantitative protocol of the PRISMA type, but of constructing, from a reasoned corpus of leading references, a critical synthesis capable of illuminating the links between sport tourism, destination image and sustainability. This approach is commonly used in sport and tourism studies when the goal is to clarify an emerging conceptual field or to foster dialogue between previously separate bodies of work, as illustrated, for example, by the epistemological clarification work conducted by Van Rheenen, Cernaianu, and Sobry (2017) on the definition of sport tourism, based on the analysis of more than five hundred texts published in the Journal of Sport & Tourism between 1993 and 2014.

The corpus used in this article comprises three categories of sources. The first includes foundational texts and key syntheses on destination image and branding. The second group comprises specialized works on sport tourism and sustainable territorial development, particularly those produced within the IRNIST network and by its members. The third group gathers secondary sources related to the Moroccan context, strategic documents from the Ministry of Tourism and the Moroccan National Tourist Office.

2. Sport Tourism: Theoretical Foundations

2.1. A concept with Long-Contested Boundaries

Sport tourism is classically defined as the temporary movement of people outside their usual environment, motivated in whole or in part by the practice, observation, or support of a sporting activity (Gibson, 1998; Hinch & Higham, 2001). This general definition, however, masks a great heterogeneity of practices and motivations, which the literature has gradually sought to categorize. Gibson (1998) thus distinguishes three main categories: active sport tourism, where the individual engages in physical activity within a tourist context; event-based sport tourism, centered on attending competitions as a spectator; and nostalgia-driven sport tourism, focused on visiting iconic sites, museums, or temples of sport. In addition to this typology, there is the now classic distinction between "hard" and "soft" sport tourism, depending on the degree to which sporting motivation is central to the travel plan (Sofield, 2003).

The scientific legitimization of the field reached a significant milestone with the work of Van Rheenen, Cernaianu, and Sobry (2017), who conducted a content analysis of all texts published in the Journal of Sport & Tourism (articles, editorials, abstracts, chapters and book reviews) for the years 1993-2014. The study identified five paradigmatic dimensions: "*time* (the duration away from a home environment), *space* (encompassing travel away from a home environment), *sport as motivation for travel* (type, level and extent of sport activity), *participant experience of the sport tourism activity* and *economic motivation* (reference to the development of an economic sector or niche market)" (Van Rheenen, Cernaianu, and Sobry, 2017). These dimensions provide insight into the epistemological foundation of the field while highlight the core concepts that have shaped the development of sport tourism research over the last years.

The study shows that definitions of sport tourism have gradually broadened, shifting from a conception centered on performance and competition to one integrating leisure activities, outdoor sports, and the cultural and identity dimensions of sports travel. The authors also highlight the persistent tensions between economic approaches, focused on measuring the financial impact of events, and sociocultural approaches, attentive to the effects of sport tourism on host communities, their identity, and their environment—a tension that directly structures the issue of sustainability developed later in this article.

2.2. Sporting Events and Event Tourism

A significant portion of the literature on sport tourism focuses on events, whether mega-events (Olympic Games, World Cups) or "small-scale sport tourism events," meaning small to medium-sized sporting events such as road races, half-marathons, or local trail runs. Getz (2008), in his now classic synthesis on event tourism, emphasizes that events play a triple role: they are attractions in their own right, catalysts for urban development and image enhancement, and drivers of the destination's image over time. This last function - the event as an image-building tool - is central to the research program conducted by the IRNIST, whose edited volume by Melo, Sobry, and Van Rheenen (2021) represents one of the most comprehensive comparative syntheses to date.

This book brings together case studies conducted using a common methodology in several countries - Algeria, Brazil, the Czech Republic, France, Hungary, Italy, Portugal, Romania and Switzerland - focusing on the economic, environmental, and sociocultural impacts of small-scale road races. The authors' contributions had a common finding: even small-scale sporting events, often overlooked in the literature in favor of mega-events, can generate significant

impacts on local development when conceived within a framework of territorial sustainability rather than simply as one-off events.

