

Staging Mass Participation Marathons in Heritage Tourism Destinations: Seeing Through the Eyes of Distance Runners

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Abstract

This study attempted to explore how World Heritage sites and mass participation marathons may have an effect on each other. Feedback and comments of marathon runners ($N=530$) who participated in the World Heritage Himeji Castle Marathon and the Mt. Fuji Marathon were content analyzed to investigate: (a) How runners perceive the image of a World Heritage site featured in a marathon; (b) How is a value proposition that bundles heritage and marathon experiences accepted by runners. The findings showed that despite the featured World Heritage status appearing to be the key element in designing the value proposition, operational elements and social interaction elements also played vital roles in the value cocreation process. Aiming to use heritage tourism resources as a differentiating factor, marathon organizers need to ensure the quality of operational elements and better involve local businesses and residents as active participants.

Keywords: World Heritage, marathon, sports tourism, Japan, social interaction

Introduction

Heritage tourism is among the oldest forms of travel. Since the ancient Egyptian and Roman eras, people have travelled to admire places of historic importance (Timothy & Boyd, 2006). After centuries of development, heritage tourism is widely leveraged by places nowadays to attain objectives ranging from local development to sustainable utilization of nature and cultural heritage (Ashworth, 2000).

Similarly, traveling to watch or participate in sports has a long history as far back as the ancient Greek Olympics and the days of Roman gladiators (Huggins, 2013). However, the term “sports tourism” has only become the focus of mass media and academic research in the recent decade (Weed, 2009). Sports tourists travel to participate in or experience sports as active participants (cycling, running, etc.) or passive spectators (FIFA World Cup, Olympics, etc.). Extant literature has investigated the impacts of sports events (Waite, 2003), sports tourists’ experiences and behaviors (Smith & Stewart, 2007), and the role of sports tourism in developing destination image (Lepp & Gibson, 2011).

At a first glance, heritage tourism and sports tourism may seem to be two independent phenomena; however, it is not unusual to see crossover between various forms of tourism. For example, researchers have investigated the relationship between heritage tourism and shopping tourism. While extant research suggested that heritage and shopping make a symbiotic and complementary relationship (Timothy, 2005), the understanding of how

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heritage tourism interacts with other forms of tourism, such as sports, is rather limited (Timothy & Boyd, 2006).

Using a content analysis approach (Franzosi, 2008), the study aims to investigate how sports tourism may interact with heritage tourism through two cases of mass participation marathons held in heritage tourism destinations. Specifically the study focuses on the runners who participated in marathons featuring, respectively, the World Heritage site of Himeji Castle and Mt. Fuji in Japan. Feedback and comments of marathon runners ($N=530$) who participated in the World Heritage Himeji Castle Marathon and the Mt. Fuji Marathon were content analyzed to investigate: (a) How runners perceive the image of a World Heritage site featured in a marathon; (b) How is a value proposition that bundles heritage and marathon experiences accepted by runners.

The result is expected to contribute to a better understanding of the interaction between heritage tourism and sports tourism. Moreover, by using a content analysis approach the study responds to the call by Smith and Weed (2007) for exploiting the potential of narrative research. Finally, the study provides evidence-based insights for event organizers and local tourism stakeholders in developing sports/heritage tourism products and strategies.

Literature review

From the perspective of heritage tourism destinations, staging sports events may bring in additional sources of tourists and revenue. First, sports activities and events function as tourist attractions and may generate counter seasonal inflow of tourists (Higham, 2005). In addition, destinations may utilize sports as an initiative to strengthen or even alter the destination image (Smith, 2005; Kaplanidou, Jordan, Funk, & Rindinger, 2012). Nevertheless, a naive assumption of easily achievable harmony between heritage and sports is impractical at its best and may even be misleading. This is especially true for heritage tourism destinations featuring World Heritage sites as the main attraction. While the designation of World Heritage status represents a globally significant recognition that carries additional appeal for tourists, ensuing issues of heritage preservation complicate the process of achieving a win-win relationship between sports and heritage.

