

Service Quality Experience and Customers' Behavioural Intentions in Active Sport Tourism

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the role played by experience in the loyalty and intent to return of sports tourists to a running race. The data for this study were collected through an online questionnaire filled in by 984 participants of one of the most important international running races in Italy. A regression analysis was conducted to evaluate the data. The results showed that aesthetic dimensions (the valence and the venue) were the principal determinant of loyalty for active sports tourists. The principal determinants of the intent to return were the venue and the technical quality (the value and the challenge). This study provides suggestions for future research and gives useful insights into managerial implications for sports tourism management.

Keywords

Experience, Service Quality, Sport Tourism, Intent to Return, Loyalty

1. Introduction

Several authors have argued that experiential components should be included in the research on consumer behaviour. The experiential perspective, indeed, goes beyond the mere consideration of the “relatively objective features” [1] of the services provided, and also considers the importance of the “symbolic, hedonic, and aesthetic nature of consumption” [1].

In sporting events, many elements contribute to forming an experience as individuals' direct participation [2] and immersion [3]. Participation and immersion are considered components of the experience quality, and are relative to the level of integration between consumers and the different components of an experience during its consumption [4].

Analysis of sporting events has been considered important since these can be used as touristic attractions by destinations [5]-[7]. It has been found that the event in itself is one of the main reasons for travelling to the destination hosting a sporting event [8]. Furthermore some authors found that the hosting sporting events can be a strategy to reach different aims: to improve the destination's image, differentiate its tourism products [9] and improve tourist seasonality [10].

In literature on sporting events one of the topics mainly discussed is about determinants of behavioural intentions. Research on the determinants of behavioural intentions (the intent to return and loyalty) of sports tourists is important as it may help tourism event organizers to identify the factors that could contribute to enhancing tourists' satisfaction, thus, leading to an event's success.

In this work we investigate the determinants of behavioural intentions in the context of active sport tourists, in particular a running event. The term of active sports tourists [11] refers to people who travel to the place where a sporting event is organized and actively participate in that event [12] [13]. Recreational runners have been considered in this category [12] [14] as non-elite sporting competitions [7] attract a lot of participants, which have often been used in destination marketing.

Several studies have developed the theoretical framework to study the determinants of behavioural intentions in sports tourism [15]-[17]. However, they have not provided any empirical support to their model. Despite the interest demonstrated, there is a general lack of empirical research focusing on active sports tourists, particularly, the aspects of destination and event experience that positively influence behavioural intentions to re-participate in an event [18].

In the post event phase, active sport tourists tend to make attributions of the sporting event experience in terms of organizational, social, environmental, emotional and physical aspects, and evaluate the experience holistically [19]. The understanding of their outcomes, in terms of intent to return and recommendation to others, can be useful for sport event organizers to favour an events success.

The intent of this paper is two-fold. On the one hand, it aims to investigate the dimensions of service quality in an experiential perspective in an active sport tourism related context. On the other, it focuses on the impact of the perceived sporting event quality on different sports tourists' behavioural intentions (*i.e.* the intent to return and loyalty, the latter in terms of recommendation and word of mouth references to the event to others).

2. Service Quality and Experience in Sports Tourism

Several researchers in literature have adopted different conceptualizations of service quality perceptions. Service quality has been described as "the extent to which a service meets or exceeds customer expectations" [20].

Among the most important studies on the conceptualization and measurement of service quality perceptions are the ones by Grönroos [21] [22] and the ones of Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry [23]. Grönroos [21] defines service quality in terms of

functional and technical qualities. While “technical quality” refers to the outcome of service, “the functional quality” refers to the service delivery process and, in particular, to the customer’s perception of his/her interaction with employees. Parasuraman *et al.* [23], in their SERVQUAL model, identify five dimensions the consumer considers while evaluating service quality: tangible elements, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. According to the SERVQUAL model, consumers evaluate services on the basis of the gap between expectations about service, their delivery and their perceptions of the performance of service received. Exceeding customer expectation has been considered important for customer loyalty [24].

Other authors, adopting Rust and Oliver’s [25] view, proposed a new conceptualization of the service quality based on three factors: consumer-employee interaction (functional quality), outcome quality (technical quality) and environment quality [26]. All these conceptualizations, however, have not been considered universal as the dimension of service depends on the type of service examined [27]. These have been considered unsuitable for the entertainment industry where it may be useful to include the aesthetic dimension of a service [28].

In sporting events, it has been suggested that the aesthetic dimension enables the discovery of the experiential aspects of service which focus on the symbolic, hedonic and aesthetic nature of consumption [1] [28]. On the basis of experiential perspective, marketing managers should consider the “explosion of subjectivity” which is the “deeper involvement of individual subjectivity in terms of emotions and feelings that each consumer has in the interactions with the products” [29]. The understanding of experiential view is important in tourism where the emotional aspect and the experiential benefits characterize the process evaluation and the choices of consumers and where the experience has been described as “the subjective mental state felt by participants” [30].

In the seminal work of Pine and Gilmore [31] which defines the experience economy, the interest towards experience is based on the possibility that well designed experience builds customer loyalty [2] [31] [32].

