EXPLORING THE MOTIVATIONS FOR PARTICIPANT ENGAGEMENT IN THE AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY GAMES

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ABSTRACT

Sports tourism has become a primary catalyst for tourism activity with a range of researchers noting the growing recognition of the inherent relationship between sport and tourism over the last decade or so. Sports events are unique to other types of events in that they attract a particularly wide range of participants with each seeking to satisfy their motivations for engagement in slightly different ways. Importantly, sport tourism is a significant and growing global industry with notable economic implications for the specific sport and/or the event as well as there being a variety of flow-on tourism and travel benefits derived by the host destination by its staging. Despite this fact, sport tourism remains however largely an area of economic and social endeavour that has not been well researched. For example, even though previous research has suggested that the university student market constitutes a significant component of the international travel and tourism industry, there has to date been little research undertaken related specifically to this population with respect to their engagement in sporting events. The primary aim of this exploratory study therefore was to identify the underlying motivations for participants engaging in the Australian University Games. This study was based on a positivistic or quantitative approach to exploring a topic and involved a purposive sampling technique. Primary data was collected by way of a self-administered questionnaire with the study sample comprising students registered as participants at the 2005 Australian University Games. The data collection process took place over a two day period in October, 2005 and entailed completion of a self-administered survey. In all, over the scheduled two day period of registration, approximately 6,500 participants formally registered for the event. Of this number, just over 1,100 agreed to complete the survey with 1039 returning it to the researcher in a usable form.

Study results revealed that the primary reason participants chose to attend the Australian University Games was to socialise and be with their friends. Other motivations for attendance included the desire to compete with other athletics and to have a holiday away from home. Results also revealed that the majority of participants were more than satisfied with the event related services provided by the AUS staff in the lead up to the Games. Findings also revealed that a significant number of participants at the 2005 event had attended previously (41%) with a majority of study respondents (67%) indicating that they would attend the event again in the future. The implications of these findings with respect to event planning and event management practices are discussed, as are recommendations for future research.

KEY WORDS
Sport tourism, motivation, event management

INTRODUCTION
Sport and tourism are both important contributors to any given community. Sport contributes purposefully to the general education of an individual and facilitates social integration by teaching individuals values such as fairness and determination. Tourism, much like sport, also contributes to self realization and the widening of people's horizons, which enables people to learn new things in life, and develop aesthetic and intrinsic interests in the surrounding landscape and culture.

Importantly, and as noted by Gibson (2003, p. 205), "The last decade of the twentieth century was marked by a growing recognition of the inherent relationship between sport and tourism". Sports events are unique to other types of events in that they attract a wide range of participants with each seeking to satisfy their motivations for engagement in slightly different ways. For instance, any given sporting event may involve a variable mix of athletes, coaches, spectators, tourists, non-resident media, technical personnel and other sports officials (Kurtzman & Zauhar, 2003; Weiler & Hall, 1992). Properly managed, sporting events have the potential to provide a range of social and economic benefits to a region or community, as well as to the tourism and hospitality operators in that area more specifically. Importantly, sport tourism is a significant and growing global industry with notable economic implications for the specific sport and/or the event as well as there being a variety of flow-on benefits for tourism and travel derived by the host destination by its staging (Walo, Bull & Breen, 1996). Despite this fact, sport tourism remains largely an area of economic and social endeavour that has not been well researched. Research within the tourism and event marketing fields reveal an abundance of studies on motivation and satisfaction (Uysal & Jurwoski, 1994; Gnoth, 1997; Wann & Branscombe, 1995), however there would appear to be a lack of any research which seeks to identify what the motivation of consumers to become sport event tourists.

Supporting such an argument, Hinch and Higham (2004) noted that the majority of the research conducted to date with respect to sport tourism has tended to examine the phenomena from the perspective of a large scale mega or hallmark events such as the Olympic Games or Wimbledon. According to the World Tourism Organisation (2001), elite sporting events are quite different from smaller and localised events in terms of variables such as scale, logistics and attendant motivation. Elite events tend to draw international attention by way of the mass media. They therefore are more attractive economically in terms of their ability to generate revenues either through ticket sales or sponsorship. Another consideration is the fact that participants in mega sports are usually motivated by the competition and/or the financial rewards that are on offer. Such events have also been proven to provide substantial economic dividends to a range of tourism stakeholders including airlines, hotels, restaurants, clubs and the host community generally through their staging.

