

Understanding the Travel Behaviour and Flow-on Tourism of Youth Sport Tourists

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Aim

Travel for youth sports is rapidly growing in the United States with estimates that the industry is worth over USD\$15 billion annually (Gregory, 2017). The visitor spending that youth sport travel generates has led to communities building youth sport-specific facilities, often with the support of public funds. Some cities are going as far as building hotels and restaurants around the facilities to create all-encompassing destinations. While we know that these events are able to generate positive visitor spending (e.g., Daniels & Norman, 2003), we know little about the behaviour of youth sport tourists. The purpose of this exploratory study is to examine the travel behaviours and flow-on tourism activities of youth sport visitors. Such an understanding will assist those who are involved in the marketing and management of youth sport events.

Literature Review

Youth sport tourism can be defined as individuals traveling to specifically participate, work, or spectate youth sport events blurring the lines of classic sport tourism definitions and creating a unique sport tourism context to research (e.g., Gibson, 1998). Existing research on youth sport travel has primarily focused on parents' future travel intentions and destination/event image (Kaplanidou & Gibson, 2012a; 2012b). Kaplanidou and Gibson (2012a) investigated the perceptions of parents' future travel intentions and the image of the event among youth travel soccer parents. They found that event image was positively linked with attitudes and subjective norms related to the event travel which influenced behavioural intentions when the travel was viewed favourably by family and friends. Further, Kaplanidou and Gibson (2012b) explored the impact of repeat visitation on future intentions among youth sport parents. Although satisfaction was found to be critical in shaping event image, future intentions to attend the same event or revisit the destination for vacation were not linked to past visitation frequency. While these findings are useful in understanding parents' future travel intentions, it is important to understand the behavioural preferences and tourism activities outside the event known as flow- tourism to maximize local impact (Taks, Chalip, Green, Kesenne, & Martyn, 2009). Previous work has focused on parents as youth sport tourists, however it is useful to understand the views of multiple stakeholders including team support staff and travel companions.

Method

As limited research has examined youth sport tourism beyond visitor spending, this study utilized an exploratory qualitative method. Data were collected from stakeholders including event organisers, venue operators, team facilitators, coaches, and family members. A short online survey was developed and distributed via social media and youth sport email lists in order to recruit individuals to participate in interviews. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 23 participants and included questions regarding typical youth sport trips, and behaviour before, during and after a trip. Youth athletes were excluded from the study due to their lack of agency in decision making and ethics approvals. A grounded theory approach was used to thematically analyze the data (Charmaz, 2014).

Findings

Findings suggest that parents typically lacked the agency to make decisions about tournament travel as this was primarily determined by coaches and club directors. Support staff noted that the venue and field quality were paramount in decision making. For events that were 1-3 hours from home a single parent often accompanied the youth athlete. Events of significance such as elite or national events often required longer travel and included more accompanying travellers. During the stay accompanying tourists often stayed within the event facility rather than exploring the destination. Unique and iconic destinations were an exception such as a major city or family resort destination (i.e., Disney) as the visitors would plan tourism activities in advance. Flow-on tourism also varied by level of competition as elite teams were more event focused while recreational teams took more interest in the destination. In general, while downtime existed during games or matches, there was limited free time to sufficiently leave the venue and engage with other activities in the destination. Further, for events that were staged in rural areas the perception of a lack of activities outside of the venue led to tourists remaining in the venue.

Conclusion

These findings suggest some challenges for tourism planning around youth sport. Although youth sport tourists travel quite frequently they appear to be primarily focused on the event itself with little regard for wider engagement in tourism activities. Youth sport travel may not generate the tourism related spend as suggested by those who are funding new facilities for this purpose. These findings suggests the need for tourism related planners to work closely and creatively with event organisers to insert tourism products into the actual experience of youth sport tourists. Packaging other tourism activities with youth sport events such as partnering with nearby professional sport teams could improve overall tourism impact beyond the sports facilities.

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