

Uncovering the motivations of sport tourism volunteers: Insights from the Athens Marathon

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to uncover the underlying motivations and goals of sports tourism volunteers who dedicated themselves to the Athens Marathon. It presented a comprehensive and timely examination of sport tourism by employing qualitative research methods, such as interviews and participant observation. The study involved 18 participants who were part of the “Athens Marathon, the Authentic” in Greece in 2020. A qualitative online survey was developed as part of a longitudinal study and encompassed a set of open-ended inquiries addressing travel planning, motives underlying sport volunteer, and prior volunteer engagements. The findings of this study shed light on the motivations and goals of tourism volunteers participating in the Athens Marathon, revealing three primary motives: egoism, leisure, satisfaction, and acknowledgment of expertise. Egoistic motives were prominent among volunteers, driven by desires for personal recognition and achievement through their involvement in a prestigious event. Leisure motives underscored the integration of travel and recreational interests with volunteerism, enhancing the fulfilling experiences of volunteers. Satisfaction and acknowledgment of expertise were also substantial, with volunteers deriving fulfillment from their contributions and seeking recognition for specialized skills in areas such as event management and logistics. These findings contribute by emphasizing the importance of tailored volunteer engagement strategies for enhancing participant satisfaction and event success.

KEYWORDS

Volunteer Tourism; Motivation; Performance; Athens Marathon

1. INTRODUCTION

Voluntourists are characterized by their active involvement in organized endeavors during their vacations, which are designed to address and alleviate the socioeconomic disadvantages faced by specific social groups, restore particular ecosystems, and explore various aspects of society or the environment (Wearing, 2001). The array of volunteer opportunities accessible to young adults varies with the destinations they choose to travel around the world. A considerable proportion of individuals who participate in volunteer travel place high value on experiences that benefit the local community (Broad, 2003). However, there is also a distinct subset of individuals who are primarily focused on contributing to wildlife conservation initiatives, conducting research, assisting in rehabilitation programs, and engaging in ecological projects within at-risk ecosystems that are at risk (Callanan & Thomas, 2005; Lorimer, 2009, 2010; Schattle, 2008). The expansion of international conservation volunteer travel has been shaped by several factors (Wearing, 2001). Several factors contribute to increasing pressure on natural environments (Eagles, 1994) and the reduction in financial support for nature conservation (Eagles, 1994; Lorimer, 2009), leading to a growing demand for volunteer involvement.

Despite the growing popularity of sport tourism, there remains a significant gap in scholarly research regarding the intersection of volunteerism and sports. This study aims to address this gap by analyzing the motivations that drive individuals to engage in volunteer activities within sport tourism. Exploring how these volunteers construct and present their identities in this unique context can provide deeper insights into the personal and social benefits derived from such engagements. Furthermore, examining the inherent tensions and paradoxes within sport-related volunteerism can illuminate the complexities and challenges faced by participants. By critically investigating these aspects, this research seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play in sport tourism volunteerism, highlighting its potential impacts on both individuals and communities.

Moreover, the need to explore volunteerism in sports is underscored by the growing integration of sports events and community development initiatives. Volunteerism in sport tourism not only supports the operational aspects of sporting events but also fosters community engagement, social cohesion, and cultural exchange. Understanding the motivations behind volunteer participation can inform the design of more effective volunteer programs that enhance participant satisfaction and retention. Additionally, examining how volunteers navigate their roles and the challenges they face can reveal critical insights into improving management practices and policy frameworks. This expanded focus on volunteerism within sport tourism can ultimately contribute to a more sustainable

and impactful development of the sport tourism sector, benefiting both host communities and the volunteers themselves.