Higham (1999) argued that small scale events can be just as important in developing the national or regional sport tourism industry as larger events. He held the view that well managed smaller events should not be underestimated as a purposeful tool for the marketing and economic development of a localised destination or region. He acknowledged however that there remained a distinct lack of research in this regard and it was an area in which future research need be completed if the full potential of such events was to be realised. Even though previous research has suggested that the university students market constitutes a significant component of the international travel and tourism industry, there has to date been little research undertaken related specifically to this population with respect to their engagement in sporting events. One of the few studies undertaken to date in this regard was by Leiper (1998) who concluded that the formation of a strategic alliance between Australia's universities and each state and territories' tourism commission would benefit all the stakeholders involved given the size and future growth potential of the market. Furthermore, even though previous research has suggested that the university student market constitutes a significant component of the international travel and tourism industry, there has to date been little research undertaken related specifically to this population with respect to their engagement in sporting events.

The Australia University Games has historically been organised by Australian University Sport (AUS), the peak governing body of university sport in Australia. Working closely with its members, and a range of state and national sporting organisations, the AUS stages the Australia University Games biennially. The event, which is held over a seven day period, covers over forty sports in championship and games formats and involves over 6,500 participants and more than 1700 teams and support staff. It is the largest sporting event of its type staged in the Southern Hemisphere and yet has not previously been the subject of any research effort. As such, and mindful of the gaps in the research previously detailed, this exploratory study sought to identify the underlying motivations for participants engaging in sport event tourism. The study also sought to identify what participants perceived to be important in terms of event offerings by focussing attention on those attending the Australian University Games in Brisbane, Australia.

METHODOLOGY

This study was based on a positivistic or quantitative approach to exploring a topic, and involved a purposive sampling technique. Primary data was collected by way of a self-administered questionnaire with the study sample comprising students registered as participants at the 2005 Australian University Games. The data collection process took place over a two day period in October, 2005 and entailed completion of a self-administered survey. In all, over the scheduled two day period of registration, approximately 6,500 participants formally registered for the event. Of this number, just over 1,100 agreed to complete the survey with 1039 returning it to the researcher in a usable form. The sample population for this study was registered participants of the Australian University Games. For the purpose of this research, a suitable study respondent was defined as any individual having status as a university student and registered as a competitive participant of the Australian University Games.

Study Process

Since this research employed a purposive sampling technique, only those of having a status as a university student and registered to compete as a participant of the Australian University Games were targeted for this research. The data collection process took place over a two day period in October, 2005 by means of a self-administered questionnaire survey. The point of registration for the event was agreed by Games organisers to be a desirable interception point at which to approach prospective respondents. A 5-page, multi-item questionnaire was distributed to event attendees as they arrived at the Games venue for event registration. Prospective study respondents were approached as they entered the venue and asked to complete and then return the questionnaire to a member of the research team. Prior to the actual survey process commencing however, the purpose of the research project was outlined verbally to the prospective respondents by the researcher. Consistent with the ethics approval given for this study, it was explained to the prospective respondents that they were able to withdraw from the study process at any time and without penalty. All of the respondents participated voluntarily with precautions put in place to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. A total of 1039 usable questionnaires were collected from respondents at the venue over the two day participant registration period.

Questionnaire design

The design of the questionnaire plays an important role in determining the validity and reliability of the data that the researcher collects, and the response rate that the researcher aims to achieve (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2000). Questions used in this questionnaire were developed based on prior studies with this type of population (Kim & Jogaratnam, 2002). Closed-ended questions are employed in this questionnaire because uniform close-ended responses can be easily coded for data entry and analysis in a computer (Henderson & Bialeschki, 2002). They are also the easiest to administer and analyse since the range of potential answer is limited. It is important to note that the survey instrument used included a number of items that were included at the request of Games management. The intent being that they be used post the event as a form of evaluation for Games organisers. As such, while a 5 page survey instrument was administered to Games participants, only those items related to the primary study aim will be reported and discussed in this paper.

In terms of consideration of the items related to this research study, the questionnaire itself was divided into two sections each containing a number of items. The first section contained questions designed to collect a range of demographic details about the Games participants. The second section had a series of items designed to measure respondents' motivations for attending the Games and seeking, in particular, to identify the primary reason they had attended the event staged in Brisbane. Questions related to sources of information, transportation, accommodation, and expected total expenditure for attending the Games were also included. Each of these questions were phrased using a 5-point Likert scale, with 1= highly unlikely, 2= unlikely, 3= unsure/neutral, 4= likely, and 5= very likely. Items used in previous studies successfully utilising a 5-point Likert scale to explore the travel motivations and characteristics of university student travel (Field, 1999; Kim & Jogaratnam, 2002) were used as grounding for the items eventually incorporated in the survey instrument.

