Stakeholder Perceptions of Sustainability in Sport Events: The Case of Stockholm Marathon

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to assess how stakeholders perceive sustainability in sport events. In total, a material of 270 interviews from four groups of stakeholders was collected, aggregated and analysed. Four factors directly related to sustainability are identified and analysed which illustrate differences across stakeholder groups in the perception of sustainability efforts associated to the sport event. The research contributes to the event management literature by furthering the understanding of sustainability in events by offering a model including four factors governing the perception of sustainability from a green perspective, from a branding perspective, from a transport and from a communication perspective.

Short title
Stakeholder perceptions of sustainability

1. Introduction

There is a conflict between increased number of events being organised around the world and limited natural resources (McCullough et al., 2018). Because of this reason, event organizers' efforts with regards to sustainability has evolved into becoming a key aspect of business performance which importance is steadily increasing (Kaidal et al., 2014). One illustrative example of this development is that the Olympic Movement invest considerably towards making sport mega-events sustainable.

One type of events within sports that has exhibited a substantial growth is marathon races which now is organised in a multitude of cities around the world were both Nike- and Asics-sponsored competitions have become particularly common. More than 2900 marathons are held throughout the world each year (Ahotu, 2020). The majority of competitors are recreational athletes and larger marathons can have tens of thousands of participants (Worlds Marathons, 2020). These mass events are a challenge for the city in which they are held, not only logistically but also with respect to the environmental strain on the eco-system and the local community. Hallmark events attract a large number of tourists to the city (Hall, 1992) and this especially the case of marathon events as these attract both volunteers, runners, runners' family and friends as well as tourists that wants to experience the event (Preuss, 2005).

As these kinds of events continue to grow and attract a multitude of stakeholders, the cities hosting marathons and the organizing committees are today faced with a number of novel sustainability-related challenges. Even though the interest for sustainability within the literature of event management has increased substantially over recent years, specific sustainability-related challenges within the context of sports events represent an area where much remains to be carried out even though a number of noteworthy contribution recently has been published (McCullough et al., 2016: McCullough et al., 2019: Trail and McCullough, 2019).

The purpose of this paper is therefore to assess how stakeholders perceive sustainability in sport events. Based on a material of 270 interviews with four groups of stakeholders, four factors directly related to sustainability are analysed which illustrate differences across stakeholder groups in the perception of sustainability efforts associated to the sport event.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: First, a literature overview is presented where the character of sports events, the role of stakeholder in these, and the manner in which sustainability has evolved into a key issue in this context is illustrated. Thereafter, procedures for data collection and analysis are presented. Lastly, the empirical results along with the theoretical contribution, limitations and directions for future research are offered.

2. The rise of sustainability in the sport event sector

Within the event industry, sports events represent one group of events that have a particularly complex character due to the high number of stakeholders they tend to encompass. Because of the multitude of stakeholders, that range from both public as well as private actors, societal developments have a tendency to become particularly pronounced in the context of sports events which the case of sustainability is an example of. More specifically, the London Olympics in 2012 was first to be ISO-certified with respect to its sustainability management, according to the new ISO 20121 standard (based on the British standard BS 8901) which establishes sustainability criteria for organization, and by doing so, providing practice advice for event organizers. However, the rhetoric of environmentalism has been going on for more than two decades within the Olympic movement. The Sydney Games (2000) supposed and vaunted the 'green' paradigm and many subsequent sporting mega events have inserted the theme of sustainable development into their events. So even though this development has been going on for a number of years within the sport event sector, the London Olympics became the first to proclaimed itself as the first truly sustainable games in history. What started in London is now continuing in other cities which will host the Olympics whereas one example is the successful Paris 2024 bid, which promises to be even 'greener' than London 2012, offering non-polluting access (extending its consolidated metro system) to the public and athletes. So, what started as an interest for environmental issues have over the years evolved into heavily integrating different dimensions of sustainability through the process of organising these mega-events which illustrate the ambition of contributing to true sustainable development. Another illustration of how the sport event sector is taking sustainability close to heart is that ISO 20121 has now been adopted by over 50 major event organizers as of May 2019.

