



SPORT EVENTS AND COVID-19: TRAIL RUNNERS' ATTITUDES AND INTENTIONS DURING THE PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has widespread negative effects on sport events, marathons, and trail-running events. Thus, it has become essential to understand the attitudes and intentions of runners in the times of unexpected crises and uncertainty such as pandemic. In this context, this study aims to examine the pandemic's influence in terms of the changes in runners' attitudes relating to their decision whether to participate in races, and changes in their habits. Employing a qualitative research design, and using participatory observation method, data were collected from 12 interviewees in Ephesus Ultra Marathon Trail Race. The results revealed four main motivations for participating in race events during the pandemic: socialization, healthy living, realizing their goals, and maintaining friendships. Despite the risks, the participants continued to take part in events because of their belief in athlete immunity, confidence in individual precautions, their respect for the rules, and the absence of fear. However, the decrease in the number of activities was found to create dissatisfaction with the limited socialization opportunities. The study offers contributions both to the literature and to practice by revealing the runners' motivation for and attitudes to participation in race events during the times of unexpected crisis and uncertainty.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sport events are extensively used in tourism to promote destinations, creating a stimulus that attracts tourists, contributing to destinations' economic and social development by increasing incomes from tourism and thus social welfare (Keshkar, 2021; Maditinos, Vassiliadis, Tzavlopoulos, & Vassiliadis, 2020; United Nations, 2020). These events usually vary from global scale events, such as the Olympics, to national races and trails, to local walking and running events (Getz, 2008). Unfortunately, the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic spread worldwide and affected millions of global activities, affecting sporting events at all three levels. To illustrate, the Olympics and Euro 2020 were postponed to the following year (Skinner & Smith, 2021; Miles & Shipway, 2020; Cooper & Alderman, 2020; Nauright, Zipp, & Kim, 2020).

Research addressing the relationship between COVID-19 and tourism mainly discussed the transformations in tourism due to the pandemic (Langarita & Cazcarro, 2022; Lebrun, Su, & Bouchet, 2021; Hedenborg, Fredman, Hansen, & Wolf-Watz, 2022; Ateljevic, 2020; Westmattmann, Grotenhermen, Sprenger, & Schewe, 2020). These transformations were found to occur in, and affect different dimensions of tourists' expectations to consumption habits. For instance, in the times of pandemic or other crises, sport events induce a

feeling of trepidation, which lessens over time, and eventually disappears (Seraphin, 2020). Currently, an increasing interest is shown to trail races, probably because of the reduced risk of infection due to being in open air. Thus, it is important to study the particular situations affecting event participants' risk perceptions during crisis periods to guide action in future crises (Johann, Mishra, Malhotra, & Tiwari, 2022; Jackson, 2019; Abraham, Bremser, Carreno, Crowley-Cyr, & Moreno, 2020).

Tourists usually avoid visiting destinations if they perceive risk, especially in times of crisis (Elshaer, Mahmoud, & Ghanem, 2022; Işık, Sırakaya-Türk, & Ongan, 2020; Malliaropoulos, Mertyri, & Tsaklis, 2015). In fact, previous epidemic crisis have influenced tourism and outdoor events, due to customers and tourists' level of risk perception (Yang & Nair, 2014; Bauer, 1960; Swarbrooke & Horner, 2007; Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005). These risks included, but were not limited to, terrorism, social risks, natural disasters, and health risks (Boguszewicz-Kreft, Kuczamer-Kłopotowska, & Kozłowski, 2022; Sönmez & Grafe 1998a; Seabra, Abrantes, & Kastenholz, 2014). However, there remains a gap in the literature focusing specifically

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on the participants' perceived risk of competing in running events (Abraham et al. 2020). Event participants' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic can be used as an opportunity to comprehend how perceptions of risk influence consumers' purchasing decisions.

