

# Destination Branding in Relation to Airports: The Case of the City of Valencia

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This study investigates various factors that contribute to the success of destination branding efforts where success is defined as the increase in airplane passenger numbers to a destination and its linked air transportation. Drawing on in-depth interviews and snowball sampling, the study examines the roles of many of the key actors involved in the efforts to increase passenger numbers. Using the City of Valencia in Spain as a case study, the role of its airport is examined as a factor of particular interest. The study concludes that Valencia has positioned itself among neighbouring destinations on the Spanish Mediterranean coast by its focus on high profile events and cultural tourism. However, other actors have taken a more active role in the effort to increase the number of tourists than the Valencia Airport that has taken a more passive role. Another finding is that the persistence in seeking resources for the costly branding efforts was another influential factor that explains the increase in Valencia tourism.

*Keywords:* Airports, destination branding, increased passenger numbers

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## 1. Introduction

Airline deregulation, low cost carriers (LCC) and increased passenger numbers (Freathy and O'Connell, 2000) have forced the air transport industry to seek new partners in industries such as retailing and tourism in order to stay in business. One strategy, which airports have seen, is that some airlines favour offering new destinations rather than access to more airports (LFV, 2008) as a way to attract more customers. There are mutual benefits in this strategy for the tourism and the air transport industry – both tourist destination accessibility and passenger numbers increase (Graham, 2003). As a result, many airports have begun to brand themselves as destination gateways in the attempt to compete with other airports.

However, it is uncertain to what extent branding enhances an airport's competitive edge (Graham, 2003). Although airport branding seems to have increased the profiles of some

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peripheral airports amongst tour operators and airlines (Halpern, 2008), this observation does not tell us if the airport brand itself attracts airlines to route flights to a particular destination (and tourists to book those flights). It may be that the destination marketing organisations (DMOs) – who are the major actors in destination branding – influence the airlines to make greater use of regional airports and to open up new routes. Moreover, there may be mutual influence where the apparent growth in passenger numbers causes DMOs to contact airports and airlines, and vice versa.

Research shows that DMOs have greater power and legitimacy in destination development than other actors such as the airport authorities or the airlines (Timur and Getz, 2008). Destination branding at airports is a form of brand extension that an airport, with or without its own brand, uses to improve and renew its image, attract new customers and/or promote further growth. The purpose of this study is to investigate the various factors that contribute to the success of destination branding efforts where success is defined as the increase in the number of passengers to a destination and its linked air transportation. In this study the role of the airport is a factor of particular interest.

### 1.1 Air Transport Industry Actors

Jarach (2001) and Graham (2003) identify the following influential actors, among others, who operate in the air transport industry: airports, passengers, cargo airlines, airport authorities, tour operators and travel agents. In this study, our main focus is the role of airports as they work with other actors to promote a destination using a destination brand.

### 1.2 Destination Branding

Research indicates that in practice destination branding to a large extent is limited to logo design and development (Balakrishnan, 2008; Blain et al., 2005). However, Blain et al., (2005:337) argue that destination branding could be much broader. They define destination branding as follows:

“...the set of marketing activities that (1) support the creation of a name, symbol, logo, word mark or other graphic that readily *identifies* and *differentiates* a destination; that (2) consistently convey the *expectation* of a memorable travel *experience* that is uniquely associated with the destination; that (3) serve to *consolidate* and *reinforce* the *emotional connection* between the visitor and the destination; and that (4) reduce consumer *search costs* and *perceived risk*. Collectively, these activities serve to create a *destination image* that positively influences consumer *destination choice*.”

Research also shows that both airports and destinations have their own brands (Paternoster, 2008). However, more research is needed on how airport brands and destination brands interact.

Prideaux and Cooper (2002) claim that the way in which private and public sector stakeholder organisations collaborate with a DMO to promote a destination will affect the rate of growth in visitor numbers. Baker and Cameron (2008) identify various difficulties in destination politics. They argue that the complex tourism product and the many stakeholders and their relationships create problems in effective destination branding. Therefore it is interesting to investigate which actors are active (or passive) in the collaboration of branding a destination as well as to investigate the complexity of the relationships amongst these actors.

