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From Interviews to Interpretation: Utilizing Delphi Method to Assess Content Validity of Sports Event Factors and their Impact on Extending the Tourism Season in Greece

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Abstract:

Running tourism is regarded as one of the most rapidly growing sectors within the sport tourism industry worldwide. This is particularly true in Greece, where running events have increased in popularity. The specific objectives of this study were to assess the content validity of the key factors that influence the organizational process of sporting events, particularly running events, from the perspectives of Greek running event organizers within the framework of sustainable sport event tourism. This study uses the Delphi method to explore how these experts interpret feedback on factors influencing sport event organization in low-season period.

The Delphi process yielded a comprehensive list of factors influencing the organizational process of sporting events during the low-season period, categorized into enhancements (focused on attracting participants to stay longer through enriched experiences) and success pillars (focused on the foundations of building trust for a well-organized event in low-season period).

The findings of the current study provide valuable perspectives into how sports event experts interpret feedback, particularly regarding extending the tourism season through sport events. The identified factors and the experts' perspectives offer a comprehensive framework for understanding the specific feedback needs of sports event experts in this context.

Keywords: *Delphi method, running events, sport tourism, organizers, seasonality*

Background: Addressing seasonality through sport event tourism

European tourist destinations exhibit diverse seasonality patterns, ranging from single summer peaks in coastal areas to year-round visitation in cultural cities or in destinations with additional shoulder seasons (Ferrante et al., 2018). These diverse seasonality patterns across Europe present a challenge for policymakers who strive to extend the tourism season and enhance the year-round resilience of the industry (Matei et al.,

2023). European policy, recognizing the crucial impact of seasonality, has set the extension of the season as a top priority in order to boost competitiveness in the tourism sector (Ferrante et al., 2018; Matei et al., 2023). There are various strategies to address seasonality in tourism; scheduling special events during the low season period is a key approach to attract visitors throughout the year (Corluka, 2019; Gkarane & Vassiliadis, 2024). Among these, sport events are increasingly recognized as a strategic tool to mitigate seasonality by enhancing the perception of an area as an attractive year-round destination (Gkarane et al., 2022). They are also becoming a powerful marketing tool for the destinations; they hold the potential to be significant contributors to the long-term growth and well-being of a community by boosting its economy and attracting media attention (Fotiadis & Vassiliadis, 2020).

Among sport events, running events are those which have become an important promotional tool for the host region (Madytinos et al., 2021) by attracting visitors, strengthening local identity and fostering a sense of community (Larsen & Bærenholdt, 2019). They are also a tool to enhance the sustainability of tourism destinations, especially during low-season periods (Gkarane et al., 2024). This is particularly important given that European commission actively promotes sustainable tourism development, with the view to ensure the economic benefits of tourism while preserving the natural resources (Matei et al., 2023).

As regards sport tourism in Greece, it has been boosted by a running boom in the past 30 years, with hundreds of events organized annually – from major marathons to local races (Madytinos et al., 2021). However, tourism seasonality is a major issue in Greece, incurring negative consequences for local community, businesses and the environment; thus, extending the tourist season or focusing on alternative forms of tourism beyond traditional beach holidays have become a need for a more sustainable tourism model (Kalantzi et al., 2023).

A challenge for researchers of sport event tourism is the fact that different stakeholders have varied expectations and perceptions of the impact of an event, influenced by the level of their involvement (Chersulich et al., 2021). To achieve long-term success, it is essential to ensure the support and participation of the local community (Wise, 2016). Locals are directly affected due to their geographical proximity; however, organizers are those who are actively engaged and deeply involved whereas locals may participate actively or passively (Chersulich et al., 2021). While widespread support is crucial for long-term success, achieving sustainable event benefits for both organizers and residents requires a strategic approach (Wise, 2016).

Research on running events is expanding; yet a key gap remains in understanding event organizers perspectives on effectively organizing events in low-season period and how specific event planning elements directly affect desired outcomes. This research, focusing on Greece, aims to bridge this gap. Specifically, it investigates the impact of running events on stakeholders (organizers) perceptions as regards a more sustainable sport tourism model in Greece in low-season period. Through these key perspectives, this study aims to identify key sport event factors that influence seasonality and contribute to success for both the running event and the local community.

Methodology

The Delphi method

The Delphi technique was chosen as the primary research method to explore event organizers perspectives. The Delphi method is a group facilitation technique that involves structured questionnaires completed by anonymous experts, aiming to reach consensus on specific issues (Hasson et al., 2000). The experts who participate in this iterative process, which often begins with qualitative data collection through interviews, share relevant knowledge and experience (Hasson et al., 2000). Through its anonymous and multi-round process, Delphi method offers a structured approach to gather rich qualitative data from experts on a specific topic (Naisola-Ruiter, 2022). This flexibility allows researchers to gain in-depth insights while overcoming limitations like time and geography (Naisola-Ruiter, 2022). It is also a valuable tool for tourism forecasting by gathering insights from tourism experts (Yoopetch et al., 2022). Unlike traditional research methods, Delphi studies do not require a large representative sample (Naisola-Ruiter, 2022) since they focus on group consensus and in-depth exploration (Keeley et al., 2016). For this study, and following a three-round Delphi process (considered sufficient to achieve consensus according to Skulmoski et al., 2007), participants responded to the questionnaire in each iteration, allowing for feedback and refinement between rounds.