3. Destination Image and Branding: Theoretical Framework

3.1. Destination Image: A Multidimensional Construct

The concept of destination image originates in the seminal work of Gunn (1972), who distinguishes between an organic image, constructed from non-tourist sources of information (education, media, accounts from acquaintances), and an induced image, shaped by the communication and marketing actions of tourism stakeholders. This distinction still structures most of the literature on the formation of tourist imagery today, particularly through the image formation process model proposed by Gartner (1994), which identifies several agents shaping the image, from autonomous sources (news reports, cultural works) to promotional sources controlled by the destination itself.

The contribution of Echtner and Ritchie (1993) proposed a three-dimensional framework for destination image, articulating an attribute/holistic axis, a functional/psychological axis, and a common/unique axis. This model made it possible to move beyond purely attribute-based approaches to image, deemed incapable of accounting for the broader, emotional, and symbolic dimensions of destination perception. Similarly, Baloglu and McCleary (1999) proposed an integrative model distinguishing between the cognitive image, based on beliefs and knowledge about the destination, and the affective image, linked to the feelings it evokes; these two components combine to form the overall image perceived by the tourist. Gallarza, Saura, and García (2002), in their conceptual synthesis, confirm the complex, multifaceted, relativistic, and dynamic nature of destination image, which evolves over time under the influence of lived experiences, media exposure, and transformations of the territory itself.

3.2. From Marketing to Destination Branding

Starting in the 1990s, marketing literature gradually transposed to territories the conceptual frameworks of branding initially developed for products and services, notably through the seminal work of Aaker (1991) on brand equity and Keller (1993) on consumer-based brand equity. Blain, Levy, and Ritchie (2005), based on a survey of North American destination management organizations, show that the essential function of destination branding lies in its ability to strengthen destination recognition and recall, ensure consistent communication of its experiential promise, and consolidate an emotional connection with visitors. Konecnik and Gartner (2007) applying the consumer-based brand equity model to the case of Slovenia,

operationalize four constituent dimensions of territorial brand equity—awareness, image, perceived quality, and loyalty—and empirically demonstrate their interrelationships.

Cai (2002) introduces the notion of cooperative branding for rural destinations, particularly relevant for territories organized around a portfolio of nature or sports activities, while Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005) remind us, at the urban level, that destination branding cannot be reduced to a communication operation but must be rooted in a real territorial identity shared by local stakeholders, otherwise it risks creating a detrimental gap between brand promise and lived experience.

3.3. Sport as a Specific Vector of Place Branding

While the general literature on destination branding is abundant, studies specifically devoted to the link between sport and territorial brand image remain more limited. Richelieu (2018) proposes a framework for analyzing sport-oriented place branding strategies applicable to cities, regions, and countries, demonstrating that professional sports organizations and major events can be leveraged as brand assets in the same way as a territory's cultural or natural heritage, provided they are integrated into a coherent brand strategy and not treated as mere one-off communication campaigns. This approach echoes the work of Kaplanidou and Vogt (2007) on the relationships between the image of a sporting event, the image of the host destination, and the behavior of sport tourists, which empirically establishes that the perceived quality of an event impacts the overall image of the host destination, and vice versa.

4. Interactions between sport tourism, image, and destination branding

4.1. Sport as an Accelerator and Brand Revealer

Combining the two preceding sets of data reveals three main mechanisms by which sport tourism contributes to building a destination's image and brand. The first is a mechanism of media visibility: sporting events, particularly when broadcast internationally, offer considerable exposure to the host destination, far exceeding what traditional tourism communication campaigns could achieve. The second is a mechanism of symbolic association: sport conveys values—performance, pushing personal limits, authenticity, conviviality, nature—that enrich and sometimes reorient the perceived image of the destination. The third is an experiential mechanism: engaging in sports in a tourist context, whether it's a trail run in the High Atlas Mountains, golf course in Marrakech or surf sessions in Agadir, involves the visitor in a tangible and memorable relationship with the territory, fostering the formation of a strong emotional image, in accordance with the cognitive-affective model of Baloglu and McCleary (1999).