According to Hankinson (2004), the success of a destination brand strategy relies heavily on the collaboration between stakeholders that extends and reinforces effective relationships. Extension of a brand refers to the services provided at the core of the brand experience, such as events, leisure activities, hotels and hotel associations (ibid). Brand extension also refers to media relationships such as publicity, public relations and advertising, service relationships with

customers, residents and employees, and brand infrastructure relationships that focus on external transport including air transport (ibid.). Because of their importance for the success of tourism promotion efforts, it is of interest to investigate the various relationships between airports and individuals/organisations in destination branding.

## 2. Research design

In this research we use the qualitative case study method since it allows the researcher to evaluate a phenomenon and its context (Prideaux and Cooper 2002). In our study, the phenomenon is destination branding, and the context is the collaboration of the actors who promote the growth in tourist arrivals to a destination.

### 2.1 Choice of Destination

For our case study, we chose the City of Valencia in Spain. In recent years the number of tourist arrivals in Valencia has increased significantly. In the five-year period ending in 2007, there was a steady increase year-to-year, reaching a peak in 2007 (European Cities Marketing, 2007/2008; Turismo Valencia Convention Bureau, 2007). During 2007, Valencia experienced a 12% increase in the number of tourists compared to the previous year. Tourism in 2007 contributed €1.5 billion to the City's economy. Table 1 compares the number of overnight stays in 2007 to the preceding four years and also shows the amount of tourist air transportation as a percent of total tourist transportation (air, car, rail, bus and ship).

**Table 1. The increase in tourism in the City of Valencia**

| Topic/Time        | 2003         | 2004         | 2005         | 2006         | 2007         |
|-------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Overnight stays   | 2.09 million | 2.17 million | 2.49 million | 3.14 million | 3.51 million |
| Air transport     | 38.6 %       | 46.1 %       | 45.4 %       | 46.5 %       | 51 %         |
| Low cost carriers | 7 %          | 19 %         | 35 %         | 45 %         | 46 %         |

Source: Regional Ministry of Tourism (2007); Turismo Valencia Convention Bureau (2007:9-23)

Valencia has enjoyed success as an events city by hosting high profile events such as the 32<sup>nd</sup> America's Cup and Formula 1 races. From a cultural and social perspective, as well as an economic one, acting as the host city for such events is a very popular way of promoting destinations domestically and internationally (Getz, 2005, 2007; Larson, 2000).

### 2.2 Data Collection

We began our research by telephoning key organisations in order to gain access to interviewees who were considered to have relevant information. Among others, these organisations were the local DMOs, the major tourist attraction groups, some events organisations and government agents in charge of tourism development (Timur and Getz, 2008). During the telephone conversations and/or interviews, we used snowball sampling (Jensen, 2002) to identify other key organisations of interest for this study. We interviewed seven people during October/November of 2008. Each interview was conducted at the interviewee's organisation headquarters. Each interview lasted from one to two and a half hours.

### *The 14<sup>th</sup> World Route Development Forum*

We conducted a pre-study (October 12-14, 2008) at The 14<sup>th</sup> World Route Development Forum ("Routes"), in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, (Routes, 2008). The purpose of this pre-study was to identify key organisations that collaborate with airports in destination promotion. "Routes" is an annual conference where air transport, service and tourist organisations network and exchange information on issues affecting the air transport industry.

### *Interviews in Valencia*

We used a semi-structured interview guide for all seven interviews. This is a common method used for in-depth interviews. After a short presentation of our research project, we asked the interviewees how Valencia had succeeded in increasing its number of tourists and specifically what effect the high profile events had had on tourism. We also asked the interviewees to identify and map the actors they collaborated with in the promotion of Valencia as a tourist destination (see Merrilees et al., 2005). Based on this map, we next asked the interviewees why they collaborated with each actor, what the collaboration consisted of and who initiated the contacts. Figure 1, which is an assembly of the interviewees' maps, depicts the complex set of relationships involved in the destination branding of Valencia. The interviewees were not informed about the research interest in the airport as a key actor in the promotion of tourism in Valencia.