From the perspective of sports tourism development, staging sports events plays an important role in providing a strategic toolkit for the hosting destination to develop, convey, and sustain place brand equity. While mega sports events such as the Olympics and the World Cup Soccer have received the most attention with respect to their economic impacts and country re-imaging effects (Kasimati, 2003; Chung & Woo, 2011), non-elite sports events such as city marathons in contrast have a participatory character. Coleman and Ramchandani (2010) investigated the economic impacts of non-elite sports events in the United States, United Kingdom, and Europe and argued that city marathons can generate economic impacts comparable to elite sports events, while putting less burden on public finances. In addition to the economic and city branding benefits, city marathons also contribute to a healthier population through long-term sports participation (Long, 2004; Lechner, 2009). Moreover, the active participation of volunteers and local residents in the staging of a marathon is manifested—when positioned on a decentralizing continuum—such an event matters to them. In particular, the involvement of citizens young and old signals their pride in an event and such bonding may give affordance to bridging the generation gap (Coleman & Ramchandani, 2010), and by extension fosters further social cohesion.

On one hand, a destination may capitalize on the potential of sports events as a place marketing instrument to strengthen or even change a destination's image (Kaplanidou et al., 2012). On the other hand, a sports event may leverage the tourism resources or brand equity of the hosting destination to differentiate itself from similar events (Aaker, 2004). As the number of marathons increases and competition among them intensifies, it was even suggested that "race organizers are no longer selling the running, but rather, the location at which to undertake the running" (Coleman & Ramchandani, 2010, p.31).

Research design

Based on the above discussions, it is expected that a heritage tourism destination could benefit from hosting sports events; however, what kind of coordinated collaboration between heritage and sports is required to make it happen? From this enquiry emerges the purpose of this study: to advance the understanding of how heritage tourism resources may interact with sports tourism products, with a specific focus on the relationship between World Heritage sites and mass participation marathons. For this purpose, the research aims to answer the following two research questions (RQs):

RQ 1: How runners perceive the image of a World Heritage site featured in a marathon?

RQ 2: How is a value proposition that bundles heritage and marathon experiences accepted by runners?

The geographical location of this research was set in Japan, where a running boom has been taking shape since the first edition of the Tokyo Marathon was launched in 2007. Observing the huge success of the Tokyo Marathon, other cities and places across Japan followed suit, and the number of running events (including marathons, half marathons, and road races) has grown from less than 1,000 in 2007 to nearly 2,000 in 2014. Moreover, the percentage of Japanese people participating in running or jogging at least once a week has increased from 2.9% in 2006 to 5.3% in 2014 (Sakakawa Sports Foundation, 2014). Therefore, Japan provides a rich pool of potential research targets.

Guided by the research question, the criteria for choosing the research targets can be simply boiled down to two keywords: marathon and World Heritage. In other words, it has to be a marathon (42.195km) whose main feature is a World Heritage site. Half marathons and road races (usually shorter than 10km) are excluded on the basis of comparability with extant literature. Marathons featuring just some heritage elements are also excluded.

After a preliminary screening of all the World Heritage sites in Japan, four candidates were identified: Kyoto, Nara, Mt. Fuji, and Himeji Castle. Kyoto and Nara are world-renowned tourism destinations and started staging city marathons in 2012 and 2010, respectively (Runners Magazine, 2016). Though it's fair to say at least some participants are attracted by the many heritage sites in Kyoto and Nara, it's hard to say their marathons have World Heritage sites as the main appeal. In contrast, Himeji Castle is the most celebrated attraction in Himeji. The race organizer actively promoted the marathon using the castle's World Heritage designation, and even stressed the World Heritage status by incorporating it into the title of the marathon. Similarly, Mt. Fuji enjoys a worldwide reputation and has been the symbol of Japan. "Run alongside Mt. Fuji, Japan's most beautiful sacred mountain and a World Heritage site," was the pitch stated on the race website. Given a good weather condition, runners can have a good view of Mt. Fuji in around two-thirds of the course.

