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Adventure Racing and Active Lifestyles

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Abstract:

Adventure racing, the combination of adventure sports in a competitive setting, has increased in popularity as part of growing adventurous leisure participation. This study reports results from a survey of 717 adventure racing participants in Australia examining sporting identity, motivations and contributions to physical activity.

Participants were motivated to engage in the event by physical, nature and adventure elements, with social factors also being important for teams. Participants are unlikely to identify themselves as adventure racers, rather having a specific sport that they regularly participate in. Whilst adventure racing has limited tourism potential, it offers positive participation aspects to individuals, and a variety of commercial opportunities for sponsors and host destinations.

Keywords: Adventure Racing, Motivations, Identity, Tourism.

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Introduction

Adventure tourism is a niche market sector that has seen rapid growth over the last decade and corresponding academic interest as illustrated in this special issue and elsewhere (see Buckley, 2006; Funk, Toohey, & Bruun, 2007). Part of this sector takes on a competitive edge around multi-sport participation as adventure racing. Although similar to multi-sport events such as triathlons, which have received some critical attention, adventure racing differs in that the activities and the promotion are directed strongly towards themes of adventure. Although the extreme end of this sector is represented by multi-day endurance events for semi-professional athletes (Mykletun and Mazza, 2016, Schneider et al, 2007), there has been significant growth in the 'softer', more popular end, of the spectrum. These are multi-sport events taking place in natural environment settings, but often relatively close to centres of major population.

Despite the growing significance of these events there is limited research on shorter adventure racing events. Some studies have examined corporate participation in these events for 'team-building' purposes (Kay and Laberge, 2002) or the prevalence and management of injuries to competitors (Jamison, Moslow-Benway, and Stover, 2005). However there is little that links these events to general participation in active lifestyles. For example, Murphy and Baumann (2007) published a literature review on the ability of mass participation events to increase population-level participation in physical activity sufficient for health benefit. The authors concluded that there is a 'paucity of research' and that 'no evaluations have assessed pre-event physical activity patterns, or tracked activity post-event' (p.195). This paper investigates motivations for engaging in adventure racing; the ability of adventure racing to facilitate increases to both physical activity and exercise levels;

the importance of adventure racing to a sporting 'identity'; and influences on travel behaviour.

This research is important because our observation suggests 1) event owners are increasingly positioning their events towards adventurous health-seeking adults; and, 2) territorial local authorities are citing positive health outcomes as justification for their investment in these events and 3) the outdoor adventure industry, equipment manufacturers and retailers are seeking to promote further consumption of adventurous products and services. What remains problematic is that while 'the public health potential of major sporting and physical activity events is often cited, the 'evidence for public health benefit is lacking' (Murphy & Bauman, 2007:193). The key aspect of this research is to identify factors that contribute to increased and sustained sport involvement (Kyle, & Mowen, 2005) with adventure racing and their relationship to participants' active lifestyles.

Adventure racing and its associated promotion through the media has created a high profile for this niche. Global events such as the *Raid Gauloises*, first held in 1989, and the *Eco-Challenge*, which featured on the Discovery channel (Hinch and Ngiam, 2004) popularised these longer events. Kay and Laberge define adventure racing as: 'a non-stop, self-sufficient, multi-day, multidiscipline, mixed-gender team endurance competition that takes place in the wilderness over a designated but unmarked course' (2002:17). However, as previously identified, there has been growth in shorter adventure races of less than one day duration, which are more accessible to a larger proportion of the population. This is in parallel to classifications of adventure tourism which have defined participation as being on a spectrum of 'hard' to 'soft' (Fennell, 1999). Notably Varley has shown how commercial opportunities are far greater at the softer end of participation, illustrated in the

adventure commodification continuum (Varley, 2006). The breadth of the adventure racing sector is illustrated in a *National Geographic* article on ‘Ten great races in amazing places, presenting everything from extreme multi day races in Patagonia, playful ‘Tough Mudder’ events, and rock ‘n’ roll marathons in Las Vegas (Siber, 2012).

