

DO SPORT TOURISM EVENTS HAVE A BRAND IMAGE?

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Abstract.—Sport tourism events are used by destinations to enhance their image. The components of an event's brand image, however, have not been well studied. Keller (1993) suggested that brand image consists of brand associations featuring attributes, benefits, and attitudes toward the "product." Understanding these brand associations will help determine those elements that constitute a sport tourism event's image. This study aimed to measure a sport tourism event's brand image associations from the participants' perspective. The sport tourism event utilized in this research was an annual bicycling event in the state of Michigan. To explore the brand image associations bicyclists have about sport tourism events, two focus groups were used. The results revealed the image of a sport tourism event consists of mental imageries related to organization, environment, physical activity, socialization, fulfillment and emotions. Implications for both event and destination marketers are discussed.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Destination marketers have focused on hosting sport tourism events as a strategy to enhance the destination image and differentiate its tourism products (Chalip & Green 2001, Chalip et al. 2003, Chalip & McGuirty 2004, Dimanche 2003, Jago et al. 2003). Sport events can range from mega sporting events, such as the Olympic Games, to medium-size sport events, such as national championships, to smaller-size sport events, such as local cycling, walking and running events. Some smaller-size sport events can also be characterized as leisure sport events, and participation in them has increased in recent years because people desire more active holidays. As a result, interest in sports like cycling,

golf, jogging and hiking is booming (de Villier, 2001). For example, sport travel generated \$2.4 billion spending in Canada while the total person-trips related to sport travel (over 80 km) was 11,982,000 in 2004 (Canadian Sport Tourism Alliance 2006). Despite the importance of sport tourism events as a marketing vehicle to promote a destination, research on sport tourism events' image is scarce. Studies have used brand personality scales or adjectives to measure the image of a sporting event and its similarities to sponsor brands (e.g., Ferrand & Pages 1996, Gwinner & Eaton 1999, Musante et al. 1999), which limits the concept of image to that of brand personality. In addition, these studies have focused on spectators' perceptions, leaving out another major category of sport tourist—the participant. More research is needed to understand the constituents of a sport tourism event image. This study aimed to measure a sport tourism event's brand image associations from the participants' perspective.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Destination marketers seek smaller recurring events that take place on a regular basis to promote their destination (Dimanche 2003, Getz 1998). In addition, event marketers need to know how to achieve a better brand image for their events. It is therefore important to understand and define the sport tourism event image and its components. Local sport tourism events such as bicycling, running, or walking are taking place in smaller communities and have not been the focus of sport tourism studies (Chalip & Green 2001). As far as the measurement of a sport tourism event's image is concerned, the literature does not currently provide a scale or a definition for a sport tourism event's image. The closest attempt to identify the image of an event was offered by Gwinner (1997), who proposed that an event's image is a function of the type of event (e.g., sports, festival, arts), the event characteristics (e.g., size, professional status, history, venue, promotional appearance) and individual factors (e.g., meanings associated with the event, strength of meanings, and history with the event). However, Gwinner's approach thus far has been generic and not customized for sport tourism events which feature elements such

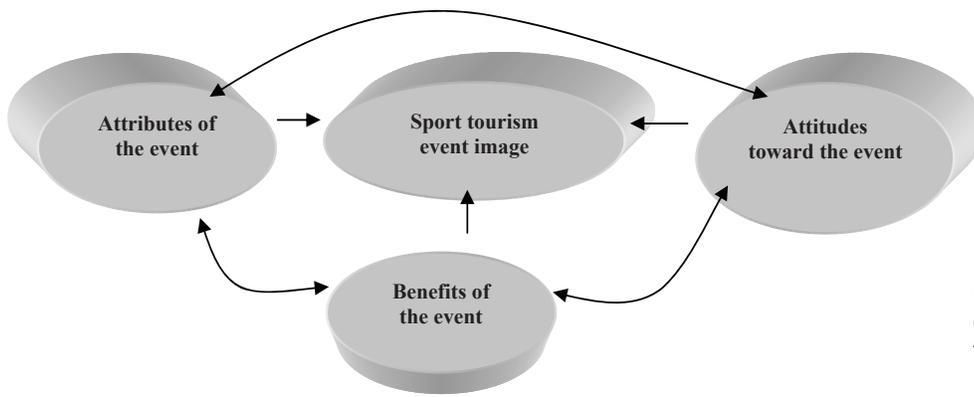


Figure 1.—A conceptual framework of the sport tourism image event from the participant's perspective (adapted from Keller, 1993).

as competition, socialization, skill requirement, and knowledge. Other studies (e.g., Ferrand & Pages 1996, Gwinner & Eaton 1999, Musante et al. 1999) measured the image of the sport event in the context of matching it with a sponsor using adjectives to describe the event's image. Musante et al. (1999) used the brand personality scale (Aaker 1997) to measure the personality match of sponsor brands and sports. Overall, these studies aimed to measure the fit between sport event image and sponsor image and found the image of the sport event was perceived as sophisticated, exciting (Musante et al. 1999), strong, methodical, young, masculine (Martin 1994), popular, entertaining, dynamic, and successful (Ferrand & Pages 1996) by spectators.