Data collection

This study employed a three-year Delphi round process to gather insights from experts (running event organizers) in Greece. The goal was to evaluate the running event organizers' perspectives on tourism seasonality, sustainability issues, and the potential for these events to extend the low or middle season period. Experts were chosen for their diverse backgrounds in sport tourism to gather a broad range of perspectives. Also, the organizers represented various geographical regions around Greece that face seasonality challenges.

Round 1

The initial round consisted of open-ended, semi-structured questions distributed electronically to our panel of twenty-nine experts who agreed to participate. These questions focused on: a) Tourism seasonality and sustainability issues b) The potential for small-scale running events during low or middle seasons to extend the tourist season. Following the collection of participants' narrative responses to the open-ended questions, thematic analysis techniques were employed. This part involved open and axial coding to identify and categorize the emerging themes.

Round 2

A smaller group of seven out of twenty-nine running event experts participated in this phase. After analysis of first round responses, participants received a summary of the first round's results, along with anonymized responses from other participants. In this phase, a detailed memorandum was applied in order to guide the Delphi method process, focusing on the examination of the content validity factors that influence the organization of sport (running) events and their potential to extend the tourism season in the context of sustainability. This memorandum included three evaluation sheets each targeting specific aspects of event organization and its impacts. The 1st sheet, titled "Seasonality and Running Events" focused on elements that could extend the event duration and enhance its attractiveness during low season periods. The second sheet, "Promotional Elements and Synergies," explored the role of local promotional efforts, sponsorships, and collaborations among stakeholders. Here, the experts assessed how these elements contribute to supporting running events and ensuring successful organization during the off-season. Finally, the third sheet, "Sustainability," examined the environmental, social, and economic impacts of running events organized in low season. The experts evaluated how sustainable planning practices could be used to maintain social harmony, community well-being, and environmental balance during event organization in this time of the year. They then evaluated proposed revisions to the event planning factors before making final "yes" or "no" decisions.

Round 3

Building on the first two rounds, the final round presented the consolidated findings to the seven participants based on their level of endorsement throughout the Delphi process. This expert consensus informed the study's key outcome: a framework outlining "Enhancements" and "Success Pillars" for running events aiming to extend the tourist season during low or middle seasons. After the data was analysed, the research findings were presented to the panel for their final review. This provided an opportunity for them to comment on the conclusions drawn from the Delphi process. The iterative nature of the Delphi technique ensured that consensus was reached among the participants by the final round.

Validity, reliability and credibility

To increase the study's validity, running event organizers with diverse backgrounds were chosen. These organizers share a common passion for sports and they are dedicated to create positive experiences for participants while promoting ecological consciousness. The Delphi method relies on recruiting participants for their specific expertise in the topic, not on achieving a demographic balance (Sekayi & Kennedy, 2017). Furthermore, the selection process specifically targeted organizers from destinations experiencing high tourism seasonality. These organizers represent a variety of locations, including urban, seaside, alpine, and rural settings to ensure that the proposed framework considers the specific challenges and opportunities that different destination types may encounter during low-season periods.

The Delphi technique itself contributes to the reliability of the study through its structured format. The researchers adhered to established procedures throughout all three rounds so as the potential for bias or errors was minimized.

To establish credibility, the experts were encouraged to provide detailed examples from their experiences to support their opinions. Follow-up questions were employed to ensure clarity and depth of understanding. This ongoing dialogue and analysis of the interview responses allowed for the identification of recurring

themes related to successful event organization during low tourist seasons. The data was constantly reread and reanalyzed to achieve the intended depth of the insight and ultimately, the consensus.

Discussion

In figure 1, we conceptualize the findings of the research. Organizers recognize that motivating participants through enriched experiences to stay longer will lead to longer visitor stays and encourage travel during the low season. Also, building trust with them through a successful event experience is also critical, as it strengthens the likelihood for returning again to the destination for future low-season events. The framework focuses on two key pillars identified through the initial interviews and validated through the Delphi method with running event organizers:

A) Enhancements: These elements, which emerged primarily from the organizers' interviews, aim to broaden the appeal of the running event and encourage longer visitor stays, with a view to contributing to tourism season extension.

- *Event Activities:* Music, cultural events, and seminars alongside the race itself can broaden the appeal of the destination, attracting a wider range of visitors.

- *Tour Activities:* Offering tours of the local area, natural wonders, and historical sites encourages visitors to extend their stay and explore the region.

- *Fun and Family Activities:* Having activities for everyone - athletes, their companions, and families - creates a more inclusive atmosphere and motivates longer visits.

