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(SP) EVENT SPORT TOURISM: THE SEARCH FOR NEO-LIMINAL EXPERIENCE

Carla A. Costa & Vassilios Ziakas
University of Texas, USA

Introduction

The marketing of event sport tourism involves a fundamental task: the design of experiences that will create value for consumers. In this respect, when organizing events, social elements should be taken into consideration in order to enrich the core product of an event and appeal to a wide range of consumers (Getz, 1997). Green and Chalip (1998) suggested that event design should provide opportunities for event participants to parade, celebrate and affirm their sub-cultural identity, create stories to cultivate an on-going event culture, or design formats to accommodate skill-oriented versus image-oriented teams. This highlights the utility of leveraging event consumers' identification with the sport's subculture when promoting sport events (Green, 2001). This line of thinking is linked with how the core product of events is envisioned and it suggests ways for augmenting events in order to appeal to market segments that otherwise may not be reached. Sport events may be augmented with cultural activities such as festivals and rituals and vice versa, in order to enrich the overall reach of events to consumers (Garcia, 2001).

The distinction between liminal and liminoid is essential. As Turner (1974) explained the traditional rituals can be described as liminal events where there is seclusion and austere conformity to a ritualistic behavior, while the modern events (i.e., festivals, sports, parades, dance, etc.) can be described as liminoid (liminal-like) since they are characterized by optation rather than obligation, individual rather than collective authorship, and secular rather than sacred settings and goals. As MacAloon (1984) suggested that the Olympics represent a particular kind of cultural performance. They stand between the fragmentation of liminality into liminal genres and the development of neo-liminal genres out of the liminoid. This view advocates for the potential of augmenting sport events with other genres (i.e., cultural performances, festivals) and create synergies between them. A central concept that was introduced by Turner (1974, 1984) was that performative genres can be understood as *communitas* that are places in which the participants create a shared meaning and reconstruct social reality without the racial, ethnic, class or linguistic boundaries. This notion is particularly important in the context of leveraging sport and cultural events for sport tourism development in order to create shared meaning and opportunities for participatory inter-connectedness. Similarly, Lewis & Dowsey (1993) in their study of the Maleny 'Fire Event', concluded that the kind of an unusual degree of participatory interaction combined with a shared belief system constitutes a neo-liminal framework creating an initial consensus of a festival atmosphere.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the extent to which the symbiosis of sport and cultural events create a neo-liminal space for event participants to instantiate a shared and valued identity and how those experiences could be leveraged in marketing communications to build the host destination's brand.

Methods

Ethnographic methods were employed to investigate the study's purpose. Data gathering included observation of sport and special events, 10 semi-structured interviews with event organizers and community leaders as well as review of marketing collateral. Researchers had distinct roles (Adler & Adler, 1987). One author lived in the community while conducting fieldwork (i.e., detailed on site observations, interviews, marketing collateral). The other author provided the view of an outsider contributing comments and participating in discussion as the study progressed from data gathering to data interpretation and analysis. Fieldwork for this study was conducted during the summer of 2005 in Fort Stockton, Texas. Fort Stockton is a relatively isolated rural community, located in South-West Texas and has a population of about 7800 people. Its economy is based mainly on agriculture, a prison system and oil production and it is a passing point for travelers who go to Big Bend national park.

Results

The findings of this study indicate that Fort Stockton's sport and cultural events are leveraged primarily as a means of providing leisure and celebration opportunities that enhance the quality of life of residents and build its image as a vibrant community. As a result, Fort Stockton has created itself as a rural sport tourism destination by hosting one of the main Open Road Races in the US and the rural event of Sheep-Dog Trials. In addition, the Recreation Department and the School District host a plethora of sport tournaments that attract nearby visitors. The provision of recreational opportunities through sport and special events intends to build community cohesiveness and engage residents on the ongoing civic discourse. The events provide the opportunity for residents to come together and share common values. The entire manifestation of expressive practices takes place mainly in the festivities of Water Carnival and Harvest Fest. The celebratory character of these events draws heavily on historical and cultural elements that are dramatized and presented in the form of theatrical performances that are accompanied by music recitals, beauty contests and aquatic competitions. Former residents who migrated return to Fort Stockton for the Water Carnival. It is a meeting point for old friends thus school reunions are scheduled around that period. This is consistent with Fairley & Gammon's (2005) expanded definition of nostalgia's multifaceted role in sport tourism. The staging of this 'social drama' seems to ritualize community residents in reconstructing a shared meaning and helps to shape a collective identity. Similarly, Harvest Fest ritualizes citizens in celebrating the town's wineries. Notwithstanding that Fort Stockton has socio-economic problems, the events provide this town with an aura of festive eudemonism and interconnectedness that are vital elements towards building a community of celebration.

Discussion

In general, it is at the community's hand to cultivate and promote synergies between sport and cultural events (Garcia, 2001). However, for these synergies to happen a systematic effort and planning is required that will integrate sport and cultural events into the structures of a community. Specific synergies present in Fort Stockton as well as leveraging strategies that can build and facilitate the development of the community's brand will be further discussed.

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E-mail: ccarla@mail.utexas.edu