Iceland—a small island-nation of approximately 330,000 people—competed in the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) Football Championships (the 'Euro') in 2016. This was Iceland’s first time qualifying for an international football competition. Despite being considered ‘underdogs’, the team was at the center of several memorable moments during the tournament which included the post-game ‘thunderclap’ with Icelandic fans, a draw with Portugal, and an unexpected appearance in the quarterfinals. Iceland’s participation in the tournament became a major story in mainstream news and sport media. Stepchenkova and Morrison (2008) and Tasci and Gartner (2007) suggest that due to the intangibility of tourism products, and in the absence of actual visitation, tourists depend on information content and visuals to bring a destination to life. The media is therefore a critical information source for prospective tourists. While studies examining sport events and destination image (e.g. Grix, 2012; Kim, Kang, & Kim, 2014), have focused on host cities (or nations), few studies have examined non-host regions. This paper explores how non-host destinations can capitalize on event media to build destination image through participation in international sport events. The image of a destination influences tourists’ choice processes, evaluations of that destination, and future intentions. On the other hand, the media is important as it influences public opinion and perceptions. Thus, the way in which the media frames a destination plays an important role in the meaning-making process for audiences and can therefore influence destination choice (Gabbioneta & De Carlo, 2019; Hall, 2002).

Following the work of Ulvnes and Solberg (2016), sport event media information is viewed as a two-dimensional concept, reflecting two main categories: i) sport, where the focus is on athletic performance and ii) other issues such as culture, tourism, and food. An exploratory case study approach (Yin, 2014) will be employed with the main data source being articles from the highest circulating print and online news publications in the United States (e.g. the New York Times), as well as sport-specific media such as Sports Illustrated (si.com) and ESPN (espn.com). Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with key personnel from Iceland’s Destination Marketing Organization- Visit Iceland. Document analysis will also be used to examine Visit Iceland’s reports, strategy documents, promotional materials, and website/s. Data will be analyzed using qualitative content analysis, whereby initial coding begins with a theoretical framework and/or relevant research findings, followed by the researcher allowing for themes to emerge from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As this study is in progress, findings cannot be presented at this time. However, this paper is expected to contribute to the literature on the role of the media in the construction of destination image. In particular, it will shed light on how countries participating in international sport events can leverage event media to enhance destination image and awareness through compelling stories about the team, its players, local culture, and heritage. While most destinations pursue event hosting for the economic and tourism benefits, this study highlights how destination image can be enhanced through event participation.