The concept of experience has been defined by different authors. According to Pine and Gilmore [31] an “experience occurs whenever a company intentionally uses services as the stage and goods as props to engage an individual”. Schmitt [33] state that experiences “replace functional values”, and are considered the main marketing benefits since these “provide sensory, emotional, cognitive, behavioural and relational values”.

Describing the context of river rafting trips, Arnould and Price [34] refer to “extraordinary experience” as “unusual events... characterized by high levels of emotional intensity and experience”. These are typical of situations where the subject is engaged mentally and physically [35] with the aim to reach an objective. These experiences depend on situations in which both capabilities and challenges are of a high level [36]. Both these factors characterized the participation in sports events.

“Experience is the outcome of participation in a set of activities within a social context... an experience involves learning during a period of time when customers interact

with different elements of a context created by the service provider in the course of this interaction, customers and service providers jointly create a unique, context-specific experience” [37].

Analysing the services in an experiential perspective, some authors refer to “experience quality” as the satisfaction at the transaction level to differentiate it from those of service quality that is referred to as service attributes [38]. Management provides services and how the customer uses them contributes to the creation of the experience quality; therefore, the experience can be determined by the service provided and the experienced emotional state of the tourist [39]. The quality of experience can be influenced by service providers, but depends on how tourists use the services provided. Indeed, tourists create their experience through an interaction with the destination and the element they bring to the process [40]. Other authors, argue that the “co-creation of experience allow creating the uniqueness of value for customers” [41].

In summary, the “quality of experience” refers to the specific benefits people obtain and is different from overall satisfaction, that is, visitors’ levels of satisfaction towards their total experience with the recreation service [39].

3. The Influence of Service Quality on Intent to Return and Loyalty of Active Sport Tourists

Several research have examined the relationship between service quality and consumer behaviour [20] [42].

In many studies, service quality has been considered an antecedent to consumer response [43]. In marketing literature, psychologists have proposed the “hierarchy of effects model”, explaining that behaviour consists of three dimensions: cognitive, affective and conative [44]. A cognitive response concerns the evaluation of services involved from the point of view of knowledge, an affective responses refers to satisfaction with the service, and a conative response concerns the behavioural intention, such as the intent to purchase. A behavioural intention (or a conative loyalty) has been defined as “a brand-specific commitment to repurchase... a loyalty state that contains what, at first, appears to be the deeply held commitment to buy” [45].

Zeithaml *et al.* [20] posit that overall service quality was positively related to loyalty.

The traditional view of service quality in terms of functional and technical quality has been related to customer loyalty. In particular, it has been found that both technical and functional qualities are significant and positively related to customer loyalty [46].

As Holbrook and Hirschman [1] believed that consumers are influenced by experience with a product, they have conceptualized a comprehensive model of the consumer response system that includes, in each dimension of the consumer response, the experiential phenomena, which are sensory responses (such as imagery, emotions, and feeling) [47]. Indeed, a number of studies have demonstrated the relationship between the experience and consumer behaviour. For example, positive sales experiences have been found to be determinants of the intent to repurchase. Customers with a positive experience have been shown to have more favourable behavioural intentions towards

the concerned product [20].

Others authors [48] have posited that the effect of the perceived service quality on behavioural intentions was mediated by satisfaction (the experience quality), particularly in the tourism industry. However, their results have demonstrated that the impact of the perceived service quality on behavioural intentions is stronger when the direct relationship is considered instead of when the relationship is mediated by satisfaction. Still, within the research on tourism, several studies have shown the relationship between the service quality and consumer behaviour. Behavioural intentions are influenced by a high level of tourists' psychological responses to particular benefits [49].

The service quality has been found to be a predictor of the intention to revisit also in different studies on sports tourism, such as tourists at a golf club [50] and visitors to a wildlife refuge [39], among others.

Cronin, Brady and Hult [51] state that the relationship between service quality and behavioural intention varied in different industries. In particular, they found that in participative sport, service quality has a direct effect on behavioural intentions.

In event tourism, Getz [52] suggests that studying the "needs, motivations, attitudes and expectations" that the consumer brought to the event tourism experience allow understanding future behaviour.

To study consumer behaviour in sporting events in an experiential perspective a new framework has been proposed.

Yoshida and James [28], starting from a study by Pine and Gilmore [31], have proposed a new service quality model for sporting events that include the aesthetic components of the service quality, along with its technical and functional aspects. The aesthetic dimension has been defined by authors as "customers overall perceptions of the aesthetically pleasing features of a service environment and ancillary products" [28]. According to these authors, the aesthetic component should not be considered a part of the functional dimension, as other authors have done, but rather as a distinct dimension of the service quality model. They have considered three dimensions of the service quality, each with sub-dimensions: the aesthetic quality (atmosphere and experience); the technical quality (opponent characteristics and the player performance); and the functional quality (the interaction between customers and functional service as front-line employees and facility functions).

This perspective recognizes the emotional aspects of consumption [2], which is considered just as important as the product and service functionality [53].

