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An Analysis of Running Event Consumer Behaviors

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the motives, constraints, and event selection factors affecting consumers' decisions to participate in running events, specifically for a running festival in the Midwest United States. In partnership with a large running festival in the Midwest United States, data were collected via an online questionnaire. In total, 1,650 individuals completed a portion of the survey with 1,235 completing the additional questions for this investigation yielding a 74% completion rate. Based on the results of this study, runners' autonomous motivation was significantly greater among those who participated in more events or longer distances during the festival. Similarly, runners with greater participation levels also perceived fewer internal constraints compared to runners who with lower participation levels.

Keywords: *Running, motivation, constraints, event selection*

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The number of running events in the United States has increased exponentially during the past decade (Running USA, 2016), reaching an all-time high of more than 30,000 in 2015. This increase corresponds with a record-high number of participants competing in half or full marathons: 1.98 million and 509,000 respectively (Running USA, 2016). To capitalize on this growth, and the growth of sport tourism more generally, there is a need to develop a stronger understanding of the consumer behaviors associated with sport event participation (Hemmatinezhad, Kalar, & Nia, 2010; Kaplanidou & Gibson, 2010; Kim & Chalip, 2010). Specifically, scholars suggested this line of research should center on both motivations (Pelletier, Rocchi, Vallerand, Deci, & Ryan, 2013) and constraints (Ridinger, Funk, Jordan, & Kaplanidou, 2012) associated with participation, which to date, the majority of this research has focused on the two variables independently. The current study addresses this gap.

Motivation

Self-determination theory (SDT) addresses fundamental issues related to an individual's "personal development, self-regulation, universal psychological needs, life goals and aspirations, energy and vitality, nonconscious processes, the relations of culture to motivation, and the impact of social environments on motivation" (Deci & Ryan, 2008, p. 182). Under SDT, three forms of motivation are created: amotivation (i.e., lack of desire to participate in an activity), autonomous (i.e., internal drive to participate in an activity), and controlled motivation (i.e., drawn to an activity through external forces). Aicher and Brenner (2015) outlined how the different forms of motivation may affect both sport event and destination selection. Subsequent research has established autonomous motivation is a better predictor for the distance in which runners participate (Aicher, Karadakis, & Eddosary, 2015), the level of involvement with running (Aicher, Rice, & Hambrick, 2017), and participants' sponsorship recall and purchase intentions (Achen, Aicher, & Karadakis, 2017). Aicher and Newland (2017) established runners are drawn to events through controlled motivation to a destination differently compared to triathletes and cyclists, and consume different destination elements (e.g., tourism, night life).

Constraints

Alternatively, constraints may prevent individuals from taking part in activities or limit their full participation and/or benefits received (Kim & Trail, 2010). Crawford and Godbey (1987) defined three constraint types: intrapersonal (i.e., psychological states or individual's skills and abilities), interpersonal (i.e., relationships with others who support their participation), and structural (i.e., resources needed to participate). Crawford, Jackson, and Godbey (1991) stated these three constraints function in a hierarchical manner, where individuals move through the different categories sequentially, and based on saliency within the current context. While the bulk of constraint literature centers on leisure

participation (Godbey, Crawford, & Shen, 2010), researchers recently have focused on the constraints and negotiation strategies among active sport participants. Common constraints include financial, time, and sport-related stereotypes for both triathletes (Hambrick, Simmons, & Mahoney, 2013; Kennelly, Moyle, & Lamont, 2013) and runners (Ridinger et al., 2012). Pritchard, Funk, and Alexandris (2009) further established leisure constraints do not affect one's motivation to consume, but rather consumption itself, suggesting one's consumption may be limited by constraints regardless of their motives to participate.

