THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY ON SPORT TOURISTS

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ABSTRACT

Sport events have emerged as integral fundraising mechanisms for charitable organisations allowing host communities to leverage the motives for sport participation and charitable giving to increase sport tourism activity. This paper explores the meaning elicited by these events for participants. Using the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) as its theoretical framework, the current research explores the role of social responsibility in fostering attachment to a charity sport event. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with charity sport event participants (N=32) to discuss their overall event experiences. Results revealed that social responsibility does contribute to participant attachment, which can shape travel decisions. The results provide further refinement of attachment within the PCM framework, as well as additional support for its application in the sport event context. Suggestions are made for event organisers to leverage social responsibility to enhance the host community and promote social change.

Keywords: Events, Attachment, Sport, Social Responsibility

INTRODUCTION

Sport participation continues to represent an important aspect of tourism and recreation in Australia. In 2002, 4.6 million Australian adults participated in organised sport and physical recreation (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003). Meanwhile, a pronounced consumer shift towards heightened ethical, social, and spiritual sensitivity has occurred (Ebenkamp & Stark, 1999). Australian charities such as Diabetes Australia and The CURE Women’s Cancer Foundation have worked to leverage these trends through fundraising events involving activities such as golf, running, and walking. The current research explores the meaning elicited by these charity sport events.

Charity sport events represent viable fundraising opportunities for charitable organisations bringing individuals together within host communities. The most successful charity sport event in the world, The American Cancer Society’s Relay for Life, generated over $350 million in 2006 (Cause Marketing Forum, 2007). Organisations raise funds through individual donations required as part of event registration fees. In 2004, individual giving within Australia reached $5.7 billion, an increase of 88% from 1997 (The Prime Minister’s Community Business Partnership, 2005). Corporate executives have begun to recognise that consumers are looking to align with products and services that provide meaning (Ebenkamp & Stark, 1999). As such, a challenge exists for event managers to foster meaning for their event to attract as well as retain sport tourists to effectively tap into this lucrative fundraising resource and improve event sustainability. The purpose of this research is to explore the role of social responsibility in fostering participant attachment to a charity sport event among sport tourists.
This manuscript is divided into three sections. First, a review of the literature introduces the theoretical framework for this research, as well as the concept of social responsibility. Second, the research methods employed are described. Finally, the results are discussed, leading to managerial implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The current research utilizes Funk & James’ (2001; 2006) Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) as its theoretical basis. The PCM is based upon the notion that both individual and social situational factors work together in the development of allegiance (or loyalty) in consumers. The PCM suggests an individual becomes connected to a sport event via processes that represent a developmental progression up a vertical continuum with four stages: awareness, or the realisation that a sport event exists; attraction, preference for the event; attachment, emotional, symbolic, and functional meaning for the event; and allegiance, or commitment to the event.

The PCM is considered theoretically sound for understanding both active and passive participation (Stewart, Smith, & Nicholson, 2003). In addition, it has been suggested that the PCM provides an integrated foundation that can be used to improve the research-practice dynamic in the examination of both active and passive recreation participation (Beaton & Funk, 2008). The PCM has been applied to the tourism context revealing that beliefs and feelings toward an event’s host destination, along with travel benefits, assist in international participants’ decision to attend a hallmark sport event (Funk, Toohey, & Bruun, 2007). In the charity sport event context, the PCM has demonstrated that motives related both to recreation participation and charitable giving attract participants to an event (Filo, Funk, & O’Brien, 2007).

Among the processes outlined within the PCM, an attachment process operates that embodies the motives satisfied through event participation taking on greater meaning, while interacting with the participant’s self-concept and values. This leads to the event taking on importance as well as stronger attitudes towards the event. Attachment is regarded as a universal human experience (Schultz, Kleine, & Kernan, 1989) allowing individuals to both express themselves as well as demonstrate a connection with others (Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988). Sport can provide individuals with a sense of attachment (Trail, Anderson, & Fink, 2000), and individuals may demonstrate attachment to different aspects of a sport object (Robinson & Trail, 2005). In the tourism context, attachment has been examined in terms of place attachment (e.g., Fredman & Heberlein, 2005; Kyle, Bricker, Graefe, & Wickham, 2004).

