Exploring Participants’ Satisfaction with Event Features at a Mass Participation Sport Event

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Abstract 2012-036

Physical inactivity has reached epidemic proportions in the United States. Data from the National Health Interview Survey (2008) showed nearly 25.4% of U.S. adults reported failing to engage in the recommended levels of physical activity. Physical inactivity has also been identified by World Health Organization as one of the leading factors of global mortality (World Health Organization, 2010). As a result, strategies designed to increase physical activity have become central to health promotion initiatives. Mass participation sport events (MPSE) represent one popular strategy to increase population-based physical activity with promising results (Bauman et al., 2009). However, this research has neglected to examine how the experience of participating in a MPSE contributes to these results. Specifically, how does the event experience contribute to satisfaction?

Research Question – What event features could explain event satisfaction for participants at a MPSE? To better understand participants’ satisfaction with event features, a post-event survey was distributed to participants in a running-event held in North East U.S. (N=2,526). The event consisted of three different running distances where 53% of respondents participated in the marathon, 38% participated in the half marathon, and 9% participated in the 8K. Additional demographic characteristics included 55% were female, 62% were between the ages of 25 and 44, and 57% were married or living with their life partners. The majority of participants were Caucasian (86%), educated (86% were college graduates) and affluent (61% had an annual household income greater than US$75,000). Event satisfaction represents an overall subjective evaluation of event participation (e.g., Oliver, 1980) and was measured with three items scored on 7 point Likert scales to create the dependent variable (M = 6.49). In addition, based on consultation with the event organizer, 15 event components were developed as independent variables, which consisted of five pre-event factors (e.g., Health & Fitness Expo, Cost of Registration), six race factors (e.g., Course, Event Atmosphere), and 3 post-event factors (e.g., Race Shirt, Race Medal).

Multivariate linear regression was employed to respond the research question. The results indicated that 15 event features explained 20% (Adjusted R² = .20) of event satisfaction. The overall regression model was significant F(15, 2,307)=40.01 p< .01. Positive relationships were observed for Event Atmosphere (b = .14), Course (b = .10), Event Information (b = .08), Event Operations (b = .14), Cost of Registration (b = .06) and Finish Line (b = .05) p<.05. Negative relationships were observed for Start Line (b = -.07) and Pasta Dinner (b = -.04) p<.05. Other event features were not
significant predictors of participants’ satisfaction.

Findings indicate that Start Line, Course, Finish Line, Pasta Dinner, Event Atmosphere, Event Information, Event Operations, and Cost of Registration, 8 out of the 15 event features, explained participants’ satisfaction with the running event. Notably, race information related to cost of registration, race day issues, destination city, and spectator related messages were positively related to participants’ satisfaction. In addition, the unique and scenic running course surrounding the city, support from locals, friends, and accompanying family members created a positive event atmosphere that elicited event satisfaction. The importance of event operations was observed with the overall organization and event logistics have a positive relationship with event satisfaction. Two event features of Start Line and Pasta Dinner were negatively related suggesting that individuals who were more satisfied with their decision to participate in the event were less likely to evaluate the these two features as positive. A common complaint for most large events is the crowded start line and lack of organization. With regards to post-event features, service provided at the finish line improved overall running experience.

Collectively, the eight event features represent important and managerial related attributes that can influence participants’ satisfaction. This research extends work on MPSEs by providing a more detailed explanation of specific event features that contribute to an overall event satisfaction which is a significant predictor of future exercise intentions and activity commitment (Funk et al., 2011). Therefore, to improve participants’ experience at a MPSE, a promising population-based intervention to increase physical activity (Bauman et al., 2009), event organizers and marketers should continue to monitor and manage event features in order to promote overall satisfaction. Sport event managers should adopt a service quality approach that covers the pre, during and post-event phases of a MPSE. Future research should continue to develop a comprehensive list of event features that can be used to assess relationships to event satisfaction.