Consequently, marathons held at Mt. Fuji (Mt. Fuji Marathon) and Himeji (World Heritage Himeji Castle Marathon) were chosen as the research subjects.

Data collection

The feedback of runners who participated in the Mt. Fuji Marathon 2013 (hereafter referred to as Mt. Fuji Marathon) and the World Heritage Himeji Castle Marathon 2015 (hereafter referred to as Himeji Castle Marathon) was collected in August 2015 from RUNNET, the largest marathon races information provider in Japan. The website of RUNNET functions as a portal for runners to search and register for marathons, as well as rate and comment on marathons in which they have participated. To rate and comment on any marathons, one has to be a registered user of RUNNET. Moreover, a checking mechanism is in place to ensure if the user really participated in the marathon he or she intends to comment on. A complete feedback is composed of numerical rating (maximum 100 points) and free text (maximum 500 words in Japanese) regarding how he or she thinks of the marathon. Regarding the feedback of the Mt. Fuji Marathon, data for 2013 was used instead of the latest available data because bad weather condition during the 2014 race day may have biased the runners' feedback.

Table 1. Summary of runners' feedback

	Sample size	Numerical rating			Narrative comment (word counts)		
		Max	Min	Average	Max	Min	Average
Mt. Fuji Marathon	313	100	14	68.8	499	11	278
Himeji Castle Marathon	217	100	51	94.4	496	10	263

Source: Original data gathered from the website of RUNNET and then organized by the author.

Note: 1. The sample size reflects the number of runners who left their feedback for the marathon.

2. Total numbers of marathon runners for the Mt. Fuji Marathon and the Himeji Castle Marathon were 13,267 and 6,034, respectively. (Retrieved from <http://fujisan-marathon.com/history>, and <http://www.himeji-marathon.jp/2015/archives/1718>)

3. The higher the numerical rating, the more a runner is satisfied with the marathon. The maximum possible rating is 100 points.

4. Narrative comments are free text written in Japanese. The system allows a maximum of 500 words, which roughly corresponds to 250 words in English.

Table 1 summarizes the runners' feedback. Most feedback was left within two weeks after the marathon took place (Mt. Fuji Marathon: 79%; Himeji Castle Marathon: 95%). The sample size reflects the number of runners who left their feedback for the marathon. Numerical ratings represent a measurement of runner's satisfaction. Narrative comments illustrate how runners evaluated their experiences in running the marathon. A typical comment may contain positive and negative experiences, as shown in the following example:

“I was really moved by the hearty cheers along the running route. Even in the mountainous area, it felt like all the villagers had come out to cheer for us. I was also thankful to the up-close cheers along the riverside cycling route. I enjoyed all the aid and food prepared for us, including citron tea, *amazake*, soba porridge, rice cake, chocolate, and fish cake. Moreover, onion soup, American hot dogs, and warm *amazake* refueled me after finishing. Though the weather was not the best I could hoped for, I'd say it's the best one among the 10 marathons I've run. The only thing I

could complain about is the location for picking up the finisher's certificate. It's a bit far away, and the sign was not clear enough". (Runner #203)

The ratings and comments formed a rich content for analysis. In particular, the narratives provided insights into how the runners perceived and evaluated their experiences. In contrast to conventional surveys in which themes are usually set and confined to suit the research topic, the narratives used in this research were spontaneously posted by committed runners on a public Internet platform without instruction by the researcher. To ensure reliability and a proper interpretation of the narratives, clear procedures were developed to guide the analysis, which will be defined in the next section.