4.2. A Bidirectional and Risk-Free Relationship

This relationship is not, however, unilateral: the pre-existing image of the destination, in turn, influences the attractiveness, attendance, and even the perceived quality of the sporting events held there, in accordance with the findings of Kaplanidou and Vogt (2007). A destination suffering from a negative image in terms of safety, accessibility, or infrastructure will see the brand value of its sporting events penalized, regardless of the intrinsic quality of their organization. This interaction also exposes destinations to specific risks that the literature is beginning to document: a logistical incident, an environmental problem, or a social controversy linked to a sporting event can, due to the media coverage associated with sport, rapidly damage an image built up over the long term. Consistency between the brand promise and the experience actually lived by participants thus remains, as Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005) remind us regarding urban branding, a condition of credibility that is all the more important for sport tourism, where the physical and sensory experience makes the gap between promise and reality particularly noticeable to the visitor.

5. Sustainability and Destination Image: A Strategic Link

5.1. Brand Image as a Condition, Not Just a Result, of Sustainability

The most significant contribution to the issue addressed in this article lies in the shift in perspective implicitly brought about by recent literature: the image and brand of the destination are no longer considered solely as a result of sustainable sport tourism, but as one of its enabling conditions. Three arguments support this thesis. First, a destination image based on authentic and verifiable attributes—genuine geographical diversity, effective infrastructure quality, and demonstrable environmental commitment—reduces the risk of dissonance between marketing promise and lived experience, a dissonance identified by Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005) as one of the main factors contributing to the failure of territorial branding strategies. Conversely, a sports destination brand built on fragile or exaggerated foundations exposes the territory to a rapid erosion of its reputation as soon as sport tourism exceeds the territory's actual carrying capacity.

Secondly, building a strong brand image around sport tourism creates a direct economic incentive to preserve the assets on which it is based: a territory whose appeal to sport tourism relies on the quality of its landscapes, coastline, or mountains has a strategic interest, beyond any regulatory constraints, in preserving these resources. Bessy and Naria (2005) highlight this in the case of Réunion Island, where the development of outdoor sport tourism is accompanied by a heightened awareness among local economic actors of the importance of preserving natural

spaces. Thirdly, a well-defined destination brand facilitates the coordination of stakeholders around shared sustainability goals: it provides a common framework—a set of values and commitments associated with the destination—to which public actors, event organizers, private tourism operators, and local populations can refer. This aligns with Cai's (2002) analysis of cooperative branding in rural destinations.

5.2. Governance, Stakeholders, and Carrying Capacity

Case studies compiled by Melo, Sobry, and Van Rheenen (2021) demonstrate that the success of small-scale sport tourism events in terms of sustainability depends less on the size of the event than on the quality of coordination between local authorities, sports federations, tourism operators, and environmental associations. This concept has been central to the analysis of the environmental impacts of outdoor sports since the foundational work on sustainable tourism and is a particular point of concern for destinations whose brand image relies on the rarity or fragility of a natural environment—desert, mountain, coastline—as is precisely the case in Morocco.

6. The Case of Morocco: Sport Tourism, Brand Image, and Sustainability

This section applies the conceptual framework developed earlier to the Moroccan context, drawing on secondary sources—strategic documents from the Ministry of Tourism, Handicrafts, and the Social and Solidarity Economy; communications from the Moroccan National Tourist Office (ONMT); and recent Moroccan academic literature. In the absence of fieldwork, this section is illustrative and explanatory in nature. It aims to demonstrate the heuristic relevance of the theoretical framework rather than to provide rigorous empirical validation.

