

Sports Tourism an Opportunity for Urban Areas: Classifying Sports Tourists According to Their Level of Sports Engagement and Consumer Behavior



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Abstract Sports tourism is one of the fastest growing sectors in tourism by combining elements of culture, health, and wellness and recreation. More and more tourists are interested in sport activities during their trips whether sports are the main objective of travel or not. Following running or other popular sports events is acting as a strong motivator for the decision-making process in the choice of destination and greatly influences the decision-making phase of consumer behavior. Sport events of various kinds and sizes attract tourists as participants or spectators and destinations try to add local flavors to them to distinguish themselves and provide authentic local experiences. The aim of this paper is to identify and classify sports tourists according to their different level of engagement in the sporting activity. Furthermore, a hypothesis is made and tested that consumer behavior will present differences both in the motivational (deciding on a destination) and in the experiential phase (visiting and experiencing a destination). A multi input matrix will allow to determine proximity to the culturally oriented or health-oriented part of the scale and define and identify consumer behavioral patterns accordingly. In the post-COVID-19 era, it is very important for destinations to find ways to reignite their tourism product while placing safety as a top priority. The link of sports tourism to health and wellness issues presents a valuable opportunity especially for urban areas to explore alternative visitation patterns.

Keywords Hotels · Athletes · Tourism · Urban · Reignite · Destinations

JEL Classification Z32 · Tourism and development

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1 Introduction

Sports tourism is one of the fastest growing sectors in tourism. More and more tourists are interested in sport activities during their trips whether sports are the main motivation for traveling or not. Following running, or other popular sports events, is acting as a strong motivator for the decision-making process in the choice of destination. Sport events of various kinds and sizes attract tourists as participants or spectators and destinations try to add local flavors to them to distinguish themselves and provide authentic local experiences. Teams are in constant search for location and destination that can host their preparatory training. Sport participation, especially in correlation to health and wellness, is a rising lifestyle trend that can't be ignored and athletes (professional, semi-professional, amateur, and more). Sports events can be a catalyst for tourism development if successfully leveraged in terms of destination branding, infrastructure development, and other economic and social benefits. The advantages of Sports Tourism are evident for destinations that are now in the early development phase but in the recent year even well-established destinations have been shifting their focus toward athletic events in an attempt to change their segmentation market, to extend their season or to become more sustainable, with Mykonos being the most characteristic example organizing its first running event in October 2022.

Being the first part of a wider research project, this paper aims to explore the potential for promoting sports tourism in the Greek tourism market, attempting to make a connection between sports-related tourism and the accommodation market by developing a categorization of hotels in line with a set of criteria according to their capacity to host sports tourists. In this paper, therefore, a literature review is conducted, hoping to shed light to the hypothesis that consumer behavior of tourists, and particularly sports tourists, will present differences both in the motivational and in the experiential phase of the journey. In other words, the literature review focuses on the existence of differences in the way sports tourists decide on which destination to visit, as to the way in which they experience a destination while visiting it. Ensuing, a discussion is made, stemming from the literature review themes.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Available Tools for Measurement

With about 1.5 billion international tourists in 2019, the direct tourism earnings topped \$1.7 trillion (WTO, 2020). Based on the size of the tourism and hospitality industry and in conjunction with the dynamic growth and increasing competition in the sector at macro and micro levels, it is important for researchers to understand people's perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors in the sector and one of the ways to do so is by using scales. In particular, a scale is a mechanism or technique used in research to quantify constructs and to distinguish individuals in categories based on

predetermined variables used in a study (Sekaran & Bougie, 2013). Various metrics, including nominal, ordinal, interval, or ratios, may be used to build scales based on scaling procedures and processes, including rating and ranking (Bruner, 2012; Sekaran & Bougie, 2013).