Data analysis

The retrieved data were organized into an Excel spreadsheet and analyzed manually using a conceptual content analysis approach. To answer RQ1, the data were examined to identify the perceived image of World Heritage sites among runners. To answer RQ2, the data were analyzed to investigate how runners evaluated the identified practices and activities.

The concept chosen for answering RQ1 is World Heritage. While the choice of concept for RQ1 is rather straightforward, concepts involved in answering RQ2 are more complicated. In this respect, the research applied the experience prism proposed by Morgan (2007) and chose to include three categories of concepts to capture runners' experiences. The three concepts are: (a) administrative and operational elements; (b) design and programming elements, and (c) social support and interaction elements.

A predefined set of keywords/phrases for each concept was developed based on the author's experience of more than 10 years of running marathons. Relevant keywords/phrases were allowed to be added as the analysis went on. Implicit terms were also considered in interpreting the texts. Due to practical reasons, the study did not employ multiple coders. Working with a research team would reduce coding bias and answer to relevant issues of subjectivity and reflexivity (Mruck & Breuer, 2003). The researcher had tried to present a consistent analysis framework but doubtless some aspects of interpretations may be informed by the researcher's own experiences in traveling and running marathons. To limit the subjectivity and ensuing problems of validity and reliability, a research protocol was developed to help the researcher insure the texts are analyzed consistently throughout the process.

Table 2. Summary of concepts and keywords/phrases

	Concepts	Keywords/phrases
RQ1	World Heritage	heritage, cultural heritage, world cultural heritage, etc.
RQ2	(1) Administrative & operational elements (2) Design & programming elements (3) Social support & interaction elements	water, toilet, baggage check, traffic, parking, etc. event, running shirt, finisher's medal, etc. cheer, volunteer, spectators, etc.

Note: As the analysis was done in a Japanese language context, the table is not exhaustive and serves as illustrative purpose only.

Table 2 illustrates the concepts and keywords/phrases applied in the conceptual content analysis procedure. Texts were examined to establish existence and frequency of concepts in

the context of the Mt. Fuji Marathon and the Himeji Castle Marathon. Implications were then inferred based on the results.

Results and discussion

Figure 1 summarizes the basic information of the two marathons covered in this study. Probably the most recognizable symbol of Japan, the majestic Mt. Fuji is not only a source of artistic inspiration but also an object of religious worship. Mt. Fuji was designated as a World Cultural Heritage site by UNESCO in 2013, just a few months after the first annual Mt. Fuji Marathon was held in 2012. The 42.195km marathon course features Mt. Fuji and two lakes that are also included in the World Heritage list (Asahi Shimbun, 2013).

On the other hand, Himeji Castle was registered in 1993 as one of the first UNESCO World Heritage sites in Japan. The presence of Himeji Castle certainly has put Himeji under the spotlight, but at the same time, it outshines other tourism resources in the area. A typical visitor may stay in Himeji for just a few hours, only for visiting the castle, and then move on to his or her next destination. In an attempt to drive overnight stays by tourists, Himeji City has directed its attention to sports tourism, and staged the first edition of the World Heritage Himeji Castle Marathon in February, 2015 (The Nikkei, 2015).

Figure 1. Basic information of Mt. Fuji Marathon and Himeji Castle Marathon



Mt. Fuji Marathon

Location: At the foot of Mt. Fuji, Yamanashi Prefecture

Access: About 2 hours from Tokyo

Date: Nov 24, 2013 (Second edition, held annually)

Number of marathon runners: 13,267

World Heritage Himeji Castle Marathon

Location: Himeji City, Hyogo Prefecture

Access: About one hour from Osaka, or 3.5 hours from Tokyo

Date: Feb 22, 2015 (First edition, held annually)