#### *2.3 Analysis of the Valencia Interviews*

To increase our understanding of destination branding in relation to airports, we categorised the interviewees' responses according to two themes: (1) theme industry organisations participating in destination branding and (2) theme activities undertaken by organisations in destination branding. In the following list we use fictitious names for the interviewees and actual names for their affiliations.

Carlos - The Regional Ministry of Tourism/The Tourist Board

Fernando - Valmor Sports Ltd., Agent for Formula 1

Javier - Turismo Valencia Convention Bureau

Diego - AENA - Aeropuertos Españoles y Navegación Aéreas - The Valencia Airport

Enrique - Victory Challenge (a team in the America's Cup)

Carmen - City of Arts and Sciences<sup>3</sup>

Patricia - Conceleria Valencia (government owned company created for facilitating the America's Cup)

Industry organisations participating in destination branding are those organisations that are directly or indirectly involved in the tourism industry. We divided the organisations into the following categories (see Figure 1). Letter codes are used to designate organisation category.

- Government - e.g., national government, town hall (G)
- Tourism organisations - e.g., tourist boards, destination marketing organisation (TO)
- Tourist attraction organisations (TA)
- Hotel, congress and fair and exhibition organisations (H)

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<sup>3</sup> A large compound of architect-designed buildings including museums, exhibition halls and theatres that showcase the arts and sciences. The buildings are also used as venues for business events ([www.cac.es](http://www.cac.es)).

- Events and sports organisations (E)
- Trade and media organisations – e.g., tour operators, product brands (T)
- Transportation organisations – e.g., railway, port, airport (GT)

#### 2.4 Limitations

Since we conducted our study from September to December 2008, our findings necessarily relate to the circumstances of that period. Furthermore, because of limitations on the research time available we had to omit consideration of certain issues such as nationality and organisational structures. We also recognize that we may not have located all the key organisations involved in the promotion of Valencia as a tourist destination. Nor have we addressed residents' and tourists' perceptions of Valencia's destination branding and of the Valencia Airport. Moreover, as our research is a case study of only one city and its airport, we admit there are limitations on the extent to which the findings can be generalized.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Destination Brands – Complementary or Competitive?

In the following presentation of the findings from the interviews, the interviewees' names appear in parentheses. See section 2.3 for their organisation affiliations.

In addition to TourSpain, which promotes Spain nationally and internationally, several regional, provincial and local destination brands exist (Carlos). The destination brands used to promote destinations follow the Spanish political structure, that is, the national, regional, provincial and city structures (Carlos, Fernando). There are three destination brands for the City of Valencia: 1) the 'Palmera' (Palm Tree), which is the joint destination logo for 'Comunitat Valenciana' (The Regional Government); 2) the Province of Valencia (Carlos); and 3) the City of Valencia (one of 543 municipalities in the Region) as 'Valencia – incredible, but true' with a focus on cultural tourism (Javier). Carlos states that the tourist board has invested a significant amount of financial resources and political effort into increasing the visibility of the Provincial brands. However, Carlos also says that approximately 80% of the tourism activities in the Region of Valencia are located in the Costa Blanca area that includes Alicante and Benidorm (neighbouring beach cities) with the remainder in Valencia and Castellón. A question may be raised as to whether the three brands complement or compete with each other.

#### 3.2 Industry Organisations Participating in Destination Branding

For the years 1996-2003 tourist grants for the entire Region were € 11.96 million; for the years 2004-2007 the grants totalled € 55.<sup>4</sup> The promotion of the City of Valencia as a tourist destination is largely the work of several organisations and a few individuals (see figure 1). One of these individuals is the Mayor of Valencia, Rita Barberá Nolla, who has been in office for almost 20 years (Carlos). A second important person is the President of Generalitat Valenciana, Francisco Camps Ortiz, who belongs to the same political party as the Mayor. These two politicians have worked together for many years (Carlos). Carlos describes their collaboration as

“a driving force for the successes like the America's Cup and Formula 1. Generalitat Valenciana pushed for bidding for the Formula 1 event ... We

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4 Delegación de la Comunidad Valenciana en Brusales. (n.d.) Retrieved December 9 2008 from <http://www.uegva.info/fundacioncv/articulos/archivos/20080129113900.pdf>

want the race because it is good for the brand of Valencia as well as the whole Region of Valencia.”

