

Path Analysis of Sport Event Image Influence on Spectator's Intentions to Revisit the Hosting Destination

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Destinations turn to sport tourism products, including events to attract more people, change the image of the destination (Dimanche, 2003), and generate economic impact in their communities. Previous research has shown the impact of sport events is positive on destination image (Chalip, Green & Hill, 2003; Chalip & McGuiry, 2004). However, the interrelationships between sport tourism event image (STEI) and destination image (DI) and their combined impact on intentions to revisit a destination is not as well understood for smaller scale sport tourism events. Thus, STEI and DI can not be employed effectively in developing successful marketing strategies. In addition, past experience with an event has not been researched extensively as to how it influences the image of the event. This research will examine the relationships between past experience with a sport tourism event, the image of the event and destination and their relationships with spectators, intentions to return to the hosting destination.

The role of past experience with a product (event) has been shown to be an important predictor of intentions to attend a sport event. Cunningham and Kwon (2003) applied the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) to understand the impact of past behavior/experience on intentions. They found the addition of past behavior significantly contributed to the prediction of intentions to attend a game, explaining 2% unique variance beyond the effects of other independent variables. The impact of past experience on how positively or negatively the image of the sport tourism event is perceived has yet to be examined. In other words, it is not clear how previous experience with a sport tourism event impacts the latter's overall image.

Recently, Kaplanidou (in press) found spectators' intentions to return to the destination (Athens) that hosted the Olympic Games were predicted only by DI variables and not by STEI variables. In another study Kaplanidou (2006) utilized the Theory of Planned Behavior to explain the impact of attitudinal concepts of event and destination image on intentions. This latter study involved sport tourism participants and found that DI mediated the positive impact of the STEI on intentions to revisit the hosting destination. Consequently, this paper aims to examine and quantify: a) the impact of previous event experience on STEI; b) the impact of the STEI on DI and c) the influence of DI on intentions to revisit the destination from the spectator's point of view.

Data for this study were collected at a bicycling race event organized annually (starting in 2005) in a northern Michigan county. The event attracts up to two hundred athletes (both male and female) and up to 3,000 spectators. The bicycling race passes through various towns over the four hour race. An onsite questionnaire was used to collect data from spectators (residents and tourists) watching the event in the various towns where the bicyclists passed through. The one-page instrument included 18 questions. Past experience, STEI, DI and intentions to revisit the destination were all measured with one-item questions. Past experience with the event asked respondents to indicate how many times they attended the event. Event and destination images asked the respondents to provide their overall image perceptions on a five-point scale where 1=very negative and 5=very positive based on previous studies on destination image (e.g. Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). Finally, intentions to revisit the county were measured on a five-point scale where 1=very unlikely and 5=very likely. Spectators were intercepted approximately every five minutes by ten trained interviewers. In total, 267 spectators were intercepted and 182 agreed to complete the survey, yielding a 68% response rate. Given the interest in tourism destination images, only 155 nonlocal spectators were used in this analysis.

To test the impact of past experience on STEI, STEI's impact on DI, and DI's impact on intentions to return to the host destination, structural equation modeling with EQS 6.1 was used. The path analytic model used robust analysis. Distribution of many of the variables were negatively skewed, therefore a robust analysis that corrects for skewness provided more powerful results against a stricter criterion for t-values.

Path analysis showed overall support for the model ($\chi^2 = 54, p = .90, df = 3, N = 146, 2/df = .18$). The fit indices showed excellent fit of the model to the data (NFI = .98, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .00 with a 90% of confidence interval of .00 - .05). The standardized path coefficients were as follows: past experience with events STEI was .17 ($p < .05$) and $R^2 = .03$; STEI DI was .41 ($p < .05$) $R^2 = .17$; and DI intentions to return to the destination was .34 ($p < .05$) $R^2 = .11$. To test whether STEI directly impacted

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intentions while controlling the other variables, regression was used and the impact of the STEI variable was found to be insignificant. This result signifies the mediating role of DI on intentions to revisit. Overall, these results favor recurring events in a destination. Destination marketers can work with event organizers to retain the event in the area and attract more and more spectators each year. Event organizers can benefit from the exposure at destination promotional material. Co-marketing efforts using an advertisement that emphasizes the place and the event simultaneously will potentially be more effective bringing spectators back to the destination and increase word-of-mouth activity. Finally, spectators with past experience attending a sport event have more a positive event image than first-time attendees. Different marketing campaigns addressing the needs of each market segment should be applied for first-time and repeat visitors.

References

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