Funk and James (2006) define attachment as an individual assigning emotional, symbolic, and functional meaning to a sport object (i.e., an event). The PCM framework highlights an individual’s values and self-concept as integral components in the development of attachment. Values can be defined as beliefs related to behaviours that transcend situations in guiding consumer behaviour (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987). Self-respect, security, warm relationships with others, sense of accomplishment, self-fulfilment, sense of belonging, being well respected, fun and enjoyment in life, and excitement are all considered values (Kahle, Beatty, & Homer, 1986). Values represent an effective resource towards understanding an individual’s motives and attitudes towards a sport object (Kahle, Duncan, Dalakis, & Aiken, 2001), and have been used to predict which activities attract tourists to specific destinations (Madrigal & Kahle, 1994).

In the charity sport event context, an individual’s belief in and support for the benefiting cause may represent a facet to which a participant becomes attached. Participants may feel that the
event organisers embody social responsibility, and this notion may enhance their connection with the event. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) represents an organisation’s duty to society (Smith, 2003). CSR has become a critical marketing strategy for organisations that is favourable to both the economy and society as a whole (Zhihai, 2007) requiring an organisation to balance its economic, social, and environmental performance (Collins, Steg, & Koning, 2007). The World Business Council for Sustainable Development defines CSR as, “the continuing commitment by business to behave ethically and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce and their families as well as of the local community and society at large” (Watts & Holme, 1998, p.3). The emergence of CSR has been driven in part by nonprofit organisations that have recognised it as an opportunity for access to resources (Lichtenstein, Drumwright, & Braig, 2004). From a tourism perspective, CSR is regarded as a strategic business issue that can improve relations between tourism business owners and the host community in which the organisations operate (Merwe & Wocke, 2007).

CSR is relevant to the sport tourism context overall, and the charity sport event environment in particular. Sport is considered an influential resource throughout communities via positive social contributions, and CSR can be demonstrated in sport through strategies including cause-related marketing and sponsorship (Smith & Westerbeek, 2007). CSR has been found to influence individual donations to nonprofit organisations (Lichtenstein et al., 2004). In addition, positive consumer response to a sport event has been found to transfer to event sponsors (Crimmins & Horn, 1996). However, the relationship between consumer response to event managers and their attitude towards the event overall requires further examination.

Sport tourists may view charity sport event organisers as socially responsible. This notion of social responsibility may align with participants’ self-concept and values, interacting with motives satisfied through participation, leading to the event taking on emotional, symbolic, and functional meaning. To explore this, the following research question is advanced:

Does social responsibility contribute to participant attachment to a charity sport event?

METHOD

To address the research question, qualitative research was conducted consisting of thirty-two semi-structured interviews with participants in a charity sport event: The 2006 Lance Armstrong Foundation (LAF) LIVESTRONG Challenge in Austin, Texas. A US-based event was used for this research as the event attracts out of town visitors making it a suitable context for the examination of sport tourists. Thirty-three percent of participants travelled to the event from out of state, with 54% of out of town visitors indicating that they came to Austin, Texas primarily for the event. The interviews focused on sport tourism experiences and perceptions of the event. Interviews were deemed suitable for this exploration as unstructured interviewing allows researchers to understand complex human behaviour (Fontana & Frey, 1994), and it was expected that event experiences would vary across participants (Veal, 2006).

Participants

Thirty-two semi-structured interviews were conducted with event participants. The 2006 LAF LIVESTRONG Challenge is an established participatory sport event aligned with a prominent charity. All proceeds from the event benefit the LAF’s mission to inspire and empower individuals living with cancer. The event was one of a series staged by the LAF in five cities across the United States between June and October 2006. To register, walk and run participants were required to pay a $50 registration fee along with a $50 fundraising minimum, while
cycling participants were required to pay a $50 registration fee as well as a $500 fundraising minimum.

The interview data consisted of thirty-two participants, with a total of sixteen males and sixteen females. Nineteen interviewees had previously participated in LAF events, while thirteen were first year participants. Twenty-two interviewees indicated they had travelled from out of town to participate in the event. Twenty-nine of the interviewees resided within the United States with one Canadian resident, one participant from England, and one participant from Puerto Rico. Finally, ten interviewees were cancer survivors themselves, and the remaining twenty-two had not had cancer.