The design and application of scales are essential, particularly in the social sciences, where they may transform an abstract idea, an unobservable condition, or a phenomenon into a quantifiable, comparable concept (Kock et al., 2019). Scales may be seen as instruments that enable academics and practitioners to explore the causes and effects of a phenomenon in many settings, contexts, and sectors in order to provide new information. Additionally, two significant considerations make the creation of scales in the tourist and hospitality industries, particularly beneficial. Firstly, tourism is one of the largest industries in the world in terms of earnings and employment generated (WTTC, 2020). Secondly, the tourism and hospitality sector involve frequent and intensive social contact, interaction, and communication among service providers as well as between customers and staff. Therefore, it may be quite helpful to design and employ constructs that allow for differentiation and classification in the tourism and hospitality sector and allow researchers the ability to interpret how individuals interact with processes, with systems, and with each other.

As of 2020, there were 253 tourism and hospitality scales (Koc & Ayyildiz, 2021), divided into various categories, such as motivation scales (Category 1), residents' perceptions and attitudes scales (Category 2), and destination image scales (Category 3). One can argue that these categories tend to overlap because they measure more or less the same phenomena. Furthermore, the SERVQUAL model which was created by Parasuraman et al. (1988) consists of a multiple-item scale for assessing customer perceptions of service quality, which is one of the scales that focus on performance evaluation, quality assessment, loyalty, and satisfaction, which is another broad category of scales (Category 4). Furthermore, this particular scale (SERVQUAL) has been used for the development of the LODGSERV (Knutson et al., 1990), the LQI (Getty & Getty, 2003), and the HOLSERV (Mei et al., 1999) scales, which are all used to assess the quality of services provided by businesses in the lodging and hospitality sectors. Based on the above and the overlaps identified among different scales, it appears that opportunity exists when it comes to the development of scales in special interest tourism (SIT) fields and as such, there is a need for scales pertaining to less researched subfields like dark, religious or faith tourism, urban tourism, nature tourism, civic tourism, and sport-related tourism among others.

At this point, it is also important to note that there is an increasing demand for sports-led tourism, which is defined as journeys taken for leisurely purposes in order to take part in or watch sports activities that take place away from one's usual place of residence (Hall, 1992) and may or may not have a competitive purpose; a more detailed discussion of the term will be conducted later in this paper. At the national level, however, the rise of sports tourism in Greece could only be supported by the corresponding infrastructures. After organizing the 2004 Olympics and a number of medal positions to follow either in team sports (football and Euro 2004) or in individual sports (Wimbledon, 2021), Greece increased its sporting legacy. The country slowly shifted its focus and has managed to earn the trust of professional and

national teams as a preferred location for team training as well as staging a number of athletic events in various destinations. The Swedish Olympic Committee has reached an agreement with two Greek resorts (“Sivota Retreat” in Sivota, Epirus, and “Porto Myrina—powered by Playitas” in Avlona, Lemnos) for hosting the training camps of its Olympic Team (Tryfona, 2022a). This deal was the outcome of a lot of effort put in the last five years to upgrade the tourist product and bring it to levels that meet the standards for Olympic team preparation. Indicative of this effort is the fact that Porto Myrina offers apart from excellent accommodation services access to a variety of sport-related facilities [Olympic-standard gym, WOD box (for CrossFit), 3 padel courts (combination of tennis and squash), multipurpose sports facilities, spa, water sports centers, access to biking and hiking trails, etc.]. It goes without saying that efforts are made by the Minister of Tourism, Mr. Kikilias, to support the development of sports-training tourism in Greece, and his meeting with the CEO of Apollo Northern Europe, which is the largest tour operator in Scandinavia, and member of the International Board of DER Touristik Leif Vase Larsen and Commercial Director, Nina Hornewall, which proves the interest to promote sport-training tourism (Tryfona, 2022b). Since most training occurs in the off-season, the growth and development of sports-training tourism may significantly extend the destinations’ tourist seasons. Additionally, by providing packages that include sports activities, which are now in demand, hotels may profit from the sports infrastructure they have built or considering developing.

2.2 Sports Tourism Definitions Discussion

As early as 1998, there has been a connection established between sport and tourism as being equal forms of travel (Gibson, 1998); hence athletes, i.e., people traveling to an area to participate in a sport event, is also considered tourists in that area (ibid). Sports tourism is also a phenomenon with cultural ties and a strong socioeconomic background for both the host country and the country of origin. Through sports, a bond is formed between people and space, and participants are connected to a specific location, country of team. In recent marketing terms, the social bond created by athletic events (InFocus, 2020) was the unique selling point of this 2022 Euro Basket Advertisement of the Greek participation with the coach of the Greek team calling people at random and the central slogan “X you are on the team”. Social integration, cohesion, respect, and acceptance of different cultures, cultural exchange, and finally civic pride are all very important elements of a successful sustainable community and can all be promoted and achieved through culture and sports.