Keller's (1993) seminal work on brand equity presents a thorough theoretical framework on brand knowledge and its constituents: brand awareness and brand image. Brand awareness "is related to the strength of the brand node or trace in memory, as reflected by consumers' ability to identify the brand under different conditions...in particular brand name awareness relates to the likelihood that a brand name will come to mind and the ease with which it does so" (Keller 1993, p. 3). Brand image was defined by Keller as "perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory" (1993, p. 3). Keller (1993) postulated that brand image is defined by types of brand associations, which in turn are defined by attributes, benefits, and attitudes toward the brand. Attributes are product related (ingredients necessary for performing the product or service) and non-product related (external aspects of the product or service that relate to its purchase or consumption) (Keller 1993). Benefits are related to the

personal value consumers assign to the product or service and consist of functional, experiential, and symbolic dimensions (Keller 1993). Functional benefits are related to intrinsic advantages of the product or service, experiential benefits relate to what it feels like to use the product or service, and symbolic benefits are the extrinsic advantages of the product or service consumption (Keller 1993). Finally, brand attitudes are consumers' overall evaluations of a brand (Keller 1993).

Sport tourism events can have a brand image formed through media exposure, word-of-mouth, advertisement and personal experiences. Sport tourism events consist of certain attributes, have benefits or costs for the sport tourist (participant and spectator), and can be the object of attitudes, especially for those having participated in such an event. Keller's (1993) framework is suitable to explore the dimensionality of a sport tourism event image because a sport tourism event can have all these components. This framework is suitable for both participants and spectators since both groups will have formed perceptions of these components. However, since the nature of the experience is different for active participants than spectators (Shamir & Ruskin 1984), this study is focusing on exploring the participants' perspective, as there are not many studies that have investigated the images this segment of sport tourists hold. Figure 1 presents a visual representation of what may constitute the image of a sport tourism event from the participant's point of view.

Although Keller's framework is indicative of what may constitute the image of a sport tourism event, qualitative research is required to understand and define

the brand image associations a consumer has about a sport tourism event (Dobni & Zinkhan 1990, Keller 1993). This type of research is necessary because sport tourism event organizers need to understand the event participants' salient image components. Also, event organizers can benefit from this information by working cooperatively with destination marketers to promote the event and promote the area where it is taking place. In summary, this study will adopt Keller's (1993) theoretical framework to examine the brand image associations sport tourism participants have about an event.

3.0 METHOD

Based on Keller's (1993) recommendations to measure the characteristics of brand associations, qualitative techniques were employed to suggest possible image associations. For the purpose of this study, two focus groups were used to study the image of sport tourism events. Focus groups were used to explore attitudes, opinions, and attributes of sport tourism events for future questionnaire items development and pilot testing (Fern 1982, Krueger & Casey 2000). The focus group participants consisted of bicyclists who participated in organized bicycle tourism events. Bicyclists were chosen because the target population's demographics were fairly similar to the demographics of U.S. sport participants (SGMA 2004). The subjects were recruited from a university bicycling club and a bike event participant list. The total number of participants was twelve, 8 in the first group and 4 in the second group. The authors moderated the two focus groups. Research questions aimed to elicit event attributes, attitudes toward sport tourism events, benefits of participating in sport tourism events, and top of mind images/characteristics the participants associated with bicycling sport tourism events. Following the research questions as guides, the text from the focus group's discussion was coded for relevant themes. As themes were developed, the researchers assigned a working definition to each code.

4.0 FOCUS GROUPS DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Data were derived from questions based on Keller's (1993) framework, which proposed that brand images consist of attitudes, benefits and attributes toward an entity. After the completion of the focus groups, note-

based analysis of the data took place (Krueger & Casey 2000). The assistant moderator took notes during both focus groups. The moderator prepared a brief written summary of the key points after the end of the focus groups and discussed the key points with the assistant moderator in order to reach agreement. Themes were identified and agreed upon between the moderator and assistant moderator based on the frequency (how many times something was said), the specificity (detail), the emotion (how emotionally they were expressed), and the extensiveness (how many people said something) (Krueger & Casey 2000). The themes derived from the analysis were the following:

- **Organizational theme** (safer routes, avoid roads/use trails, organized transportation, convenient, event atmosphere, expensive/inexpensive entry fees, registration deadlines, vacation destinations for overnight stays, event activities at destinations, good services—e.g., showers);
- **Environment theme** (beautiful scenery, countryside, new places, the best of an area);
- **Physical activity theme** (healthy, endurance, perseverance, good physical condition, training);
- **Social activity theme** (socialization, meeting other people, vacation with family and friends, new things to do);
- **Fulfillment theme** (selffulfillment, accomplishment, challenge); and
- **Emotional theme** (relaxing, exciting, enjoyment, pride, happy, friendly, range of emotions before, during and after).

