

# The event image of the Athens Marathon from the Sport Tourist Marathon Runners' perspective: A qualitative and quantitative approach

## Contact details

Name author(s): K. Kaplanidou, PhD (Assistant Professor) (1), D. Funk, PhD (Professor) (2), N. Buta (PhD student) (3) & G. Goutzioupas (4)

Institution(s) or organisation(s): University of Florida (1, 3); Griffith University (2); Athens Classic Marathon (4)

City and country: Gainesville, USA (1, 3); Queensland, Australia (2); Athens, Greece (4)

Email address for correspondence: kiki@hnp.ufl.edu

## Aim of paper and research questions

The purpose of the study was to understand and describe the event image components of active sport tourist participants (i.e., marathon runners). The research question of the study was: a) what are the dominant event image themes for active sport tourists such as marathon runners?

## Literature review

Sport events can be classified based on their size (e.g., small, large), the type of sport tourist they attract (e.g., active, passive), the imagery they can generate for their audiences through the media (Chalip, Green & Hill, 2003) and through direct experiences (Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2007). The image a sport tourist holds of a sport event or destination may influence their likelihood of re-visiting the host destination (Bigne, Sanchez & Sanjez, 2001), which can provide economic benefits for the host community (Gratton, Shilbi & Coleman, 2005). Event imagery may vary depending on the nature or size of the sport event and the type of sport tourist (i.e., active or passive). Kaplanidou (2006) conceptualised the image of a sport event from the active sport tourist perspective (i.e. bicyclists) as the mental representations active sport tourists have about the organisational, environmental, physical, socialisation, fulfilment and emotional aspects of the event (see also Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2007). The present study extends this research to examine marathon participants.

## Research design and data analysis

The sample included marathon runners participating in the 2008 Athens Classic Marathon event who travelled from countries outside of Greece. Data were collected through a voluntary online-survey. The online survey consisted of demographic, event image and other questions beyond the scope of this study. The Athens Classic Marathon event organisers sent an initial email addressing the availability of the on-line survey to 2,000 participants on November 18, 2008. An email reminder was sent one week after the initial email contact on November 24, 2008. There were 50 undeliverable emails. Therefore the valid sample size consisted of 1,950 participants. Three hundred seventy-three (373) surveys were completed. The response rate was 19.1%. For the purpose of this study, event image was measured qualitatively following the destination image measurement paradigm (e.g., Echtner & Ritchie, 1993), asking respondents to indicate the three words that come to mind when they think of the Athens Classic Marathon event. The words were classified into seven themes (see results below) which were validated for content validity by two faculty members and two PhD students in sport and tourism. The WORDER

software was used (see Stepchenkova & Morrison, 2008) to analyse open ended responses and count key words associated with the identified themes.

## Results

The quantitative analysis of the words revealed marathon runners held historical, physical, emotional, organisational, environmental, fulfilment and social images about the event. This conceptualisation supports and extends previously discussed research because it delineated a unique destination dimension related to tradition and history for the Athens Marathon event. The frequency analysis of pre-specified key words associated with each dimension revealed that from a total of 1015 words elicited by the 373 respondents, nearly half focused on emotional (n=249) and historical (n=219) imageries of the event. Organisational (n=166), physical (n=158) and environmental (n=112) event descriptors followed the first two dominant themes. Fulfilment (n=65) and socialisation (n=46) dimensions were not mentioned as frequently.

## Discussion and conclusion

The image of a sport event can differ among participants of different sport events. For example, previous research (e.g. Kaplanidou, 2006) found six dimensions of image for a small scale bicycling event that did not include historical aspects as it was the case with the Athens Marathon participants. Each event image can therefore built on unique event image associations (e.g., in this case history which is tied to the destination's characteristics) to create a point of differentiation from similar events (e.g. marathons) and better positioning than the competition. The other event image themes that were not elicited as often could indicate a problematic area that needs improvement if deemed important for promotion by the event organisers. Future research is needed to test the nature of event image associations for other events and types of active sport tourists.

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