The ISO certification has not only set precedence for other large sporting events but also raised the bar by showing the general public what to expect from a large, city-branded sporting event. The increasing involvement of an increased number of stakeholders becoming involved in sporting events (Cornwell, 2019; Dolles & Söderman, 2008a, 2010; Söderman & Dolles, 2015) means that organizing committees now must allocate more resources than ever before to sustainability best practice due to that this is often expected by vast majority of stakeholders (Söderman & Dolles, 2008, 2010; Dolles & Söderman, 2008b). More specifically, environmental (e.g. climate change) and social (e.g. accountability) pressures becomes integrated in the demands from shareholders and stakeholders exerting pressure on organisations to take sustainability issues more seriously (Kim et al., 2015; Schaltegger & Burritt, 2005).

The sport organization wants to sell efficacy through 'green'. Green means two further things: it is embedded in the marketing process and it is a goal. This goal is thus a type of marketing for organizations that aim to reach highest levels of sustainable environmental care. Sustainable Environmental Marketing (SEM) is a broad concept with many definitions. The marketing process usually implies several decision makers, competitors, partners, suppliers and customers creating value in the sport organization. Freeman, one of the pioneers of stakeholder theory, defined stakeholders as 'any group or individual who is affected by or can affect the achievement of an organization's objectives' (Freeman & Velamuri, 2008, p. 6), when the idea was first derived from stockholders in the 1980s.

This is key to the central idea of achieving maximum overall cooperation, implying communication between the network of stakeholder groups and the objectives of the corporation. An extensive stakeholder approach and consequent engagement is often seen in sport sponsorship, even though changes in practice are often reactive rather than proactive. Because of the multitude of stakeholders in sports events, a number of stakeholder's groups are typically engaged in terms of athletes, audience, officials and volunteers; in outdoor sporting events the importance of residents is also raised (Balduck et al., 2013; Turco, 2013). In arena sports like football, there is a huge corpus of work on the difference between different stakeholders such as players, referees and audiences.

The literature on the measurement of CSR and sustainability, although evolving (Clarkson, 1995; Székely & Knirsch, 2005), still proposes no standard method on how to assess sustainability in the context of sport events. As the concept of sustainability is highly contextual in nature, it is inherently difficult to find any existing, well-established and fitting format upon which to base any quantification attempts. Indeed, Gjølberg (2009) notes the difficulties in attempting to compare practices that have no consensus over definition, or sufficient data. Coltman et al., (2008) research on the use of reflective and formative measurement models in international business and marketing encourages marketers to evaluate the potential appropriateness of formative models.

The relational properties of stakeholders and the organization have benefited from the stakeholder dialogue as a means of constructive collaboration as it 'not only enhances a company's sensitivity to its environment but also increases the environment's understanding of the dilemmas facing the organization' (Kaptein & van Tulder, 2003, p. 208).

An essential question therefore becomes how sport event organisers should manage pressures that involved stakeholders exert with regards to societal developments in general, and in our case, sustainability in particular. Several researchers have suggested that sustainability might help predict customer equity drivers (e.g. Sun et al., 2014). However, no truly effective index or scale for examining the perceived relationship and the customer equity drivers of value equity, brand equity or relationship equity has been available.

In existing literature, Kim et al., 2015, Wicker (2018), Trail and McCullough (2019) to the best of our knowledge represents the three direct attempts that has offered with regards to this issue by having 1) adequately developed and tested an index of perceived sustainability based on extant literature and 14 core concepts (Kim et al., 2015), 2) estimated the annual carbon footprint of active sport tourists (Wicker, 2018), as well as 3) having created and tested an sport sustainability campaign evaluation model in the context of sport events (Trail and McCullough, 2019). As such, much work remains to be carried out to explore how stakeholders perceive sustainability in sport events and add to the emerging literature on this issue (Kim et al., 2015, Trail and McCullough, 2019, Wicker, 2018).

