

EXPLORING THE ROLE OF SPORT EVENTS IN ESTABLISHMENT OF PLACE ATTACHMENT TOWARD A SPORT EVENT HOST DESTINATION

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INTRODUCTION

Repeated measures design is seldom used to measure attitude and behavioral changes in relation to sports events. This study uses repeated measures to explore the role of a special sport event in the formation of place attachment to the event's host destination. The event investigated is the Australian Ironman Triathlon, an annual event which was, for the first time in 2006, hosted in a new destination.

The relationship between people and places of their sport and recreation activity has been examined extensively in the leisure literature and is referred to as place attachment (Kyle, Graefe, Manning & Bacon, 2004a). Recent research suggests that place attachment consists of two primary dimensions: place identity and place dependence (Kyle et al, 2004). Place identity is taken to be the relationship between person and place that provides a personal distinctiveness and adds meaning to a person's life (Kleine & Baker, 2004). The second dimension, place dependence, reflects the importance of the place in providing the type of amenities necessary to take part in the activity –i.e. the more functional meaning of place (Kyle et al., 2004a).

A key aspect of sport event tourism is coupling the sport event with the tourism destination. This interaction between activity and place allows human bonding with the recreation place to occur (Kruger & James, 2003). In the sport context, limited theoretical and empirical attention has been given to understanding the relationship between attendance at a sport event and the formation of attachment to a place where an event is held. Research has rarely measured change in the level of attachment to an event destination. Furthermore, attachment to a place or destination has rarely been studied in terms of whether the sport event visitor would return to the tourist destination at a later time. To address this lack of research the present study examines a) *whether place identity and place dependence with the destination will increase as a result of event experience* and b) *whether place identity or place dependence will be positively related to intention to return*.

METHODS

The research design for this study was a pre-event/post-event repeated measures design. The respondents were competitors in the Ironman Australia Triathlon, held at Port Macquarie, New South Wales in April 2006. The sample comprised 41 males and 17 females (58 total responses) ranging in age from 18 to 65 years, with 74% in the 25-44 age group. An online survey measured the two dimensions of place attachment; place dependence and place identity to Port Macquarie using a seven item (7-point) Likert scale developed from items drawn from previous studies (Kyle et al., 2004a; Williams, Patterson, Roggenbuck, & Watson, 1992). Post-event respondents were also asked if they would return to the event or return to the destination on holiday and whether they would recommend the event or destination to others.

RESULTS

Repeated Measures Analysis of Variance was used to test pre-event and post-event differences for place attachment. Results showed that place identity with Port Macquarie was significantly higher after the event, $F(1,57)=14.45$, $p<.01$, ($M1=3.47$, $M2= 4.20$) but there was no significant difference between pre-event and post-event place dependence, $F(1,57)=.044$, $p>.05$. A one-way ANOVA test for overall place attachment and intention to return was significant, $F(28,29)=1.861$, $p=.05$. The results showed that returning to Port

Macquarie on holiday was significantly related to place attachment, $F(16,41) = 2.040$, $p < .05$. Place identity was significantly correlated to intention to return, $r = .43$, $p < .01$. Place dependence was also significantly correlated to intention to return $r = .34$, $p < .01$. However, one way ANOVA of each place dimension and intention to return using, showed that only place dependence was significant, $F(16,41) = 2.107$, $p < .05$.

DISCUSSION

The findings provide evidence that participants of a sporting event can form an attachment to the place where an event is held and change can be measured. Most previous studies of place attachment have measured attachment at the time of the activity in order to capture the emotion and feelings for a particular place, but the current study was able to measure feelings for the place before and after exposure to the event.

The findings show that place identity significantly increased after the event. Some level of meaning has been attributed to the place as a result of the sport event experience. This might be due to the fact that some had not been to the town previously and were genuinely surprised by what they found. For those who had been to Port Macquarie previously, repeated visits or familiarity may have fostered the formation of an emotional bond (Hammit, Backlund & Bixler, 2006). Both race experience and interaction with the town might act in concert to change the emotional attachment to the place. If this is true, then using events to attract competitors to a destination should assist in the formation of attachment or a positive attitude to the destination through the event experience. The finding of no change in place dependence due to the event was somewhat unexpected. Results indicate the addition of the tourism component to the sport activity may confound this dimension of place attachment. The findings on place dependence might be explained by the difference in type of activity – a competitive sport event rather than a recreational activity.

Destinations hold sport events to attract people to attend but also encourage repeat visitation (Jago, Chalip, Brown, Mules & Ali, 2003). These data support the notion that formation of a strong attachment to the place has an effect on likelihood of intention to return and to recommend to others. The level of attachment with Port Macquarie after the event was significantly related to intention to return to Port Macquarie for a holiday in the future. The event experience leads to attachment to the destination which is likely to lead the sport event tourist to consider the destination in the future. It is also possible that the attitude toward the sport event creates a proximal effect for the destination so that even though the event is not on, the fact that the individual has attended the event and the destination changes the way the individual views the destination. This is an important finding, for although place attachment has been related to loyalty previously (Kyle, Graefe, Manning, & Bacon, 2004b), this has not been extended to a tourism destination and the intention to return on holiday without the accompanying event.

Understanding of the role of place attachment for special events will allow sport and destination marketers to attempt to change attitudes toward a destination by using a blend of events that may foster attachment toward the event host. However, further research is needed to discover the process by which place attachment, particularly place identification, is formed and what aspects of a destination coupled with an event will lead to the formation of an emotional bond.

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