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Factors affecting return participation in sport tourism running events: The role of running involvement, place attachment, event attachment and travel patterns.

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ABSTRACT

This presentation examines active sport tourists (runners) engaged in a small-scale, annual sport tourism event (Melissa's Road Race held in Banff National Park, Canada). More specifically, the affect of a number of factors on race participants' intentions to compete in the event in the future was examined. These factors included: physiological involvement in running, attachment to the park and the event, and selected travel patterns. Multiple regression analysis was used to examine 421 participant's responses, to determine what factors might positively predict return visitation and participation. Attachment to Melissa's Road Race, perceptions that the park was an "appropriate" venue for the Race, attachment to Banff National Park, plans to return to the Park as a place to visit, and the number of days event participants had visited the Park in the last 12 months all contributed to the prediction of intentions to participate in Melissa's Road Race in the future. These variables explained 34% of respondent's intentions to re-participate. Interestingly psychological involvement in running failed to significantly predict future participation.

Key words: *involvement, running, sport tourism event, active sport tourist, place attachment, event attachment*

INTRODUCTION

Introduction and review of literature

This presentation reports data collected at a small scale sport tourism event. The event, Melissa's Road Race, has been held annually in Banff National Park, Canada for the past 30 years. It is designed to encourage visitation to the park during the shoulder season. It features 10 km and 22 km races. The study examined active sport tourists (Gibson, 2003) who participated in this event in September 2007. Calls have been made by scholars and practitioners to expand understanding of small-scale sport tourism events (Gibson, Willming, and Holdnak 2003) and active sport tourists (Gibson 1998; Weed and Bull 2004). In particular, this presentation proposes to identify factors that predict return participation in Melissa's Road Race. Understanding why sport tourists choose to return to a sport tourism event facilitates continued success of such events and their ability to attract visitors. This is particularly important for destinations that seek to diversify their visitor base or elongate their tourism season (Getz 1998; Higham 1999), two main objectives of destination managers at Banff National Park.

Based on a review of previous literature, several concepts were selected and measured to assess their utility in predicting future participation in the sport tourism event. *Involvement*, the perceived personal importance and/or interest consumers attach to, in this case, the activity of running (Dimache, Havitz, and Howard 1993; Laurent and Kapferer 1985; McIntyre and Pigram 1992; Mowen and Minor 1998), was anticipated to be a predictor of return participation in Melissa's Road Race. The more involved an individual is in running, the more interested they may be in participating in competitive running events as they facilitate opportunities to engage in a favourite past time, enabling interaction with other running enthusiasts and related benefits (McGehee, Yoon, and Cardenas, 2003). *Place attachment* was also identified as a viable initiator of return participation. Place attachment, the cognitive, affective and functional bond with a place (Halpenny 2006; Jorgensen and Stedman 2001) has been linked with intention to return to the place of attachment (Bricker and Kerstetter 2001; Halpenny 2007; Yuksel, Yuksel, and Bilim 2010). *Attachment to the event* itself, Melissa's Road Race, was also expected to be a predictor of return participation.

METHODOLOGY

The distribution of self-completed questionnaires occurred in the days prior Melissa's Road Race. The study was explained to every third participant at registration; each potential respondent was asked to return the completed survey in a postage paid envelop once they arrived home. A total of 1200 questionnaires were distributed to 3500 potential recipients; 421 questionnaires were returned (response rate = 35%). SPSS 17.0 was used to conduct statistical analysis including descriptive statistics, assessment of scale reliability using Cronbach's alpha coefficients, and multiple linear regression. Variables were entered simultaneously into the regression model to assess their ability to predict intentions to participate in Melissa's Road Race in the future. Those factors anticipated to most likely affect return participation in the race were entered first. Qualitative open-ended comments were used to enhance analysis of the quantitative data. Psychological involvement was measured with 11 items representing centrality, identity expression, identity affirmation, social bonding, and attraction (Havitz and

Mannel, 2005; Kyle, Absher, Hammitt, and Cavin, 2006). Behavioural involvement was also measured and selected indicators are listed in Table 1. Fourteen items measured place attachment and event attachment respectively. These two scales measured place identity, place dependence, place affect, and social bonding (Halpenny 2006; Hammit 2004; 2006; Kyle, Graefe, and Manning 2005). A number of additional travel pattern indicators and opinion variables were documented (see Table 1). A multi-dimensional measure of satisfaction, which has been linked to return participation in events was not included in the survey instrument; instead perceived value of the event and entrance to the park was assessed with the questions: "To what degree was the price of your [admission to/registration in...] a good value?" In combination with these social-psychological variables Plans for future event participation was documented through respondents' agreement or disagreement with the statement "I plan to run in Melissa's Road Race in the future."