Materials

A list of possible questions for each interview served as a guide. The list was structured to elicit participants’ perceptions of the event and the overall event experience. Refer to the Appendix for the interview guide. The interview guide was used to direct each interview, but questions were asked to follow-up on responses provided by the interviewees (Seidman, 1998).

Procedures

The interviews were conducted at the event in October 2006 after each interviewee had completed the event. With each interviewee’s permission, all interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Thirty-three individuals were approached for interviews, and one did not want to be audio recorded, thus the interview was not conducted. Each interview lasted an average of ten minutes.

Once completed, the interview transcriptions were coded using a mid-range coding scheme. According to Denis, Lamothe, and Langley (2001) this facilitates themes emerging both inductively from the data as well as deductively using an existing framework. Attachment within the PCM framework served as the guide in this analysis. Denis and colleagues suggest that this mid-range method of analysis “allows one to gain insight from the data without necessarily denying or reinventing concepts that have been useful previously” (p.812). The transcriptions were analysed by the primary researcher. The theme of social responsibility is presented narratively through direct quotations to highlight and further explain this concept. Using the definition of CSR highlighted above, comments related to the LAF’s positive contribution to the event, the community and society overall were used to uncover social responsibility. Pseudonyms are used in place of participants’ names to introduce quotations. For additional demographic and background information relating to each participant, please refer to Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic, Background Information, and Pseudonyms for Individuals Quoted in Interviews (N=10)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Interview Number</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Out of Town Visitor</th>
<th>Country of Residence</th>
<th>First Year Participant</th>
<th>Cancer Survivor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Melvin</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rex</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kya</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abraham</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joel</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delilah</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Max</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bethany</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petra</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
RESULTS

The notion of social responsibility demonstrated by the LAF emerged from the interviews. Social responsibility was described by participants as they highlighted the importance of the cause and the LAF’s involvement as motivation for travelling to the event. Furthermore, social responsibility was detailed through participants’ explanations of their connection with, and favourable opinions of, the LAF.

Individuals repeatedly mentioned how the event represented a “great cause,” and “supporting a good cause” was frequently cited as a reason for participation. The importance of the cause was elaborated on by participants who explicitly referred to the LAF’s involvement as their motivation. Melvin stated, “It’s a pretty popular event, but the LAF got me involved.” Rex expressed a similar statement, “The LAF certainly is a draw and motivation, at least for me to come out here and see what it’s all about. No doubt.” When asked about overcoming obstacles to participating, Kya replied, “The reason it was an easy decision to do it [the event] is because it was related to the LAF.” Abraham described how he felt responsibility to complete the event in saying, “It’s one of those things, if I let myself down, no big deal, but with the LAF involved, there’s a lot more people that I would be letting down.”

The connection or identification event participants shared with the LAF further exemplified social responsibility. Joel indicated that, “I connect a lot with the LAF. I think it’s a great organisation and a great cause.” Delilah expanded upon this in saying, “I try and support them in every way that I can through events like this.” In discussing obstacles to participation, Delilah elaborated, “I support this organisation a lot and I’ve done the race a few years now, so I try and do everything I can and not let anything hold me back.”

Finally, the role of social responsibility was demonstrated in the positive feelings participants hold towards the LAF. Abraham expressed this by stating, “I think it’s great that they’ve organized everyone to make a difference. It’s awesome.” Max praised the LAF’s impact on the event, “The Foundation has made it, like a real event. Without the Foundation, it wouldn’t be as organised, there wouldn’t be as many people, so it’s definitely helped it out a lot.” Bethany made a similar comment:

The LAF gets so much more involved. Sometimes we go ride in things and I kind of remember why I’m there and what I’m riding for. And it’s bad to say, but here everyone is so involved and so supportive. And I think that’s a big difference.

The positive regard participants hold for the LAF, and their role in the event, was best described by Petra detailing how she felt as she crossed the finish line:

I was feeling quite euphoric that I was actually a part of this whole thing. I mean, anybody can go ride their bike for 100 miles, but to be a part of this organisation and cause, just makes you feel a little better about yourself.