Number of marathon runners: 6,034

The perceived image of World Heritage sites among marathon runners

Table 3 shows ways runners referred to “Mt. Fuji” in their comments and how often they did so. Since the word “Mt. Fuji” can refer to the mountain or the marathon race, a distinction was made to distinguish the two different contexts. With respect to concepts related to Mt. Fuji, the mountain was mentioned a total of 101 times. While the adjectives used by runners to describe the mountain were in accordance with the common image of Mt. Fuji, it came as a surprise that few runners referred to Mt. Fuji as a World Heritage site, even though Mt. Fuji was designated as a World Heritage site just a few months before the marathon took place. In contrast, Arima (2015) examined the image of Mt. Fuji presented in guidebooks and found that “heritage” was the second most frequently used word in the 2014 edition of the guidebook covered in the study. The finding implies that the inherent image (beautiful, magnificent, etc.) of Mt. Fuji outweighs the recently acquired status of a World Heritage site, even when the event organizer and guidebook publisher actively promoted Mt. Fuji’s World Heritage designation.

Table 3. The usage and frequency of "Mt. Fuji", observed from runners' comments

Concepts related to Mt. Fuji		Concepts related to Mt. Fuji Marathon	
Beautiful	49	Featured in the course	56
Amazing	22	Race title	27
Magnificent	18	Location	10
World Heritage	7	Event mascots	4
Sacred	3	Medal	3
Varied	2	Travel information	1
Total	101	Total	101

Note: N=313

With respect to concepts related to the Mt. Fuji Marathon, "Mt. Fuji" was also mentioned a total of 101 times. More than half of commenters stated Mt. Fuji was featured in the marathon course. The finding is in accordance with the fact Mt. Fuji is the main feature of the marathon.

Table 4. The usage and frequency of "Himeji Castle", observed from runners' comments

Concepts related to Himeji Castle		Concepts related to Himeji Castle Marathon	
Beautiful	6	Featured in the course	28
World Heritage	5	Race title	23
Restoration work	5	Location	5
White exterior	1	Medal	3
Total	17	Total	59

Note: N=217

Table 4 shows ways runners mentioned "Himeji Castle" in their comments and how often they did so. The frequency in total was considerably lower than that observed in the Mt. Fuji Marathon; moreover, only a total of 17 mentions of Himeji Castle were related to the castle itself. Similar to the findings in the Mt. Fuji Marathon, few runners mentioned Himeji Castle as a World Heritage site. Though we cannot conclude that the designations of Mt. Fuji and Himeji Castle as World Heritage sites are not well recognized by the public, the findings show that the World Heritage status doesn't rank highly in the runners' order of perceived images.

Bundling heritage with marathon events: An investigation through runners' eyes

Runners' comments were analyzed to investigate how a value proposition that bundles heritage and marathon experiences was accepted by the runners. By summarizing runners' comments, tables 5 and 6 illustrate how runners evaluated their experiences participating in the Mt. Fuji Marathon and the Himeji Castle Marathon. The results were categorized by concepts and satisfaction level, which was measured by runners' numerical ratings of each marathon.

First, administrative and operational elements can be regarded as the infrastructure required for staging a marathon. A race organizer has to ensure a smooth process that includes among others, easy registration, convenient access, ample supply of water and food, and logistics such as baggage checking, changing space, and enough toilet facilities. To a certain level, these services are taken for granted by runners. Indeed, while no more than 20% of runners positively commented on any administrative and operational elements, 48.4% of the unsatisfied runners complained about the number of toilets available in the Mt. Fuji Marathon. The satisfaction level of the Mt. Fuji Marathon was hugely compromised by insufficient toilet facilities.

