

A STUDY OF OLYMPIC SPORT TOURISTS' INVOLVEMENT WITH THE EVENT AND THE HOST DESTINATION OLYMPIC CITY

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INTRODUCTION

Involvement is an important concept in the field of leisure and sport tourism (Dimanche, Havitz & Howard, 1991) because it reveals how people process a product or service. Understanding the levels of involvement of passive sport tourists has not been extensively covered in the literature. This study aims to test whether Olympic sport tourists (i.e. people who travel to attend Olympic Games) differ on the levels of involvement with the sport event and the destination. The results of this study will help toward understanding levels of passive sport consumer involvement and will indicate potential differences and similarities based on trip motivations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The construct of involvement has been studied extensively in both consumer behavior and leisure fields (e.g. Havitz & Dimanche, 1990; Laurent & Kapferer, 1985; Zaichkowsky, 1994). In the leisure field, involvement has been defined as “a psychological state of motivation, arousal, or interest between an individual and recreational activities, tourist destinations, or related equipment, at one point in time, characterized by the perception of the following elements: importance, pleasure value, sign value, risk probability and risk consequences” (Havitz & Dimanche, 1990, p. 184). Spectators have a primary experience of the hosting destination and as Kyle, Bricker, Graefe, & Wickham (2004) discuss in their study about recreationists and their attachment with places, recreationists, who organize their lives and relationships around chosen activities, are likely to develop emotional bonds to specific recreation settings. Kyle et al. (2004) also indicated that there is not a clear-cut relationship between involvement and place attachment. If spectators are seen as passive recreationists, one has to ask whether the place they travel to attend a sporting event influences the development of a bond with it and eventually motivates them to revisit that destination. Hinch, Berrett, & Walker (2000) indicated that positive impression of a destination increases with increased perceived worth of the event. Consequently, Olympic sport tourists may differ in their perceptions of involvement with the O.G. and the host city based on the trip's primary purpose (Josiam, Clements & Smeaton, 1997). In this study, the passive sport tourists whose primary purpose of the trip was to attend the O.G. were described as Olympic spectators, while those whose primary purpose of the trip was other than to attend the O.G. were described as Olympic tourists. Understanding whether involvement with the event and the destination differs based on sport tourists' trip purpose will help destination marketers and event marketers with target market segmentation approaches. The previous discussion leads to the study's hypotheses.

H1: Olympic spectators' involvement with the sport event (O.G.) will be higher than Olympic tourists;

H2: Olympic spectators' involvement with the destination (Athens) will not differ from Olympic tourists due to the importance of the setting to the activity.

METHODS

Data were collected during the 2004 O.G. in Athens, Greece using an onsite survey at the Athens Olympic Sport Complex where the opening and closing ceremonies and eight other major sporting events (e.g. track and field, swimming) took place. Olympic travelers were intercepted every 20 minutes. The primary investigator and another trained interviewer collected the data during the course of 10 days the O.G. was hosted. The

questionnaire was in English and used adapted involvement profile statements by Dimanche et al., (1991) and Kerstetter and Kovich (1997). An adapted version of Gursoy's and Gavcar's (2003) tourist involvement scale was used to investigate Olympic travelers' involvement with the destination. Both scales included eight items and were measured on a 7-point scale where 1=totally disagree and 7=totally agree. Due to the length of the questionnaire and the nature of the survey (onsite), only two out of three items available on the original involvement scale were used (i.e. pleasure, important, sign (social) and risk dimensions). In total, 310 English speaking Olympic travelers were intercepted from which 238 agreed to participate in the research yielding a response rate of 77%. Fourteen questionnaires were partially completed and were not included in the analysis resulting in a sample of 224 respondents.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Data were analyzed using SPSS 12.1. Independent samples t-test compared two groups on their involvement levels with the event and the destination. The groups were Olympic spectators (primary purpose of the trip was to attend the O.G.) and Olympic tourists (primary purpose of the trip was other than attending the O.G., e.g. vacation, visit friends and family, business trip). The results revealed significant differences between Olympic spectators and tourists in six out of eight O.G. involvement scale items. Olympic spectators were significantly different ($p < .05$) from Olympic tourists in the dimensions of importance and pleasure as well as sign (social element). These two groups did not differ in the O.G. involvement in the concept of risk. These results support H1 on six out of eight O.G. involvement scale items. Regarding H2, the results revealed significant differences between Olympic spectators and tourists in only one out of eight involvement with the destination scale items. Olympic spectators were significantly different from Olympic tourists when they were asked about their involvement with the host city Athens in terms of their interest in it as a vacation destination. Surprisingly, spectators had higher levels of interest in the destination than the tourists. These results support H2 for most of the involvement scale items. These results will be portrayed in more detail (e.g. figures and group comparison visuals) in the poster presentation.

DISCUSSION

Olympic spectators consider the destination to be an important part of the experience. Despite the fact that the main purpose of spectators' trip was to attend the Olympics, they were as involved with the destination as the Olympic tourists, whose primary purpose of the trip was to mainly vacation in Athens. The event experience seems to impact the involvement of Olympic spectators with the destination by bringing their destination perceptions levels up. Finally, involvement risk perceptions about the event seem to permeate trip purpose, showcasing that risk could be a constant in sport tourists' processing of the experience. The potential for marketing campaigns and synergy between event organizers and destination marketers is evident through the results of this study. More aggressive early cooperation on promotional campaigns and target market segmentation could be cost efficient and effective for both event and destination marketers when the common needs and characteristics of these two groups are identified. Attention should be paid to the involvement levels of Olympic tourists with the destination as they could be annoyed with event crowding and price increases.

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