In many countries, participatory sport events were postponed or even cancelled. Such events were also impacted in other ways, such as border closures, and new rules and regulations for social distancing and lockdowns. In some instances, events went ahead with a local field, because sport tourists were unable to travel due to COVID-19. This study focuses on this kind of a case, and aims to examine the trail runners' attitudes, as well as their intention to participate in the sport events during the pandemic. For this purpose, the Ephesus Ultra Trail Marathon held in ancient city of Ephesus, located in Selçuk, Izmir, Turkey, was selected for study via interviews with race participants, and this data is supported by authors' observations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Outdoor Sport Events and Perceived Risk

The literature focusing on outdoor events covers marathon races, bicycle races, skydiving, skyrunning and trail races (Beaton, Funk, Ridinger, & Jordan, 2011; Perrin-Malterre, 2018; Getz & McConnell, 2014; Perić, Dragičević, & Škorić, 2019). Regarding trail races, the research has addressed the issues including the business model (Perić, & Slavić, 2019); organizational structure (López-García, Muriel-Isidro, Ruibal-Lista, Maneiro, Amatria-Jiménez, & Moral-García, 2021); participants' perception of space (Hinch & Kono, 2018); political, economic, and social impact on locals (Perrin-Malterre, 2018); participants' spending characteristics (Peric et al. 2019); participants' identifications (Shipway & Jones, 2007) and psychology (Beaton et al. 2011).

Outdoor events are also approachable from different points of view, as they contain and are associated with many risk factors, including, but not limited to, financial, business and management aspects. Some studies have examined the relationship between major sporting events, such as the 2002 World Cup and Olympic Games, and terrorism (Toohey, Taylor, & Lee, 2003; Taylor & Toohey, 2007; Toohey & Taylor, 2008). Beck (1992) emphasized that the common point among environmental, economic and terrorism-related global risks is that all have consequences, actions and uncertainties, which result from issues emerging from civilization. Cleland (2018) also examined participants' perceptions and experiences of the risk to society in elite sporting events. For those who attend events, the risk environment created by COVID-19 may constitute one of the most important crises of recent years.

Consumers make decisions based on their perceived risks (Mitchell, 1999). Buying any product or service involves temporal, physical, social, psychological, and financial risks (Bauer, 1960; Roselius, 1971). As a consumer, tourists and event participants also face risks, which vary according to the type of event, and risk perceptions similarly vary (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005; Sönmez & Grafe 1998a; Sönmez & Grafe, 1998b).

Physical and health risks appear more prominently for those participating in sports activities (DeJong,

Fish, & Hertel, 2021; McCloskey et al. 2020; Malliaropoulos et al. 2015). Event participants reduce their perceived risk through a series of psychological and cognitive processes (Sharifpour, Walters, Ritchie, & Winter, 2014; Choo, Choo, & Kang, 2016). Trail running events, for instance, include falling and injuries type of risks due to their intense physical activity (Viljoen, Sewry, Schweltnus, van Rensburg, Swanevelder, & Jordaan, 2021; Scheer, Valero, Villiger, Rosemann, & Knechtel, 2021). Attending an event during the COVID-19 pandemic may possibly pose additional serious risk (McCloskey et al. 2020). Yet, studies on the event participants during the pandemic (Madininos et al. 2021; Westmattelmann et al. 2020; Sato, Oshimi, Bizen, & Saito, 2020) have failed to clearly show how runners deal with these risks, or why they may not even perceive risk.

2.2. COVID-19, Sport and Trail Running Events

Unprecedented conditions due to COVID-19 and subsequent lockdowns have impacted many sectors of society, including sport events. Postponement or cancellation of sport events caused catastrophic economic losses worldwide. From the early periods of the pandemic onwards, the literature regarding the relationship between COVID-19 and sport events includes conceptual studies (Ludvigsen & Parnell, 2021; Miles & Shipway, 2020), descriptive commentaries (Dubinsky, 2022; Grix, Brannagan, Grimes, & Neville, 2021; Daniels & Tichaawa, 2021; Parnell, Widdop, Bond, & Wilson, 2020; Ludvigsen & Hayton, 2020; Sheptak & Menaker, 2020; Davis, 2020) and empirical analyses (Tomino & Peric, 2022; Espiner, Degarege, Stewart, & Espiner, 2022; Maditinos et al. 2020; Westmattelmann et al. 2020; Sato et al. 2020). All of these aimed to assess the consequences of COVID-19 on sport.