3. Method

3.1 Case study approach

To assess how stakeholders perceive sustainability in sport events, the case-study method is chosen since case-study research is the traditional methodology for studying the complexity of the 'real world' and as "case study research can lead to extensive descriptions but the real contribution appears when data is analysed and interpreted as the ground for conceptualization and theory generation, conclusions, reporting and practical application" (Gummesson, 2017:6). Case theory is an effort to better address the complexity of business and management and the need to transform research and theory into simplicity, thus facilitating decision and actions and reaching meaningful results (Gummesson, 2017). As a popular sport, marathon running has stimulated limited research. However, this research is still not very advanced since the bulk of data sources have been newspaper articles and biographies with trivial, but often ambitious, approaches. The preliminary stage of research necessitates a holistic approach with a focus on the boundary between athletes and environment. This implies, besides Gummesson 2017, case studies (e.g. Scholz & Tietje, 2002; Welch et al., 2011; Yin, 2009). Case-study research involves 'how' and 'why' questions, focuses on contemporary events and is used when there is no control of the behaviour studied (Yin, 2009). Since the main purpose is to develop theory, the approach is abductive (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; Hilmersson & Jansson, 2012).

Factual data means to generate data. When there is less data available, as in the case of the Stockholm Marathon, but there are people involved in an event, then we define the data as 'perceived', according to Galtung (1969: 27).

3.2 Designing a survey

In the first step, 25 interviews were carried out to identify a set of concepts to build a framework of environmental and social dimensions for the purpose of data collection. A research group comprising of one professor and five Master's students in the marketing department of Stockholm Business School together carried out 25 interviews which respondents of marketing students familiar with sustainability, branding, CSR and marketing literature found on campus. After the interviews, the research group discussed the results and identified contexts and other frequently used words and concepts, both practical and theoretical. In this process of heuristic analysis (Gummesson, 2017: 153) four main concepts emerged from the material: green, transport, communication and brand. In the second step, following the identification of the four main concepts, a survey was developed which included nine questions and utilized a Likert scale (1-5), see Appendix 1.

In green factor, the respondents were asked for their perception of the information regarding the environmental efforts associated with the race, as well as their perception of the availability of green alternatives during and in connection with the race, with the latter question posed in order to gain a better understanding of how factual information played in their perceptions (please see Q3, Q5 and Q7 in Appendix 1). In the communication factor, the respondents were asked how the race affected the inhabitants of the city of Stockholm, as well as how accessible they perceived the information regarding the event to be (please see Q2 and Q4 in Appendix 1). In the transport factor, the respondents were asked about transport alternatives to, from and during the race as well as walking distance and these aspects overall meaning for the perception of the race (please see Q6 and Q9 in Appendix 1). In the brand factor, the respondents were asked about the reputation of the race as well as the total experience of the race (please see Q1 and Q8 in Appendix 1).

3.3 Data collection and analysis

With the help of this approach and this survey, data was collected one day before, during and two days after the race. On-site approaches gathering data at the sport venue permit immediate data acquisition. After about 25 test interviews with students on campus two weeks before the race, we decided to allocate 120 seconds to every respondent (see Turco, 2013: 312). After adjustments of the initial version of the survey, five different pre-tests (45 interviews altogether) were then conducted with respondents from the four stakeholder groups. They were asked to validate the questionnaire's clarity, structure and logic. Lastly, the questionnaire was tested for internal consistency and therefore to pass a reliability test.

Data was collected at the Stockholm Marathon on 1 June 2013 from both participants and non-participants: runners, volunteers, spectators and locals. Supported by five Master's students, the collection was made in Stockholm by the author and his research assistant during the two days leading up to the race, and on race day, 1 June 2013. Respondents were not actively singled out by the interviewers based on their stakeholder type, but were targeted as randomly as possible by availability and willingness to participate in the survey.

The total number of surveys collected was 272, but two were excluded from the analysis due to insufficient answers. There was thus a sample consisting of 157 runners, 33 volunteers, 54 spectators and 26 locals. The 21,716 **runners** are the core customers of the event; they co-create its primary value. The organizing committee engages most of the 3,300 **volunteers** at its disposal. The data collected from volunteers, who are mostly youth athletes, will give an inside view of the topics being examined. **Spectators** co-create value as they provide the ambience and 'hype' of the event, its value being consumed primarily by the runners but also by other audiences (TV audience and the spectators themselves). **Residents** are crucial for creating long-term value by building a legacy brand They will make or break the setting in which the event takes place. A successful event turns locals into spectators. Larger. community engagement could translate into added value for the event and sponsors if the event can associate itself constructively with the peripheral value being created. It is essential to keep the organization informed of the community's perception of the event so as to minimize friction and maximize community support.