One example of a shorter multi-sport adventure racing event is the Anaconda adventure race series, which was held in four locations in Australia annually. Each of these involved four sequential stages of approximately a 2km ocean swim, 15km paddle, 10km cross-country run and a 20km mountain bike race. The events took place in backcountry conditions, thus maintaining an ‘adventurous’ setting.

Participants could complete all of the disciplines or could be involved as part of a team. Although they were a competitive series, the majority of participants were local to each race with between 500 to 1500 participants in each event. Events were positioned as an adventurous leisure activity for active individuals. The title sponsor is a popular outdoor clothing and equipment store in Australia, emphasising the event as leisure participation with the tagline being ‘*you’ve got 52 weekends- make the most of them*’. The events themselves have since been dropped by this sponsor, but event organiser is still involved in their continuing promotion. Buckley (2003) and Cater (2005) have illustrated the importance of the outdoor retail sector in the promotion of adventure tourism more broadly, and this is further evidence of the alignment of modern leisure consumption practices with themes of adventure.

Methods

In order to understand participation in adventure racing, an online survey was sent to participants through the event organiser. Initially participants were approached through a newsletter link, although low response rates prompted a follow up email

directly to the participants. This direct approach had a much higher response rate, and in the end 717 respondents completed the questionnaire. This research note will discuss: a) motivations for participating; b) how participation relates to participation in other adventurous activity and events; and c) participant travel behaviour to the events. Results for this research note are presented at the whole of sample level, without detailed analysis of any sub groups within the cohort. We focus on descriptive statistics as these are more useful to all stakeholders (Cater, 2017).

Results

Three quarters of respondents were male, as these events are marketed primarily to this gender. Research has noted that when female participation is promoted in adventure activities, it is often done so alongside shorter races for children, alluding to inferior capabilities and reinforcing a gender bias (Doran, Schofield and Low, 2018). Such bias is also evident in recent popularity of mud races such as ‘Tough Mudder’, which rely on a dominant ‘masculine and militaristic character’ (Weedon, 2015). Participation in adventure races is dominated by thirty-somethings, who have established expertise in relevant disciplines and are able to afford specialist equipment (figure 1). Participation rates then decline steadily over this age group, with less than 10% over 50. Participants were well educated, with over 2/3 possessing a university education.