Taken together, these participants’ comments reflect attachment to the event, contributed in part by CSR. Stronger attitudes towards the event are revealed through the use of adjectives such as “great” and “awesome” to describe the event and cause. In addition, the importance of the event was highlighted by Abraham’s comments concerning the significance of completing the event and not letting anyone down. Also, Delilah’s remarks regarding supporting the organisation and event in “every way” that she can as well as not letting “anything” hold her back
DISCUSSION

The theme of social responsibility as a facet of the event that contributes to participant attachment emerged from the data. Social responsibility was embodied in the role of the LAF in driving individuals to travel to the event, the connection participants felt towards the LAF, and the positive feelings sport tourists shared for the LAF. Overall, the findings support the notion that sport can represent a positive influence on society and communities through social contributions (Smith & Westerbeek, 2007).

The emergence of social responsibility as a contributing factor towards participant attachment in the charity sport event context introduces a number of implications. First, the finding that the LAF’s role in the event served to motivate individuals to travel to the event demonstrates that social responsibility can influence individual donations to nonprofit organisations (Lichtenstein et al., 2004). Also, the connection individuals expressed towards the LAF reveals that social responsibility can be an important marketing strategy for organisations (Zhihai, 2007). Furthermore, the favourable opinions held for the LAF as a result of their management of the event portrays social responsibility as an invaluable resource for nonprofit organisations (Lichtenstein et al., 2004).

The findings also support the notion that sport can provide an individual with a sense of attachment (Trail et al., 2000). In addition, the connection to the LAF described by sport tourists exhibits attachment as a means to demonstrate a connection with others (Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988). Social responsibility was revealed through comments highlighting the event and the LAF’s importance, along with positive feelings towards both entities. This demonstrates that the event has taken on emotional, symbolic, and functional meaning for sport tourists (Funk & James, 2006).

As described above, the PCM framework suggests that motives take on enhanced meaning while interacting with self-concept and values. Taken together, these lead to participant attachment. Social responsibility represents an aspect of this process in the charity sport event context. Social responsibility was revealed in part by the LAF’s role in the event, which served to motivate travel and participation. Participants mentioning the LAF as a “great cause,” while discussing how the organisation’s role in the event made participating and travelling an easy decision, exemplify the importance of this motivation. Moreover, social responsibility appears to tie closely to participants’ self-concept. In depicting their connection with the LAF through comments concerning making a difference and being reminded of why they are participating, sport tourists seem to express how social responsibility closely aligns with their self-concept. Finally, social responsibility can be interpreted as a belief guiding behaviour for sport tourists, relating to values (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987). The sport tourists’ connection with the LAF and their favourable opinions for the organisation could be tied to values such as self-fulfilment, sense of belonging and being well respected (e.g., Kahle et al., 1986).

Theoretical Implications

The findings suggest a number of theoretical implications. First, this research represents further evidence of the PCM framework’s relevance to the sport tourism context (Funk et al., 2007; Kulczycki & Hyatt, 2005). It has been suggested that this framework is suitable for the examination of active sport participants (e.g., Beaton & Funk, 2008; Stewart et al., 2003) and the current research provides support that charity sport events can take on emotional, symbolic,
and functional meaning for sport tourists. Furthermore, this research further develops
attachment within the PCM framework. Social responsibility is portrayed as an integral
component of the attachment process in the charity sport event context relating to motives,
values and participants’ self-concept. Finally, this research suggests that social responsibility
resonates with sport tourists. Sport tourists are influenced at the macro level by the values and
norms related to their race, class and gender as well as aspects of their culture (Gibson, 2004).
The current research advances social responsibility as an element of this macro influence that
connects sport tourists and impacts travel decisions.