The rise in the popularity of volunteer travel, encompassing both general volunteer travel and conservation volunteer travel, prompts significant inquiries into the motivations of young adults who participate in conservation volunteer travel (Wearing & McGehee, 2014; Lorimer, 2009; Wearing, 2001). Are conservation volunteer travelers primarily motivated by the desire for a pleasurable experience when engaging in their activities? Do individuals have an inherent motivation to contribute to environmental improvements? Moreover, what is the influence of the environmental worldview on young adults' propensity to participate in ecologically focused volunteer endeavors during their leisure time? It can be contended that conservation volunteer travel functions as a synthesis of the two manifestations of well-being. This phenomenon refers to the merging of pragmatic and romantic viewpoints on engagement in environmental matters among young adults. In this context, young adults perceive themselves as actively participating in environmental causes while also being drawn to secluded and unspoiled locations, which provides an escape from their everyday lives. In essence, the engagement of young adults in conservation volunteer travel yields not only volunteer pleasure but also a sense of purpose driven by the recognition of escalating global environmental degradation. The primary aim of this research was to investigate the potential impact of young adults' inclination towards seeking experiences in different ecosystems on their motivation to participate in conservation volunteer travel. Furthermore, the objective of this study was to investigate the correlation between participants' environmental perspectives and their perceived experiences related to volunteer conservation travel.

Getz (1991) asserted that the management of volunteer efforts for events demonstrates significant differences compared to the management of long-term or permanent volunteer positions. The author suggests that the management of short-term events should prioritize acquiring resources, particularly by recruiting volunteers and fostering community support to encourage local residents to participate in volunteer activities. To ensure successful recruitment and retention of volunteers, it is crucial for managers to possess a thorough comprehend the intrinsic motivations that compel individuals to participate in volunteer endeavors. Previous research has examined the factors that drive individuals to volunteer in various areas including social services (Cnnan & Goldberg-Glen, 1991; Omoto & Snyder, 2002) and sports (Green & Chalip, 1998a, 2004). The research results provided valuable insights that have influenced the formulation of strategies designed to attract and retain volunteers across different settings. However, the primary emphasis of these management

strategies has been on recruiting volunteers who reside within the host communities rather than sourcing volunteers externally. The Athens Marathon, known as "The Authentic," is an iconic event that attracts sports tourism volunteers from around the world. The Athens Marathon holds a unique place in the hearts of athletes, historical enthusiasts, and volunteers alike, as it traces its roots back to ancient Greece, where the legendary Pheidippides ran from the city of Marathon to Athens to deliver victory news. This marathon not only showcases the spirit of endurance, but also serves as a platform for volunteers to contribute their time, energy, and skills to create a meaningful and unforgettable experience for all involved. Through empirical evidence and in-depth analysis, this study seeks to uncover the underlying motivations and goals of sports tourism volunteers who dedicated themselves to the Athens Marathon. By understanding their perspectives and aspirations, the study can shed light on the transformative power of sports tourism volunteerism and its impact on individuals, communities, and overall events.

1.1. Literature Review

The utilization of volunteer labor has become increasingly crucial for sports managers and organizations to deliver sports services effectively and efficiently (Cuskelly et al., 1998; Getz, 1991; Green & Chalip, 1998a, 2004; Williams et al., 1995). In the sports industry, individuals who contribute their time and effort to facilitate recreational and competitive sport opportunities for community members have been referred to as "systematic volunteers" (Shibli et al., 1999). These individuals willingly offer essential sports services by actively participating in ongoing management and administrative responsibilities (Auld, 1994; Cuskelly, 1995; Doherty & Carron, 2003). Their involvement is pivotal in ensuring the smooth operation of sports events and activities, highlighting the significant role of volunteerism in sustaining the sports industry. Prior studies have identified altruism (Cuskelly et al., 1998) and task and social cohesion (Doherty & Carron, 2003) as the underlying motivations for individuals engaged in systematic volunteering. Caldwell & Andereck (1994) identified three distinct categories of motivation that prompt individuals to participate in volunteer activities within a recreational setting. The motivations identified in this study encompassed three key factors. First, purposiveness refers to an individual's desire to make meaningful contributions to society through their tasks and actions. Second, solidarity encompasses the need for social interactions, group affiliation, and networking opportunities. Finally, material incentives are related to the acquisition of tangible rewards. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that sport volunteer work encompasses more than just its ongoing or systematic roles.