The words in parentheses are actual words used by participants in each focus group. The two focus groups seemed to differ in perceptions of physical activity and training. The university bicycling club was geared more toward the competitive nature of the events, while the bicycle tourism event participants were more interested in the healthy and vacation oriented nature of the activity. Some examples of the comments participants had about the themes mentioned above were the following:

"You know...it is just a great place to meet people because you meet people basically like-mind. Wanting recreation,

wanting some physical activity on their vacation, so... already you are off to a good start of, you know, of just getting along with people. And people do, I mean people can be riding along and you may not know people around you but all of a sudden you start talking and it is very friendly. And of course the sights are just great..."

Another person said:

"For me, the ride is fairly challenging, especially the first one that I went on to choose. I was just not prepared to do 70 miles days back to back on the first ride".

Another focus group participant commented on the challenging aspects of the event, the nature and the relaxing atmosphere:

"It [the event] is an accomplishment and at the same time it raises people's awareness. They don't have to drive their cars everywhere, they can ride their bicycles, and enjoy nature and if there are other people doing it, then if they want to do that there is an option. [The Michigander brings to mind images of] enjoy nature and no worries, there is no stress, there is no to do list. People have time to talk to you or they have time to help you and nobody is looking at their watch and nobody has an appointment they had to get to. So, you get quality conversations with people."

Finally, another participant commented on the opportunities the event offers:

"When you go on a trail you come to places you do not even get to when you drive your car."

Based on these data, a definition of the sport tourism event image was proposed:

The image of a sport tourism event is the mental representations sport tourism participants have about the organization, environment, physical activity, socialization, fulfillment, and emotional involvement with the event.

The purpose of this definition is to provide the basis for the development of a scale that will measure the themes identified in the definition.

5.0 DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study was a preliminary step toward identifying the images active sport tourism participants associate with a specific sport tourism event. The results indicated organization, environmental, physical activity, socialization, fulfillment, and emotional imageries were associated with the event.

Events are branded products through marketing communications (brochures, websites, magazines, word-of-mouth), and they have to communicate the proper brand image for their target markets and the entities that are part of their image (e.g., environment is related to the hosting destination's resources). Jago et al. (2003) suggested sport event marketers and destination marketers should work together to capitalize on sport events as poles of tourism attraction. The results from this study reinforce this view. In the latest tourism business magazine, the Canadian Tourism Commission (CTC) (2006b) discussed the role of events in selling destinations. Although the connection between athletic achievement and tourism is not plainly evident, the achievement on the one field will have an impact on the other (Canadian Tourism Commission 2006b). CTC also presents a website that is the one-stop shopping resource for athletes, coaches, and spectators. CTC also encourages the sport and tourism communities to work together to take advantage of a range of opportunities arising from the upcoming Olympic Games in 2010 and from Canada's strong brand image as a hosting destination (Canadian Tourism Commission 2006a).

The definition of sport tourism event image produced in this study unveils those image items that participants favor about a sport tourism event. These items can be utilized in the development of a destination brand. The results from the development of a sport tourism event image definition revealed that destinations can utilize the organizational, environmental, physical activity, socialization, fulfillment and emotional involvement themes to create related branding images for their destination. The goal would be to attract more people to destinations that identify with those images and increase the numbers of participants in the event because

event image indirectly influences intentions to return to the destination that hosted that event (Kaplanidou 2006). For example, respondents of this study rated the event highly on how fulfilling and healthy it was. Destination and event marketers could utilize promotional images related to fulfillment and healthy activities and places in relation to re-hosting the event to achieve brand leveraging or brand development. This information can also be used to attract sponsoring companies that carry similar brand images and aim for congruency enhancements of their company's image. If the event scores high in items the sponsor company aims to promote, then brand image enhancement could potentially occur. Also, if destinations are the sponsor of an event, then the same implications apply to them.

Event marketers usually focus on spectators. However, participants and their families coming along to support them, are guaranteed visitors in the destination that hosts the sport tourism event. Understanding the active sport tourist (participant) can help event marketers better target participants' needs. For example, in a study of runners who could be participants in the Old Coast marathon event in Australia, Chalip and McGuirly (2004) suggested four clusters of runners: dedicated runners, running tourists, active runners, and runners who shop and concluded that each group prefers different activities offered at the destination to be bundled with the event (e.g., dedicated runners preferred marathon official parties as an activity bundled with the event). These results are examples of event marketing customization for participant clusters. These clusters are identified based on their activity preferences at the destination but also could be segmented based on their event image perceptions. For example, dedicated runners may have higher perceptions in the image item of health and organization, while running tourists may have higher perceptions about emotional image theme and socialization image theme. Based on these perceptions, target marketing approaches can be customized to fit the needs and perceptions of each segment. Since this was a preliminary study, future research should develop and test a set of scale items with a sample of sport tourists.

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