The Influence of an Individual’s Social World Status on Event Participation and Travel Behaviors

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Facilities/Events - Other (Amateur Sport)
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Individuals in pursuit of physically active lifestyles through sport such as triathlon, running, and cycling travel to various events to socialize, learn, experience, and celebrate their subculture (Green & Chalip, 1998). As these individuals progressively experience different events their motives, preferences, and behavior evolve over time and develop into a career of involvement and commitment (Buning & Gibson, 2015). As a result, communities along with event organizers compete in a growing and thriving tourism market in pursuit of the benefits associated with attracting non-local visitors such as economic impact and tourism development (Gibson, Kaplanidou, & Kang, 2012). Since, this unique sporting context is based on social organization scholars have relied on the concept of social worlds as a framework to study and understand the travel behavior of these individuals (Buning, & Gibson, 2016; Getz & Patterson, 2013; Patterson, Getz, Gubb, 2015).

Social worlds as described by Unruh (1980) is a form of social organization that consists of actors, events, organizations, and practices that coalesce into a domain of involvement and interest for the participants (p. 277). The participants of a social world become more immersed as they gain skills, knowledge, experiences, and social connections that can be identified through four progressive distinct social types: outsiders, occasional, regulars, and insiders (Shipway, 2008; Unruh, 1980). Further, many of these event participants often travel with non-participants (e.g., spouse, children) and/or other event participants and as such have been shown to alter their preferences to appease their companions. Thus, different circumstances surround a specific trip, otherwise known as travel conditions in turn creating a complex problem in organizing and marketing events (Buning & Gibson, 2016).

As this industry becomes increasingly competitive being able to understand and adapt to the behaviors and preferences of active sports tourists is critical as their perception of the destination and the event predicts repeat event participation and revisit intentions (Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2007). Further, researchers have suggested a deeper level of understanding is needed to evaluate the role of social worlds among active sport tourists, as well as the importance of the travel conditions in influencing participation levels and event and destination repeat intentions. Thus, this investigation centered on developing a stronger understanding the influence social world status has on event participation, travel conditions, and revisit and repeat intentions. To guide the study, hypotheses were posited based upon the established literature. H1: Differences will occur in social world status among local participants and sport tourists. H2: Individuals with higher social world status will participate in longer distances. H3: Differences will be present in travel conditions based on social world status. H4: Individuals with higher social world status will be less likely to repeat their event participation and revisit the destination.

Through a partnership with a major running festival in a large midwest US city, surveys were distributed to participants via email following the event. The survey instrument consisted of 4-items that measured social world immersion (Gawhiler & Havitz, 1998), 11-items that measured travel-related behavior (adapted from Taks et al., 2009), and demographic items. A total of N = 3,924 complete responses were received from which included non-resident visitors (n = 2,219) and local residents (n = 1,705).

To test the hypotheses, a series of reliability testing, descriptive statistics, and multiple analysis of variance (MANOVA) were utilized. Cross tab results indicated significant differences (2 = 268.52, p < .001, Cramer’s V = 0.28) in the percentage of local participants and sport tourists in social world categories indicating support for H1. Locals participants identified as outsiders (n = 128, 72.3%) and occasional (n = 466, 58.5%) compared to sport tourists who identified more frequently as regulars (n = 918, 59.4%) and insiders (n = 766, 74.2%). A second cross tab supported hypothesis 2 in that differences in participation levels based on social world categorization were present in the data (2 = 405.59, p < .001, Cramer’s V = 0.34). Full marathon participants were more likely to identify
as insiders (n = 573, 43.3%) or regulars (n = 555, 42.5%); half marathon participants predominately identified as regulars (n = 901, 45.9%), and 5k participants indicated they identified as occasionals (n = 110, 42.0%). Chi square analysis indicated support for the third hypothesis as well ($\chi^2 = 37.42$, $p < .001$, Cramer’s $V = 0.08$). MANOVA results supported H4 as significant differences were present among social world status for both revisit ($F [3, 2039] = 3.30$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = 0.01$) and event repeat intentions ($F [3, 2039] = 2.69$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = 0.01$). In both conditions, insiders were least likely ($M = 6.26$, $SD = 1.61$) to revisit the city or repeat the event ($M = 5.08$, $SD = 1.85$).

The results indicated social world status impacts likelihood to travel for a participatory sport event, participation distance levels, the participants travel conditions, and likelihood to return to the location or participate in the event again. Of importance, the results indicated those individuals who become more immersed in their social world are more likely to seek novelty in the events they choose to participate. With this knowledge, event managers should be able to focus their marketing and segmentation efforts to determine who is more likely to participate in the event, as well as repeat the event in the future (Aicher & Newland, In Press). Destinations may also use this information to develop methods to enhance individuals’ intentions to return to the destination through focused leveraging techniques.