6.1. An Explicit National Strategy for Linking Sport and Tourism Image

Morocco provides a particularly relevant case study for the issues addressed in this article, as national tourism authorities have explicitly integrated sport and event tourism into their destination branding strategy. The Ministry of Tourism indicates that events constitute an integral component of the communication strategy for the Morocco destination brand, with the stated objective not only of enlivening tourist destinations but also of generating an international image through the media coverage of events organized in the Kingdom. This strategic direction gained new momentum with the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations, presented by the Moroccan National Tourist Office (ONMT) as an opportunity to demonstrate that Morocco is not limited to a seaside or cultural leisure destination but is also establishing itself as a

credible platform for international event and sport tourism. This will be achieved by inviting tour operators, journalists, and travel influencers from priority source markets.

This strategy is a continuation of the "Entertainment, Leisure, and Sports" program of Vision 2020, which already aimed to enhance the country's sport tourism potential through the creation of large-scale sports centers and the strengthening of each region's international positioning based on its specific strengths. In Richelieu's vocabulary (2018), this translates into a genuine national "sport-oriented place branding" strategy, where sport is not merely tolerated as one tourist activity among others but mobilized as a strategic vector for repositioning the country's image on the international tourism stage.

6.2. A Diversified Portfolio of Sporting and Geographic Assets

In accordance with the Echtner and Ritchie (1993) model, the strength of a destination image rests in part on unique and differentiating attributes. In this respect, Morocco possesses a portfolio of sporting assets supported by a rare geographical and climatic diversity for a single country: the High Atlas Mountains, make it, one of the leading trekking destination on the African continent; the resorts of Oukaïmeden and Michlifen allow for the practice of winter sports; The Atlantic coast, from Essaouira to Dakhla via Agadir and Taghazout and Anza, is internationally renowned for surfing and kitesurfing; the regions of Marrakech, Ouarzazate, and Merzouga host motorsports and raids and many other activities ; finally, the Marathon des Sables, an ultra-endurance race held in the Moroccan Sahara Desert since 1986, is one of the most iconic and longest-standing sport tourism events associated with the country on the international stage. In addition to these natural assets, there is a calendar of recurring international sporting events - the Hassan II Golf Trophy and the Lalla Meryem Cup golf tournament in Rabat, the Mohammed VI International Athletics Meeting, and the Marrakech Grand Prix (Motor sport) and the10 km International by WeCasablanca - to which have been added, more recently, the organization of the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations football tournament and the preparations for co-hosting the 2030 FIFA World Cup with Spain and Portugal. This diversity constitutes, in the sense of Cai (2002), a potential basis for cooperative territorial branding, with each region able to build a specific sports sub-brand linked to a unifying national brand.

6.3. Sustainability Issues Remaining to Be Empirically Documented

However, the conceptual analysis developed invites a critical examination of the conditions for the sustainability of this Moroccan sports branding strategy. Several points of concern emerge from the existing literature, although a rigorous empirical evaluation has not yet been

completely conducted at the national level officially – a part from some initiatives. The first concerns water resources: several flagship activities of Morocco's sport tourism offering—golf, winter sports, desert events such as the Marathon des Sables—take place in contexts of structural water stress. This raises the central question, within the framework of environmental sustainability, of the compatibility between the development of this offering and the sustainable management of natural resources. The second concern relates to the fragility of coastal and mountain environments, which support a large part of outdoor sports activities, and for which the concept of carrying capacity mentioned is particularly critical, especially on the Taghazout and Anza coastline or in the most frequented valleys of the High Atlas.

The third point of concern relates to the socio-cultural dimension and the involvement of local populations, which, is a condition for the acceptability and therefore the sustainability of territorial development strategies through sport.

The fourth point concerns governance: the success of a sustainable sports branding strategy, according to the framework, requires effective coordination between the national level (like Ministry of Tourism, Moroccan National Tourist Office (ONMT), Sports federations and others) and the regional and local levels (local authorities, tourism operators, host communities and others), as well as the digitalization and upgrading of sports infrastructure, which industry professionals have identified as a prerequisite for Morocco to achieve the status of a world-renowned sport tourism destination. The available literature does not currently allow for a precise documentation of the state of this multi-level coordination across the various Moroccan sports regions, which constitutes a priority area for empirical research identified in the conclusion of this article.