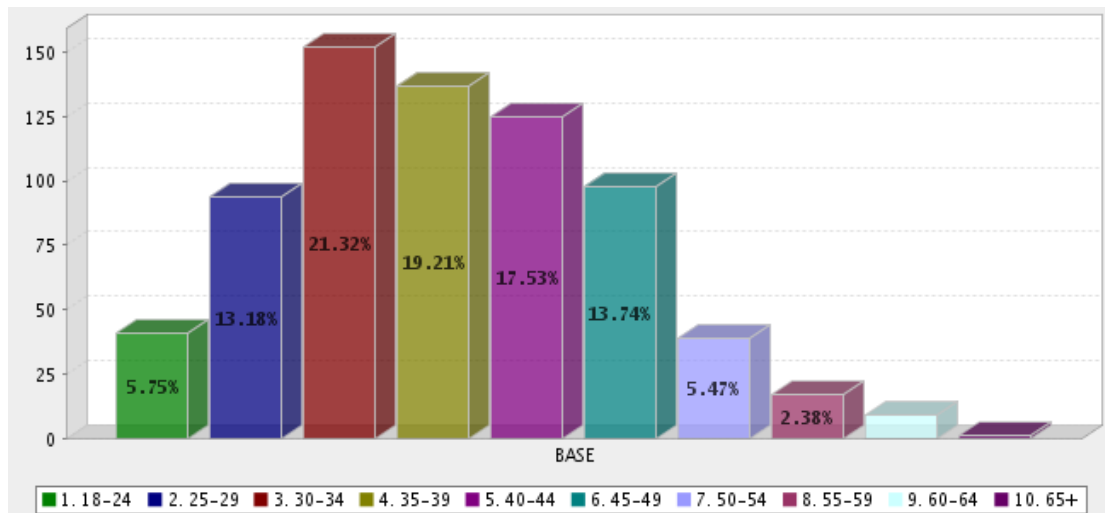


Figure 1: Age profile of respondents participating in Anaconda Adventure Races

Motivations for participating in adventure racing were split into six areas, intellectual; social; physical; escape; adventure; and nature, building on categories identified by Cater (2008). Individual statements were ranked on a seven point scale, and all items on average received moderate to strong agreement, with the exception of low interest in *expanding knowledge* in the intellectual category (mean= 3.77). Other intellectual aspects were also among the lower motivations. Social aspects were important, particularly as the majority of participants were participating as part of a team, with only a fifth completing the whole event individually. Whilst the desire to *meet new people* was relatively neutral, *interaction* (mean=5.4) and *completing the challenge with friends* (mean= 5.85) were valued. Physical aspects were among the strongest motivations, but these seem to be individually focused rather than competitive, with strongest agreement for *challenging own abilities* (mean=6.3) and *keeping in shape* (mean=6.13).



Figure 2: Motivations for participating in adventure racing

Escape items had only lower agreement, perhaps as a reflection of the relatively high intensity aspects of the adventure race, with only stress relief scoring slightly more than some agreement (mean=5.1). However the ‘adventurous’ aspects to the race were significant, with all items scoring significant agreement, risky activity scoring slightly lower (mean=5.33) than thrilling (mean=5.96) or adventurous (mean=6.07) participation motivations. It was also of some importance that the adventure race was different to more regular exercise (mean=5.45), a point we return to in looking at participants general sports participation. The natural setting of the events was important, with competing in nature (mean=6.03) and the surroundings

(mean=5.85) both achieving high mean scores. Challenging nature was of lower importance (mean=5.04), in common with earlier work on general adventure tourism participants (Cater, 2006).

Participation in more general sports events was not unusual as nearly 70% of competitors competed in an organised sporting event more than twice a year.

However, there was a strong novelty factor in participating in such adventure racing events, as three-quarters of participants had competed in 5 or less adventure races. This novelty positions adventure racing in the mind of competitors, with 92% of participants agreeing that ‘adventure racing is fun’.

Participants were very physically active, with 80% exercising more than 6 hours a week, although only a proportion of this was deemed to be specifically for adventure racing. One part of the survey asked participants to explain the relationship between adventure racing and individual sports they engaged in regularly. Perhaps unsurprisingly, participants most frequently participated in one of the four disciplines which were part of the adventure race (kayaking, swimming, mountain biking and running) (figure 3).

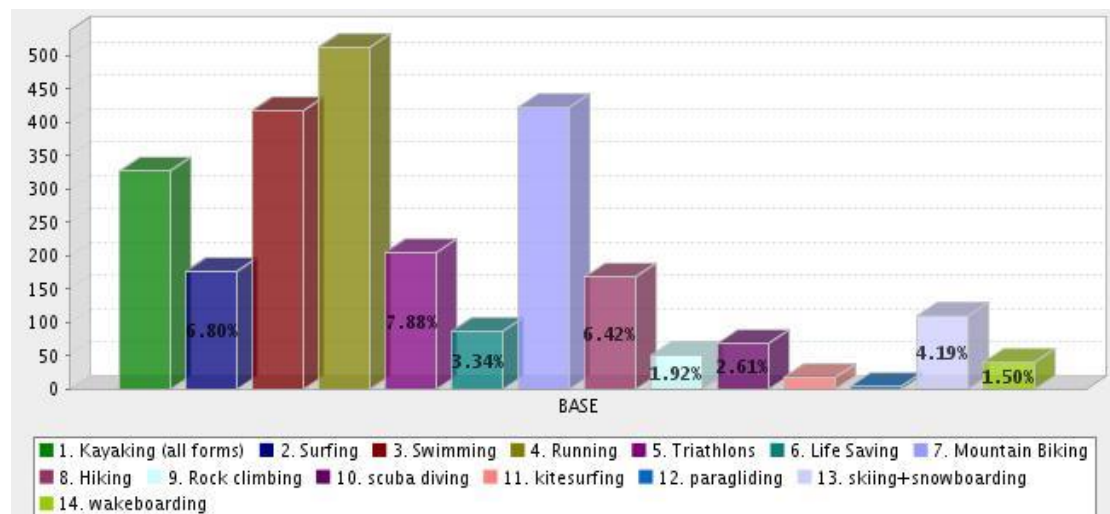


Figure 3: Regular participant participation in specific sports (Multiple responses possible)