Related studies have shown that COVID-19 has negatively affected marathons and trail-running events, causing postponement or cancellations (Swart & Maralack, 2020; Dejong et al. 2021). The restrictions also impacted training frequencies. Some studies focused on physical health (Scheer et al. 2021; Dejong et al. 2021). Parnell et al. (2020) for instance, investigated the strategies used to reduce the spread of the disease in mass sport events, focusing on the case of EURO 2020. They proposed that social distance would be ensured by reducing transportation frequency and route restrictions to reduce access during the event period. Focusing on runners and variables affecting decision-making during the pandemic, Maditinos et al. (2020) found the following key factors affecting participation in running events during the pandemic: participants' distance from, and available transportation to the race location, the number of participants, compliance with precautions, and organizers' plans for contingencies. Martins, Moraes, & Marchi Júnior (2021) explored how COVID-19 impacted school sport, analyzing how the authorities responded to its effects concluding that this had been widely affected by cancellations caused by difficulties in the implementation of COVID-19 regulations.

From a public view, the postponement and cancellation of sport events is not necessarily regarded as a negative issue, even over the course of a whole year of global sporting events. In the example of the Tokyo Olympics, Sato et al. (2020) concluded that most participants supported the postponements, potentially an important indicator

of a common desire to protect public health. Similarly, some authors found that runners do not necessarily perceive COVID-19 as a major long-term threat to their activities. For instance, Urbaneja, Julião, Mendes, Dorado, & Farías-Torbidoni (2020) analyzed the impact of COVID-19 on the physical activity of sport event participants, finding a belief that the restrictions were temporary, and would not last more than few months.

McCloskey et al. (2020) evaluated the spread conditions of the COVID-19 at mass events, examined the risks, and concluded that five different factors affect the risk of events in such circumstances. Among these, they draw attention to factors such as the number of cities the event will be held in, the participation of risky groups (e.g. 65+ years old), and international participation (McCloskey et al. 2020). Hoang, Al-Tawfiq, & Gautret (2020) discussed the risk of COVID-19 in the Tokyo Olympics in view of the recommendations of WHO, highlighting insufficient data on the spread rates at previous mass gatherings. Carmody, Murray, & Borodina (2020, p. 947) concluded, "If professional sport is to return in the near future, event organizers must accept that assessment of risk must be undertaken, and measures put in place to ensure any risks from the event are less than the benefits." Yet, to the authors' knowledge, the studies in the context of events is scarce, and especially, for those involving data from event participants. Thus, in this study, using the context of ultra-marathon trails, we aim to assess the relation between runners' beliefs and perceptions, and the new conditions and practices imposed by pandemic, which are generally enforced by compulsory law and hygiene protocols. Therefore, the research questions for the study were formulated as follows:

- a) Are there any changes in runners' attitudes relating to their decision whether to participate in trail races because of the pandemic?
- b) Are there any changes to their habits during their participation in trail races because of the pandemic?

3. METHOD

The research employed a case study design, a detailed and comprehensive qualitative research approach using multiple sources of information from life in general, or a particular situation over a period. In case studies, in-depth information is collected for either a situation description or thematic analysis (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2009).

3.1. Sampling

Ephesus, among the cultural heritage in Turkey, is located in the Selçuk district of Izmir. The region is not only a center of attraction for millions of tourists annually, but also is the location of the house of the Virgin Mary, a religiously significant site for many. Since 2017, the region has hosted several sport events, including the Ephesus Ultra Marathon, an event organized by ITRA (International Trail Running Association). In previous years, the marathon included three different routes, ranging from 12 to 55 km, but it currently includes six different routes, ranging from five to 120 km. The marathon has separate classifications for women and men, with three different age classifications: under 40, between 40-49 and 50 and over. The Ephesus Ultra Marathon

in the pandemic year was originally postponed from March 2020 to September 2020, and then again to March 2021 because of the increase in cases. Those who had applied for the race within this period had the right to a refund, or to participate in the postponed event. In 2019, the year before the pandemic, 1,027 runners completed the Marathon; in 2021, under pandemic conditions, the number rose to 1,127 (Ephesus Ultra Marathon, 2021). This shows that rather than negatively affecting runners' willingness to participate, the pandemic has led to an increase in demand.

The Ephesus Ultra Race was chosen as the sample case for several reasons. The researchers decided to choose the closest destination for easy access, which would minimize the inconvenience of a possible cancellation or postponement, considering the uncertainty surrounding the races. For researchers based in Izmir, this race was the most convenient, considering financial and time limitations. At the time of the event, the weekend curfews were in effect, so researchers needed official permission to access the race destination.

