

A Comparative Method of Analysing Small Scale Sport Tourism Events: Half Marathons



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Abstract While significant efforts have been made to define the conceptual boundaries of sport tourism, less attention has been paid to designing a method of studying sport tourism events comparatively. As such, the comparative method introduced in this chapter by the International Research Network on Sport Tourism (IRNIST) helps scholars and practitioners evaluate the tripartite (e.g., economic, environmental, and social) impacts of these events on the local community. In comparing a like event across nine countries and three continents within the same year, the method and corresponding findings elucidate a more empirical way to understand similarities and differences across space, as well as to propose best practices relative to future planning and implementation. The proposed approach, while requiring further refinement, enables researchers to recognize trends and patterns of small scale sport tourism events. This comparative method also has the potential to bridge the historical divide between scholars and practitioners, encouraging applied research while building a collaborative relationship in support of economic and ethical sustainability.

Keywords Comparative Method · Local Sustainable Development · Small scale Sport Tourism Events

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R. Melo et al. (eds.), *Small Scale Sport Tourism Events and Local Sustainable Development*, Sports Economics, Management and Policy 18,

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-62919-9_3

Introduction

Scholars have sought to theorize the conceptual foundation of sport tourism as a field or sub-field of research for several decades (Hinch & Higham, 2001; Melo & Sobry, 2017; Sobry, Liu, & Li, 2016; Van Rheenen, Cernaianu, & Sobry, 2017; Weed & Bull, 2012). In his meta-review of the emerging body of literature over a decade ago, Weed (2006) utilized the analogy of a brickyard, comparing the collection of sport tourism studies to a disparate and random assemblage of bricks. He asked whether the extant collection of bricks combined to build a conceptual foundation or coherent edifice of knowledge. Nearly a decade later, Van Rheenen, Cernaianu, Sobry, and Wille (2017) argued that sport tourism as an evolving epistemology requires both bricks and mortar to buttress this distinct edifice, recognizing strong commonalities and coherence within this maturing field.

While significant efforts have been made to define the conceptual or definitional boundaries of sport tourism (*what it is*),¹ less attention has been paid to the problem of research methods or *how* to study sport tourism. Weed's meta-review or evaluation of 80 studies at the turn of the twenty-first century (2000–2003) found a lack of methodological heterogeneity or diversity in sport tourism research. Specifically, nearly three quarters (71.0%) of the reviewed research articles utilized a positivist approach. While these quantitative studies may have been technically sound and provided value to the agencies that funded them, Ryan (2005) questioned the contribution of these studies to the broader body of sport tourism knowledge. For example, many of these studies revealed little understanding of sport tourism participation, behavior, or motivation. Nor have these studies done much to inform future policy.

Without getting into distinctions between empirical or experiential, quantitative or qualitative methods of understanding, this dynamic field of inquiry, an international network of researchers interested in sport tourism (IRNIST),² has grappled with the feasibility of proposing a comparative method of analysis. This collection of case or field studies from nine distinct geographic contexts is an effort to offer a possible template of comparative study within sport tourism. It is a modest effort, to be sure, and an opening for a larger and more inclusive dialogue. We hope that lessons learned from this comparative analysis will inform future IRNIST projects.

This research project draws on previous efforts of scholars (Hallman & Petry, 2013; Henry & Ko, 2013; Nicholson, Hoye, & Houlihan, 2010) and groups of

¹In a 2014 Twentieth Anniversary Special Issue of the *Journal of Sport & Tourism*, the call for papers asked potential contributors to address the big questions related to sport tourism: what we know, what we do not know, and what we need to know.