Following these contributions described in current literature on consumer behaviour in sports tourism, we have developed a theoretical and interpretative framework consisting of three dimensions of service quality in active sports tourism: functional quality, aesthetic quality and technical quality.

3.1. Functional Quality as Determinant of Active Sport Tourists' Intent to Return and Loyalty

Functional quality is generally considered to be strictly related to the evaluation of ser-

vice delivery which could include aspects such as personnel, announcements, parking and other ancillary service factors. All these aspects are considered to be of particular interest to sports marketers [54] where the interaction with frontline employees has been considered one of the sub-dimensions of functional quality [28].

Among the most studied dimensions of functional quality, one of the most analysed is relative to the importance of the quality of interaction with the staff. Many findings in service marketing, in different contexts, have suggested that interactions with the service provider or service staff are crucial and, in some cases, the most important factor in predicting the service quality [55] [56].

Staff interaction quality, *i.e.*, the interaction between a service provider and customers, focuses on how a service is delivered [22]. It concerns the relationship with the service provider and also implies a good personal service (such as staff attitude, knowledge and skills). Pullman and Gross [32] found that the creation of an “emotional connection” by the service provider during the customers’ experience ensures the loyalty of the customer. In sports event tourism, the quality of staff interaction refers to the quality of the relationship between staff members and participants as perceived by the latter wherein the staff provides support to participants. It has been suggested that the relationship with the staff may be an antecedent to the intent to return to sporting events [17], and may positively impact the loyalty of visitors attending an international dance festival [57].

The context of active sports tourism may have some specificities. In an active sporting event, such as a marathon, the interaction with staff may represent a key variable in affecting the intent to return and loyalty. Thus, we have hypothesized the following:

H_p 1: The staff attitude in active sports tourism events positively influences the intent to return and loyalty.

Another sub-dimension of the functional quality is relative to the facility function, which Yoshida and James [28] refer also to as informational aspects. The importance of this element for the functional quality in active sporting events has also been suggested in previous studies in other contexts, such as festivals [58], where the information service effect was proved to directly impact tourists’ loyalty to the event. In this study, we want to demonstrate, rather, the key and direct impact of information service organization on the behavioural intentions of active sports tourists. Thus, we have posited that:

H_p 2: The information service quality in active sport tourism events positively influences the intent to return and loyalty.

3.2. Aesthetic Quality as Determinant of Active Sports Tourists’ Intent to Return and Their Loyalty

The main sub-dimensions of aesthetic quality are considered to be valence (or experience) and venue.

Experience has been considered an essential component of aesthetic quality [28]. Brady and Cronin [26] refer to valence to indicate the outcome of consumer experience, *i.e.* a positive or negative evaluation of a service experience. It has been linked to

a service outcome; for example, in sporting events it can depend on the result of the game [26]. Thus, valence refers to the quality of the live experience that a consumer undergoes while participating in an event.

The experience quality “involves not only the attributes provided by a supplier, but also the attributes brought to the opportunity by the visitor” [40]. This definition of experience quality (or valence) includes the psychological component of the outcome received by visitors involved in touristic activities.

Tian-Cole and Scott [49] have argued that a touristic experience consists of stages: the performance quality, the experience quality, the overall satisfaction and the revisit intentions. The authors have introduced a concept of experience quality that differentiate it from the overall satisfaction. In their work, performance quality refers to destination attributes that are managed by the service provider; the experience quality includes the benefits people get from a trip; overall satisfaction is defined as the global feeling associated with the trip, and revisit intentions concern the intent to return to the venue in the future. It has been found that the experience has a positive influence on expectation [59] and purchase intentions [60]. In the tourism sector in particular, experience quality has a direct positive effect on the future behavioural intentions of participants of a festival [38] and an indirect positive effect on behavioural intentions of visitors of a water park due to the presence of customer satisfaction as the variable of mediation [61].

In our study, the valence, especially the experience quality that we have considered within the aesthetic quality dimension [28], has been considered a factor influencing the intent to return and the loyalty of sports tourists.

H_p 3: The perception of valence in active sport tourism events positively influences the intent to return and loyalty.

A second component of the aesthetic dimension refers to “the interaction between the customer and the aesthetically pleasing characteristics of a service environment” [28].

The setting is considered to be a main component of the consumption experience [62] along with the actors and the performance.

Some authors have argued that the perceptions of the physical environment affect service quality perception [26]. The physical environment in which a service is performed is considered a key determinant of satisfaction with a service experience [63], so as to allow customer participation and connection with the event, especially in case of a memorable context [31].

In the context of sports tourism, two important dimensions have particularly been considered: the cultural experience of physical activity and the cultural experience of the location [64]. Therefore, the dimension of the environment may be understood as embodying the characteristics of the venue in which an event is organized [17]. Active sport tourists are particularly interested in an environment in which they can achieve their optimal performance [65] and in a sports venue that provides “more comprehensive entertainment objective” [66].

The evaluation of the physical environment has been found to be positively related to customer loyalty behaviours [67], even in case of a sports event. Indeed, it has been shown that the interaction of a place along with activity and people is “central to the sports tourism experience” [68].