Table 5. Runners' comments on Mt. Fuji Marathon by satisfaction level

Concepts/categories	Very satisfied (N=89)		Somewhat satisfied (N=131)		Not satisfied (N=93)	
	Positive comment	Negative comment	Positive comment	Negative comment	Positive comment	Negative comment
Administrative and operational elements						
Transportation	13.5%	3.4%	12.2%	14.5%	7.5%	14.0%
Baggage	3.4%	5.6%	2.3%	15.3%	1.1%	17.2%
Toilet facilities	15.7%	6.7%	7.6%	27.5%	2.2%	48.4%
Drink stations	19.1%	-	3.8%	3.8%	4.3%	3.2%
Registration	1.1%	-	0.8%	0.8%	1.1%	-
Changing space	1.1%	3.4%	0.8%	13.0%	1.1%	10.8%
Design and programming elements						
Course (World Heritage)	47.2%	-	47.3%	-	41.9%	-
Course (other elements)	40.4%	2.2%	43.5%	5.3%	33.3%	6.5%
Medal & goodies	15.7%	4.5%	12.2%	3.8%	6.5%	4.3%
Pre-race elements	3.4%	1.1%	1.5%	0.8%	2.2%	2.2%
Post-race elements	3.4%	2.2%	1.5%	10.7%	-	15.1%
Food & beverages	25.8%	-	16.8%	0.8%	8.6%	2.2%
Social support and interaction elements						
Cheer from spectators	31.5%	1.1%	27.5%	-	17.2%	-
Support from volunteers	24.7%	-	15.3%	-	11.8%	-
Interaction with runners	3.4%	19.1%	0.8%	19.1%	-	9.7%

Note: Satisfaction level is measured by runners' numerical rating on the marathon. Very satisfied: 100~80 points; somewhat satisfied: 79~60 points; not satisfied: lower than 60 points.

Table 6. Runners' comments on Himeji Castle Marathon by satisfaction level

Concepts/categories	Very satisfied (N=205)		Somewhat satisfied (N=10)		Not satisfied (N=2)	
	Positive comment	Negative comment	Positive comment	Negative comment	Positive comment	Negative comment
Administrative and operational elements						
Transportation	1.0%	1.0%	-	-	-	-
Baggage	11.7%	1.0%	10.0%	10.0%	-	-
Toilet facilities	4.4%	4.4%	-	30.0%	-	-
Drink stations	10.2%	2.0%	10.0%	-	-	-
Registration	3.9%	3.4%	-	-	-	-
Changing space	20.0%	1.5%	10.0%	-	-	-
Design and programming elements						
Course (World Heritage)	15.6%	-	20.0%	-	-	-
Course (other elements)	21.5%	6.8%	40.0%	30.0%	-	50.0%
Medal & goodies	8.3%	1.0%	20.0%	10.0%	-	-
Pre-race elements	4.9%	1.0%	-	-	-	-
Post-race elements	7.8%	3.4%	10.0%	-	-	50.0%
Food & beverages	25.4%	0.5%	-	10.0%	-	-
Social support and interaction elements						
Cheer from spectators	86.8%	-	80.0%	-	-	-
Support from volunteers	30.7%	-	20.0%	-	-	-
Interaction with runners	1.0%	1.0%	-	10.0%	-	-

Note: Satisfaction level is measured by runners' numerical rating on the marathon. Very satisfied: 100~80 points; somewhat satisfied: 79~60 points; not satisfied: lower than 60 points.

Second, design and programming elements are regarded as the core of an event. The crossover between World Heritage sites and marathon running was well accepted by the runners. More than 40% of runners commented positively on Mt. Fuji, but only about 15% of

runners commented positively on Himeji Castle. Mt. Fuji seemed to have a stronger presence than Himeji Castle. Other elements featured in the running route were celebrity runners, beautiful scenery, and roadside festivals. Another common design was local specialty food, which can be naturally blended into the running experience because food and beverages are indispensable elements before, during, and after running. In the case of the Himeji Castle Marathon, food and beverages were the most praised element, surpassing even the World Heritage status. The somewhat surprising finding can be explained by the difference in their strategic focuses. While Mt. Fuji was leveraged to attract participants to the marathon, the crossover worked the other way round in Himeji. In the case of the Himeji Marathon, it was the marathon being leveraged with an aim of driving overnight stays by visitors. Therefore, the World Heritage status of Himeji Castle was just one of the factors in a coordinated effort to promote Himeji.