²IRNIST refers to the International Research Network in Sport Tourism. Established in 2010, the network represents scholars and practitioners from around the world. The network is interested in the varied intersections of sport and tourism and the promotion of responsible local sustainability. IRNIST has held six annual conferences, its most recent in Marrakech, Morocco (April 2019), and is devoted to addressing the cultural rift between scholars and practitioners, as well as the cultural bias in favor of North America, Western Europe, and parts of Oceania—to the exclusion of the “global south.”

researchers such as MEASURE and COMPASS³ who seek to analyze differences and similarities in sport participation between social groups and social contexts, although their foci have not been sport tourism specifically. This collection of studies is more specific in nature, focused on a singular small scale sport tourism event, half marathons, or road races, hosted and experienced within several distinct locations across several countries and continents.

In order to reveal how the policy process functions on a local level, those actually doing and those studying sport tourism (e.g., practitioners and researchers engaged in sport tourism) need to understand how input variables affect change in output variables. Inputs are the financial, human, and natural resources that combine to develop a proposed activity or event, while outputs represent what is done with the inputs or resources and how they are used to achieve a set of outcomes. In other words, the output is the “data” that proves the activity or strategy occurred (Shakman, 2014). Strategies are the game plan, a series of steps or activities taken to achieve a set of desired outcomes. These outcomes represent both costs and benefits, with the summation of these results producing potential positive and negative impacts. And yet, as Henry and Ko (2013) caution, statistically significant relationships or findings do not *of themselves* constitute explanations of how outcomes or best practices are achieved.

Scholars interested in a more ethical and sustainable approach to sport tourism and event management have proposed the utilization of a triple-bottom line (TBL) orientation to plan, implement, and evaluate what actually constitutes successful or best practices (Adams and Zutshi Adams & Zutshi, 2004; Dwyer, 2015; Getz, 2009). A TBL approach takes into consideration the social and environmental impacts of a business venture in addition to the traditional measure of profit generation, such as return on investment or shareholder value (Van Rheenen, 2017).

The challenge of a TBL approach is not its ethical orientation to do the right thing but its practical application as a reporting tool or methodological approach. This challenge is heightened when scholars seek to compare the tripartite outcomes and impacts of sport tourism events from one location to another. Based on these concerns and challenges, Weed (2006) encouraged the emerging field of sport tourism “to become epistemologically and methodologically heterogeneous and diverse, as befits a multi-disciplinary research area that draws on a range of subject areas for synergistic insights” (22). With that said, comparison across like activities such as sport policy and sport tourism research requires some agreed-upon assumptions and metrics to ensure methodological rigor.

Many scholars are trained with a defined disciplinary approach to study culture and myriad social phenomena. Many disciplines—anthropology, economics, political science, and sociology, among others—conduct comparative research, asking

³Founded in 2010, MEASURE stands for “Meeting for European Sports Participation and Sport Culture Research,” while COMPASS stands for “Community of Providers of Physical Activity and Sport.” Both groups comprise a network of mostly European researchers interested in sport participation issues. They meet once or twice annually, often connected to large conferences focused on these broad topics.

how a unit of analysis in one geographic setting is similar to, or different from, that unit of analysis in another setting. This process of comparison for any number of units of analyses serves as the basis for research findings and interpretations.

For the purpose of this project, the unit of analysis is the small scale sport tourism event rather than national sport systems per se. Geographically, the comparison is local and/or urban rather than national, often focused on small and medium-sized cities or locales, although the collection also includes several major cities. This comparative approach enables researchers and practitioners to recognize variation within, as well as across, boundaries (e.g., nation states), seeking to avoid the pitfall of drawing broad, often superficial, conclusions from such comparisons. These conclusions may both reinforce national stereotypes, as well as infer generalizability where the evidence is simply too limited to make such assertions. Because the small scale sport tourism event occurred at roughly the same time in each geographic locale, this comparison is ahistorical, although the data could be used for future longitudinal or temporal studies, such as comparative studies of the same event over time.

From a policy analysis perspective, then, this comparative approach operates at the micro- or meso-level, understanding the nature and impact within a specific context and related to a particular/common sport tourism event. This is not to say that the analyses or findings do not reflect national or transnational trends and patterns, such as rurality, seasonality, and public-private partnerships. In turn, these themes may serve as the focus of comparative inquiry, particularly as we seek to better understand the impact of small scale sport tourism events on local sustainable development.