These results were similar when asked how participants would define themselves (figure 4), with these four sports being the most popular along with triathlons, although 15% of participants were keen not to be defined by sport participation. Nevertheless, participants did feel aligned to the identity of adventure racing, with 60% moderate agreement with the phrase “Adventure racing says a lot about who I am”. Thus there is strong narrative capital gained by participation in such events, providing stories for adventure racers to construct their identity. This is well illustrated in the publication *“The Thrill of Victory, The Agony of My Feet: Tales from the World of Adventure Racing”* (Jamison, Moslow-Benway, and Stover, 2005).

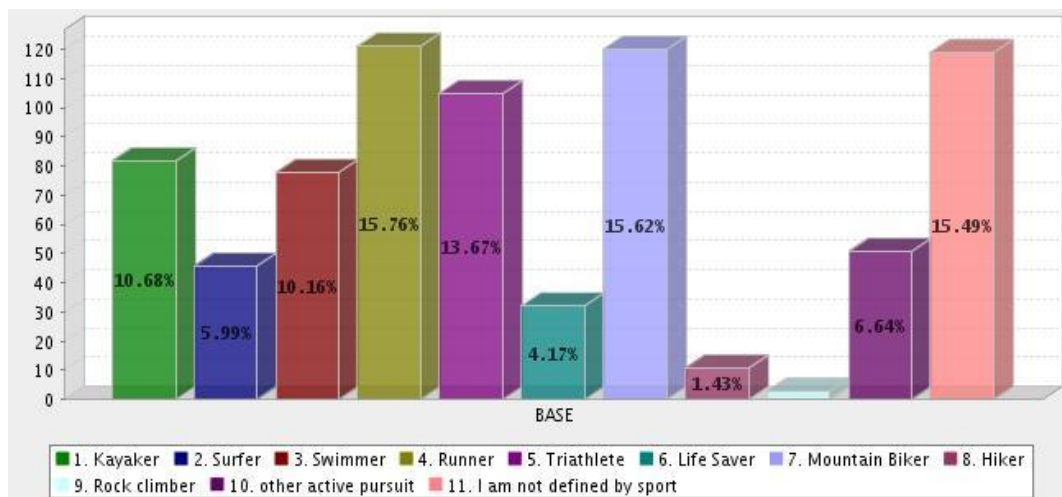


Figure 4: Participant sporting identity: *Of this list, how would you define yourself?* (single response only)

Lastly the survey would suggest that there is only a limited overlap between adventure racing and tourism activity. Only 27% arranged holidays around adventure racing and less than 20% felt that adventure racing was a major reason for travel. However, the high activity rates of participants is further noted by nearly all (>90%) of the respondents agreeing that they liked to do adventurous activities whilst on holiday. Therefore, whilst there is a limited direct link between adventure races and tourism, there is an indirect link between adventure racing and adventure tourism, in that participants in the former are likely to engage in the latter activities when on holiday. Further, as the adventure racing market matures there may be greater tourism potential as 85% would like to do more adventure races in the future.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that adventure racing is an important part of the growing interest in adventure activity, and has important implications for health and wellbeing, as illustrated in the results. Participants are motivated to engage in adventure racing in particular by adventure, nature and physical aspects (Figure 2). At the softer, team oriented end of such events, social aspects are also important. Thus the qualitative psychosocial benefits identified by Mykeltun & Mazza (2016) in extreme adventure racing have similar quantitative tropes in the soft adventure racing segment in this study. A minority of participants see themselves as 'adventure racers', as most have an alternate discipline, and see soft adventure racing as a fun diversion from their main sport. Participants are already physically active so there may not be much potential in adventure racing as a mechanism for encouraging greater sport participation, although its high profile and association with outdoor retail stores does promote active lifestyles. Of course, one may critique the degree to which these stores promote activity over consumption in the broader population, however one must

recognise the aspirational potential of such partnerships. Indeed, whilst this study demonstrates there is limited travel connected to these particular events, respondents did indicate a preference for active holidays, illustrating the continuing growth of adventure tourism more broadly.

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