I'm Racing Abroad! Examining Sport Event and Destination Choices

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Sport tourism is not a new phenomenon, dating back to the ancient times when people travelled for the Olympic games (Hudson, 2003). The last few decades however, have witnessed a surge in passive and active sport travel (Delpy, 1998; Gibson, 2003; Kaplanidou & Gibson, 2012) due to an expanding demographic profile (Glyptis, 1989), heightened interest in health and fitness (Collins, 1991), and governmental initiatives aimed specifically at sport tourism (Gibson, 2003). As one of the largest and fastest growing market segments of the tourism and sport industry (Hritz & Ross, 2010), sport tourism is increasingly becoming highly valued and recognized by governments due to the value of tourism to a country’s gross domestic product (Hritz & Ross, 2010). Researchers have suggested that in order to truly capitalize on sport tourism’s growth, there is a need to better understand why individuals select certain events and destinations (Hemmatinezhad, Kalar, & Nia, 2010). While the study of motivation dominates the sport tourism literature (e.g., Dellaert et al., 1997; Getz & McConnell, 2011), there are few studies investigating how motivation, constraints, sport event elements, and destination assets interact to inform active sport tourism decisions. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the destination (e.g. location, attractions, optional destination bundles, etc.) and the event elements (e.g., distance, type, event elements – challenging course, expo, destination, etc.) attract sport event participants.

Following IRB approval, 5,000 participants were solicited via an email to participate by completing a 15-minute survey. The questionnaire contained four parts. The first portion identified athlete type and race type. Next, eight race destination products were ranked. Then, athletes were asked to rate the level of importance for each event element, motive and/or constraint on a scale from 1 (completely unimportant) to 6 (very important). Finally, athletes answered training and demographic questions. The scale items were tested for internal consistency and found to be reliable (α = .70 to .75). The part-worths from the conjoint analysis were calculated for the seven product attributes, and then cluster analysed using two-step cluster method with Schwarz’s Bayesian Criterion to identify the market segments. Cross tabulation was used to examine the differences in athlete type and segment, and racer type and segment. Lastly, ANOVA with a LSD posthoc test was used to identify differences between groups.

A total of 732 usable surveys were returned (response rate=14.6%). Fifty-four per cent of the sample was male, overwhelmingly White (90.7%), and highly educated (85.7% college graduate or higher) with high household incomes (49.9% >$100,000). The part-worths from the conjoint analysis were extracted. Price was the single greatest contributor, with lower prices preferred. The destination location, entertainment availability, and fun nightlife were also highly valued. Guided tours and unguided sightseeing were moderately important and athletes did not prefer opportunities to shop. Cluster analysis identified three segments: escapists, explorer, and partiers. Cross tabulations revealed the segments were significantly different by age – younger athletes, fell into the Partier segment and older athletes were more likely to make up the other two segments. Cross tabulation also indicated significant differences in segment by athlete type. Runners and cyclists were more likely to be classified as explorers, whereas triathletes classified as escapists. Lastly, there were significant differences in athlete by racer type. Triathletes classified as more advanced in skill, tending to race long course events (e.g., half or full Ironman). Cyclists were also advanced, but tended to race short to moderate distance events, whereas runners classified as beginners/intermediate skill, racing short course distances.

ANOVA revealed significant main effects of athlete type and racer type on barriers to travel. Posthoc tests indicated runners were less likely to travel due to barriers than triathletes and cyclists. Additionally, beginner and intermediate athletes were less likely to travel due to barriers than the more experienced athletes. ANOVA also revealed significant main effect of motivation to explore by athlete type. Posthoc tests determined triathletes and runners were more motivated to explore the destination than cyclists. ANOVA results further revealed a significant interaction effect between racer type and segments for motivated by sport ability. This indicated tourist segments...
were affected by the skill level, and course distance raced by the athlete (racer type). Motivation for sport ability also demonstrated a main effect for athlete type. Posthoc tests signified cyclists were more motivated by sport ability than triathletes and runners. ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for athlete type on event elements and destination elements. Posthoc test revealed triathletes and cyclists were significantly higher than runners for event elements. A second posthoc test for destination elements revealed triathletes and runners were significantly higher than cyclists. Finally, no interactions or main effects for motivated by escapism or motivated by social and sport interaction were present in the sample.

The main focus of this study was to explore the destination and the event elements that attract sport event participants. From a theoretical perspective, the current investigation fills a gap in the current literature on sport tourism. Conjoint analysis revealed three distinct active sport tourists types: escapists, explorers, and partiers. Escapists were not interested in any of the destination attributes – guided tours, entertainment, shopping, or a vibrant nightlife. Rather, they preferred unguided sightseeing to any other option and were open to both domestic and international destinations. Explorers were very interested in the guided tours, entertainment, and the nightlife and were interested in international travel over domestic. The partiers were highly interested in the vibrant nightlife of the domestic destination and had a moderate interest in other entertainment options offered by the destination.

All active sport tourists in the sample were influenced heavily by cost, which could be considered a constraint to participation (Godbey et al., 2010). The sensitivity to cost is not surprising given the costs associated with each sport, and have previously been found among both triathletes (Hambrick et al., 2013; Kennelly et al., 2013), and marathon runners (Ridinger et al., 2012). Strategic partnerships between event and destination marketing organizations may alleviate this constraint (Tkaczynski et al., 2009) in order to potentially increase sport tourism from a much larger audience (Blain, Levy, & Ritchie, 2005).

In terms of demographic segmentation, both age and athlete type influenced the active sport tourist. The younger athletes in the sample were drawn to the vibrant nightlife and entertainment options, whereas the older athletes were more likely to travel for escapism and exploration. Closer inspection of athlete type and segment revealed running and cycling tourists are more likely to travel to explore the destination, whereas triathletes prefer the ability to escape.

A unique contribution of this study was evaluating the behaviours of the three different groups based on the distance and competitiveness of the event. The distance typically raced and the level of competitiveness also influenced the race event type the athlete sought when traveling for sport. Triathletes and cyclists tended to be advanced and/or professional traveling for long course distances, whereas runners were more likely to be beginners and/or intermediate traveling for shorter course events. This is valuable to the event organizations as they consider how the event marketing and destination marketing strategies can align to offer destination bundles (Chalip & McGuirty, 2004) and event elements that matter to the participants. This knowledge may assist event managers identify the appropriate outlets to market their events, as well as the messaging they should utilize.

Based on this study, age, athlete type, racer type, and destination and event elements create segments event and destination-marketing organizations may utilize to strengthen the events appeal to sport tourists. The price sensitivity of the sample indicated the importance of developing strategic partnerships to create packages to reduce costs while the differences between the other categories assist with design and marketing elements they could use to attract sport tourists. Results and implications for future study will be discussed.