4. Findings

Table 1 presents the result per stakeholder group with regards to the four factors Green, Transport, Communication and Brand. As the figure illustrate, every stakeholder group gives the green factor the lowest score (2.6–3.6) and the brand factor the highest score (4.3–4.6). The green factor score is lower for the locals than for other stakeholder groups. The other three factors show no remarkable differences between the average score given by each stakeholder group.

The runners' group was predominantly male, and the residents' group was predominantly female. Male runners were the most positive of all. There were fewer gender differences among participant stakeholders than for non-participants. In the non-participant stakeholder groups (spectators and locals), the males were significantly more positive in their responses to sustainability questions than their female counterparts.

Another observation is that the 'locals' are the most negative stakeholders in eight of the nine questions. However, unexpectedly, in response to Q2, i.e. how the event affected the inhabitants of the city of Stockholm, the locals are more positive than any of the three other stakeholders.

	Green				Transport			Communication			Brand		
	Q3	Q5	Q7	**GF**	Q6	Q9	**TF**	Q2	Q4	**CF**	Q1	Q8	**BF**
Runners	3.8	3.4	3.6	**3.6**	4.3	4.5	**4.4**	4.0	4.6	**4.3**	4.6	4.6	**4.6**
Volunteers	3.5	2.8	3.3	**3.2**	3.9	4.5	**4.2**	4.0	4.2	**4.1**	4.6	4.6	**4.6**
Spectators	3.7	2.8	3.5	**3.3**	3.9	4.5	**4.2**	4.1	3.8	**3.9**	4.4	4.5	**4.4**
Locals	3.0	2.0	2.8	**2.6**	3.5	4.4	**4.0**	3.9	3.5	**3.7**	4.4	4.3	**4.3**
All together	3.7	3.1	3.5	**3.4**	4.1	4.5	**4.3**	4.0	4.3	**4.2**	4.5	4.5	**4.5**
Average groups	3.5	2.7	3.3	**3.2**	3.9	4.5	**4.2**	4.0	4.0	**4.0**	4.5	4.5	**4.5**

Table 1. Average Likert score for each question, factor and stakeholder group.

5. Analysis and Discussion

In the results, a trend is observed towards event stakeholders' perceptions being increasingly negative about event sustainability the less they participated in it from a co-creation perspective. This could possibly be explained by co-creation activating the reputational reservoirs and, in doing so, impairing the objectivity of respondents in relation to their level of event participation. This would strengthen the suggestion that co-creation acts as a catalyst to reputational resource properties of the brand.

Assuming an equally weighted index score, those results with neutral values suggest that the factors are perceived to be of equal importance to the evaluation. The basic idea is that the index should be analysed at one race event by the organizer and/or the sponsor. The succeeding year/race, a similar calculation with the same model should be done and, hopefully, the aggregated sum or one or several of the factors will score higher. Since this is an ordinal scale, only trend/direction can be registered.

In existing literature, three direct attempts have been carried out to explore sustainability and sports events (Kim et al., 2015, Trail and McCullough, 2019, Wicker, 2018). The contribution of Kim et al. (2015) is in sustainability as an aspect of business performance. Their purpose is to clarify measures of perceived sustainability (MPS) from a marketing perspective to analyse the effects of perceived sustainability on customer equity. Kim et al. (2015) and their MPS scale enables researchers to examine relationships between perception of sustainability and other key customer equity drivers such a value equity and brand equity. The present study distinguish itself by instead being based on individuals, i.e. marathon runners as well as three other major stakeholder groups.

The purpose of Trail and McCullough (2019) is to create and test a sport sustainability campaign evaluation model among sport participants of a 10-mile community run event. 'Needs' and 'values' dominated and explained half of the variance in participating in assessing the environmental campaign. The sample was 531 runners help managers and marketers to understand how needs and values affect positive attitudes to towards campaign. Also in this case, the present study add to the understanding of sustainability and sport events by taking a broader perspective through the integration of multiple stakeholder groups in the assessment of this interplay.