Sports tourists accord importance to the services offered by the sports tourism destination as a relevant factor for their choice of destination. Destination image and attitude towards the destination influence the choice of a destination even in the case of running sports events [13] [69] and the revisit intentions of a sport event [18].

In sports tourism, the servicescape influences consumer behaviour intention and this impact can be mediated by other factors [66].

In our study, the aspects of the environment, that we have defined as the venue quality, have been considered to be the factors influencing the intent to return and the loyalty of active sports tourists.

Thus:

H_p 4: The perception of the characteristics of the venue in active sport tourism events positively influences the intent to return and loyalty.

3.3. Technical Quality as Determinant of Active Sports Tourists' Intent to Return and Loyalty

There is consensus in the literature that technical quality refers to outcome of service, the factor that the customer evaluates after service delivery [22].

In sports tourism, this dimension has been considered to be formed by most components: “opponent characteristics” and “player performance” [28]; competitiveness of the game, performance of the team, team's effort and the level of play [70].

We agree with these authors that the first sub-dimension of technical quality in sports tourism is linked to the level of game competition or challenge.

The dimension of competence-mastery has been considered an important motivation factor for participants in leisure activities. This dimension refers to the “extent to which individuals engage in leisure activities in order to achieve, master, challenge and compete” [71]. The dimension of competition has also been seen to be a motivation factor in the tourism sector [72] and, in particular, a major motivation factor for active participation in a sporting event [73]. The component of competition has been considered by event participants to be an important part of the sport tourism environment [74]. The level of competition or challenge can influence positively or negatively the sports tourist's experience. For example, in case of “serious competitors”, who are individuals with high levels of competence, a low level of competition can generate an emotion of boredom [75].

This dimension is important in terms of experience as well. It has been found that an “event experience can boost the personal capabilities and characteristics to new levels” [3].

In sports tourism, the level of competition has been considered to be one of the elements directly influencing the quality of the sports tourism, which, in turn, influences

the satisfaction and the sports tourists' intent to return [17]. Within the “competition motive” dimension, research comparing one's own ability with another's, has been identified as “a challenge factor”, which refers to the ability to challenge oneself and others [76].

In our study, the dimensions of challenge have been considered factors influencing the intent to return and the loyalty of active sports tourists. Thus:

H_p 5: The perception of the challenge in active sport tourism events positively influences the intent to return and loyalty.

In active sport tourism, the outcome of the service or evaluation process is linked to the experience the customer has during the event. Sports tourism being a hedonic service, the outcome of the service is evaluated from an experiential perspective [66].

Considering the active participant, we do not consider as a second dimension the “player performance”, a dimension that has been found to be a sub-dimension of technical quality for passive sports tourists [28]. We think that for active participants, the outcome or value created by experience is the other important sub-dimension of technical quality. In this kind of experience, the value is co-created with the customer [41]. Babin, Darden, and Griffin [77] distinguish between utilitarian and hedonic values. They argue that value has to recognize both utilitarian and hedonic outcomes because the sum of these is the outcome of service experience.

On the first type of value, the utilitarian value, different definitions have been used in literature. Zeithaml [78] has defined value as “the consumer's overall assessment of the utility of a product based on perceptions of what is received and what is given”. Values have also been defined as a trade-off between the perceived quality and the perceived monetary sacrifice [79]. The higher the gap between the perceived quality and perceived sacrifice, the higher the perceived value will be. Zeithaml [78] has identified four dimensions of the perceived value: value as low price, value as whatever the consumer wants in a product, value as the quality obtained for the price paid, and value as what the consumers gets for what he gives. Petrick and Backman [16] have identified five dimensions of the perceived value: quality, monetary price, non-monetary price, reputation and emotional response.

In tourism literature, Holbrook's approach of value has been considered useful because it allows “surpassing” of “the utilitarian approaches” [80] based on the trade-off between quality and price, and consider the emotional component of value, “a kind of effect, and a response to service delivery” [81], the “outcome of an experience” and, in particular, its evaluation [81].

The measure of perceived value is important because it has been considered the most important determinant of repurchase intentions [82], better than either the satisfaction [83] or the quality [51].

In sports tourism, the perceived value directly and positively influences behavioural intention [66]. For example, the perceived value is believed to affect the intention to revisit a destination of an entertainment vacationer [84] and golf travellers [15] [16]. In sports tourism field, value perceptions influence behavioural intentions.

The perceived value is also a good predictor of consumer loyalty [82] [85]. In tourism, perceived value has been found to be an antecedent to destination loyalty [86].

In our study, the dimensions of the perceived value have been considered to be factors influencing the intent to return and the loyalty of active sports tourists. Thus:

Hp 6: The perception of value in active sport tourism events positively influences the intent to return and loyalty.

Based on our hypotheses we proposed the following model (see **Figure 1**).

4. Methodology

In the analysis, the variables were measured using scales already validated in previous studies carried out in a similar context. The summated variables were formulated. In order to verify the scales' internal reliability, Cronbach's alpha was computed [87]. **Table 1** gives the reported alpha values.