3.2. Pre-Test

The research design was constructed in the light of the literature review and the opinions of three experienced experts, in addition to the three research authors. Afterwards, a pre-test was conducted via an in-depth interview with an experienced runner to identify any unclear and/or unnecessary expressions, or important omissions. Some example questions were: What are your thoughts on participating in a running race in the risk environment of the COVID-19 period? Do you think that the necessary precautions have been taken for the race? Why do you trust this particular event? What are the differences in your participation process in this year's race compared to previous periods? The issues that emerged from the test interview were shared with three experienced researchers, who contributed to the revision of the interview protocol.

3.3. Data Collection

Data required for the research were collected from 12 participants. Participants were fully informed about the research before giving their permission. A purposive and convenience sampling method was used to select the interviewees due to time and other physical constraints. The selected interviewees had already spent some time in the rest area after the race, as it was thought that tired runners coming directly from the race would be more likely to give superficial answers. In addition, one of the researchers, himself an experienced runner, was able to make observations as a race participant. Additional data for the research were collected using participatory observation method, which aims at a deeper understanding of the actors, interactions, and events at the research site (Allen, 2017). The author running in the race conducted the participatory observation; he recorded his experiences on a chart at hourly intervals, noting his conversations with the relevant people, and supporting his observations with photographs taken during the race.

3.4. Validity and Reliability

In order to provide validity, the questionnaire

was reviewed by knowledgeable researchers in the field of tourism and recreation, and revised by the authors in the light of their suggestions. The interviews continued until the responses started to repeat themes. The interviews were sound recorded, and transcribed, and notes were made for use in coding and interpretations. In order to increase reliability in the research, the same interview questions were used with all participants, and the audio recordings were backed up electronically. The transcription and analysis took place between April 24 and May 7, 2021, during which time, the views of the participants identified as not directly relevant to the research were excluded (Berg, 2001; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). While conducting the participatory observation, hourly records of experiences occurring during the race were entered on a chart, conversations with the relevant people were audio recorded, and photographs taken to support the observations.

3.5. Data Analysis

This study employed content analysis, a widely used method in qualitative research (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As Hsieh & Shannon (2005) suggest, there are three content analysis approaches: conventional, directed and summative. Although all three approaches are used to interpret meaning from text data content, they differ in coding schemes, origins of codes and the level of trustworthiness. For this particular study, conventional content analysis was employed. The conventional content analysis method generally involves coding data, creating themes, organizing and bringing codes and themes together, and finally, defining and interpreting the findings (Creswell, 2013; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Weber, 1990). Kozak (2017) considers that content analysis should begin with an examination of the participants' texts, images, and discourses emerging from the data, and then, interpretations can be made after identifying the thoughts and situations more emphasized than others.

According to these identified concepts, the data from the semi-structured interviews and from the participatory observation are classified into themes, under which opinions with similar content are categorized (Creswell & Miller, 2000). It is important that the classification is consistent, to ensure valid inferences, and increasing the reliability of content analysis. This can be demonstrated by broad agreement among people coding the same text (Mayring, 2004; LeCompte & Goetz, 1982).

4. FINDINGS

In this research, the focus is on examining the experience and risk perceptions of the runners in Ephesus Ultra Marathon during the pandemic. Firstly, descriptive information about the participants is presented. As seen on Table 1, there is an equal number of men and women, with the average age of 40, from Istanbul, Izmir and Bursa. In addition, most have a bachelor's degree. The participants' occupations are varied, and all have an income of 5,000 TL or more.

For the analysis, themes were created in line with the opinions of the 12 participants, and then the answers were grouped in sub-themes and codes. Participants are identified by numbers. Table 2 demonstrates the themes, sub-themes and codes

based on opinions given in the interviews, which are separated into five sub-themes. Two thirds of the participants had between 4-10 years of racing experience, although more than half were participating for the first time, and most preferred moderate distances of 23 to 42 km. Their reasons for participating included for recreation and sport, as well as a healthy lifestyle and closeness to nature.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of the Participants

Participant Number	Gender	Age	Residence	Level of Education	Profession	Monthly Income (TL)
P1	Male	34	Balıkesir	Bachelor	Business Manager	10000
P2	Male	49	Kütahya	Bachelor	Teacher	5000-6000
P3	Female	40	Istanbul	Bachelor	Computer Engineer	10000-15000
P4	Female	46	Izmir	Bachelor	Officer	5000
P5	Female	39	Bursa	High School	Operator	3000-5000
P6	Male	34	Izmir	Bachelor	Architect	7000-9000
P7	Male	40	Istanbul	Bachelor	Sport Organizer	5000-8000
P8	Male	44	Bursa	Bachelor	Teacher	5000
P9	Female	33	Istanbul	PhD	Doctor of Medicine	10000-15000
P10	Female	40	Bursa	Bachelor	Nurse	6000
P11	Female	42	Izmir	Bachelor	Musician	5000-10000
P12	Male	42	Zonguldak	Associate	Operator	10000

