

Session: **New trends in management and marketing V.**  
Abstract nr: **EASM-0017**

### **Images of rural sport event tourism destinations held by spectators and participants**

*K. Hallmann<sup>1</sup>, C. Breuer<sup>1</sup>*

*<sup>1</sup>German Sport University Cologne, Institute of Sport Economics and Sport Management, Köln, Germany*

k.hallmann@dshs-koeln.de

#### Background

Destination images are essential for a destination because they represent the destination's mean of competing in the market. Images are used to attract tourists towards the destination as images determine purchase intentions, i.e. the decision to travel to a destination (Beerli & Martín, 2004). The bidding process for a sport event and hosting a sport event have become an essential part for the tourism strategy of a destination (Turco, Swart, Bob, & Moodley, 2003) because synergy effects between event and destination have been found (Xing & Chalip, 2006). The influence of the affective components on destination image has been verified by previous research (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Lin, Morais, Kerstetter, & Hou, 2007). Besides, the influence of the cognitive components on destination image was also confirmed (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Lin, et al., 2007). Lin et al. (2007) have found differences of image components for different types of destinations (natural, developed, and theme park).

#### Objectives

This study aims to advance knowledge of images of rural sport event tourism destinations held by sport tourists. The sport tourists are distinguished into spectators and participants due to a higher involvement of participants, as was found out for marathon runners (Funk, Toohey, & Bruun, 2007). The research question for this paper is: What are the images of rural destinations as perceived by spectators and participants of a sport event?

#### Methods

A quantitative research design was chosen as it can capture the subjective evaluation of destination image by sport event tourists and it allows detecting general patterns of the image. A survey was conducted using a self-administered questionnaire. The study population comprised sport event tourists (participants and spectators) at ten rural sport event tourism destinations. The sport events were held in the sports of marathon running, triathlon, cycling, rowing, biathlon, cross-country skiing, and nordic combined. A random sample was drawn and the final sample comprised n = 2,822 respondents (n = 2,054 spectators and n = 768 participants). Different variables (e.g. Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Ferrand & Pages, 1996) were used to detect the affective and cognitive image components. The data was analyzed using PASW 18 and AMOS 18. Confirmatory factor analyses were used to evaluate the images held by spectators and participants.

#### Results

The perceived image differs between spectators and participants. Spectators perceive the destination as more cheerful, more pleasant, more international, more natural, and having a higher reputation than participants. Conversely, participants experience the destination as more exciting and relaxing at the same time and more modern. The results for the final estimated model for spectators indicate a satisfactory model fit. However, with regards to the exact model

fit it can only be said that it tends towards a good model fit ( $\chi^2 = 16.431$ ;  $df = 6$ ;  $p = 0.012$ ). The normed  $\chi^2$  has a value of 2.739 which is below the suggested threshold of 3 (Bollen, 1989). The SRMR (0.010) and CFI (0.988) show a good model fit which applies also to the RMSEA (0.029, LCL = 0.013, UCL = 0.046,  $p_{close} = 0.979$ ). The results of the model affirm that the four affective image indicators are strong predictors for destination image.

The estimated model for the participant sample for rural sport event tourism destination image shows a good fit indicated by the exact model fit ( $\chi^2 = 7.028$ ;  $df = 6$ ;  $p = 0.318$ ). The normed  $\chi^2$  supports the satisfactory fit with the value of 1.171. The SRMR (0.017) and the CFI (0.997) strengthen the good model fit. Besides, the RMSEA indicates again a satisfactory model fit (0.015, LCL = 0.000, UCL = 0.051,  $p_{close} = 0.944$ ). The factor loadings of the image indicators vary for the two models.

#### Conclusion/Application to practice

The results indicate that spectators and participants perceive the same image attributes differently when associating them with the destination. A possible reason for the dissimilarities in image perception might be the different involvement due to different travel motives (Funk, et al., 2007). Destination marketers should distinguish the appeal for different target groups like spectators and participants to promote the destination. Nonetheless, it is essential to transport emotions as they are a very essential part of destination image.

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