Seeking a Social Experience at a Themed Running Event

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Marketing - Consumer Behavior (Amateur Sport) virtual asynchronous
Poster
Abstract 2020-183 Session: Poster Session I

Running events are a popular form of sport participation. One relatively new type is a fun themed event. However, little is known about factors that explain post-event evaluations (e.g., perceptions of quality). These running events may be attractive to some adults as the sport can be adapted to meet various interests, needs, and abilities.

Previous research highlights the importance of a social experience to event participants' assessment of the event and continued involvement (Xing, Chalip, & Green, 2014). In particular, event attendees often seek to celebrate a sport based identity with similar others and feel a sense of camaraderie (Green & Chalip, 1998). However, not all participants at an event are highly identified members of the sport subculture, as events also attract new members (Snelgrove & Wood, 2010). Furthermore, although event attendance is an expression of an identity, mere attendance is not enough to evaluate the experience positively. Rather, participants also need to develop feelings consistent with their identity and motivations, such as a sense of community (Xing et al., 2014). Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore how a runner identity, social motivation, and being a new subcultural member are related to sense of community and, in turn, perceived quality of a fun themed running event.

Data were collected via questionnaires from 464 participants at the Le Chocolat running event (5K, 10K, half marathon) held in Ontario, Canada. The event was promoted as a Mother's Day primer and used chocolate as the event's theme. Questions included validated measures of runner identity, social motivation, organized running event history, sense of community, perceived quality, and demographic information. Data were analyzed using structural equation modeling. Consistent with registration data the vast majority of the sample identified as female (i.e., 90%).

First, data were inspected for normality and no issues were found. Next, a measurement model was assessed and a good fit was found (χ2/df = 2.21; CFI = .982; NFI = .967; RMSEA = .052). Discriminant validity was also established (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Last, the structural model also indicated good fit (χ2/df = 2.20; CFI = .980 NFI = .964; RMSEA = .052). Indirect effects were assessed using a bootstrapping procedure. Specifically, social motivation, runner identity, and being a subcultural member were positively associated with sense of community and indirectly associated with perceived quality through sense of community.

Theoretically, results suggest that developing a sense of community is a key mechanism that explains the formation of perceived quality for participants who have a runner identity and are motivated to connect with other runners. Furthermore, runners new to organized running events are less likely to feel connected to other runners at an event designed to welcome all types of participants. Practically, results suggest that event organizers should design opportunities to socialize and celebrate identities and promote the camaraderie experienced through fun themed events. Furthermore, they should work to welcome and actively socialize runners new to organized events so they can develop a sense of community.