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Only five survey respondents lived in Banff NP; these were removed from the sample. Of the remaining active sport tourists, 37% were day visitors and 63% were overnight visitors. Nine-five percent of respondents traveled more than 80 km to participate in the Race. Day visitors spent approximately 5.5 hours in the park, while the average number of days overnight visitors spent on their trip, which included participation in Melissa's Road Race, was 2.7 days. More respondents participated in the 10 km race (65%) than the 22 km race (34%). A higher proportion of females (67%) than males (33%) responded to the survey; their average age was 41 years old. The most frequently cited household income category was CND \$140,000 or more/year (28%) and completed education degree was University bachelor degree (48%). Respondents had participated in an average of 3.3 Melissa's Road Races, including the 2007 Race; 35% were first time racers. Participants expressed a higher intension to return to run the Race ($M=4.5$) than visit the park ($M=4.2$); this may be linked to the perceived value for money spent. Utilizing a 10-point scale rather than a 5-point scale, which was common for all other questions, race participants noted the value for their race entry fee was much higher ($M=8.0$) than the perceived value of the fee to enter the park ($M=6.4$). The latter opinion was characterized by a great deal of variation within the sample ($SD=2.6$). This unfavourable opinion of park fees has been noted in several other studies of visitor perceptions of park fees in Canada's mountain parks (e.g., Halpenny 2008). Many participants commented through the open ended questions, that the park fee should be integrated into the Race fee or waved as they were only in the park to compete. This may be explained by intolerance of paying multiple fees. This park fee value perception has significant sustainability implications from a park management standpoint. First, value perceptions play a role in decisions to return to a destination, and second, the view that paying the Race fee should be adequate for use of the park services and infrastructure for a day does not provide the park with revenues needed to address the real costs of hosting such special events. Participants stated they found the Race more appealing because it was located in Banff National Park ($M=8.2$; 10-point scale), and strongly agreed the setting was appropriate ($M=4.5$; 5-point scale).

The 14 place attachment items were combined into an average aggregate score for each participant. Prior to this the reliability of the scale was assess and found to be very good ($\alpha= .92$;

DeVillis, 2003). Similar data management methods were used for the 14 event attachment ($\alpha=.92$) and 11 psychological involvement items ($\alpha=.89$). Race participants expressed equally high degrees of attachment to Melissa's Road Race and Banff National Park ($M=4.5$), and moderate levels of psychological involvement in running as a pastime ($M= 3.8$). Participants competed in an average of 14 races during the past 5 years, ran 3.4 times/week, visited Banff National Park 8.1 times in the past year (mode=3 times).

The multiple regression model explained 58% of variance of the respondents' future participation in Melissa's Road Race. Only 4 of the 14 variables entered into the model contributed to the prediction of participation. Event attraction explained the most ($\beta =.39$, $p<.001$), followed by plans to return to the park ($\beta =.24$, $p<.05$), perceptions of Banff as an appropriate setting for the Race ($\beta =.18$, $p<.001$), attachment to Banff National Park ($\beta =-.20$, $p<.001$) and number of visits to the park in the last year ($\beta =.10$, $p<.05$). Plans to return to the park ranked high as a predictor, perhaps because it was measured in a similar fashion to the dependent variable. The predictive strength of attachment to the event and attachment to Banff demonstrates the importance of social bonding opportunities and cognitive, functional, affective elements of an individual's attitude toward an event or place in fostering return participation in a tourism event. The positive predication of the dependent variable by respondents' opinions that Banff National Park was an appropriate context for the Race could be interpreted in at least two ways. First, respondents saw the destination's attributes as attractive as a sport tourism venue. Interestingly, a similar variable, the appeal of Banff NP as a venue of the Race did not contribute any unique explanation to the model. Second, respondents may have made a normative judgement that hosting a sport tourism event in a national park was an appropriate use of the park, and signified this judgement through participation in the Race. Number of trips to Banff NP in the last 12 months was likely a positive predictor of future participation because it is a good indicator of ease of travel to the park (facilitate by factors such as proximity of residence to destination, access to transportation, etc.), an important component of participation in future events held there.

Table 1 – Factors predicting intentions to participate in Melissa's Road Race in the future

Variable	β	95% CI	
		Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Event attachment	.391**	.269	.526
Appropriate setting	.183**	.083	.290
Banff NP attachment	-.203*	-.342	-.060
Plans to return to park	.237**	.102	.288
Days visited park in last year	.103*	.000	.011
Times participated in race	.062	-.007	.033
Value of race fee	.057	-.012	.062
Appeal of Banff NP as race setting	.067	-.010	.058
Psychological involvement	.024	-.093	.150
Value of park entry	.008	-.026	.026

Times run/week	.037	-.038	.074
Races competed in during last 5 years	.049	-.003	-.005
Money spent on running in last 12 months	.068	.000	.000
Money spent on overnight trips to observe/participate in running events	-.017	.000	.000

Note: R=.582; R²=.338; F=11.945; N=384; CI = confidence interval; *p<.05, **p<.01. Behavioural involvement measures included: times run/week, money spent on running in last 12 months, money spent on overnight trips to observe and participate in running events, races competed in during last 5 years

Interestingly psychological involvement in running failed to predict return participation in Melissa's Road Race. Indicators of behavioural involvement were also non-significant predictors. One reason for this may be that the event may not have been "elite" or challenging enough for highly involved runners seeking personal bests and physical challenge. The longest route was a half marathon, 22 km. It was also speculated that the behavioural involvement indicators may have cancelled similar independent variables' unique contributions in the model; however, their predictive performance did not improve through testing of this potential overlap phenomenon. A final explanation for the lack of predictive ability of the psychological involvement may be the items used to measure involvement; advances in measures of psychological involvement may help address this (Kyle, Absher, Norman, Hammitt, and Jodice 2007).

Further links between these findings and the sport tourism, involvement, and attachment literatures will be made to explore practical implications for site managers; however, initial analysis suggests an emphasis on connecting event participants with the destination and event, cognitively, affectively, and functionally may prove to be a worthy allocation of resources. Additional analysis of data documenting the nuances of place attachment sub-dimensions (i.e., place identity, place affect, place dependence, and social bonding) will assist in this. Parallels in other studies have been observed, namely: Gross and Brown 2008, 2006; Hwang, Lee and Chen 2005; Yuksel, Yuksel and Bilim 2010.

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