Event Selection Factors

Determining why individuals choose to participate in a specific event has received a considerable amount of attention in the literature as researchers and event management organizations strive for differentiation in the marketplace. Thus far, the event's image and reputation (Aicher & Brenner, 2015; Buning & Gibson, 2016a; Hallmann & Breuer, 2010), challenge provided by the event (Buning & Gibson, 2016b; Lough, Pharr, & Geurin, 2016), value provided by the event (Buning & Gibson, 2016a, 2016b), and the services provided to the athletes (Hallmann, Kaplanidou, & Breuer, 2010) have been found to influence event selection for participants. Some of the research has focused on marathon participants specifically (e.g., Lough et al., 2016) and have supported these items as important selection factors, while others (e.g., Aicher & Newland, 2017) utilized these factors to segment athletes to evaluate their event and destination behaviors.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine the motives, constraints, and event selection factors affecting consumers' decisions to participate in running events, specifically for running festivals. A running festival is considered any running event that includes more than a half and full marathon during the race weekend. Two research questions were developed to direct this investigation:

RQ1: Do differences exist in motivations and constraints based on race participation levels (i.e., distance and number of events completed)?

RQ2: Which motives and event selection factors predict repeat participation intentions for individuals with high and low level of constraints?

These findings may afford running event organizations the ability to differentiate their product, meet their participants' needs, and enhance their branding strategies. Furthermore, understanding the difference between high distance participants (e.g., half and full marathoners) and low distance participants (e.g., 5K, 10K) may engender strategies to transition the fun recreational runner into longer distance participants, which is an area of focus for these organizations (Newland & Aicher, 2015).

Method

In partnership with a large running festival in the Midwest United States, data were collected via an online questionnaire. This running festival is held each spring and includes the following running events: Dog Run, 1 Mile, 5K, 10K, half marathon, marathon relay, marathon, and four different combination options. Each year, the running festival distributes a post-event survey to solicit feedback regarding the event. The scales utilized for this investigation were added to the end of this questionnaire. E-mails were distributed to event participants one week following the event. In total, 1,650 individuals completed a portion of the survey with 1,235 completing the additional questions for this investigation yielding a 74% completion rate.

Measures

To measure motivation, constraints, and selection factors, three different scales were used: Sport motivation scale (SMS-II) (18 items) (Pelletier et al., 2013), constraints (10 items) (Nyaupane & Anderreck, 2007), and selection factors (10 items) (Crompton, 1979; Newland & Aicher, 2017). Each of the scales measured participants' level of agreement with the provided statements on a seven-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*). In addition, the participants' demographics, race participation levels, and repeat intentions were included in the dataset provided by the event organization.

Participants

The demographics collected by the race organization were similar to the running population in the United States (Running USA, 2016). Women ($n = 758$) outnumbered men ($n = 475$), the average age of the participants was 43.27, and the highest percentage of participants ($n = 403$) had a household income of more than \$100,000. In terms of race participation, the marathon distance was the most popular ($n = 345$), followed by the half marathon ($n = 220$); other combination (only two events) ($n = 124$); 5K ($n = 104$); 5K, 10K, and half marathon ($n = 98$); 10K ($n = 96$); 1 mile, 5K, 10K, and half marathon ($n = 85$), marathon relay ($n = 85$); 1 mile, 5K, 10K, and marathon ($n = 43$); 5K, 10K, and marathon ($n = 20$); and dog run ($n = 12$).

Results

Research Question 1

To address the first research question, a multiple analysis of variance (MANOVA) was calculated to test for differences in forms of motivation (i.e., autonomous, controlled, and amotivation) and constraints (i.e., interpersonal, intrapersonal, and structural) based on race level participation. MANOVA is a statistical procedure which detects statistically significant mean score group differences across a set of variables. For more information about MANOVA

procedures, refer to Field (2013). In this analysis, participants were grouped by their race level participation. High level consumption participants included those who completed multiple events, including either the half or full marathon, or those who completed just the marathon distance. Low level consumption participants included those who completed one event from a distance of half marathon or shorter, or a combination of the shorter events (i.e., 1 mile, 5K, and 10K).