4.1. Variables

The measures used in this study were taken from previously conducted studies in a similar context, and adapted based on comments of two representatives of the management of the Firenze Marathon. Responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale with 1 referring to "strongly disagree" and 5 referring to "strongly agree". (The items of questionnaire are in Appendix).

4.2. Independent Variables

4.2.1. Functional Quality

Staff attitude, or the quality of interaction with the staff related to their service attitude, was measured with the three-items scale developed by Brady and Cronin [26], and

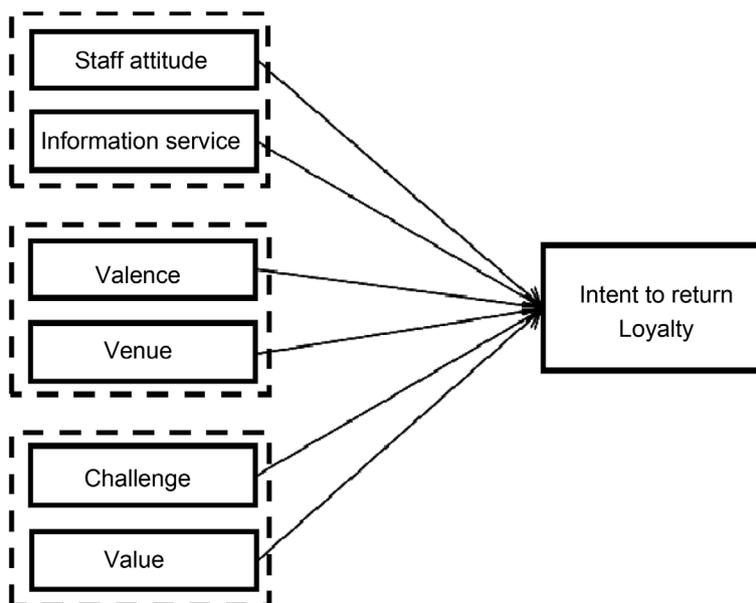


Figure 1. The model.

Table 1. Mean, Standard deviation, Cronbach's alpha and correlation (N = 984).

| | Mean | SD | Alpha | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 |
|------------------------|------|-------|-------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---|
| 1. Intention to return | 4.06 | 0.763 | 0.692 | 1 | | | | | | | |
| 2. Loyalty | 4.58 | 0.719 | 0.884 | 0.479** | 1 | | | | | | |
| 3. Venue | 4.38 | 0.634 | 0.778 | 0.366** | 0.645** | 1 | | | | | |
| 4. Valence | 4.44 | 0.696 | 0.893 | 0.389** | 0.730** | 0.540** | 1 | | | | |
| 5. Challenge | 4.00 | 0.797 | 0.741 | 0.325** | 0.384** | 0.394** | 0.418** | 1 | | | |
| 6. Value | 3.82 | 0.754 | 0.734 | 0.384** | 0.605** | 0.491** | 0.644** | 0.419** | 1 | | |
| 7. Information service | 4.33 | 0.631 | 0.840 | 0.350** | 0.546** | 0.446** | 0.613** | 0.375** | 0.502** | 1 | |
| 8. Staff attitude | 4.29 | 0.734 | 0.895 | 0.308** | 0.450** | 0.336** | 0.577** | 0.293** | 0.434** | 0.557** | 1 |

Note: Sig. ** < 0.01.

originally termed employee attitude. An example: “You can count on the employees at the Firenze Marathon staff being friendly”.

Information service was measured with a six-item scale readapted for this specific study. The original scale by Yoon and colleagues [58] consisted of 4 items. An example: “Signage along the course enhanced to understanding information and direction”. In this study, two further factors were added to the original scale. They were: “Firenze Marathon’s information point Expo was effective in providing information” and “The Firenze Marathon stand where the competitor kit was delivered was well organized”.

4.2.2. Aesthetic Quality

Valence refers to the quality of the tourism experience. It was measured with a three-item scale developed by Brady and Cronin [26]. An example: “I believe Firenze Marathon tried to give me a good experience”.

Venue was measured with a four-item scale developed by Shonk [88]. An example: “Florence ranks very high as a sport venue”.

4.2.3. Technical Quality

Challenge, or the level of race competition, was measured with a three-item scale originally developed by Ryan and Lockyer [76]. An example: “Firenze Marathon is an event that is a challenge”.

For value, a measure developed by Yoon and colleagues [58] was used. The scale was comprised of three items and was originally called festival value. An example: “Firenze Marathon was worth what I spent (money, time and effort)”.

4.2.4. Dependent Variables

Loyalty, that is the fidelity to an event expressed in terms of intention to recommend the event to others and promote it by word-of-mouth, was measured with a two-item scale. The measurement was first published in a work by Martínez Caro and Martínez Garcia [89], and comprised three items. However, specifically for this study, which also considers the intent to return as a dependent variable, the item included in the original scale of loyalty developed by Martínez Caro and Martínez Garcia [89], which is referred

to as the intention to return, was deleted. Besides, when computing the scale's internal reliability, the exclusion of that item increased the Cronbach's alpha value. An example: "I will tell my friends my satisfaction with this race".