However, due to political issues, the promotion of the America’s Cup was not without conflict. Patricia explained that the different owners of the America’s Cup organisation had a difficult time working together. In particular, there were problems with resolving the financial issues between the national government and the owners. A complicating factor might have been that Valencia received European funding for the development of its infrastructure (Javier).

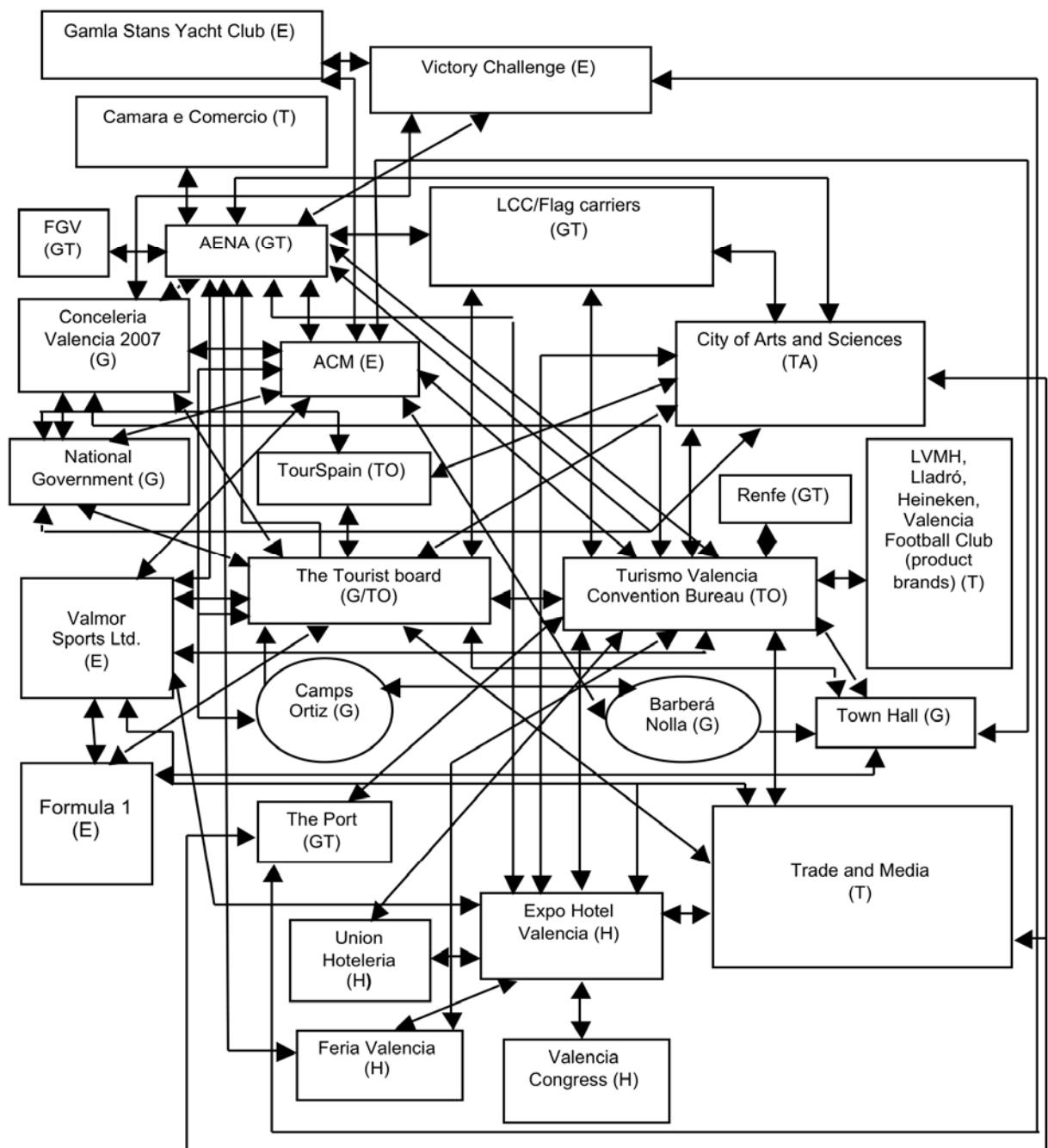


Figure 1. Organisations that collaborate in promoting Valencia, directly or indirectly (see section 2.3 for the letter codes designating organisation category).

|                        |  |
|------------------------|--|
| ACM                    | The America's Cup Management   |
| AENA                   | Aeropuertos Españoles y Navegación Aéreas - The Valencia Airport, Manises.   |
| Camara e Comercio      | Chamber of Commerce  |
| CAS                    | City of Arts and Sciences  |
| Conceleria Valencia    | Governmental and regional organisation established for the America's Cup Event   |
| Feria Valencia         | Venue Company, organizer of fairs and exhibitions  |
| FGV                    | Ferrocarril Generalitat Valenciana (the Underground Rail Transport)  |
| Formula 1              | Owner of the Formula 1 Event   |
| Francisco Camps Ortiz  | President of Generalitat Valenciana  |
| Gamla Stans Yacht Club | Yacht Club that owns the Victory Challenge team in the America's Cup   |
| Heineken               | Beer company   |
| LVMH                   | LVMH Group (Louis Vuitton and Moët Hennessy), a luxury brand company   |
| LLADRÓ                 | Porcelain and pottery company  |
| LCC                    | Low Cost Carriers  |
| Renfe                  | National Railway Company   |
| Rita Barberá Nolla     | Mayor of the City of Valencia  |
| TB                     | Tourist Board  |
| TVCB                   | Tourismo Valencia Convention Bureau  |
| TourSpain              | National Tourism Organisation  |
| Trade and media        | Tour operators, travel agencies, communities/blogs, social media marketing, familiarity trips and/or promotion projects (e.g., coolcapitals.com) |
| Union Hotelaria        | Network of hotels in Valencia  |
| VS                     | Valmor Sport Ltd. (Agent for Formula 1)  |