Regarding participants' opinions about event organizers, there were seven codes, ranging from the adequate provision of service offerings to the relative lack of information and markings in the event area and track. Most participants were satisfied, but some were critical of the insufficient information and markings, along with infrastructural and superstructural conditions of the event area. The following comment was fairly typical relating to event organization:

P10: "The track was beautiful. I look at how the track is rather than where I'm going. What I needed was lemon, salt and water, I was able to access them at CP points. Some of the direction flags disappeared, I don't know how the organization could find a solution to this. Maybe the flags could be tied to the stones. Especially in the morning, I was hesitant about where to go at some places and that's why I fell. I had a torch, but it wasn't enough, I got lost."

Table 2. Participants' Opinions on Ephesus Ultra Race Event

Sub-Themes	Codes	Participant Number
History of participation in running races	0-3 years	P1, P3, P10, P11
	4-10 years	P2, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P12
Purpose of participation in running races	Sport	P1, P4, P7, P10
	Recreational activity	P3, P4, P5, P7, P8, P11
	Healthy lifestyle	P1, P2, P6, P9
	Closeness to nature	P2, P5, P7, P12
History of participation to Ephesus Ultra	First time	P1, P2, P3, P9, P10, P11, P12
	Participation in previous years	P4, P5, P6, P7, P8
Raced track length at Ephesus Ultra	5 km	P11
	23 km	P1, P2, P3, P4, P6
	42 km	P5, P7, P9, P10
	61 km	P8
	120 km	P12
Opinions on Ephesus Ultra organizers	Sufficient service offering	P1, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12
	Insufficient information and marking	P2, P4, P9, P10
	Lack of activity	P2, P3
	Satisfaction with the nature of the track	P3, P6, P10, P12
	Insufficient infrastructure/superstructure	P1, P4, P10
	Track insecurity	P2, P10
Positive changes on the track	P1, P3	

Three participants made almost no comments about lack of activities, dangers on the route, and improvements in the route. Possible reasons for these issues being less important are as follows: although the event was carried out under pandemic precautions, many types of activity were available. Regarding danger, most interviewees ran during daylight hours, and there were officials and event employees to direct the participants. Lastly, more than half were first time runners, and therefore unable to comment on the changes to the route.

Despite the indicated problems, most participants were satisfied with the event and organization in general. However, considering the focus of this study, it was important to investigate their opinions on the COVID-19 pandemic, and its effects on the event. Table 3 classifies the theme, sub-themes, and codes for each participant regarding the relationship between the event and the pandemic. As indicated, participating in the race in an environment of risk seems to be one of the main sub-themes, which is then divided into seven codes. The distribution of these codes reveal that more than half of the participants have confidence in their own individual precautions, and a similar proportion, in the organization. Moreover, nearly all participants found the precautions taken sufficient. To illustrate, participant P3 stated:

P3: "I think it doesn't pose much risk, as long as everyone wears a mask, there is no risk. Because you don't talk to anyone in the race. Maybe it could be at start and finish points, but I think the organization took as many precautions as they could, the rest is individual precaution."

Nearly half the participants, on the other hand, voiced concerns about the risk of infection, as many people were together in the same area. Other, but less frequently cited issues were the social distance between runners, the need for socializing, and the high immunity level of athletes. An issue that draws attention is that some participants are prepared to take risks in order to socialize. As participant P11 expressed:

P11: "Due to the quarantine period that has been going on for 1 year, the desire to socialize outweighs the fear of COVID-19 for myself. I know the risks, I can't say I have no fear, but I wanted to socialize anyway."

Even though nearly all participants remarked on the sufficiency of the existing precautions, some expected more. These expectations mainly concerned enforcement of social distance at start and finish, the checking of HES codes and temperature measurement. Participants P11 and P9 commented on the issue as follows:

P11: "More attention could have been paid to the starting moment. They said we would start two by two, but we started in a crowd. In addition, more attention should have been paid to the masks in the first 200 and the last 100 meters. I remembered that we had to wear a mask at the end, but most people didn't, so it would have been better if someone could have warned us beforehand, as it could pose a risk if someone was suspected of being ill."