The intent to return was measured with the three-item scale developed by Shonk [88]. An example of a question is: "I plan to return to Florence for another sporting event".

4.2.5. Data Collection

To test our hypotheses, data was collated through an on-line questionnaire administered to participants of the 30th edition of the Firenze Marathon held in November 2013.

It is the second among the most frequented marathons in Italy and draws more than 10,000 participants every year. It is an international and "unique" event held annually at the end of November in Florence. According to the organizers, the Firenze Marathon is among the top 20 marathons in the world in terms of quality and attendee numbers.

After the event, the Firenze Marathon organizers inserted the link to the questionnaire on their official website. Moreover, they sent an email invite along with the link to the participants of the 2013 edition presenting the research and asking them to respond to the questionnaire. A reminder was also emailed after a month.

Of the 11,332 participants, around 2000 could not be reached directly by the email. At the end, 984 questionnaires were completed and considered for the purpose of this study, thus resulting in a response rate of almost 11% which is considered as acceptable as the general lower response rate demonstrated for web survey [90] and the controversial evidences suggesting that "a low response rate does not necessarily entail nonresponse error" [91].

Descriptive statistics on the data gathered showed that Italians accounted for 83.7 per cent of the sample. The majority (83.5%) of the respondents were men. A large number of the participants had either a high school diploma (38.2%) or a university degree (32.1%).

5. Findings

The data was analysed by using a statistical software (SPSS 20). Each variable was computed as an average of the answers on different item scales. The mean, standard deviation and correlations have been reported in **Table 1**.

In order to test the hypothesis, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted. Besides the variance inflation factor (VIF) was controlled to measure the degree of multi-collinearity. The highest value was 2.496. Thus, all values were less than 10 as suggested by Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, and Tatham *et al.* [92].

The results of the regression analysis have been presented in **Table 2** and **Table 3**. The multiple regression analysis was used to test whether the three dimensions of the service quality significantly predicted the two behavioral intentions: loyalty and the intent to return of customers.

Table 2. Regression analysis on loyalty (N = 983).

| <i>Variable</i> | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 |
|---------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Staff attitude | 0.212*** | | | -0.004 |
| Information service | 0.427*** | | | 0.078** |
| Valence | | 0.539*** | | 0.426*** |
| Venue | | 0.354*** | | 0.315*** |
| Challenge | | | 0.158*** | -0.005 |
| Value | | | 0.539*** | 0.141*** |
| R ² adj | 32.8*** | 62.1*** | 38.5*** | 63.6*** |

Note: Sig. ***<0.001; **<0.01; *<0.05.

Table 3. Regression analysis on intent to return (N = 983).

| <i>Variable</i> | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 |
|---------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Staff attitude | 0.164*** | | | 0.072* |
| Information service | 0.258*** | | | 0.080* |
| Valence | | 0.270*** | | 0.078 |
| Venue | | 0.220*** | | 0.147*** |
| Challenge | | | 0.199*** | 0.126*** |
| Value | | | 0.300*** | 0.137*** |
| R ² adj | 13.9*** | 18.4*** | 17.8*** | 22.3*** |

Note: Sig. ***<0.001; **<0.01; *<0.05.

In particular, factors related to the functional dimension of the service quality *i.e.*, the staff attitude and the information service, were entered into the first model of the analysis; the proportion of variance explained by these two variables was significant for the loyalty ($R^2_{adj} = 0.33$, $p < 0.001$), as well as for the intent to return ($R^2_{adj} = 0.14$, $p < 0.001$).

In the second model, only the two aesthetic dimension *i.e.*, the valence and the value, were included, which revealed a significant impact on both dependent variables, the loyalty ($R^2_{adj} = 0.62$, $p < 0.001$) and the intent to return ($R^2_{adj} = 0.18$, $p < 0.001$).

The second model was followed by a third block entry of the technical dimensions of the service quality *i.e.*, the challenge and the value. A positive relationship with the loyalty ($R^2_{adj} = 0.39$, $p < 0.001$) and the intent to return ($R^2_{adj} = 0.18$, $p < 0.001$) was also demonstrated for these variables.

In the end, all six predictors were included in both equations in the fourth model. The models had significant results for both the loyalty ($R^2_{adj} = 0.64$, $p < 0.001$) and the intent to return ($R^2_{adj} = 0.22$, $p < 0.001$) and explained the higher variance level compared to the first three models in the two analyses.

However, when all factors of the quality of service were considered together, some of them lost their significant impact on the dependent variable.

In the regression analysis shown in **Table 2**, the results demonstrated that the staff attitude and the challenge did not significantly predict the loyalty, while the valence, in **Table 3**, lost its significance in predicting the intent to return.

1) *Functional quality as determinant of loyalty and intent to return*

According to results presented in model 4 of **Table 2** and **Table 3**, the staff attitude affecting tourists' intent to return in a positive and significant way ($\beta = 0.072, p < 0.05$) however in contrast to our hypothesis the staff attitude did not predict the loyalty in a significant and positive way; therefore hypothesis 1 is only partially supported.