Results suggested differences existed in autonomous motivation, amotivation, internal constraints, and external constraints based on race participation level. Individuals who fell into the high participation category indicated greater autonomous motivation levels ($M = 5.52$, $SD = 1.15$) compared to those who participated in shorter or fewer events ($M = 4.85$, $SD = 1.42$). Similarly, the high participants reported significantly lower levels of both internal ($M = 1.77$, $SD = 0.87$) and external constraints ($M = 2.68$, $SD = 1.13$) compared to those in the lower group ($M = 2.29$, 1.13 ; $M = 2.85$, $SD = 1.28$, respectively). No differences were found in controlled motivation between the groups. Remaining results are presenting are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Comparison of Motivation and Constraints between High and Low Participation Levels

Variable	<i>F</i>	High		Low	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Autonomous	82.53*	5.52	1.15	4.84	1.42
Controlled	2.77	3.19	0.99	3.09	1.06
Amotivation	29.23*	1.46	0.87	1.78	1.14
Internal Constraints	81.56*	1.77	0.87	2.29	1.13
External Constraints	5.38**	2.68	1.23	2.85	1.28

Note: * indicates significance at the .001 level, ** indicates significance at the .05 level

Note: Scales are on a 7-point likert type scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree)

Research Question 2

Two steps were utilized to address the second research question. First, participants were divided into high and low constraints groupings based on a sample median point split for both internal ($M = 2.04$) and external constraints ($M = 2.77$). Based on the median split, 746 individuals were classified into the low internal constraint category and 487 into the high internal constraints. Similarly, individuals with low external constraints ($n = 706$) were greater than the number of individuals who were classified into high external constraints ($n = 527$).

Next, a series of regressions were calculated to see if autonomous motivation, controlled motivation, and selection factors predict participant likelihood to repeat the event in the future. For more information on how to perform a regression analysis, refer to Field (2013). The first model tested the predictive ability of the

motivation and selection variables for individuals in the low internal constraint group, and the model was significant ($adj. r^2 = .07, p < .001$). Event history, course challenge, expo quality, and autonomous motivation were significant predictors in this model. For those with high internal constraints, the model was also significant ($adj. r^2 = .07, p < .001$); autonomous motivation was the only significant predictor in the model.

The next two models tested the low external constraint group ($adj. r^2 = .09, p < .001$) and the high external constraint group ($adj. r^2 = .10, p < .001$), with both models yielding statistically significant relationships. For those who reported low external constraints, event history, course challenge, expo quality, and autonomous motivation were significant predictors in the equation. Autonomous and controlled motivation were the only significant predictor for the high external constraint group. Combined, the regression models indicate the influence of race selection factors on decisions to participate vary based on the presence of internal and external constraints. Table 2 provides a full display of the results.

Table 2

Regression Results of Selection Factors and Motivation Regressed on Repeat Intentions While Controlling for the Internal and External Constraint Level

Condition	Low Internal Constraints	High Internal Constraints	Low External Constraints	High External Constraints
adj. r^2	0.07*	0.07*	0.09*	0.09*
F	5.40*	3.92*	6.45*	5.58*
Reputation	0.03	0	0.01	0.03
History	-0.06*	-0.01	-0.05*	-0.03
Location	-0.04	0.00	0.00	-0.04
Ease of Travel	-0.04	0.03	-0.01	-0.01
Challenging Course	0.06**	0.02	0.07*	0.02
Cost	0.00	0.02	-0.01	0.03
Expo Quality	0.05**	0.01	0.05**	0
Merchandise	0.02	0.03	0.02	0.02
Proximity	-0.02	-0.01	-0.01	-0.03
Event Type	-0.02	0.00	0.00	-0.04
Autonomous	0.17*	0.23*	0.17*	0.30*
Controlled	-0.06	-0.07	-0.03	-0.14**

Note: * indicates significance at the .001 level, ** indicates significance at the .05 level

