How Image Influences Attachment and Loyalty Toward Event and Destination in a Recurring Event: First-time vs. Repeat Spectators

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Marketing - Consumer Behavior (International Sport)  
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  
Abstract 2018-232  
Friday, June 8, 2018  
3:00 PM  
Room: Sable B

Annually recurring sport events are hosted in certain destinations every year and often serve to turn communities into premiere sport destinations (Parent, Eskerud, & Hanstad, 2012). Compared to one-off events, recurring events are more likely to attract repeat spectators, as some will attend the events every year (Parent et al., 2012). Thus, sport tourists’ loyalty remains an important indicator of successful event development of recurring sport events such as the Formula One (F-1) event (Huang, Mao, Wang, & Zhang, 2015). Moreover, it is worth noting that existing studies provide evidence to support the co-branding and interactive approaches between destination and sport events (Xing & Chalip; 2006, Lai, 2016). In addition, some researchers suggest that the destination and event are congruent with each other; that is, the extent to which an event shares features and visitors with the destination results in the destination loyalty in a recurring sport event (Huang et al., 2015). However, little is known about the distinct formation of event loyalty and destination loyalty, or how loyalty toward a recurring event influences destination loyalty. Further, Kaplanidou and Gibson (2010) have argued that first-time spectators (FTS)’ perceptions of event and destination might be different from those of repeat spectators (RS) under the assumption that repeat spectators’ past experiences influence their judgment of both the ongoing event and the destination. First-time spectators who are less familiar with the event should have fewer heuristic cues to influence the assessment since they lack past experience associated with the surroundings. However, few researchers have examined whether event past experience (i.e., first-time or repeat spectators) has a moderating effect on sport tourists’ loyalty formation (Kaplanidou & Gibson, 2010).

Building on the theory of destination choice set formation (Thill, 1992), tourists’ destination loyalty is theorized as a sequential process through which the tourists perceive the destination image that meets their needs (Stylos, Bellou, Andronikidis, & Vassiliadis, 2017). Regarding the event, Lai (2016) argued that event image and destination image are theoretically distinct constructs, and as a result, their non-overlapping features may cause different levels of loyalty. Further, the trust transfer process (McKnight, Choudhury, & Kacmar, 2003) explains how event assessment can be transferred to destination assessment, as it is a cognitive process in which the trust in one domain influences attitudes and perceptions in another domain (Lee, Kim, Lee & Kim, 2014). As sport tourists, they are more familiar with the event than the destination, and as such, they are likely to use assessment of a familiar event as a cue for forming perceptions about the destination. Hence, a theoretically plausible model is developed in this study that include two pathways exploring the formation of sport tourist loyalty toward the sport event and the hosting destination in the context of a recurring mega sport event (i.e., Shanghai F-1). We proposed a model through event-based and destination-based paths suggesting that sport image influences attachment and loyalty toward event and destination per the theory of destination choice. Further, attachment and loyalty toward the event are antecedents of attachment and loyalty toward the destination derived from the trust transfer process. Innovation in the model is expected to engender a novel and interesting explication as to how various types of event sport spectators with different event past experiences related to the event form loyalty toward the event and the hosting destination.

To test the above model, we collected data from the 2017 Formula One Chinese Grand Prix. The research assistants, who were positioned at five locations in different areas of the circuit on the last day of the three-day event, were instructed to intercept every 10th potential survey respondent. Furthermore, because the survey was given to sport tourists, the target population was comprised of spectators from outside of Shanghai who attended the Formula One event. As a result, data from a total of 363 participants were collected. Of those, 125 were identified as first-time spectators (33.4%) and repeat spectators totaled 238 (65.6%). The questionnaire derived from previous studies...
CFA revealed that model fit for the measurement model was adequate ($\chi^2/df = 2.304$, $p < .001$, $CFI = .912$; and $RMSEA = .060$). The AVE values all exceeded the suggested value of 0.50 (Hair et al., 2006), indicating good convergent validity. All factor loadings, ranging from .569 to .849, were statistically significant and above the suggested value of .50 (Kline, 2011). None of the interfactor correlation within the measurement model was above the threshold of .85 (Kline, 2011), indicating good discriminant validity (MacKenzie, Podsakoff, & Podsakoff, 2011). All the AVE value was higher than the squared correlation, further supporting the good discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). All values of Cronbach’s alpha and composite reliability reached the threshold value of 0.70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994), as they ranged from 0.757 to 0.946.

To test the differences between the first-time spectators and repeat spectators, the invariance test was conducted. Results of the chi-square difference test revealed that there was no statistical significance between the two models ($\chi^2(21) = 35.551$, $p > .01$), supporting the metric invariance. As a next step examining the structural invariance, a baseline model (unconstrained model) was compared to the fully constrained model. The chi-square difference test revealed that there was statistical difference between the model ($\chi^2(35) = 71.4$, $p = <.001$), indicating that differences occurred between first-time spectators and repeat spectators. As expected, event image influenced event attachment (FTS: $\beta = .569$, $p < .001$ vs. RS: $\beta = .956$, $p < .001$), event attachment positively exerted the event loyalty (FTS: $\beta = .758$, $p < .001$ vs. RS: $\beta = .965$, $p < .001$), destination image positively influenced destination attachment (FTS: $\beta = .629$, $p < .001$ vs. RS: $\beta = .803$, $p < .001$), destination attachment affected destination loyalty (FTS: $\beta = .593$, $p < .001$ vs. RS: $\beta = .294$, $p < .001$), and event loyalty exerted destination loyalty (FTS: $\beta = .501$, $p < .001$ vs. RS: $\beta = .105$, $p > .05$ vs. RS: $\beta = .233$, $p > .05$). Yet, the event attachment was not found to be a significant antecedent to destination loyalty (FTS: $\beta = .593$, $p < .001$ vs. RS: $\beta = .294$, $p < .001$).

Building on the theory of destination choice set formation and the trust transfer process, this study empirically investigated the structural relationship among image, attachment, and loyalty as they are related to recurring mega-event and the hosting destination. Additionally, this research filled a gap in the existing literature that has yet to explain as to how event past experience (i.e., first-timer and repeat spectator) moderates the proposed structural model. Compared to first-time spectators, repeat spectators’ loyalty toward event and attachment toward destination were much greater predictors of destination loyalty. This finding implies that repeat spectators were more likely to consider event loyalty and destination attachment to form their destination loyalty. From a marketing management perspective, the present study suggests that managing event, destination image, and attachment are crucial in generating event and destination loyalty for both first-time and repeat spectators. Especially for the repeat spectators, a recurring mega-event can be a great platform through which to promote the destination.