There is an emerging phenomenon in which individuals actively seek to offer their time, expertise, and services as volunteers for a wide range of sports events. In accordance with the findings of Getz (1991), the administration of volunteer initiatives for events, commonly known as "episodic volunteering," demonstrates unique attributes compared to long-term volunteer endeavors. This section explores the underlying factors that drive individuals to engage in volunteer activities within the sports event framework. Understanding these motivations is essential for sports managers and organizers to effectively recruit, retain, and engage volunteers, ensuring the successful execution of both recreational and competitive sports events. People undertake journeys to achieve meaningful experiences that enable them to explore and understand their own identity and experiences that cannot be attained within their usual daily routines (Wearing et al., 2008). Volunteer travel is a type of travel that provides young adults with unique opportunities to interact with individuals from various parts of the world, gain insights into different cultures, experience living in a foreign country, and broaden their perspectives (Benson & Seibert, 2009). According to Caissie & Halpenny (2003), individuals can fulfil their aspirations for self-actualization, relaxation, and stimulation through their involvement in ecological initiatives.

The notion of sport volunteerism aligns with the concept of individuals pursuing personal development and self-enhancement, as expounded by scholars such as Brown and Morrison (2003) and Brown (2005). The inclination towards engaging in volunteer activities within the sports sector is predominantly motivated by the aspiration to immerse oneself in diverse cultural settings and establish new social connections with like-minded individuals (Brown, 2005). This tendency is evident in those who combine their passion for sports with a desire to volunteer, seeking opportunities that allow them to experience different cultures and meet others who share their sports interests.

Individuals who engage in sport volunteer work while traveling frequently dedicate a significant amount of their vacation time to these activities, as they hold significant meaning for them (Brown, 2005). According to a study conducted by Callanan & Thomas (2005), sport volunteers can be classified along a spectrum of behaviors, including shallow volunteering (involvement in activities primarily driven by personal interests and self-improvement), intermediate volunteering, and deep volunteering (displaying genuine concern for the well-being of the host community). This classification is pertinent to sport volunteers, where participants might engage in activities ranging from assisting in sports events for personal enjoyment to deeply committing to community sports development.

Based on research conducted by Callanan & Thomas (2005), individuals who prefer brief volunteer endeavors in sports, typically spanning a few weeks, are often characterized by limited prior experience and a restricted range of skills. These sport volunteers are motivated by the opportunity to enhance their personal experiences, participate in sports activities, and build their skill sets in new environments (Wymer et al., 2010). Understanding these motivations and behaviors is crucial for effectively managing and leveraging volunteer contributions in the sports industry.

Although there is a dearth of empirical studies examining the motivations of volunteers involved in travelling sports events, it is possible to hypothesize the potential incentives that drive individuals to engage in such volunteer work. Coyne and Coyne's (2001) study underscores the importance of financial considerations as a predominant factor among individuals embarking on their initial foray into volunteerism. The authors argue that the matter of concern is no longer relevant to individuals who participate in recurrent volunteer endeavors. However, participation in volunteer activities that require travel, particularly on an international scale, demands significant financial investment. Travelling volunteers exhibit a distinct characteristic that sets them apart from the majority of regular volunteers. Nevertheless, their behavior does not exhibit characteristics typically associated with individuals who are encountering a particular situation for the initial time. Like other individuals who participate in frequent volunteering, it is reasonable to expect that travelling volunteers would exhibit robust social motivation, especially if social benefits played a significant role in their initial volunteer experience. Given that the predominant nature of volunteer participation in sporting events is characterized by intermittent involvement rather than sustained engagement and typically entails a relatively brief duration of commitment, it is worth noting the significant investment of time, financial resources, and other essential means required for travelling to partake in such volunteer endeavors. Consequently, there is an increased emphasis on the distribution of labor and resources required for participating in volunteer activities at sporting events. To effectively overcome these barriers, it is imperative that volunteers possess a heightened level of motivation. At present, there is a dearth of clarity regarding whether volunteers who engage in travel for the purpose of volunteering possess unique motivations in comparison to volunteers participating in other types of sporting events, or whether they simply demonstrate a heightened level of motivation stemming from the same advantages.