Third, social support and interaction cocreated with spectators, volunteers, and fellow runners, are expected to enhance runners' experiences through the four channels of social support proposed by Willis (1991). Spectators provide emotional support through cheering. Volunteers provide tangible and information support. Fellow runners provide companionship support. Runners were in general thankful of the spectators who cheered for them along the route. However, a huge difference was observed between the two marathons in the percentage of runners who made positive comments about spectators. Were the runners in Himeji simply more grateful or were the local residents in Himeji more passionate in cheering? It is true that Himeji City is more densely populated than the area around Mt. Fuji, but the difference in population does not seem to be the only reason explaining the disparity in runners' comments. The city authority of Himeji made great efforts in communicating the merits of staging a marathon. Moreover, local residents of Himeji may be more willing to participate as the city is known as a "city of festivals". An impressive spectator turnout was observed even in sparsely populated areas along the running route.

With respect to the interaction with other runners, the negative comments observed in the Mt. Fuji Marathon were mostly directed towards runners' misbehavior of littering and urinating in public. In contrast, few runners in Himeji expressed such concern. Could the behavior of runners in Mt. Fuji be so different from those in Himeji? The enquiry once again puts the problem of insufficient toilet facilities in the spotlight. In addition, runners of the Mt. Fuji Marathon appeared to be less tolerant of others' misbehavior in such a pleasant environment as Mt. Fuji. The finding highlights the importance of administrative and operational elements when staging a sports event in environmentally sensitive areas such as a heritage tourism destination.

Conclusions

Through a content analysis of the feedback left by runners who participated in marathons featuring, respectively, the World Heritage sites of Himeji Castle and Mt. Fuji in Japan, this study attempted to examine: (a) How runners perceive the image of a World Heritage site featured in a marathon; (b) How is a value proposition that bundles heritage and marathon experiences accepted by the runners.

Despite World Heritage status appearing to be a key element in the marathons, the status of World Heritage did not rank highly in the order of runners' perceived image. Moreover, a successful value proposition bundling heritage and marathon requires coordinated efforts of the administrative and operational elements, design and programming elements, and social

support and interaction elements. The implications of this study suggest that event organizers need to consider several issues when staging marathons in heritage tourism destinations. First, marathon organizers have to ensure administrative and operational elements such as toilets and changing spaces are sufficient relative to the number of participants. Second, heritage tourism resources can be incorporated into the marathon experiences as a differentiating factor. Third, marathon organizers are advised to better communicate the purposes and benefits of the marathon to local businesses and residents, with the aim of encouraging them to participate actively in the marathon, whether as runners, sponsors, or volunteers.

This study has made two primary contributions. First, the study is expected to contribute to a better understanding of the potential of leveraging a mass participation marathon to (re)vitalize a heritage tourism destination. Second, the study applied a content analysis approach to analyze data gathered in Japan. Both the research method and the research target are underrepresented in the literature. Thus the study is expected to expand methodological awareness in the field of sports tourism and deepen our understanding in the current situation of sports tourism in Japan.

A limitation of this study lies in the nature of runners' feedback. Most of them focused their narratives on what happened on the day of the running, so a complete picture of runners' behavior was not observed. Another limitation is the difficulty in segmenting the runners. Different segments of runners favor different kind of activities (Chalip & McGuirty, 2004) and hence may exhibit different behavior patterns. The data available in this study were insufficient to identify these different patterns. In addition, this study has mainly investigated how marathon runners evaluated their experiences of participating in marathons held in heritage tourism destinations. Event sponsors, volunteers, and local residents as well are crucial stakeholders in a marathon, therefore an investigation into a larger set of stakeholders is warranted. Future research should integrate the analysis of relevant stakeholders to reveal the dynamics of their interactions and use these insights to reach sustainable solutions for staging mass participation marathons in heritage tourism destinations.

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