A more nuanced comparison of these sport tourism events, such as road races or half marathons, examines structures of organization and sponsorship (public, private, some combination thereof), hosting rationale and motivation, as well as participation profiles, behaviors, and motivations. This includes active sport tourists as well as event volunteers. Additionally, the impact of such events on the local community and the relative engagement with host residents may be of primary, secondary, or even tertiary importance from the sponsor's perspective, particularly if the organizing bodies of the event are external to the local community. But because few sport tourism events would occur without public support and subsidies (Burgan & Mules, 2001; Mules & Dwyer, 2005), local leaders, organizing sponsors, government agencies, and domestic and international sport federations become primary stakeholders and therefore have a moral obligation to promote responsible sustainability and to protect the quality of life of local residents (Fredline, 2005; Fredline & Faulkner, 2000; Van Rheenen, 2017).

A sport tourism event *may be* part of a regional or national policy, whether sport-specific or tourism sponsored, but it may also be organized in a more localized or decentralized manner with few national policy implications. The event may be organized with local sustainability development central to its organizational goals and desired outcomes, while other organizers may have paid scant attention to the social

and environmental impacts associated with the event, focused almost exclusively on the economic impact of the event. On the other hand, municipal sponsors of small scale sport tourism events may be motivated more by tradition and community building than revenue generation. As demonstrated in the forthcoming chapters, some of these local organizers do not seem to acknowledge that these events could leverage other forms of tourism in these specific locales (whether during or after the event), while other sponsors are keenly aware of the potential economic value added and multiplier effects of these events for future tourism.

Global sport tourism serves as an important marketing vehicle for both cities and nations aspiring to world-class status (Whitson & Macintosh, 1996). In this capacity, sport tourism has evolved within a global market to help “brand” cities and nations just as multinational corporations sell commodities tied to the concomitant consumption of sporting events. As a result, mega sporting events have been used as a strategic mechanism for nation building and increased market share (Cornelissen & Swart, 2006; Gillis, Oliver, & Briggs, 2007; Van Rheenen, 2014).

On the other hand, scholars have noted that local residents tend to spend less during these mega sporting events and that the location tends to lose or displace visitors who might have come to the city during this time but decide not to due to the mass event (Fourie & Santana-Gallego, 2011; Matheson, 2002; Solberg & Preuss, 2006). Furthermore, where the city and/or region has financially supported or sponsored a particular event that may have catered primarily to visitors, the money could have been spent otherwise to benefit local residents. It is often difficult to quantify the effect of a municipality’s sport tourism event on future tourism, despite the promise of site or brand recognition.

In addition to differences among organizers and their relative success in promoting future tourism, so too is there variation in the motivation for participation in these small scale sport tourism events. As demonstrated in the nine distinct field studies presented within this collection, some participants report that they will return to these locales in the future for other touristic reasons, while others state that it was only the sport tourism event that drew them to this place, with no incentive to return (except perhaps for the same event again).

This comparative approach offers scholars and practitioners a method to better understand the profiles of participants, as well as the meanings they have co-constructed in relation to these events. The method likewise helps researchers evaluate the economic, environmental, and social outcomes and impacts of these events on the local or municipal community. In comparing a like event across several distinct locations, we are better able to understand similarities and differences across space and propose best practices relative to future planning and implementation. As such, the data and corresponding findings might likewise be used as a benchmark for future longitudinal studies, comparing across time as well as space.

A Proposed Mixed Method Approach

This comparative study is part of a research project coordinated by the International Research Network In Sport Tourism (IRNIST). All contributors studied a half marathon event in their respective countries. The sport tourism event was to be hosted in a small- to medium-sized city with between 2000 and 10,000 participants. The main purpose of this study was to examine and compare the varied experiences and impacts of a sport tourism event on local sustainable development. The following chapters reveal the demographic profile of the road race participants across several sites and then analyze the real and perceived economic, environmental, and social impact of this sport tourism event from multiple perspectives.