### *3.3 Destination Branding Activities*

The work of the collaboration between the organisations engaged in destination branding involves several separate activities. Next we discuss only the destination branding activities undertaken by the organisations and by AENA.

#### ***Advertising***

According to Diego, since AENA is controlled centrally by the national government, the Valencia Airport is limited in its decision-making. Carmen states that the Airport only promotes the City of Arts and Sciences (CAS) on posters at the terminal.

### *Information Services*

According to Diego, the Camara e Comercio is a very important collaborator with the Valencia Airport on tourism matters. AENA is both a member of the transportation commission that consists of several airports and the tourism commission that consists of hotels and restaurants. TVCB provides AENA with statistics on the number of passenger arrivals. TB, FGV and Feria Valencia have information desks at the airport (Diego).

### *Event Services*

A three-year collaboration between ACM and other arrangers culminated in the actual America's Cup event in 2007 (Diego). All the teams passed through the airport, the boats were transported by plane and most of the press and public arrived by plane.

### *Transport Accessibility Services*

AENA's most important collaboration is with TVCB. Diego describes this collaboration as follows: "The work that Turismo Valencia is doing for the City is highly important for the Airport ... the tourists have to land somewhere". Concorcio Valencia 2007's collaboration with AENA concerned ACM's request for private flights, a special terminal for VIP guests and a special place for promoting the event at the Airport. The Airport had to agree to these requests before the City was given permission to host the America's Cup (Patricia). The Victory Challenge teams' contacts with AENA were made through TVCB because team equipment was sent by air transport (Enrique). The collaboration between VS and AENA concerned special terminal arrangements for important guests, landings and departures per VS schedules and sometimes the use of helicopters (Fernando). FGV collaborates with AENA on the underground rail transport from the airport to Valencia (Diego). Finally, collaboration developed between LCC and the flag carriers. TB's collaboration with AENA on tourist only concerns statistics:

"The connection to AENA is just looked upon as fuel ... an administrative thing ... you do not get to the tourism part ... there is no contact with AENA for promotion ... only statistics ... AENA is strictly regulated and only looks at landings and takeoffs. It is an attitude. If you want to talk to AENA, you cannot go to the Valencia Airport; you have to call Madrid [AENA's headquarters]." (Carlos)

### *Facilitation services*

Javier at TVCB explains that an agreement exists with the Valencia Airport to use some military space for customers (e.g., BMW's launch of a new car). The end customer (e.g., BMW) pays the Airport. According to Javier, AENA agrees to this arrangement because

"...before, you could not do anything at the Airport. What is good for us and for you [pointing at AENA on the map] is good for the City. The Airport's answer was always 'we do not do that'. And the response from us [TVCB] was 'why not'? We tried to show them that they are part of tourism . . . that they belong to tourism."

Diego from AENA describes the commercial activity in collaboration with TVCB as follows:

"The Airport rents the space to show cars, for example, BMW, Toyota, Mercedes, Opel ... They have used the space to show 100 cars at the Airport ... other companies want fast arrivals and departures, so we have a terminal for private aviation where business people, celebrities and royals arrive and depart. We call that terminal 'Aviacion Privada'. Also, the Airport has a press



hall that BMW used to present their cars ...The Airport does nothing to promote this. Turismo Valencia does all the work of finding customers. The customers only sign the contracts with us."

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 *The Vision of Valencia*

The vision that guides the work of most of the organisations (see figure 1) is to put the City of Valencia, and the surrounding Region, on the map. "Putting Valencia on the map" includes increasing the public's general awareness of Valencia, including its desirability as a place to live or visit. Although the influential individuals and relevant organisations in the City do not refer to the steps prescribed by Blain's et al. (2005) (see section 1.2), they essentially follow those steps in promoting tourism. They describe their efforts as focused on the promotion of tourism that leads to increases in the number of tourists and the creation of a growth situation with good business opportunities.

Achieving this vision of "putting Valencia on the map" has to a large extent focused on hosting high profile events and developing cultural tourism. In addition to the annual Formula 1 race and the annual Valencia Tennis Tournament on the ATP World Tour, the most spectacular event held recently in Valencia was the America's Cup in 2007. The development of cultural tourism has manifested itself in the CAS and other activities in a network with TB and TVCB. Besides these major events, the City and Region of Valencia host an increasing number of different corporate and professional business events every year, such as new product launches. These events, combined with the sun and beach of the Spanish Mediterranean coast, have attracted more and more tourists in recent years (see table 1). Airplane travel is now the number one transport mode to the City/Region and its surroundings.

### 4.2 *Key Individuals Behind Destination Branding*

A growth situation such as the City of Valencia is experiencing does not materialise out of thin air. The interviewees in the study name two individuals - the Mayor of Valencia and the Regional President of Generalitat Valenciana - as the main people behind the branding activities. These two individuals not only took the initiative in formulating the vision of "putting Valencia on the map", but also supported (and support) the specific work of promoting Valencia. As office holders for a number of years, both politicians have been able to pursue this vision with a long-term perspective. There is no indication of opposition to their tourism-related activities from other political parties. It is evident that the cooperation works well as both the City and the Region have benefited from these individuals' joint efforts.

The Mayor's and the Regional President's choices of favourite events reflect their personal interest in the Valencia tourist destination branding. The Mayor favours the America's Cup and the Regional President favours Formula 1. The two politicians have been key actors in the promotion of Valencia as the location for these events.

While creating the City/Region's vision and setting the goals may have been the work of the Mayor and the Regional President, others (such as the interviewees in this study) were needed to execute their plan of making Valencia a popular tourist destination. Many of the interviewees and their organisations provide the structure needed for realizing the vision. While there has been some friction between these organisations, it seems that they have overcome most of the kind of problems Baker and Cameron (2008) describe (see section 1.2). The private and public sector stakeholders have successfully joined forces, facilitated by the DMOs (see Prideaux and Cooper, 2002).

