Sport Event Website Quality: The Case of the Rotorua Marathon

Billy Crayford, Athletics New Zealand
Carl Jackson, Athletics New Zealand
Michael Naylor, Auckland University of Technology
David P. Hedlund, St. John's University

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Introduction

Event websites are an important medium for sport participants to access information. A high quality website can increase user satisfaction and those that contain key information have been linked to favourable event attitudes (Filo, Funk, & Hornby, 2009). Despite the clear importance of creating and maintaining a high quality website, little research has been conducted on evaluating effectiveness – an important component of any stage-based marketing framework. Participant perceptions of website quality in the context of sport has largely been ignored by sport management scholars and even more so in relation to sport event websites. The work of Ko and colleagues (2005, 2011) stands alone in the extant sport management literature and therefore the Sport Website Quality Scale (SWQS) serves as the foundation of the current project. Consumer satisfaction (e.g., Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Oliver, 1981) has been thoroughly explored and its importance within consumer behavioural frameworks incorporating perceptions of quality is no longer in question. The satisfaction construct should therefore be a key endogenous variable in any exploration of sport website quality (SWQ).

The Rotorua Marathon is a large event for which much of its communication with participants takes place online. The official website was revamped for use during the build-up to the 2014 event. In the weeks following the new site’s launch, it was deemed important by management to evaluate user’s perceived quality of the new website and whether those perceptions were linked to satisfaction and other outcome variables of interest. The purpose of the current project was therefore to replicate and extend the research of Hur, Ko and Valacich (2011) in the context of the new Rotorua Marathon event website. Another purpose of the research was to explore how perceptions of website quality influenced outcomes beyond the two modelled by Hur et al. - loyalty and satisfaction. Broadly then, the current research expands our collective understanding of website quality perceptions amongst sport participants. With consumer’s increasingly accessing sport related information through online platforms – this area of research is timely and important.

Procedure

Although Hur et al.’s SWQS was used as a platform; the questionnaire implemented in this research was amended based on contextual uniqueness. Four of five SWQS dimensions were retained (information, system, design and fulfilment) while interaction was removed. The Interaction dimension was removed as the current website design does not include an interactive capacity and therefore quality perceptions reflective of this dimension were not possible. Instead, respondents were asked about their engagement with the event’s Facebook site – the platform strategically set out by event organizers to facilitate interaction – as well as their opinion on adding an interactive capacity to the new website. In addition to satisfaction and loyalty, alternative outcome variables were added including one which measured perceptions of quality improvement from the old to the new website. Questionnaire respondents indicated their degree of agreement with items representing the constructs of interest on a 7-point scale.

An invitation and link to the online questionnaire was distributed to past event participants through various electronic means. After removing cases of individuals who had not visited the new site and other additional cleansing, the final data set (n = 168) was used for the factor analytic and structural modelling that was to follow. A majority of the respondents were female (56%) and there was a reasonable dispersion across age groups ranging from under eighteen to seventy-plus. Overall, the sample is considered an appropriate representation of event participants. Almost all respondents reported accessing the website using a computer rather than a tablet or smartphone. Exploring perceptions of website quality in terms of hardware would be an interesting avenue for further research.
Results

Given the objective of building on the work of Hur et al., the first stage of the data analysis involved testing a similar structural model using a similar process. Here and subsequently, relationships amongst constructs are the focus rather than item and dimension level analysis including validity and reliability. Although the initial model fit was poor ($\chi^2 = 220.94$, df = 72, $p < .001$, CFI=.91, TLI=.89, RMSEA=.11, SRMR=.11) the key finding in regards to the replication model was that – unlike Hur et al. - no evidence of full mediation emerged. While Hur et al. found positive and significant relationships between (1) SWQ and satisfaction (.94) and (2) satisfaction and loyalty (.74) (one fully mediated relationship), the results of the current study indicated positive and significant relationships between (1) sport web quality and satisfaction (.94) and (2) sport web quality and loyalty (.43) (two separate direct effects).

The fit was also initially poor for the model incorporating the improvement variable ($\chi^2= 255.33$, df = 83, $p < .001$, CFI = .90, TLI = .88, RMSEA = .11, SRMR = .11). Upon model refinement, the results did indicate positive and significant relationships between (1) SWQ and satisfaction (.94) and also (2) SWQ and loyalty (.43) (two separate direct effects). The relationship between satisfaction and loyalty was not significant, so no mediated relationship was found, and the relationships between the quality comparison of websites and sport web quality, satisfaction and loyalty were all not significant.

Bootstrapping is a re-sampling method in which cases are randomly selected from the original data set and used to create new data sets which are then tested alongside hypothesized structural models (Hayes, 2009; Kline, 2005). Bootstrapping has become popular for testing mediated relationships recently and its use here represents an extension and improvement on Hur et al.’s original work. In the current analysis, data were re-sampled the recommended 5000 times (Cheung, 2007). Estimates of the direct effects, indirect effects and total effects were calculated and model fit was initially poor ($\chi^2= 351.78$, df = 83, $p < .001$, CFI = .89, TLI = .86, RMSEA = .14, SRMR = .11) but improved with re-specification. While both the indirect effect (sport web quality to satisfaction to loyalty) and direct effect (sport web quality to loyalty) were insignificant, the total effect was positive and significant at .54 (95% confidence interval: .44 - .63). In addition, the indirect effects (sport web quality to satisfaction and through to improvement) and direct effect (sport web quality to improvement) were insignificant, however the total effect was positive and significant at .25 (95% confidence interval: .05 - .45).

Discussion

More research on SWQ should take place in the context of event and non-sport websites while operationalizing the loyalty and satisfaction constructs in this context remains an on-going challenge. This research builds on the body of evidence (e.g., Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Oliver, 1981) that perceptions of quality are linked to satisfaction. Although Hur et al.’s work supported only a fully mediated satisfaction model, the results here using the same method are evidence of just significant direct effects. Through the use of the bootstrapping methodology, support for the fully mediated model was provided which muddies the theoretical waters even further. It is advisable that researchers incorporate bootstrapping into the estimation of future structural models incorporating SWQ. The addition of improvement as an outcome variable is promising in terms of adding more practical meaning to future SWQ research in which the quality of a new website is the explicit focus. Based on the contextual uniqueness of the current project, findings related to the satisfaction construct are probably more practically meaningful as the marathon website is primarily accessed for the purpose of entering the event as opposed to visiting regularly for ongoing interaction. Although work in this area has just begun, it is clear that sport management practitioners should seek to more explicitly understand how participants engage with online communication mechanisms like an event website and how perceptions of quality are linked to satisfaction.