P9: "Considering the need for social distance, larger areas, allowing people to stay away from each other, need to be provided at the start and finish. Also, HES code checks or fever measurement were not conducted at the entrance."

Table 3. Participants' Opinions Regarding Attending a Race During COVID-19

Sub-Themes	Codes	Participant Number
Participation in the race in risk environment	Absence of fear	P1, P3, P7, P9, P10, P12
	Trust in individual precautions	P3, P5, P6, P9, P10, P11, P12
	Social distance between runners	P1, P3, P7
	Need for socializing	P8, P11
	Trust in athlete immunity	P6, P10
	Trust in the organization	P2, P3, P5, P6, P7, P9, P12
	Existence of risk perception	P2, P4, P7, P8, P11
Status of taking necessary precautions	Sufficiency of measures taken	P1, P2, P3, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10, P12
	Insufficiency of measures taken	P4
Participants' expectations for extra precautions	Responsible behavior of participants	P8, P9, P11
	Mask/social distance control at start and finish	P2, P6, P9, P11
	HES code and fever measurement application	P1, P6, P7, P9
	Lack of superstructure and equipment	P4, P5
Differences from previous races	Lack of activity	P1, P2, P4, P6, P8, P10, P11, P12
	Decreased socialization	P6, P8, P12
	Lack of food/beverage service	P2, P3
	Social distanced start	P7, P10
Opinions on lack of transfer service	Transportation by personal vehicle	P1, P3, P4, P5, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12
	Transportation by train	P2, P6
	Difficulty of transportation	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P8, P11
	Familiar hotel choice	P1, P6
Opinions on accommodation	Disuse of accommodation	P2, P4, P5, P8, P11
	No fear of accommodation	P1, P2, P3, P7, P9, P10, P11, P12
	Tent preference	P6, P8

Less importance was given to the lack of infrastructure and missing equipment, referring to the lack of toilets and lighting on the route, but a considerable number expected the participants themselves to behave more responsibly and take their own precautions.

P8: "They (the organizers) have done everything that comes to their mind. The participants need to be more aware and careful about wearing masks, social distance and hygiene."

The differences compared to previous events emerged as one of the most significant issues observed in the study. In this context, among the four issues mentioned in the pre-race interviews, most participants commented that the number of activities did not meet expectations. Other, less significant issues mentioned involved the decrease in socialization, along with the lack of food/beverage service, and the social lack of distance precautions at the start of the race. To illustrate, participant E6's comprehensive comment regarding the issue can be seen below.

P6: "The quotas are limited; the number of participants has decreased. Unfortunately, there is not much activity like in previous years. There would be spaces to socialize, there would be lots of volunteers, we would interact with them and get motivated, here there is none of that. The pasta party has been abolished; there is no more hot food. Today, my running group ran but I couldn't speak any of them. I guess the ones that finished running have left. Of course, people also come to socialize. I remember there used to be 'after' parties. These kinds of activities are not available now, so there may be many who don't want to participate in the event."

The race was in Selçuk, 83 km from Izmir, and public transportation options were limited to bus and train. No transfer vehicles were provided, perhaps

due to financial limitations, but the organizers may also have decided that providing transport was an unacceptable risk in a pandemic period. Accordingly, lack of transfer service emerged as a much-cited issue. Most participants preferred to access the event in their own vehicles, only two used the train option, and more than half raised the issue of the difficulty of reaching the event area. Participants P2 and P4 made relevant comments:

P2: "Transportation is a big problem. We came by train. There is a transportation problem here; there is definitely a need for improvement."

P4: "We came in our own vehicle. We would have had problems if transportation was not provided, because there is no transportation or shuttle service. Those who came from outside or on previous days had already arrived with their own vehicles. So, they found a solution anyway, but the organization didn't do anything."

Last, but not least, considering the pandemic and contamination risks, and because many participants were from Izmir, the nearest city, accommodation was not the problematic issue that it could have been. However, as seen on Table 5, more than half of the participants expressed no concerns about staying in hotels in the event region, if the required precautions were applied.

P11 stated: "I didn't stay because I came from Izmir. But if I stayed, I wouldn't have any concerns since I would already be isolated in the room and at the dining table in hotels."