All contributors to the project agreed on a common methodology, with the intention of comparing results from nine distinct cities and countries. Three continents—Africa, Europe, and South America—were represented. The countries and respective cities comprised in this comparative study included Algeria (Béjaïa), Brasil (Guarujá), the Czech Republic (Ústi nad Labem), France (Phalempin), Hungary (Debrecen), Italy (Rome-Ostia), Portugal (Coimbra), Romania (Bucharest), and Switzerland (Vallée de Voux).

The methodological approach included a survey instrument or questionnaire to collect information from key stakeholders involved in the event, as well as structured interviews to gather further data regarding the organizational and management processes of the event, as well as the perceived and actual impact on local sustainable development. Direct observation was the final aspect of this methodology, a means to triangulate all of the collected data.

The data were then analyzed according to a qualitative-quantitative or mixed method approach. Contributors utilized monivariate, bivariate, and multifactorial analyses of the survey instrument. Participant responses were then compared with what was reported by key stakeholders (e.g., the organizers or sponsors of the event) during semi-structured interviews. Researcher observation tested the claims relative to reported impact on local sustainable development. This comparative methodology, organized according to an interdisciplinary and systemic model, was tested for the first time during this international research project.

Foundations for Comparison

All contributors to this comparative project were asked to provide a Fact or Data Sheet for their case study, highlighting national statistics (e.g., country capital, geographic size, population, Gross Domestic Product, Tourism Contribution by percentage to the GDP, sport tourism categories by popularity and percentages if available). The Fact Sheet also requested data on the host location of the sport tourism event (e.g., the name of the city, its geographic size, population, percentage of GDP or Euro/local currency per capita, main professional sectors, and sport tourism

events). Finally, the Fact Sheet asked participants to provide data about the half marathon sport tourism event under study (e.g., the name of the event, the total number of participants, the number of residents participating in the event (percentage of total), the number of volunteers, the type of organization(s) hosting/managing the event (public, private, a combination of the two), as well as the sponsors of the event (public, private, a combination of the two). Additionally, contributors were asked to provide an overview about the sport tourism industry in their respective country, highlighting the importance of small scale sport tourism events nationally. Authors were likewise asked to discuss trends in the sport tourism market in the twenty-first century and how, if at all, these trends intersected with local, regional, and/or national sustainable development policies.

Survey Instrument/Questionnaire

The general study was based on an anonymous survey instrument or questionnaire established by all nine members of the project. The questionnaire was composed of 40 items, developed initially in English, and then translated in the native language of the country under analysis. The questionnaire was intended to measure multiple variables: the participants' profile, motivation, and overall experience, as well as the economic, environmental, and socio-cultural impacts of the event. The survey included several questions to determine the participants' demographic profile, such as self-reported age, gender, family status, level of education, socio-professional category, and income level. The questionnaire also asked respondents whether this was the first time that they had participated in this particular event or if they had done so previously. We were also interested to know whether the runners came alone or with others, and if so, with how many people and how were they related. Additionally, the survey sought to better understand participant motivation and the overall experience as runners within this sport tourism event. Respondents were asked to rank the importance of several factors in their motivation to participate (e.g., challenge, competition, socialization, etc.).

The structured survey questioned race participants where they resided/lived to assess the distance they had traveled to attend the event. We asked participants what means of transportation (walk, public transportation, car, train, etc.) they used to get to the event. Additionally, the survey asked respondents if they stayed overnight, and if so, for how many nights? If they required accommodations, where did they stay (e.g., at a friend's house, in a hotel, at a campsite)?