Data analysis

A range of analyses including descriptive frequencies, cross tabs, and a test for scale reliability were completed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). SPSS is particularly well suited to positivistic survey research in that allows the researcher to complete the

analysis of large sets of data whilst engaging minimal resource costs with respect to completion of the task.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Study Sample

Of the 1039 respondents, 54.2% of the valid respondents were female and 45.8% male. The age of the respondents ranged from 17 to 25 years of age and older, with the majority aged between 18 and 22 years (79.1%). Survey results indicated that the majority (90.3%) of participants were Australian students with only a small minority of respondents reporting that they were international students participating in the Games. The largest group of respondents to the 2005 Games came from New South Wales (30.7%), followed by Queensland (29.7%) and Victoria (23.9%. Tasmania was the least represented state with only 0.2% of the study respondents. The majority of respondents reported that they lived in an urban setting (78.4%). Only a small proportion of participants reported that they lived in either a regional or rural setting. Study results also revealed that 89.3% of respondents were undergraduate students with the remainder studying at the postgraduate level (10.7%). The participants of the Australia University Games came from a broad cross-section of universities with Monash University of Technology and The University of Queensland the primary providers of student participants.

Primary motivation for attending the Games

Study findings revealed the primary reason for respondents attending the Australian University Games was to "go with friends" (29% of respondents). The second frequent reason offered was to "compete with other athletes" (14.5%). Other important motivators identified included "holiday away from home" (13.9%); "participate in organized events" (11.3%), and "prestige in representing their university" (6.3%). Such results support those arguments presented for two of the most popular reasons put forward for tourism motivation and engagement. These being pull and push factors (Dann 1981), and the seeking and escape model (Iso-Ahola, 1982). These theories argued that a primary motivation of travel was individuals seeking to get away from their regular place of resident. This they achieved by taking a holiday away from home and, more particularly, by seeking out opportunities to travel to a particular destination with the intent of participating in an event in order to social with friends. Importantly, study results reveal that there are a number of motivating factors for participation in sports tourism with no one motivation significantly factored higher than another. Study findings were consistent with the findings of Dos Reis Vong (2004) who, in a study of the travel characteristics of university students, found that socialising and being with friends were critical factors for decision making when it came to travel. Thus, these findings lend further support for the notion that a cohesive and purposeful social program, as a component part of the wider sporting based activities, are a critical factor for the successful staging of the Games.

Previous attendance at the Games

More than 41% of respondents indicated that they have attended a previous University Games with the remainder being first time attendees in 2005 (58.6%). Among those respondents who indicated that they had attended a previous Australian University Games, there was an increase in the percentage who reported attending from year 2001 to year 2004, with figures of 5.6% and 33.2% respectively. The results indicate a high degree of satisfaction amongst respondents with their involvement in previously staged Games. As sport tourism is very much service industry based, where characteristically intangibility and inseparability of production and consumption exist, high levels of perceived satisfaction are critical for the long term success of an operation (Pegg & Suh, 2005). As such, study results would indicate game participants at the Australian University Games are of the view that event is valued and a worthwhile endeavour in which they seek to be involved.

Likely attendance in the future

The majority of the respondents (67.2%) reported that they would likely or highly likely attend another staged Games event in the future. Only just over 16% of respondents indicated that they were highly unlikely or unlikely to participate again, while a further 16% of respondents were unsure. The finding indicates that at the time of completing of the survey, most participants were satisfied with their involvement in the Games and would seek to engage in the 2006 event if at all possible.

Recommendation to others

Those surveyed held the Games in high regard with 85% of respondents indicating that they would encourage others to attend the event in the future. Specifically, 60% reported that they were highly likely to undertake such action with a further 25% stating that they would likely recommend the event to their friend, fellow student or co

workers. As noted previously, in a service dominated industry, word of mouth is a critical indicator of the event quality and is a sound measure of overall consumer satisfaction (Pegg & Suh, 2005). Importantly, the high value attached to their involvement in the 2005 Games bodes well for the level of student uptake for engagement in the next Games which is scheduled for Adelaide in the second half of 2006.

Event attendance in lieu of a holiday

From the survey, more than half of the respondents indicated that their participation in the Games would not affect the decision to take a separate holiday, either interstate or internationally. However, 23% of study respondents reported that their participation in of the event might curtail the opportunity to take a holiday. Such a finding is consistent with that found by Dos Reis Vong (2004) who found that a large segment of the student travel market had limited discretionary income and that a decision to travel to one location or activity usually resulted in the loss of opportunity to engage in alternative options. This would suggest that event organisers need to carefully consider the location chosen to stage the Games as a sizable number of event participants make decisions about travel based on their ability to value add to the experience beyond that of simply participating in the Games.

Likely attendance at multiple events

Significantly, study results revealed that 36% of the respondents indicated that they were highly likely to attend both the regional university games and the Australian University Games regardless of whether or not they were staged in different geographic locations in any given year. A further 15% of respondents indicated that would most likely not attend both games with a 268% of respondents unsure at the time of completing the survey. As noted by Sharpley (1999), understanding such issues is critical for understanding the motivations of tourists and the needs they seek to satisfy through engagement in particular activities or events. In better understanding tourist motivations and the barriers and constraints to their engagement, key stakeholders, for example Games organisers, can better plan the provision of services such that the Games become a more critical item in the decision making process of the prospective consumer.