7. Discussion: Towards an Integrative Model

The comparative analysis of the theoretical frameworks used in this article allows us to propose an integrative model articulating four dynamically interacting components and based on the previous mentioned literature.

1. The first is the territory's sporting event capital.

2. The second is the perceived image of the destination, itself decomposable into cognitive and affective dimensions and fueled both by media exposure to sporting events and by the lived experience of sports tourists.

3. The third is territorial brand capital, which combines awareness, image, perceived quality, and loyalty, and determines the destination's capacity to convert its event visibility into a sustainable competitive advantage.

4. Finally, the fourth is territorial sustainability, understood not only in its threefold economic, environmental, and sociocultural sense but also in a more holistic way with the governance dimension.

The main contribution of this literature review lies in formalizing the feedback loops linking these four components. A positive feedback loop links event capital, image, and brand equity, in accordance with the mechanism described before: the richer and more coherent the portfolio of events, the more the image is reinforced.

The stronger the brand equity, the more it consolidates, which in turn facilitates the attraction of new events and investments. A second loop, less frequently addressed in the existing literature, links brand equity to territorial sustainability: as discussed, strong brand equity creates an incentive for economic and institutional actors to preserve the environmental and socio-cultural assets on which it is based, while effective sustainability, in turn, reinforces the credibility and resilience of the brand image in the face of potential crises.

Conversely, a sports branding strategy disconnected from realities on the ground - overexploitation of resources, exclusion of local populations, saturation of sites - exposes the destination to a negative image degradation loop whose reversibility is far from guaranteed. The literature on crisis management in tourism shows that rebuilding a damaged image generally requires significantly more time and investment than its initial development. Applied to the Moroccan case, this model suggests that the current strategy, based on the accumulation of high-profile international sporting events (AFCON 2025, preparations for the 2030 World Cup) and the promotion of remarkable geographical diversity, has thus far primarily activated the first loop - that of strengthening brand awareness and image through events - without the second loop, explicitly linking this image strategy to measurable environmental and social sustainability objectives, being documented with the same clarity in the available academic literature. Although institutional discourse emphasizes the importance of sustainable tourism, there is a notable scarcity of statistical data on the subject. This potential imbalance between image building and consolidating its sustainability constitutes, more than a criticism, a point of focus for stakeholders in the sector and an invitation to empirical research.

Conclusion

This literature review has limitations that should be explicitly stated. Methodologically, the absence of a systematic PRISMA-type protocol for example, while acknowledged and justified by the conceptual objective pursued, does not guarantee the exhaustiveness of the corpus used and could be addressed in a future study by a systematic review specifically focused on publications related to sport tourism in Morocco.

However, this article has offered a narrative literature review articulating two previously relatively separate fields of research - sport tourism and destination image/branding - around the issue of territorial sustainability. A cross-analysis of the foundational theoretical frameworks of destination, territorial, and sustainable sport tourism, that establishes that destination image and branding are not simply by products of sport tourism but rather one of the structural conditions of its sustainability, by reducing the risks of dissonance.

The aim is to bridge the gap between promise and experience, encouraging stakeholders to preserve the assets that underpin the region's attractiveness, and providing a common framework for the multi-stakeholder governance required by any sustainable territorial development project through sport.

Applied to the case of Morocco, this analytical framework highlights an explicit and proactive national strategy for linking sporting events with the international positioning of the destination brand, supported by remarkable geographical diversity and a remarkable portfolio of events. At the same time, it reveals a clear need for empirical research to document, beyond institutional discourse, the actual conditions for the environmental, social, economic and governance sustainability of this strategy. In this sense, this literature review is not an end point but a starting point: it proposes a structured conceptual framework capable of guiding future field research on the subject "Moroccan sustainable sport tourism".

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