When Sport Participants Meet Service Touchpoints: A Blessing or a Curse?

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The simultaneous growth in the supply of and decrease in demand for participant sport events (PSEs) has created an increasingly competitive, saturated market environment (Running USA, 2017). To mitigate such adverse effects of declining participation levels, a key strategy is to create positive event experiences that foster satisfaction, reduce churn, and enhance consumer loyalty (Baker et al., 2018). Despite the importance of delivery of high-quality sport consumer experience in the management of participant and spectator sports, the empirical findings regarding the nature, type, and strength of antecedents on customer satisfaction have been inconsistent (Du et al., 2015; Yoshida & James, 2010). The mixed results may be attributed to lacking an adequate conceptual basis.

In response, the sport experience design (SX) framework was introduced (Funk, 2017), which features a unified perspective to investigate how three unique yet interconnected elements Sport User, Sport Context, and Sport Organization interact within a complex sport experience ecosystem. In the PSEs context, the sport user considers health and event-related benefits sought and acquired by participants during and outside of traditional managerial and temporal boundaries beyond the running course. The sport context refers to a multitude of service touchpoints encountered between the participants and organizations along a journey of experience episodes (Yoshida, 2017). Finally, the sport organization represents PSEs whose goal aims to optimize participating experience that produces positive emotional responses toward the events. The critical focus of the research was to integrate both the conventional transactional-based service logic and a novel consumer-centric approach to study runners’ experience throughout the entirety of the PSEs lifecycle.

Data from a long-distance running event (n=2,324) was analyzed to examine the inter-relationships between participant benefits, service quality, and their joint interaction effects on event satisfaction using the MIMIC model with the Partial Least Squares SEM. The results revealed a good model fit ($\chi^2=307.901$, SRMR=0.027, NFI=0.932). Collectively, event-related benefits ($\beta=.323$, p<.001) (including Competition, Charity, Entertainment, and Socialization) and service quality ($\beta=.305$, p<.001) (consisting of Event Attribute, Event Operation, Expo Amenity, Service Delivery, and Service Extension) had more substantial effects on event satisfaction (adj $R^2=44.2\%$) than health-related benefits ($\beta=.123$, p<.001) (containing Appearance Enhancement, Physical Performance, and Stress management). A significant negative interactive effect was also identified ($\beta_{EVENT\times SQ}=-.128$, p<.001), indicating the linkage between service quality and event satisfaction may not be universally positive. That is, participants’ level of utility was less likely to be sensitive to service quality when individuals were more likely to agree that the participation creates opportunities to satisfy needs to compete, enjoy, socialize, and contribute to good causes.

Taken together, the current study operationalized the conceptual knowledge of the SX framework (Funk, 2017). Through testing a multitude of customer interactions and service touchpoints, the findings can help PSEs organizers assess the effectiveness of delivering an optimal PSEs experience to achieve business goals and satisfy health and event-related benefits runners anticipate accruing through participation, which in turn allows organizers to address the aforementioned industry challenges.