Replicating the approach of Daniels and Norman (2003), Gratton, Dobson, and Shibli (2000), and Gibson, Kaplinadou, and Kang (2012), the next section of the survey asked participants to estimate their overall budget—not only for the event itself, but also to include all other incidental expenditures/expenses incurred (race registration, equipment, accommodation, food and beverages, souvenirs, etc.). A series of questions focused on the respondents' activities outside of the race, their

thoughts on the touristic appeal of the town, and the likelihood that they would return to the city or region for touristic purposes in the future.

Utilizing a likert-type scale, several questions sought to determine participant impressions related to the quality of the event, the municipality's level of attractiveness, and the efforts of the organizers to prevent any environmental impact. These final questions sought to illicit participant responses relative to the perceived impact on local sustainable development.

Researchers sought to distribute and disseminate the survey to participants in a number of ways. In the weeks and days leading up to the sport tourism event, researchers disseminated information about the study at local sites, such as schools and race headquarters. Participants were encouraged to complete the survey when they collected their race bibs and registration packets. In some cases, paper copies of the questionnaire were distributed and collected by researchers. Information about the study and the survey link was also posted on neighborhood forums, online magazines catering to running enthusiasts and the event website. In some instances, volunteers handed out flyers in advance and during the event to race participants outlining the objectives of the study with the survey link. Social media platforms were likewise utilized to distribute the survey. Web survey tools, such as Google Forms and LimeSurvey, were developed and sent to the email addresses of all registered participants of the half marathon. Several email reminders with the survey link were sent to all participants the days after the race, soliciting participants to answer the questionnaire.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Authors were encouraged to interview key stakeholders of the organizing bodies sponsoring or managing the event, as well as city officials where the half marathon was hosted. As such, contributing authors interviewed both public and private officials, including mayors, deputy mayors, tourism managers, directors of racing club associations, and executive directors and CEOs of private companies managing these sport tourism events.

An interview guide was provided to all contributing authors. The interview guide prompted a series of questions about the history of the event (years in operation, number of participants, had participation been capped at a particular number and why), the ways in which the event was organized, the sponsors, etc. Interviewees helped researchers better understand the collaborative relationships of the various stakeholders, both public and private, engaged in promoting and managing the event.

One of the primary purposes of these interviews was to reveal the motivations of those entities hosting and organizing the half marathon. These key stakeholders were likewise asked to evaluate the economic, environmental, and social impacts—tangible and intangible—of the event. In terms of economic indicators, what tools do stakeholders use to calculate revenues and expenses associated with the event, potential opportunity costs, profits, and multiplier effects.

The interviews sought to uncover the level of support from the local community, as well as the level of satisfaction with the outcomes of the event. For example, does the event create civic pride, a positive municipal or territorial identity and/or the promotion of other forms of tourism in the short, medium, and long-run? Have local business leaders (restaurants, hotels, petrol stations) been invited to participate in the event during the planning phases, serve as local sponsors or direct recipients of tourism dollars? How do the organizers measure the social-cultural impact of these sport tourism events on the local economy and community?

Relative to environmental sustainability, respondents were asked what measures, if any, were implemented to protect and preserve the local environment? Similarly, researchers asked interviewees how the ecological footprint following the event was calculated. For example, have the organizers of the event prioritized the purchase of eco-labeled products and the consumption of local goods in order to minimize the ecological footprint? Is there a contract or written agreement between the local government and the organizing bodies to ensure sound environmental practices? Are there provisions for non-compliance or damages incurred as a result of the event?

Direct Observation

In addition to collecting survey data from race participants and conducting semi-structured interviews of event organizers and other key stakeholders, researchers from the nine site locations provided direct observation of the sport tourism event under study. An observation guide (please see attached) was provided to all contributing authors. The observation guide drew attention to the planning and design of the event, focused on transportation, parking, the determined race route, and the environmental and social impacts associated with the half marathon and the influx of race participants, spectators, and volunteers. Observation also referred to the day of the event, directly witnessing the organization and management of the race. These observations or field notes were the final set of data for these nine distinct case studies, serving to triangulate these observations with survey and interview data.

