Sport-related Commuting, Travel, And Subjective Well-being: The Unhappy Commuter and the Happy Sport Tourist?

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Aim

This study examines the effect of sport-related commuting/travel for different purposes, including regular weekly participation, competitions/tournaments, league games, day trips, and sport vacations/training camps, on subjective well-being (SWB). It advances the following research questions: How are participation frequency and commuting/traveling for different participation purposes related to SWB? Since the direction of the relationship can be both ways, i.e., sport participation might add to SWB, but happier people might also be more likely to participate in sport, the second research question considers reverse causality: What is the causal effect of participation frequency and commuting/traveling for different purposes on SWB? The results of this study have implications for sport managers employed in sport clubs and associations and in tourism agencies. Since sport participation is supposed to enhance SWB, information about whether well-being effects are evident for all types of sport participation purposes and associated commuting and traveling provides valuable knowledge for sport managers.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

From a theoretical perspective, individuals are assumed to plan and undertake activities, such as shopping, social, and recreational activities to satisfy their needs and improve or maintain their level of SWB (Abou-Zeid & Ben-Akiva, 2012). Travel and commuting can have both negative and positive effects on SWB. Starting with negative effects, people are confronted with various environmental stressors, such as crowd, congestion, noise, and pollution, during commuting and travel (Koslowsky et al., 1995). On the positive side, individuals might value travel because it facilitates engagement in their daily activities which, in turn, might help them progress towards their goals in life or derive enjoyment from pursuing these activities (Ettema et al., 2010).

Previous studies have documented a positive effect of sport participation on SWB (Downward & Dawson, 2016; Huang & Humphreys, 2012; Pawlowski et al., 2011; Ruseski et al., 2014). The empirical evidence with regard to the relationship between commuting, travel, and SWB is inconsistent: Some studies have indicated a negative relationship (Kahneman et al., 2004; Stutzer & Frey, 2008), while others have observed no significant effect (Dickerson et al., 2014). Studies detecting a positive effect on SWB have highlighted the importance of active commuting in the form of walking and cycling (Martin et al., 2004; Rasciute & Downward, 2010; St-Louis et al., 2014). Hence, existing research has examined either sport participation or (active) commuting and traveling, while commuting and traveling for the purpose of active sport participation has received less attention.

Research Design and Data Analysis

Survey data on the commuting and sport-related travel behavior of active sport participants in 21 sports in Germany were collected between January and June 2016 (n=7,060). Participation frequency and the number of kilometers travelled for different purposes were assessed for

2015. The online survey included questions about respondents' sport biography, sport participation frequency and travel behavior, and socio-economic characteristics.
Both linear and instrumental variable regression analyses (GMM) were estimated with SWB as dependent variable and standard errors clustered by sport. The latter take endogeneity into account by using a set of instrumental variables (sport motivation, sport club density, survey month) for the five sport participation frequency and distances variables, respectively.

Results and Discussion

Respondents are on average 30.9 years old and 62.0% are male. They have practiced their sport for 11.7 years and 69.6% are a club member. Approximately 31% have A-levels and 43% a university degree. Average income is €1,627 and life satisfaction is 8.5 on an 11-point scale. Altogether, they participated in 109.1 weekly sessions (equivalent to 2,582km), 1.4 competitions/tournaments (472km), 4.0 league games (373km), 1.5 day trips (389km), and 0.8 sport vacations/training camps (1,884km) in 2015.

The results of conventional regression analyses show a significant negative relationship between commuting to regular training sessions and SWB, while the association between sport vacations/training camps is positive and significant. The instrumental variable models reveal significant positive effects for weekly commuting and day trips, suggesting that the notion of the unhappy commuter does not hold for commuting for sport participation purposes. All other sport participation purposes are not significantly related to SWB – neither in terms of participation frequency nor distance travelled.

Conclusion and Implications

The findings support the importance of considering the causality of effects which many existing travel studies have neglected. Another contribution of this study is that it considers the heterogeneity of individual sport participation behavior by distinguishing different participation purposes. The insignificant effect of participation in competitive sports (tournaments, league games) suggests that sport organizations need to be more proactive to make their core product a pleasant experience.

References

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