The information service had a positive and significant impact on both the loyalty ($\beta = 0.078, p < 0.01$) and the intent to return ($\beta = 0.080, p < 0.05$) thus supporting Hypothesis 2.

2) *Aesthetic quality as determinant of loyalty and intent to return*

The valence and the venue, both aesthetic dimensions, were the two factors with more relevant effects on the loyalty and intent to return.

The venue predicted both the loyalty ($\beta = 0.315, p < 0.001$) and the intent to return ($\beta = 0.147, p < 0.001$) thus supporting hypothesis 4.

The other aesthetic dimension that is the valence affected loyalty ($\beta = 0.426, p < 0.001$) however failed to predict the intent to return and, consequently hypothesis 3 was only partially supported.

3) *Technical quality as determinant of loyalty and intent to return*

The challenge affect tourists intent to return in a positive and significant way ($\beta = 0.126, p < 0.001$) while it did not predict the loyalty. Therefore hypothesis 5 is supporting only for the dimension of intent to return.

The value impact the loyalty ($\beta = 0.141, p < 0.001$) and the intent to return ($\beta = 0.137, p < 0.001$) thus supporting hypothesis 6.

In **Figure 2** we present through a graphical representation the relationships existing

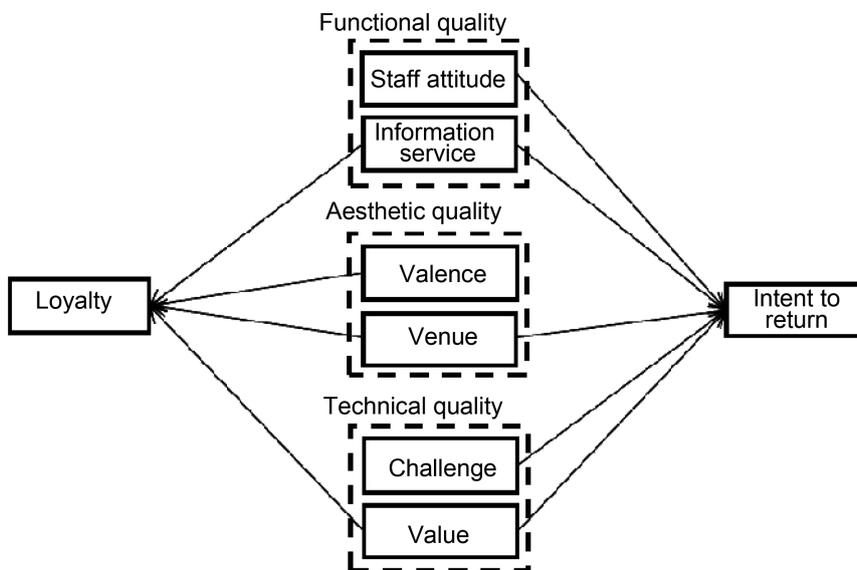


Figure 2. The results.

between the investigated variables.

6. Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to verify the determinants of two distinct active sport tourist behaviours: their intent to return and their loyalty to an event in terms of their intention to recommend the event to others (e.g., friends and family) and promote it by word of mouth.

The results of this study confirmed previous results which claimed that the aesthetic dimension is important for active sports tourism because it allows finding out the experiential aspects of the service quality [28]. In particular, our findings showed that the aesthetic dimension composed of valence and venue quality is the principal determinant of the loyalty of active sport tourists in terms of their intention to recommend the event and promote it by word of mouth. Tourists' intention to promote the event among friends and family and positive word of mouth (*i.e.* loyalty), depends also on two other factors particularly linked to the experience of the event itself in terms of its symbolic and hedonic meanings. These two factors are the value received in terms of technical quality and the information service that represents the more “tangible” dimensions of functional quality.

Therefore, our study increased the knowledge in the field of sports tourism and, in particular, of the determinants of the loyalty of active sports tourists participating in an international event.

The second finding of our study showed that the determinants of the intention to participate in an active sport tourism event are, first of all, just one of the two dimensions of the aesthetic quality—venue. Also, both components of technical quality (the challenge and the value) and functional quality (the information service and the staff attitude) do explain in a significant manner the active sport tourist's intention to return.

The venue quality was confirmed to be a key determinant of the service quality even in the field of active sports tourism. As different authors have found, active sport tourists are not only interested in an environment in which they can achieve their optimal performance [65], but also give importance to the service offered by the sports tourism destination as a relevant factor for their choice of destination in terms of the cultural experience of the location [64]. In this sense, it seems that two different dimensions of the perceived experience affect these two kinds of behaviour. Aspects more related to the importance of service offered by the tourism destination, may have a greater effect on the tourists' loyalty behaviour, expressed in terms of the intention to recommend this event. Aspects related to the relevance of the experience itself in terms of own performance and relational enrichment (e.g., staff interaction) might be more linked to one's own intent to return. In this sense, managers of active sport events should be aware of different mixes of determinants as affecting different kinds of behaviour.