Wicker (2018) assess one particular variable, namely transport, and determine the carbon footprint of skiers and boarders active snow sport tourists. Carbon footprint was computed using information about distances travelled and means of transportation related travelling in Germany during one year. As such, the present study provides a framework which takes this particular variable into account but also integrate three other major aspects which are essential to evaluate in order to get an overall assessment of the impact that a particular sport event has.

6. Conclusions, limitations and directions for future research

In the context of sports events, there is an inherent problem and an empirical challenge in aligning organizational goals between public as well as private actors, i.e. combining the logics of non-profit organizations (with volunteers instead of employees) and publicly listed for-profit organizations (often sponsors) (Demir & Söderman, 2015; Carlsson-Wall, Kraus and Messner, 2016). In this paper, a model has been developed to enable assessment of the sustainability efficacy of event organizers among different stakeholder groups. As such, the contribution of this paper is to have identified a model including four factors governing the perception of sustainability from a green perspective, from a branding perspective, from a transport and from a communication perspective.

In terms of limitations, the study should be understood as one of the initial steps (Kim et al., 2015, Trail and McCullough, 2019, Wicker, 2018) to capture the transformational pressures that sustainability entails for the sport event sector. Nevertheless, this is an attempt to establish a way of assessing the sustainability credentials of sport events. More emphasis on the model as a way of assessing the marketing efficacy of event organizers on sustainability criteria is needed. While a specific case is not directly meant to be generalized, it can offer substantive theory to be used in other cases of the same kind, but not beyond that.

A further reflection on generalization implies that two issues regarding the methodology of this paper might impact the reliability. First, the sample is based on four stakeholders and their perspectives. It is therefore limited to their point of view. The study has developed a heuristic framework measuring reasonable validity. However, the reliability expressing quality of being trustworthy of performing is questionable if consistently well (Greyser, 2009).

With regards to directions for future research, a deeper understanding of consumer involvement and how it generates perceived sustainability is needed. This paper is limited to one sport and one race and only a small group of supporters for each running club, but the four-factor framework could be used as a starting point when researching other sport events and stakeholders.

Many other topics for further research came up during the work with this study. Foremost among those is how best to formulate propositions and identify other proxies for measuring sustainability in the domain of sport events – a challenging task. Furthermore, what triggers the engagement and the eagerness to be involved in sport events in the first place? What are the relevant challenges for the organizers and the sponsors? More could be focused on consumer involvement levels to identify how they affect the perception of sustainability.

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Appendix 1

ENGLISH

1. How would you describe the reputation of Asics Stockholm Marathon?

1		3		5	☐
Very bad	Bad	Neither bad nor good	Good	Very good	No opinion

2. How does ASICS Stockholm Marathon affect the inhabitants of the city of Stockholm?

1		3		5	☐
Very negatively	Negatively	Neither negatively nor positively	Positively	Very positively	No opinion

3. How is the supply of green alternatives during and in connection to the race? (Food, transports etc)

1		3		5	☐
Very bad	Bad	Neither bad nor good	Good	Very good	No opinion

4. How accessible was the information regarding ASICS Stockholm Marathon?

1		3		5	☐
Very inaccessible	Inaccessible	Neither accessible nor inaccessible	Accessible	Very accessible	No opinion

5. Specifically, how do you perceive the information regarding the environmental efforts of the race?

1		3		5	☐
Very bad	Bad	Neither bad nor good	Good	Very good	No opinion

6. Information regarding transportation alternatives to, from and during the race was?

1		3		5	☐
Very bad	Bad	Neither bad nor good	Good	Very good	No opinion

7. How do you perceive the environmental profile of the race to be? (eg. the emphasis on sustainability)

1		3		5	☐
Very bad	Bad	Neither bad nor good	Good	Very good	No opinion

8. How would you describe the total experience of ASICS Stockholm Marathon?

1		3		5	☐
Very bad	Bad	Neither bad nor good	Good	Very good	No opinion

9. The start and finish lines are within walking distance, how does it influence your overall perception of the race?

1		3		5	☐
Very negatively	Negatively	Neither negatively nor positively	Positively	Very positively	No opinion

10. Choose 3 words that you associate the most with ASICS Stockholm Marathon

Fresh   Smooth   Cumbersome   Healthy   Inspiring

Monotonous   Accessible   Nature   Fun   Inaccessible

11. Other opinions