Still the correlation between culture and sports, though obvious and well defined throughout history, is a more complicated matter. Many are the scholars that argue modern sports have given birth to vandalism, hooliganism, violence, and opposition. Sports in some of its extreme violent representations is viewed as the modern civilized evolution of war. It is clear that when an idea is abused or there is a small group of people following illegal, violent behaviors, that cannot and should not reflect

back on the ideal but it should be treated as an isolated incident that requires better organization in order to be avoided.

Viewing sport competition as an event that provides an experience in its own merit (Getz, 2008), deriving a meaning out of the experience, especially when immersing in it through active participation (Pine & Gilmore, 1998), and sieving this experience and its derived meaning as affected by the sport event's setting, is also discussed (Funk & Bruun, 2007; Getz, 2008; Green & Chalip, 1998).

The discussion here below is not at all exhaustive, as the topic can be approached from a wide variety of angles, as the literature indicates (Gibson, 1998; and many more). The point of view of this particular paper is not to focus on destinations and the role of the public sector in order to develop sports tourism. The paper follows a marketing and operational approach in an attempt to include the private sector in the argument. Hotels and accommodation are facing intense competition due to the widening of the tourism and hospitality sector to new destinations, but also they are facing intense competition within the destination, in their external micro environment, by new entries and sharing economy platforms (VRBO, AirBnB, and more). It is now more relevant than ever, to examine the theoretical aspects at first, of sports tourism in an attempt to relate them to marketing opportunities for existing accommodation, hotels and the private sector.

2.3 Categorization of Sports Tourism Analysis

In 1998, Gibson (1998) identified three main expressions of sports tourism according to the main behavioral patterns or reasons for traveling. As expected, the first category is **active participation in sports** followed by **Sports Tourism as an Event** and finally **nostalgic sports tourism**. Active participation in sports tourism includes anyone traveling to participate as an athlete in sports. This definition does not make a distinction between professional athletes, organized tournaments, team sports of single athletes, and recreational sports activity. Professional NBA players traveling for a game are in the same category as a family of four visiting a ski resort (Gammon & Robinson, 1997).

Event related sports tourism includes all the people traveling to a destination to participate as athletes at the event or be spectators to the events or work in administrative or volunteering positions for the event (ibid). In marketing terms, this segmentation is very broad and does not entail specific behavioral patterns. Events related to tourism can prove to have the most benefits for the accommodation and business sector of a destination. The location of the event is predetermined competition and marketing can be limited to the micro external environment, contained within the destination. In reoccurring events, it creates a loyal clientele with very specific well-defined and well-known demands that are easily met by tourism professional. Events are usually off-season or in the outskirts of the peak season and can present an opportunity for initiating future visits. Sports events are one of the first tools employed by destinations in order to increase their tourism demand (POROSEA, 2019). Good

example can be the triathlon in Poros, Zagori Mountain Running, Spartathlon, and even the Boston Marathon. It is worth mentioning that in terms of segmentation profiling people participating in sport events have an inclination toward a healthier lifestyle and demonstrate more sustainable behavioral patterns.

Passive participation in events tourism can include accompanying people for the athletes. The recreational requirements are enhanced since they do not have to follow a competitive athlete's lifestyle in full but they are semi-actively engaged in the sporting event (POROSEA, 2019). Again the destination is predetermined and hotels have to compete in the micro environment within the destination. Common behavioral patterns are difficult to identify and relate to the level of engagement with the event and the type of event.

