Attracting Spectators to Non-Traditional Sport Events: The Case of Swimming

Inge Derom, Vrije Universiteit
Marijke Taks, University of Ottawa
Ryan Snelgrove, University of Waterloo
Luke Potwarka, University of Waterloo
Laura Wood, University of Waterloo

Aim of the Research

Swimming is a traditional participant sport with high rates of participation among the general population. Despite high attendance rates at the Olympic Games, Commonwealth Games or World Championships, swimming is a non-traditional spectator sport that experiences difficulties in attracting large audiences (Wilson, 2006). Swimming has been critiqued for having low entertainment value, poor quality of stadiums, low involvement and identification among the fans compared to traditional spectator sports such as football or hockey (Westerbeek & Smith, 2003). To further develop swimming as a spectator sport, the purpose of this study is to better understand how spectators consume different types of swimming events, more specifically a competitor and a spectator swimming event. The findings of this research will provide insight into the spectator experience and will help to improve fan engagement and marketing initiatives to attract larger audiences to swimming events.

Theoretical Background

Motivation models are extensively used in research on spectator attendance, seeking to explain why individuals are interested in consuming particular events (e.g., Funk, Mahony, Nakazawa, & Hirakawa, 2001). Although motivation models can predict a person’s interest in attending a particular event, they offer little insights into the nature of the spectator experience. Madrigal’s (2006) FANDIM scale suggests that spectators cognitively process an event in six ways. The dimensions are fantasy (imagining being part of the action), flow (being immersed in the action), evaluation (critically evaluating the athletes), aesthetics (admiring the beauty of the sport), personalities (focusing on specific athletes during a competition), and physical attractiveness (appreciating the appearance of the athletes). The six underlying dimensions are thought to be consistent across various sport contexts, but the importance of the dimensions might vary between spectators of the same sport (Madrigal, 2006). We examine differences in FANDIM among spectators at two types of swimming events: (1) a competitor event (the 2016 Belgian National Swimming Championships), and (2) a spectator event (the 2016 FINA World Swimming Championships). The “competitor event” generally attracts family and friends of competitors as spectators. Given this interpersonal relationship, spectators are believed to be more affectively, behaviourally and cognitively involved with the sport of swimming when compared to spectators at the “spectator event”, who attend the event for the spectacle and entertainment value (Chelladurai, 2014). Therefore, this research examines differences in cognitive processes of sport spectating among attendees at two types of swimming events, while taking into account the fact that experiences differ according to the spectators’ involvement with the sport as well as their demographic characteristics (e.g., Mutter & Pawlowski, 2014: Shank & Beasley, 1998).

Method, Research Design, and Data Analysis

At both events, spectators were approached at random when they entered the facility at the start of the event. They were invited to complete a paper and pencil survey during the course of the event and return it to the research booth when they left the facility. Madrigal’s FANDIM scale was used to measure the cognitive dimensions of sport spectating. Data on physical attractiveness were excluded as this dimension was deemed inappropriate because the events included youth athletes. Measures of swimming involvement covered behavioural, affective, as well as cognitive involvement (Aicher, Paule-Kobe, & Newland, 2016). Cognitive involvement is the acquisition of information and knowledge about a sport (measured using four items with $\alpha = .88$, e.g., I consider myself a fan of swimming). Affective involvement includes attitudes, feelings and emotions the individual associates with the sport (e.g., my child is a competitive and/or recreational swimmer). Finally, behavioural involvement refers to participation (e.g., I am a competitive and/or recreational swimmer) and/or spectating (e.g., I have watched a competitive event in...
person and/or online prior to this event). Demographic variables included: age, sex, having children (dummy variable) and place of residence (local, regional, national, international). A total of 353 surveys were collected, of which 336 were usable. Reliability tests confirmed the consistency of the FANDIM dimensions (ranging from $\alpha = .78$ on personalities to $\alpha = .95$ on fantasy). Multiple regressions were used to predict each FANDIM dimension, controlling for type of event, spectators’ swimming involvement and demographic characteristics. Correlations were calculated and revealed that there were no problems with multicollinearity among the variables.

Results, Discussion, and Implications
In terms of predicting FANDIM dimensions, type of event was a significant predictor for aesthetics ($t = 4.267, \beta = .27, p < .001$) and fantasy ($t = 3.997, \beta = .24, p < .001$), emphasizing the importance of cognitive processes related to the beauty of the sport and imagining being part of the action for the audience at the spectator event. Being a fan of swimming (cognitive involvement) was a significant predictor for four FANDIM dimensions, regardless of the type of event that spectators attend and experience. Gender was only significant in predicting evaluation ($t = -3.321, \beta = -.16, p < .01$), with men being more attentive to the performances of athletes. Negative affective involvement was a significant predictor for aesthetics, fantasy and flow, meaning that these dimensions become more important for parents as spectators when their children were not competitively involved in swimming. Spectators with no children were significantly more immersed in evaluation and fantasy. Those who have watched swimming events previously (behavioural involvement) were more likely to evaluate athletes’ performances, and local spectators were more likely to imagine being part of the action. Age was the only significant predictor for personalities (i.e., focusing on famous athletes during the event; $t = -2.442, \beta = -.15, p < .05$).

Aesthetics ($M=5.19, SD=1.38$), evaluation ($M=4.29, SD=1.54$) and flow ($M=3.75, SD=1.66$) were the most important dimensions of the spectator experience at the swimming events, based on the FANDIM mean scores. Aesthetics is predicted by the type of event, but evaluation and flow are important for spectators regardless of the type of event. Event organizers and marketers of swimming events can grow the audience by reaching out to potential spectators with a low affective involvement in swimming (i.e., no kids involved in competitive swimming), and enhance fan experience by focusing on cognitive involvement (i.e., knowledge about the sport of swimming) by educating and informing spectators about the sport in their marketing communications leading up to the event. They can enhance the aesthetic, evaluation and flow experiences at the events by adding visual images and replays on large screens during the event, emphasizing the beauty, the performance levels and the actions of the competitive swimmers. The findings of this study have implications for the use of innovative technology at (permanent or temporary) swimming infrastructure. The use of underwater cameras, for example, can enhance the spectator experience as this additional footage provides more opportunities to evaluate performances and experience flow.