Note: Scales are on a 7-point likert type scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree)

Discussion

Much of the previous research (e.g., Aicher et al., 2015; Ridinger et al., 2012) on motivation of running participants focused on a single distance (e.g., marathon runners only). Given the nature of running festivals, comparisons between runners' event participation levels offers event managers much needed information on factors affecting participation for consumer segments of interest. The purpose of this study was to examine the motives, constraints, and event selection factors affecting consumers' decisions to participate in running events. Based on the results of this study, runners' autonomous motivation was significantly greater among those who participated in more events or longer distances during the festival. Similarly, runners with greater participation levels also perceived fewer internal constraints compared to runners with lower participation levels.

This latter finding indicates those who participate at higher levels either experience fewer constraints, or more likely, actively seek out ways to negotiate their constraints as a product of their internal drive to participate. The fact that runners participating at higher levels are more autonomously motivated supports this notion. Additionally, this finding provides event organizers with insight into the differences in consumer motivation based on participation levels, which could inform marketing practices. For example, when advertising longer distance events, marketers should emphasize internal drivers of participation in their promotional materials and content strategies. Messages focused on performance, skill level, healthy living habits, and training are most likely to resonate with high-level race entrants. Message content might include elements such as training regimens, health monitoring, performance apparel, diet, and recovery tips.

The lower level participation group, that is individuals running shorter distances or participating in one festival event, are a different consumer. As such, different messages are needed to attract the more casual race participant. Despite the significant differences mentioned, autonomous motivation was still the strongest influence in their decision to participate. That said, this group faces stronger internal constraints, suggesting an internal drive to participate countered by internal inhibitors that may either prevent them from racing or prevent them from participating at higher levels. These individuals are still motivated by factors such as interest in running, living a healthy lifestyle, or losing weight; however, struggle more than high level participants when faced with constraints such as doubts over their abilities, performance anxiety, or lack of support from others. With this in mind, event organizers should actively seek out ways to assist short distance runners in overcoming such constraints. Developing a presence in the race community in the months leading up to the event through developing local online support communities, sponsoring training groups and casual meet-ups; and offering training, diet, and healthy living strategies tailored for individuals who may not be as familiar with such content would be advisable.

Motivation and selection factors influenced the decision to return to the running festival for participants in the low internal and low external constraint conditions. For example, in the low internal constraints condition, autonomous motivation significantly predicted repeat intentions as did several of the selection factors. Similarly, controlled motivation significantly predicted intentions to return when external constraints were low, and several selection factors also predicted repeat intentions. The relationship of selection factors with repeat intentions is supported by previous research stating organizational and destination elements facilitate motivation levels of those who participate (Aicher & Newland, 2017; Newland & Aicher, 2015).

Practically speaking, results suggest selection factors are not important to future patronage decisions among individuals experiencing constraints, both internal and external. This finding further supports the notion that event organizers should actively seek out ways to help potential patrons navigate potential constraints. Post-race surveys should include questions regarding the intensity of various constraints to provide event organizers with the data needed to assist in constraint negotiation in future years. If results of that effort indicate interpersonal constraints may inhibit future patronage, for example, event managers can work over the course of the next year to develop social outings for race participants, both running and non-running related. If cost or time commitment to train are relevant constraints, organizers can develop structured payment options, and training regimens designed for people with competing time constraints. The goal here should be to alleviate the intensity of relevant constraints, to allow potential race participants to focus on desirable event selection factors such as location, proximity, and event history. Like most marketing efforts, enticing current race entrants to return for future races is easier than attracting customers with no prior experience with the race or festival.

As with any study, this study is not without limitations. Given the larger sample size, the significant differences and beta coefficients may be vulnerable to misinterpretation. Future research should concentrate on a replication of these results in various contexts. A second limitation of this research study is the measurement of only those individuals who participated in the event. Subsequent investigations could incorporate those who did not participate in the event to determine the influence of motivation and constraints on participation or sport consumption.

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