In individual recreational sports tourism, the destinations is not a given and there is competition. In most cases, the competition is limited to places offering similar experiences (e.g., the Austrian and Italian Alps, Bansco, or rafting activities in rivers). Participants usually travel in small groups and the activity is highly seasonal (Dragovic & Pasic, 2020). Hotels need to compete among their immediate neighbors (micro external environment) and have a global reach as well in order to support the destination during the decision-making process of the potential tourists. Recreational needs are also a priority but again the healthy lifestyle supported by this type of tourism points toward spa treatments, relaxation, good food, nature appreciation, and sustainable environmentally friendly behavior (ibid). The interesting finding in the segmentation analysis is that individuals participating in such activities have above average education and income. A good example would be golfing, where all the supporting activities have to follow the same level of sophistication like for example wine tasting.

Nostalgic sports tourism is the only category that does not include athletes and involves traveling to a location to pay tribute to a sport-related field of hall of fame. However, Ramshaw and Gammon explain that the term "nostalgia" is too limited to include heritage, which should be addressed as a separate idea, so that the "complexity of the sporting past be revealed" (Ramshaw & Gammon, 2015, pp. 248–249). Although the discussion on Nostalgic Sport Tourism could easily deviate toward Heritage Tourism, or Sports Heritage Tourism, for the purpose of this paper, it will be contained to Nostalgic Sport Tourism, in the sense that, when experienced by tourists as such, it does not entail any special sport-related implication for hotels in the area.

It is clear that this very broad categorization cannot include all the different categories occurring ad hoc in relation to different sports, different motivations, and different level of engagement. In terms of accommodation and with the goal of providing personalized service according to individual needs, a more detailed segmentation is required. Still, even at this early stage, some common behavioral patterns among tourism can start occurring. The initial methodological approach was to run three separate very small focus groups on semi-informed and informed individuals in the field of tourism, marketing, and sports. The literature review and the very small focus groups will lead in the formulation of a research hypothesis. The

initial findings will act as pilots in designing a more detailed and focused methodology approach which will focus on behavioral patterns and opportunities occurring for hotels in relation to sports tourism.

In 2004, Robinson and Gammon (2004) made an attempt to further divide sports tourism into secondary categories by developing the idea of a sports tourist—athlete including a hard and soft notion in the motivation and behavioral pattern. Hard tourist athletes are mainly motivated by the competitive side of sports and soft tourist athletes view sports as a recreational rather than a competitive activity. Both these categories are more relevant to active participation in sports and can be applied to a very limited extend to event sports tourism and not at all to nostalgic sports tourism. It is clear from this categorization that soft tourist athletes would have their tourist side emphasized, thus requiring a mixture of other supplementary activities to complete their experience. They can be viewed as recreational tourists with a special interest in sports with the social elements being of importance in their overall experience (Weed & Bull, 2004). Hard tourist athletes are more interested in the competition side, therefore requiring support infrastructure like special meals or training ground and have less time for other supplementary tourism products. One can argue that they are business tourist with their main business being sports.

3 Discussion

The main hypothesis for this paper is that sports tourism can present an opportunity and a competitive advantage in marketing terms for hotels. The need for a classification system and a scale that would reflect the needs of sports tourist would act as a guide in the decision-making process when deciding on accommodation, which is evident. Sports tourism has been identified as a dynamic part of the tourism market and is growing rapidly as the lifestyle and mobility patterns change. Destinations have indeed identified this trend and are keener in bidding for mega sports events or even ghosting smaller sporting events. The private sector and hotels are only now beginning to realize the potential of this growing market with the exception of the hotels mentioned in the paper. The need for a classification model that will follow the current tourism trends for personalized service and will include the needs of sports tourists is evident. The marketing approach focusing more on identifying hotels that can offer services tailor-made to the requirements of different categories of sports—tourists or athlete—tourists will provide a competitive advantage for hotels and will allow visitors to make more informed choices, thus enhancing their experience and proving beneficial to the destination as well.

A more detailed analysis of the needs and requirements of sport tourist is therefore required based on their behavioral patterns. Simple motivation and main reason for traveling cannot cover the complexity of the issues, and more detailed indicators such as type of sports, level of engagement, seasonality, and life style are also important elements when attempting to create a badge or scale that will refer to amenities and services but will also reflect individual or group needs. Following this initial

conceptual paper, the research will continue with detailed structured interviews in order to identify specific needs and requirements and attempt to co-relate them with hotel services and amenities with the overall goal of creating a multi-entry matrix leading to a sports hotel classification.

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