- *Local Product Exhibitions:* Showcasing local products through exhibitions supports local businesses and offers visitors a unique cultural experience.

B) Success pillars: According to the participants in the survey, these factors are crucial for a successful event, particularly during the low-season and contribute to repeat visitors:

- *Solid organization:* A well-organized running event with a clear plan and efficient execution is crucial for its success, especially in low season period. The importance of effective event organization is highlighted by Kaplanidou et al. (2013) and it is even more crucial during low-season periods when resources may be limited.

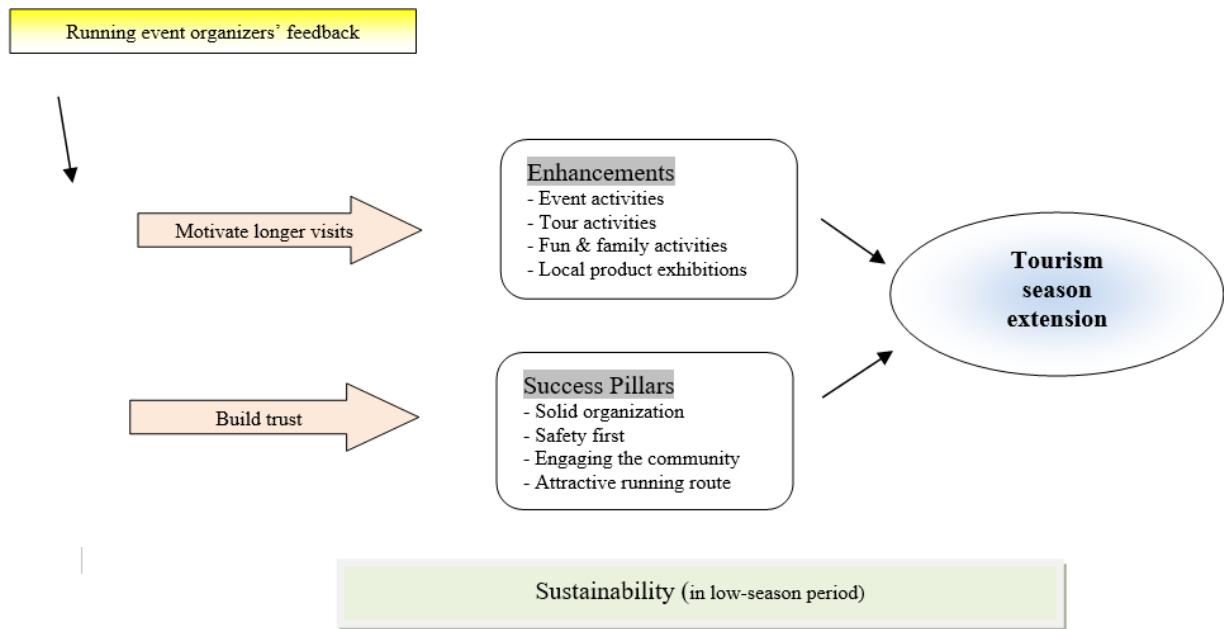
- *Safety first:* Ensuring the safety of all participants (runners, volunteers, spectators) is of paramount importance. In their study, Perić et al. (2018) emphasize the heightened sensitivity of sport tourists towards safety concerns.

- *Engaging the community:* High participation levels, from volunteers and local professionals, are also important. High volunteer participation is also recognized by literature (Gkarane, 2020; Kaplanidou et al., 2013) as a key success factor.

- *Attractive running route:* An attractive and well-designed running route enhances the experience of participants.

The suggested framework operates under a sustainability umbrella which reflects the shared belief among the organizers that running events (organized in low-season) can contribute positively to the economy of the destination and to the local community (socially) without compromising the well-being of the natural environment.

Figure 1: A Framework for Sport Event Factors and Tourism Season Extension



Conclusion, Implications and Limitations

In conclusion, this study investigated the potential of running events to address tourism seasonality in Greece through a multi-level qualitative method. The proposed framework, build on experts' insights and grounded in sustainability principles, highlighted two main pillars (enhancements and success pillars). This framework can become a valuable starting point for event organizers in Greece to organize successful running events all the year round.

Although this study has adopted a primarily conceptual perspective, these points in turn suggest a number of practical implications. Firstly, by focusing on a mixture of activities and practices, running events can become key drivers of extended tourism periods. Moreover, the approach presented will provide sustainable outcomes for the host destination by boosting the local economy and enhancing the social fabric of the community through successful low-season running events.

This study provides valuable insights but limitations still remain. Although the reliance on expert opinions through the Delphi method may be robust, it may not capture the diverse perspectives of the tourism sector. Future research could explore these factors through the perspectives of local community and tourists to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the framework's impact. Also, it would be interesting to assess the actual impact of implementing the framework on tourism season extension. Finally, the specific context of Greece may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions with different tourism dynamics. Therefore, expanding the research to different geographic regions could enhance the applicability of the proposed framework.

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