The analysis suggests that the venue is an important element of the competitive advantage of a marathon. The success of sporting events, like marathons, which are re-

producibile in many locations, may depend on the uniqueness of the venue (that is not reproducible) and on the value that organizers create for the participants in terms of the functional and technical qualities offered.

Therefore, our research increased the knowledge in the context of retaining active sports tourists of an event.

Theoretical and Managerial Implications

This work provides a theoretical contribution to sports tourism literature by examining the components of service quality that positively influence the intent to revisit a venue and loyalty to a sporting event in terms of intention to recommend it and promote it through positive word of mouth.

The results of the study have useful implications for organizers of international active sporting events. The success of an international event depends to a large extent on the choice of an appealing destination and on the investments made in transmitting the characteristics of the experience it offers the participants. The abstract and physical attributes can be managed by tourism organizations to develop a specific sports tourist destination brand that contributes to creating an attractive image of a destination in a different market segment.

The context of this work has important implications for sports events to allocate appropriate resources in the factors that play an important role in creating loyalty to the event.

Sports organizers should understand all characters of the active sport tourist experience because they play an important role in the intent to return to the venue and generating loyalty to the event.

Since the service provided at a destination is considered relevant for the choice of destination by active sport tourists [65], sports tourist destination planners have to pay attention to the elements that are considered by active sport tourists to meet their needs with the aim to ensure loyalty behaviour.

“The challenge for destination developers is to close the gap in service quality perceptions by the active pro-sport tourist” [65].

In particular, since the venue is considered the principal factor for the loyalty of an active sport tourist and it is also important for intent to return, the managers should pay more attention to the “environmental area” as it can play an important role in creating positive experience. This is confirmed by other experiences in sports tourism [70].

Another important factor in developing loyalty is relative to valence. All the elements that can contribute to a positive experience have to be considered. In case of a marathon, the events linked to the marathon, such as the marathon expo, play an important role in creating a “memorable experience” [31].

Another component of the experience of active sports tourist is relative to value perceived. Service experience has been described as the functional and emotional value [81]. A running experience is the sum of the value perceived with respect to all services

provided to participants since “value is now centred in the experiences of consumers” [81]. The services offered are the results of the labour of staff. Even though they did not appear significant in the final step of regression from loyalty, the staff were found to be an important variable for the tourists’ own intention to return.

The staff at this kind of event as for the majority of events [93] is formed by volunteers. As recognized in previous studies, volunteers play an important role in terms of economics, tourists satisfaction and benefits for the community hosting the events [94].

To increase the tourists’ intent to return, organizers should pay attention to planning and management of volunteers with the aim to “understand their motivations and expectations as a foundation to developing appropriate recruitment, retention” [95] and develop appropriate training programmes for staff members to provide better service to active sport tourists.

The level of challenge is significant only in the case of intent to return as participants do not give importance to this aspect while recommending the event.

One of the limitations of this study is that we analysed only one event. There is a need for a comparative analysis that considers other kinds of events taking place at different venues. The specificity of the venue, the touristic appeal of Florence, may have influenced the results of our study, which assigns much importance to the venue.

Besides, the study is cross-sectional and variables were measured using a common method and source. Consequently, there may have been some systematic bias (common method variance).

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Appendix. Items of Questionnaire

| <i>Dimensions</i> | Corresponding questions |
|-----------------------------|---|
| <i>Independent variable</i> | |
| Functional quality | <p>Staff attitude</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You can count on the Firenze Marathon staff being friendly • The attitude of Firenze Marathon staff demonstrates their willingness to help me • The attitude of Firenze Marathon staff shows me that they understand my needs <p>Information service</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Firenze Marathon's information point Expo was effective in providing information • The Firenze Marathon stand where the competitor kit was delivered was well organized • On the Firenze Marathon web site it was possible to find all the information about the race • Signage along the course enhanced to understand information on and direction • Information inside the competition kit (map, rules, etc.) were useful and clear • Firenze Marathon staff provided a good guide service |
| Aesthetic quality | <p>Venue</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Florence ranks very high as a sport venue • Florence is well suited to host the Marathon • What makes the Firenze Marathon great is the wise choice of the course • The Firenze Marathon should not be held at Florence <p>Valence</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When I leave Firenze Marathon, I felt that I had a good experience • I believe Firenze Marathon tried to give me a good experience • I believe Firenze Marathon knows the type of experience its participants want |
| Technical quality | <p>Challenge</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Firenze Marathon is a challenge where you challenge yourself • Firenze Marathon is an event that is a challenge • Firenze Marathon is an event where you can challenge others <p>Value</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Firenze Marathon was worth what I spent (money, time, effort) • Firenze Marathon offered me more value than expected • Firenze Marathon offered me more value than did other marathons |
| <i>Dependent variable</i> | |
| | <p>Intent to return</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I plan to attend another Firenze Marathon in the future • I plan to return to Florence for another sporting event • There is no doubt that I will return for another visit to Florence <p>Loyalty</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I will tell my friends my satisfaction with this race • I would recommend this race to a friend |

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