

# APPLYING THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL WORLD TO THE STUDY OF WINTER SPORT TOURISTS

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## **Context**

In the tradition of symbolic interactionism and subcultural theory Unruh (1979) defined a social world as: “an internally recognizable constellation of actors, organizations, events and practices which have coalesced into a perceived sphere of interest and involvement for participants (p. 115). For some membership to a social world is an important part of their identity and lifestyle (Shamir, 1992). Although, with the highly fragmented nature of modern life (Simmel, 1950) it is likely that social world membership is more often than not one part, although for many, an important part of their lives. Indeed, Unruh suggested that four types of membership in a social world could be distinguished: Strangers, Tourists, Regulars, and Insiders. He proposed that these four social world types could be distinguished according to four characteristics: orientation towards the activities and relationships of the social world; personal experience with the activities and operation of the social world; relationships with other social world members, and degree of commitment to the social world. Thus, strangers are distinguished by their marginal participation; tourists are novices; regulars are those whose participation has become more serious; and insiders are those whose identity is closely tied to the social world. Various scholars have used a social world framework to examine participation in several leisure activities including sport fishing (Dtitton et al., 1992), contract bridge (Scott & Godbey, 1994) and YMCA membership (Gahwiler & Havitz, 1998). While work in sport tourism has suggested that related constructs such as involvement (McGehee et al., 2003) and serious leisure (Gibson et al., 2002; Green & Jones, in press) might be useful in understanding sport tourism behaviour, as yet the concept of social worlds has not been used. Thus, this exploratory study examined the utility of the social world construct in the context of winter active sport tourism in Greece in relation to patterns of participation, benefits sought and destination image. Specifically the study asked: 1). To what extent is membership in the different social types of a social world associated with different travel behaviours and activity participation patterns? 2). Do members of the different social world types seek different benefits in a sport tourism experience? 3). Does membership in different social world types influence the images tourists hold of a sport tourism destination?

## **Methods**

A convenience sample ( $N = 120$ ) was recruited from winter recreation and sport visitors to Epirus, (north western Greece). Epirus is one of the most popular and attractive sport tourism destinations in the Balkans for rafting, horse riding, walking and skiing. The region also contains some important historical sites and is noted for its scenery. The sample consisted of 75 men and 44 women, the majority of whom were younger (74.8% < 35 years), single (66.4%), highly educated (63%) and over half (57.5%) were employed fulltime. On arrival at their accommodation the tourists completed a self-administered questionnaire. The instrument included items measuring activity participation, benefits sought, destination image, a modified version of the Social World Segmentation Scale (Gahwiler & Havitz, 1997), and demographics. The data were analysed using K-Means cluster analysis ( $K=4$ ) to segment respondents according to their type of social world membership (4 items; 4 point scale), Chi-squares and one-way ANOVA to test for differences among the sub-group responses. Destination images were treated as separate variables (11 items; 5 point Likert-type scale) while benefits sought (25 items; 5 point Likert-type scale) were factor analysed using principle components analysis with a varimax rotation.

## **Results**

The K-mean cluster analysis produced a four-group solution, which was meaningful and statistically sound. In accordance with Unruh's (1979; 1980) identification of four social world types, the four sub-groups were distinct in terms of the four characteristics: orientation, experiences, relationships and degree of commitment (Gahwiler & Havitz, 1998; Unruh, 1979). Following Gahwiler and Havitz's protocol, the means of the four characteristics were used to classify the participants into the four social world types: strangers ( $N=26$ ) indicating a low level of involvement in all four characteristics; tourists

(N=29), slightly higher means on experience, commitment and orientation and above average relationships mean scores; regulars (N=35) characterized by slightly above average means scores on all four characteristics; and insiders (N=30) who had the highest mean scores on all of the characteristics. An ANOVA confirmed that the four sub-groups were significantly different from each other on the four characteristics (F 61.18;  $p < .01$ ); tourists (F131.48,  $p < .01$ ); regulars (F 86.12,  $p < .01$ ); and insiders (F 64.50,  $p < .01$ ).

The four sub-groups were treated as independent variables and the remaining analysis explored significant differences in terms of travel and activity participation, benefits sought and the destination images held by the tourists. As for travel behaviour, significant differences were found between the social world clusters on two of the three variables measured. Insiders (M 5.63) and regulars (M 6.10) averaged more recreational trips per year than tourists (M 3.28) and strangers (M 1.88) (F 3.86,  $p < .01$ ). Significant differences in the benefits sought by members of the different social world types were also revealed by ANOVA. Strangers and tourists reported seeking pleasure, relaxation and novelty, while insiders and regulars sought challenge and sport experiences. In further analysis, the 25-item benefits sought scale was factor analysed revealing five composite variables that explained 66.24% of the total variance. The five constructs were labelled *socializing*, *sport experience*, *challenges*, *enrichment*, and *relaxation*. ANOVA revealed significant between sub-group mean differences only in the two of the five composite benefits variables. As expected insiders reported the highest mean scores for seeking challenge (M 4.28) and strangers reported the highest mean scores for relaxation (M 4.66). Socialising, sport experience and enrichment failed to differentiate the four social world types substantiating the need for further exploration. Regarding the images of Ipeiros as a sport tourism destination, participants rated the region highly in terms of beautiful scenery, diverse recreational paths and good value for money, while good nightlife and entertainment, interesting cultural attractions and appealing local food rated slightly above average. Interestingly, no significant differences were identified among the four social world types which may indicate that for these participants, the region is viewed overall as an attractive sport tourism destination.

### **Discussion and Implications**

The results from this exploratory study seem to suggest that the concept of social world types may be useful in understanding different patterns of sport and tourism behaviour. In relation to their study of YMCA members, Gahwiler and Havitz (1998) found support for Unruh's proposition that it is possible to distinguish differences among the social world membership types in terms of involvement, loyalty to the service provider and their preferred activities. In sport tourism research, studies suggest that within the macro typology of active, event and nostalgia sport tourism that differences are evident in behaviours, attitudes and motivations (e.g., Ritchie et al., 2000). Understanding a tourist's style of membership may enhance our ability to explain why "sport tourists do what they do" (Gibson, 2004). Moreover, in terms of practice, it may be possible to segment potential target markets more effectively by understanding more fully the needs of that particular type of sport tourist. Interestingly, for the participants in this study, the destination was perceived as uniformly attractive and a good place to take part in their chosen activities. This finding warrants more investigation, although it can be compared to William and Gibson's (in press) contention that some destinations have a stronger organic image as sport tourism locales than others and this may affect the respondents' responses when asked about well-known destinations.

### **References**

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