Nearly half the participants came from nearby places such as Izmir and Aydın, and these decided to avoid renting accommodation. The participants who needed accommodation chose either to camp, avoiding the dangers of enclosed spaces, or to stay in a familiar hotel, where they were assured of cleanliness and safety, such as P6 mentioned:

P6: We stayed overnight at our friend's hotel. If it were not available, we would set up a tent. We love tents; the pandemic would also be a reason to use tents as an accommodation option.

The authors also collected and compiled observational findings relating to the study focus. Accordingly, concerning the services offered, it was seen that food service at the end of the race followed appropriate precautions, following hygiene and social distance rules, and providing a lunch box with hand disinfectant. Among the medical precautions were an ambulance with medical staff, and additionally, a massage service, and clean and hygienic toilets were provided at the finish point.

Although there was no transfer service from Izmir to the event area, the organization offered transfer service from the finish back to the starting point. There was, however, no visual guidance announcing the pick-up points or departure times. Also, these vehicles were not large enough to allow social distance rules to be enforced. In contrast, CP points were separated and spread out in accordance with the social distance rules. Announcements concerning rules about social distance and masks were made at the start and finish, but these not always followed, especially at the finish. The participants finished the race without masks, and group photos were taken at the end of the race without social distance or masks. Although there were signposts and markers on the running route, there were some deficiencies at certain points. Lastly, maintaining social distance

was not always possible in some narrower parts of the track.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The focus of this study was on the trail runners' attitudes and intentions to participate in sport events during the pandemic. Data was collected through interviews held with Efes Ultra Trail Race participants during the event in the ancient city of Ephesus, located in Selçuk, Izmir, Turkey, on 13-14 March 2021. The interview data were supplemented with participatory observations during the event.

Of the studies that examined ultra-trail activities, few focused on participants' attitudes and real-time on-field event experiences in times of crisis. Studies tend to focus on the risk of injury and examined medical harm (Viljoen et al. 2021; Scheer et al. 2021; Dejong et al. 2021; McCloskey et al. 2020; Malliaropoulos et al. 2015). In contrast, the findings in this study are closer to those of Maditinos et al. (2020). In this context, the most frequently occurring findings addressed COVID-19-related issues: the event area, the risk status at the area, mask, distance and hygiene precautions, and the organizers' responsibilities.

The study potentially contributes to the literature by revealing the motivational factors for participating in race events during the pandemic, as follows: socialization, healthy living, realizing their own goals, and maintaining friendships. Moreover, for many participants, attendance was found to be in accordance with their own pre-pandemic race plans. The participants were able to overcome their doubts over the inherent risks because of their absence of fear, their belief in athlete immunity, and individual efforts in taking precautions in line with the rules. The study revealed that the participants rejected PCR testing in favor of precautions, safety announcements and social distance markings. Some participants emphasized that they may not have attended in the case of a mandatory PCR test result. Another key finding in both interviews and observation is the dissatisfaction caused by the fewer activities, and more limited socialization opportunities.

The study also has certain managerial implications. For instance, in order to prevent future dissatisfaction, event organizers should provide increased socialization opportunities. In addition, most participants stated that, to avoid the risks involved in using public transportation, they preferred to attend local races. Thus, a major reason for the runners' unwillingness to attend the races might also be feelings of uncertainty and insecurity. According to Işık, Sırakaya-Türk, & Ongan (2020) for instance, the rising uncertainty during the economic crisis can cause consumers to change their priorities and postpone or completely cancel their travel plans. From this point of view, the uncertainties experienced as a result of the pandemic crisis, just as in the economic crisis periods, may cause the participants to abandon their plans to attend the race. In this context, it may be beneficial to organize events to cover every region. Moreover, it is necessary for the event organizers to make extra efforts to comply with the conditions and regulations in pandemic period. In addition, this research points to the need for the integration of stakeholders such as local government and organization officials. A

final emerging issue is the need to make necessary arrangements, which consider the demands and expectations of the runners in pandemic period.

The main limitation of this study is its focus on a single event. Therefore, further studies can explore the issue focusing on other events in Turkey or abroad, taking into account cultural differences. Additionally, findings in future studies could also consider runners' preferred route lengths. Lastly, COVID-19 vaccination, which was not common in Turkey at the time of data collection, may affect runners' opinions and experiences; therefore, further research could also focus on this changed circumstance.

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