2. METHODS

This paper presents a comprehensive and timely examination of sport tourism by employing qualitative research methods, such as interviews and participant observation. Participants in this study were individuals planning to volunteer at the “Athens Marathon, The Authentic.” A qualitative online survey was developed as part of a longitudinal study on the motives and experiences of those who travel to volunteer at sporting events. The survey encompassed a set of open-ended inquiries addressing travel planning, motives underlying sport volunteer, and prior volunteer engagements. The survey's web link was distributed via email to 25 individuals, resulting in 18 completed responses, corresponding to a response rate of 72%. Additionally, the authors conducted 11 supplementary unstructured interviews with participants and undertook participant observation. Notably, four of these interviewees were among the 18 respondents who completed the survey. Interviews were used to gather additional data pertaining to volunteer satisfaction, motives for traveling to a volunteer, and previous volunteer experience. The duration of the interviews ranged from five to 20 minutes.

Qualitative survey responses, interview notes, and field notes were entered into the QSR NUD*IST software. The process of categorization, identification of themes, and recognition of shared characteristics was facilitated by employing the constant comparative method, as described by Glaser & Strauss (1967) and Weiss (1994). In this methodology, researchers utilized a systematic and iterative approach to identify key concepts and categories among the respondents. Additionally, they examined the interrelationships between these concepts, which contributed to meaningful organization of the data. The researchers conducted a comprehensive analysis of survey responses, interview notes, and field notes. They individually assigned codes to the categories of phrases, opinions, and observations. Following this, a collective endeavor was initiated to analyze and juxtapose the distinct coding practices with the aim of guaranteeing uniformity in both semantic content and understanding. The process of choosing quotations for the presentation is predicated on their capacity to faithfully and comprehensively represent the viewpoints of all parties involved.

3. RESULTS

Three key motives emerged from the data: egoism, leisure, satisfaction, and acknowledgment of expertise. The following sections describe these motives:

3.1. Egoistic

By design, all group members had volunteered to participate. When asked why they were interested in volunteering in Athens, several participants referred to their experiences, personal achievements, and egoistic goals. For example, one participant said: “I had the best 3 days of my life in TCS Amsterdam Marathon as a volunteer and would like to attend “Athens Marathon, The Authentic” Another said, “To continue the great experience of being a volunteer when I was in Italy’.” Many respondents expected that volunteering at the “Athens Marathon, The Authentic” would be a “once-in-a-lifetime” opportunity. Individuals’ decisions to volunteer at the "Athens Marathon, The Authentic" were significantly influenced by their egoistic recollections of these experiences. Individuals expressed a desire to engage in volunteer work in Athens to recapture the experiences they had previously encountered during their international volunteer endeavors. One participant recounted the process by which a group of four individuals conceived of the notion of engaging in volunteer work during the closing ceremony of the 2004 Paralympic Games in Athens.

Frankly speaking, my first reason is the personal goals I have in my life. But coming second is more of like to travel abroad. However, prioritizing travel abroad is often preferred. I was drawn to the Ancient Olympic Games and the prospect of volunteering in Athens. The preference lies in favor of Europe as opposed to India or Asia.

The spirit, camaraderie, and friendships made during Voluntourism are the egoist characteristics of those volunteers.

3.2. Leisure

The role of leisure in choosing to volunteer is based on more than just holiday recollections or social relationships. One respondent, who had organized his travel independent of the group, expressed that he would still come to the group meetings because of the friendships that the group afforded. He suggested that his experience would not be as good without proper event management. By sharing stories on the website via the message-posting board and discussion groups and having regular meetings, the group was able to foster and nurture ongoing friendships during leisure time. When asked what they expected to gain from volunteering at Athens, all respondents highlighted their leisure. As one participant stated:

With my participation in “Athens Marathon, The Authentic” I expect to gain individual benefits that included “bicycling, traveling, friendships already formed and making new ones” and being able to “meet old friends and make new ones.”

Furthermore, the establishment of a strong sense of camaraderie among the group of individuals planning to journey to Athens was evident prior to the Olympic Games. This phenomenon was observed during the development of the travel itinerary. The establishment of camaraderie among individuals who had collectively arranged to travel to Athens for volunteering was highly significant, even though they were aware that they might not have the chance to engage with each other during the event.