Managerial Implications

The study’s findings also introduce a number of implications for event managers and host
communities. First, from a sport tourism perspective, with social responsibility established as
an important facet of the event amongst participants, event managers and destination marketers
should organise a variety of supplementary activities and endeavours that allow event
participants to become involved in the host community throughout the entire weekend.
Furthermore, event managers and destination marketers should look to transfer the attachment
participants feel towards the event to the host city. Place attachment is an individual’s
emotional bond to a physical site stemming from the meaning assigned to the site through
interactions (Kleine & Baker, 2004), and attachment to place has been linked to feelings of
sentiment, spirituality and belonging (Trigger & Mulcock, 2005). Event managers should look
to align the sentiment and belonging elicited by the event with the event’s host city, which could
allow the overall meaning of the event to shift to the destination.

Next, beyond the philanthropic and charitable aspects of the event, event managers as well as
sponsors can work to communicate all socially responsible aspects of the event to further
cultivate this dimension of the event, as well as encourage change in society. The event as
promotion of the active and healthy lifestyle can be depicted to bolster the social responsibility
inherent to the event. In addition, any conservation or environmental awareness dimensions of
the event should be highlighted. These facets of the event can then be publicized throughout all
event-related media coverage. O’Brien and Chalip (in press) suggest that social change can be
promoted through the media exposure afforded to an event. Finally, event managers can look to
communicate the social responsibility component of their event through all marketing
communications. Social responsibility can then be leveraged to enhance an organisation’s
image (Dowling, 1986), and this enhanced image can contribute to sustainable competitive
advantage for the organisation (Amis, Pant, & Slack, 1997) in their recruitment and retention of
event participants.

Limitations

Two limitations of the current research should be recognised. First, the interviews were
conducted at the post-event party after participants had completed the event. As a result,
fatigue, socialising with friends and family, and other activities placed limits on the amount of
time interviewees were willing to give to the interview process. Longer interviews could have
provided greater depth of information. Second, interviewees volunteered to participate after
being approached and asked by the primary researcher. This willingness to spend time and
energy discussing their event experience may reveal a pre-existing connection with the event.
Thus, potential bias towards the event amongst interviewees should be acknowledged.
**Future Directions**

Using the findings of this research as a starting point, a number of future studies can be conducted. First, the current research examined active event participants only, while charity sport events rely on a dedicated volunteer force that is critical to the event’s success. The notion of multiple points of attachment has been related to event volunteers (Fairley, Kellet, & Green, 2007). Additional research can be conducted to determine whether social responsibility contributes to volunteer attachment, as well as to explore additional aspects of the event that lead to attachment amongst volunteers. Event managers can then leverage these factors to more effectively attract and retain volunteers. Next, research can be conducted exploring the impact that participant attachment has on how favourably participants view event sponsors. Brown and Dacin (1997) found that consumers believe corporate participants in sponsorship are demonstrating social responsibility. Also, as highlighted above, positive response to a sport event transfers to event sponsors (e.g., Crimmins & Horn, 1996). Further work can examine if participants who feel attached to a sport event develop more favourable opinions of sponsoring organisations as well as increased likelihood of purchasing sponsor products. Finally, quantitative data can be collected using scales developed to assess social responsibility. An analysis could then be conducted evaluating the relative contribution of social responsibility versus the recreation and charitable giving factors previously explored in the charity sport event context (e.g., Filo et al., 2007).

**CONCLUSION**

This research uncovers the contribution of social responsibility to participant attachment to a charity sport event. Social responsibility relates closely to motives, values and a participant’s self-concept, leading to the charity sport event taking on emotional, symbolic, and functional meaning among sport tourists. It is hoped that this research leads to further exploration of social responsibility in the sport event context to assist sport event managers and event sponsors in effectively leveraging this factor. Furthermore, additional work can be conducted on other facets of charity sport events that may contribute to participant attachment. This can assist event managers in developing successful strategies for attracting and retaining sport tourists through enhanced overall meaning for the event.

**REFERENCES**


Appendix

Interview Guide

-Could you explain what was going through your mind and how you were feeling when you crossed the finish line?

-How has the LAF’s role in the event shaped the overall meaning of the event for you?

-Do you know what the LAF’s mission is?

-How closely do you identify with the LAF’s mission and activities?

-What do you feel is the most important aspect of the LIVESTRONG Challenge?

-Prior to registration, what did you foresee as potential obstacles to participation?

-How did you negotiate or overcome those obstacles?

-Would these obstacles be harder to manage if the event were not aligned with the LAF?