Concerning the different brands (see section 3.3) that attract tourists, the vision of “putting Valencia on the map” is not intended to diminish other localities’ efforts to attract tourists. Since Valencia’s goal is to focus on a tourist niche that features culture and sporting events rather than only sun and sand, the City has simply tried to offer an alternative tourist destination to the kind promoted by Alicante and Benidorm.

#### *4.3 The Valencia Airport and Destination Branding*

The Valencia Airport is important for tourism in terms of its destination accessibility. Ease of arrival and departure are vital aspects of the overall airplane experience at a destination (Macchiavelli and Vaghi, 2003). However, the development of the Airport was primarily initiated by organisations other than the local or central AENA representatives. In Valencia, AENA has played a rather passive role in the overall destination branding efforts and does not seem to have had any significant influence on the increase in the number of airline passengers. Organisations like TB and TVCB have been far more active. When the Valencia Airport engages in other activities, such as renting space to BMW for launching cars, TVCB initiates such activities. TVCB also has to convince AENA that these activities will increase airport revenue and will increase tourism. These findings suggest that the Valencia Airport, Manises is not fully aware of its important role in the tourism industry.

Contrary to Paternoster’s (2008) observation about airports, we found that the Valencia Airport promotes no brand of its own. The only display of branding at the Valencia Airport, on site and in their written documentation, was of other organisations’ branding. The only relevant brand for air transport that we saw at the Valencia Airport was the AENA logo; however, it has no add-on tag for the local destination. This lack of unique branding by the Airport is consistent with the rather passive role it takes in promoting tourism. We conclude, like Graham (2003), that an airport brand does not necessarily promote the growth in passenger numbers. Although it is interesting to speculate whether a more active role by the Valencia Airport would have contributed something additional to the destination branding of Valencia, such a role might still not require a specific airport brand, especially if another airport brand simply increases the number of brands currently in and around the Valencia Airport.

#### *4.4 Funding the Development Activities*

The vision of “putting Valencia on the map” has, of course, required vast resources. Hosting high profile events and constructing attractive tourist attractions are costly endeavours. Fortunately for Valencia, the Spanish national government and the European Union (EU) have contributed significantly to the financing of the City’s many activities and infrastructure improvements. In addition, domestic sources have matched the rather large amounts of regional development funds from the EU. As one interviewee remarks, it is noteworthy that the City of Valencia claims it has been far more successful in obtaining EU development funds than surrounding regions.

## **5. Conclusions**

The City of Valencia has succeeded in increasing its number of tourists by choosing a specific promotional strategy. Rather than advertising itself as only another sunbathing place on the Spanish Mediterranean coast, the City has promoted itself as a cultural and sporting events destination. The events hosted are often cultural, recreational and/or business- oriented. Even for the more dedicated company events (e.g., product launches), the recreational dimension is a supplementary argument for locating them in Valencia. Thus the overall visitor experience (see Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Ryan, 2002) is promoted. This mix of professional and recreational

reasons for choosing Valencia can be seen as an example of the effort to consolidate and reinforce the emotional connection between the visitor and the visitor's destination (Blain et al., 2005).

Visitors and tourists place a high value on convenient transportation when they recommend particular locations to others (Chen and Gursoy, 2001). In the age of LCC, when airports are serving more and more passengers and when numerous travel blogs rate airports and airport services, the airport brand seems to have become increasingly important. However, the Valencia Airport, which is vital for destination accessibility to the City of Valencia, has seen an increase in the number of passengers served without promoting a brand of its own and without taking a particularly active role in self-promotion. Other actors, collaborating in a complex development process, are far more active in the promotion and brand extension of Valencia as a tourist destination. These actors obviously try to compensate for the Airport's passivity. Therefore we call for further studies on the results when a destination's airport takes a more active role in the tourism development activities and brand extension efforts.

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