Overall impression of Games organisation

The majority of the respondents reported that they were satisfied with the level of the service and the facilities provided by organizers to support the staging of the Games. In all, just over 21% of respondents thought the level of provision was very good with a further 40% regarding them as good. Only 5% of study respondents were of a negative view with a significant number (33.2%) unsure. This finding would indicate that the Australia University Games is well regarded by participants generally but that a sizable proportion of attendees have yet to be convinced. Such a finding would suggest that greater effort needs to be made by games organisers to communicate the value of the services being provided. As noted by Collier (1999), it is critical for service providers to offer that which is perceived by the consumer as meeting their needs such that they can positively have input into the consumer decision making process.

Having a good time as a primary motivation

When asked if they were attending the Games to have a good time, just fewer than 56% of respondents strongly agreed with a further 31% agreeing with the statement. In all, 86% of the respondents reported that having a good time was a key consideration for attending the Games. This result was consistent with those arguments presented by Stewart (2001) who contended that the need to develop friendships and a sense of belonging were key push factors for why many individuals attended an event.

Importance of sport competition

When asked if they attended the Games because of the standard of the sporting competition, 22% of the respondents strongly agreed with the statement with a further 36% agreeing that they attended the 2005 Australia University Games because of the standard of sports competition available at the event. Only 15% of the respondents gave a negative response to this survey item with a further 27% reporting that they were unsure. The finding would suggest that the standard of sporting competition available to sports participants has a positive influence on an individual's decision making process but it nevertheless remained a lesser motivation to attend than the participant's desire to have a good time.

Importance of social program

The majority of the respondents, with 32% of respondents strongly agreeing and a further 28% agreeing, were of the

view that the social program aligned with the staging of the Games was a big incentive for them to attend the Australia University Games. Of the total pool of study respondents, some 21% of those surveyed did not agree with a further 19% unsure. The result supports the Games organizer's decision to offer a significant social program as an adjunct to the sports element of the Games. The results however do highlight the fact that there remains a significant group of attendees not convinced of the merits of the social program.

Focus on fun

A total of 23% of the respondents indicated that there was too much emphasis on having fun rather than focussing greater attention on the sports element of the event. About half of those surveyed (51.4%) however, held the view that the event should be focussed on fun and entertainment. Such a result again supports the key importance of the social program to the overall event and aligns with the argument presented by Iso-Ahola (1982) who contended that people seel out opportunities to engage in leisure activities from which they derive personal pleasure whilst, at the same time, escaping the everyday routine of existence, in both the personal and interpersonal dimensions of their lives.

Likely attendance at social events

Some 76% of the respondents were found likely or highly likely to attend the organised social events to be staged at the event of the University Games with only14% of the respondents unsure of their engagement in such activities. These results are consistent with previous research (Collier, 1999; Maslow, 1970) that a primary motivator for engagement in sporting events was actually the social dimension and not the competitive element of the sport itself. Very few of the participants indicated they were highly unlikely or unlikely to attend any social events at all. The responses to this item reiterate the importance and popularity of the Australia University Games Social Program and are consistent with earlier study findings that having a good time was a primary participation motivation for most Games attendees.

CONCLUSION

The primary aim of this exploratory study was to identify the underlying motivations for participants engaging in the Australian University Games. Study results revealed that the primary reason participants chose to attend the Australia University Games was to socialise and be with their friends. Other motivations for attendance included the desire to compete with other athletics and to have a holiday away from home. As such, event managers need to plan their events around a suite of social activities that are, in turn, either complementary or supportive of the core sport activities. It is clear that when marketing the event, the information disseminated must include information about the social program and the means by which participants can engage in such activities.

Getz and Cheyne (1998, p. 152) contended that if one is to fully appreciate the value of sports tourism to a community, one must start by gaining an understanding of issues from the tourism context. That is, one must not only understand the needs, motives and benefits of consumers, but also the destination and event attractiveness. Marketing, barriers and personal contingency factors need also be appreciated as each shape, in some manner or other, decisions related to travel. While this research study has sought to probe some of these issues, it is clear that much data related to sports tourism, and the Australia University Games in particular, has yet to be mined. That stated, and as argued previously by Gibson (2002, p.119), it is equally clear that such activity need be "grounded in suitable theoretical paradigms which help researchers explain the phenomenon under investigation, as well as link the study to the wider body of knowledge not only in sport tourism, but in leisure, tourism and sport studies as well". As such, and given the lack of research in this area, further attention by academics and practitioners alike with respect to sport tourism in the Australian setting appears well justified.

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