Limitations and Challenges

There are significant challenges to developing a common and accessible methodology easily adopted for such a comparative project. Language poses the initial challenge or limitation to this comparative project. While English is the most common shared language among contributing authors and was the language selected for a uniform survey instrument in the research design phase of this study, the translation of this survey into the local language became the responsibility of each author or group of authors. The process led to a revision of the instrument itself, with

questions edited, added, and deleted to better fit the local context. This led to a lack of uniformity in data collection and analysis.

The length of the survey instrument further exacerbated this linguistic challenge. Forty questions were deemed by authors to be too long. It was one of the main reasons cited for low survey response rates from participants. Response rates ranged from a low of 5.5% to a high of 44%, with the average response rate across all case studies just below one fifth (19.25%) of race participants. In the case with the highest return rate from participants, researchers incentivized survey responses with a potential monetary reward. Survey respondents were entered into a random raffle or drawing to win the registration payment for next year's half marathon. Future efforts at adopting this comparative methodology should consider editing the survey instrument to fewer questions. This may help ease the work associated with the translation process as well as increase participant response rates. Incentivizing participants to complete the survey, as evidenced in the Swiss case study, should also be considered.

The guides provided to contributors relative to the proposed structured interviews and direct observations were likewise too lengthy. While they offered tremendous latitude for scholars to select from a series of possible questions, these research documents should be shortened to simplify the data collection process and narrow the focus of analysis. As such, the research design in constructing a comparative method in analyzing small scale sport tourism events is an initial template, an iterative effort at further refinement. An edited and refined set of instruments will make more rigorous the comparative methodology for future research projects sponsored by IRNIST and other sport tourism scholars and practitioners worldwide.

Additionally, the challenge of developing a comparative methodology in sport tourism can be recognized when we consider the three editors of this volume and their disciplinary identities. Claude Sobry is an economist, Ricardo Melo identifies as a sociologist, and Derek Van Rheenen sees himself as an anthropologist, although he adopted a folklore methodology, often referred to as "the comparative method," for his dissertation at the University of California, Berkeley (Van Rheenen, 1999). It is therefore likely that scholars in this interdisciplinary field have particular interest, expertise, and biases based on their scholarly training. For example, when we analyze the economic, social, and environmental impacts of an event, our training may direct us in particular ways to this intellectual exercise.

Thus, while there are significant challenges to developing a comparative methodology for small scale sport tourism events, the potential value of such an effort and the iterative process of refining this comparative methodology promise the discovery of best practices across these events, particularly as it pertains to the promotion of local sustainable development. Such an approach delves more deeply into the current field, expanding our understanding beyond the unique cultural and political circumstances of a given event in a singular, local context. The approach, while requiring further refinement, allows scholars to recognize trends and patterns of small scale sport tourism events. This comparative approach also has the potential to bridge the historical gap between scholars and practitioners, encouraging applied

research while building a collaborative relationship in support of economic and ethical sustainability.

Future Directions and Forthcoming Chapters

The forthcoming chapters provide richly textured descriptions and analyses of nine distinct half marathon races across three continents. As these contributions will illustrate, there are numerous similarities across this common event in distinct locales. For example, the demographic profile and motivations of race participants (demand) were very similar from one event and one geographic context to another. There are likewise significant differences from one case study to the next, particularly in the organization and sponsorship of the events (supply). There is tremendous variation, for example, in the relative attention paid to potential and realized impacts on local sustainable development connected to these events. These differences and similarities will be discussed in greater detail in the final chapter of this book. As noted in the introduction, the following chapters present the findings of this international research project alphabetically and by continent. Chapter 4 begins in Algeria (Northern African) and Chap. 5 takes us to Brasil (South America). We then traverse to Europe for Chaps. 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12, landing in the Czech Republic and then traveling to France, Hungary, Italy, Portugal, and then Romania. We end our journey in Switzerland, a fine, final destination. The book concludes with a chapter of comparative summation and a call to action, a global effort toward genuine sustainable development.

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