3.3. Satisfaction and Acknowledgment of Expertise

Participants who volunteered at pertinent events possessed insider information about the formulation of marathons. The desire to share knowledge and acquire skill sets through volunteering at pertinent events emerged as significant motivations for individuals seeking to travel to Athens for volunteer work. One respondent stated the following:

“What we learned from the other Marathons Worldwide can make a difference at Athens.”

Another said,

“The New York City Marathon gave me valuable experience, which I hope to be able to exhibit at Athens Marathon, The Authentic.”

The participants expressed the belief that leveraging the knowledge and skills obtained from previous marathons would be essential in order to enhance their experience at the Athens Marathon and increase the likelihood of success. The respondents expressed the inherent significance of exchanging knowledge and skills at the Athens Marathon, The Authentic, which they gained through their participation in the Olympic Games or other international events.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study shed light on the motivations and goals of sport tourism volunteers participating in the Athens Marathon, the Authentic. Through extensive surveys and interviews, three primary motives emerged: egoism, leisure, satisfaction, and acknowledgment of expertise. First, egoistic motives were prominent among volunteers. Many participants expressed a desire for personal achievements and recognition. They saw volunteering at Athens Marathon as an opportunity to showcase their abilities and contribute to a renowned event. By being associated with such a prestigious marathon, the volunteers felt a sense of pride and accomplishment, bolstering their self-esteem and self-worth. Second, leisure motives were a significant driving factor for many volunteers.

They viewed their involvement in the marathon as an opportunity to engage in recreational activities and enjoy their time in a vibrant and historical city. For these individuals, volunteering served as a means of combining their love for travel and leisure with a purposeful endeavor, making their experiences more fulfilling and enjoyable. The third motive that emerged from the findings was satisfaction and acknowledgment of expertise. Volunteers derived immense satisfaction from their contributions to Athens Marathon. They found fulfillment in knowing that their efforts made a tangible difference to the smooth execution of the event. Witnessing the joy and gratitude of the runners and spectators further amplified their sense of satisfaction. The act of giving back and being part of something larger than themselves brought about a deep sense of fulfillment that motivated them to continue volunteering in similar sports tourism events. The acknowledgment of expertise is a significant motive for a subset of volunteers. Many individuals who possessed specialized skills or knowledge in areas such as event management, first aid, and logistics volunteered to showcase their expertise. They sought recognition of their abilities and appreciated the opportunity to apply their knowledge to a practical setting. Being acknowledged as experts in their respective fields not only bolstered their professional reputation, but also provided a sense of validation and purpose for their participation.

Overall, this study's findings highlight the diverse motivations that drive tourism volunteers in the Athens Marathon. The egoistic motive reveals the desire for personal recognition and achievement, whereas the leisure motive emphasizes the integration of travel and recreational interests with volunteerism. The satisfaction motive underscores the fulfillment derived from having a tangible impact, and the acknowledgment of the expertise motive signifies the importance of recognizing and utilizing specialized skills. Understanding these motives is crucial for event organizers, tourism authorities, and volunteer coordinators, as they strive to effectively engage and retain volunteers. By recognizing and addressing these motivations, it becomes possible to tailor volunteer programs to cater to the diverse needs and desires of individuals. This, in turn, enhances the overall experience of both volunteers and participants, leading to a more successful and impactful event.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, motivations for egoistic achievement, leisure, satisfaction, and acknowledgment of expertise play significant roles in the participation of tourism volunteers in the Athens Marathon. Further research and implementation of strategies that cater to these motives can empower volunteers and create a vibrant and thriving sports tourism volunteer community, ultimately

benefiting both volunteers and the success of future marathons and similar events. By tailoring sport volunteer programs to cater to these motivations, organizers can create a more fulfilling experience for volunteers, ultimately leading to the success and impact of future marathons and similar events. In conclusion, motivations for egoistic achievement, leisure, satisfaction, and acknowledgment of expertise play significant roles in the participation of tourism volunteers in the Athens Marathon. Further research and implementation of strategies that cater to these motives can empower volunteers and create a vibrant and thriving sports tourism volunteer community, ultimately benefiting both volunteers and the success of future marathons and similar events.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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