“I Mean, You Don’t Really Have a Choice”: The Youth Sport Travel Experience

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Facilities/Events - Other (Youth Sport)  
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  
Abstract 2018-237  
Friday, June 8, 2018  
3:25 PM  
Room: Acadia C

Travel to youth sporting events has quickly become a major segment of the overall US travel industry, with estimates ranging from 7 to 10 billion in visitor spending annually (e.g., Koba, 2014; Wertz, 2017). As a result, many communities have entered into an arms race to plan and develop facilities aimed at attracting youth sport events in search of procuring the economic development benefits associated with non-local visitors (Jenkins, 2015). One such project located in Emerson, Georgia aims to be the largest youth travel sport specific facility in the world with a plan to develop 1,300 acres of playing surfaces combined with hotels, dining, and entertainment (LakePoint Sporting Community, 2017). However, beyond visitor spending data (e.g., Daniels & Norman, 2003) there is a dearth of research available on youth sport travel. As part of a larger project on youth sport travel, this study investigated the trip planning, communication, and information search behaviors of youth sport visitors.

The limited published research on youth sport travel has explored the perceptions of parents’ future travel intentions and the image of the event. Kaplanidou and Gibson (2012a) found that the event image held by youth soccer travel parents in turn forms their future intentions that extend to their social circle of traveling family and friends. Further, as a component of the youth travel experience the parents pursue the opportunity to be with likeminded people that are involved in the activity and enjoy the time away with family and other youth sport travelers. In a similar study, Kaplanidou and Gibson (2012b) discovered that the past experiences of youth sport tourists are not significantly linked with their future intentions to attend the same event again or revisit the destination for vacation purposes. Still, the study found satisfaction to be critical in creating the image and intentions of youth sport visitors. The authors call for future research into different youth sports and different types of youth sport spectators in regards to gender of the child, athlete ability, and the decision-making process.

Since research into the youth sport travel experience is limited, this study used a qualitative method to collect rich data from a variety of perspectives. Past work has largely focused only on youth sport parents; thus, we sought to include other types of youth sport visitors including team facilitators, coaches, referees, general fans, and event support staff. A sampling frame was generated via a short online survey distributed via social media and youth sport email listservs. Participants were then purposefully selected based on pre-established criteria such as sport and gender of the child, their position within youth sport travel and their experiences within the youth sport travel landscape. Data was collected via in-person semi-structured interviews with the respondents (Patton, 2002). As the first phase of the project was conducted to explore the travel experiences, preferences, and information sources and delivery for youth sport travelers, questions focused on the experiences of the youth sport traveler in “good” and “bad” venues and locations. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded independently by two researchers familiar with the data and context. A grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) approach was used to analyze and organize the data beginning with initial (i.e., open) coding followed by axial and theoretical coding completed. The sample (N = 23) consisted of youth sport parents, grandparents, event organizers, coaches, fans, team facilitators (i.e., team moms), venue operators, support staff, officials, and team managers that were involved in 12 different youth sports at a variety of skill levels, ages, and genders.

The findings indicate that youth sport travel decision making occurs in a top-down fashion, with the coach passing information to a team facilitator (i.e., team mom) who then includes the parents in the decision making process. While the coaches may be aware of the decision concerning the travel schedule weeks to months in advance, parents indicate their understanding of the travel schedule often occurs only a week to two in advance of the event, limiting the time they have to prepare for the trip. Communication between the decision makers occurs prior to and during the event, with word-of-mouth being the common means of communication before the event and apps/group texting emerging as an additional means of communication at the event.
The disconnected manner that communication occurs prior to the event influences the amount of time parents have to schedule their travel. The limited time to plan and the lack of knowledge and interest in some locations influences the destination image and the desire to search for additional information concerning activities outside of the sport. Many participants indicated their destination image greatly influenced their information search behaviors. Well-known destinations would elicit trips to popular attractions and extra days outside of the sporting event while the study participants, parents specifically, would not search for destination information for less desirable locations. Lastly, the image of the event, the destination, and the facility were found to be comingled and indistinguishable for most of the respondents as a poor experience with the destination would lead to a poor appraisal of the event and so on.

Originating from the study findings are numerous theoretical and practical implications. The youth sport context seems to be unique in the role the visitors have in their travel decision making and their lack of agency in the process. As a result, destinations are presented with a curious problem of uniformed visitors that are afflicted by poor communication across their travel group. For destinations that are less well known, ancillary events and tourist activities will have a difficult time drawing event visitors due to the lack of suitable preparation and communication, an area in need of future research with event and facility management and decision-makers. Still, the passive nature of many of youth sport visitors combined with their relative high income presents an ideal market for creative destination marketing in an effort to generate positive tourism development.