

Can event service quality predict memorable tourism experience in a participatory recurring sport event? The case of Oceanman International

POLYAKOVA, Olga <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6947-2394>>, KARAGIORGOS, Thomas, KONSTANTINIDIS, Konstantinos, NTOVOLI, Apostolia and ALEXANDRIS, Kostas

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**CAN EVENT SERVICE QUALITY PREDICT MEMORABLE TOURISM
EXPERIENCE IN THE CONTEXT OF A PARTICIPATORY RECURRING SPORT
EVENT? THE CASE OF OCEANMAN INTERNATIONAL**

Abstract

This study contributes to the literature on memorable tourism experience in the context of a recurring franchised participatory sport event. It tests the influence of event quality factors (Shonk and Chelladurai, 2008) on the dimensions of the memorable tourism experience (MTE) model and on word-of-mouth communications, in a case study of the Oceanman open water swimming series. Empirical data were collected from swimmers, across ten events in different countries, with a total sample of eight hundred and seventy-eight. The analysis showed that MTEs significantly predicted word-of-mouth communications supporting our hypothesis that service quality is one of MTE antecedents. Six of the seven MTE dimensions were significantly predicted by the four service quality dimensions, with the hedonic and local culture having had the highest predictions. The study has theoretical value for further modelling participants' decision making for repeated behaviour and applied value for identifying critical event attributes which should be properly planned.

Keywords: event participants; service quality; franchised event; memorable tourism experience; swimming.

INTRODUCTION

Fostering an environment that promotes positive tourism experience is a critical task in tourism management, since it is well documented that memorable positive experiences can bring several desired attitudinal and behavioural outcomes, such as repeated behavior, development of positive word-of-mouth and destination branding (Kim, 2018; Zhang et al., 2018). “Memorable tourism experience” (MTE) has been recently proposed as one of the constructs that can be measured with a valid and reliable scale (Kim et al., 2012) and can capture what visitors’ remember or recall after having visited a destination (Kim & Jang, 2016; Park & Santos, 2017).

Memorable experiences in tourism settings have been mainly studied in relation to a destination’s characteristics, aiming to identify those destination attributes that can create positive and long-lasting experiences for visitors (e.g., Kim et al., 2012). It has however been recently proposed that sport events can also influence the development of memorable experiences for spectators, if are planned and delivered properly (Stergiou et al., 2022). We further argue that participatory sport events is a promising area for studying tourism experiences of participants, who can be amateur athletes or just serious leisure participants such as runners, swimmers, bikers etc. Kaplanidou and Gibson (2010) defined such participants as active event sport tourists as they undertake a participatory sports-related travel associated with event participation. The participatory sport events have an experiential nature and they create mainly emotional experiences, which are the most likely to be remembered or recalled by participants (Theodorakis et al., 2019).

Since today there is no published research aiming to study memorable tourism experience in the context of a recurring participatory sport events. It is well documented today that small scale sport events (national or international) have

multiple tourism, economic, social and environmental outcomes for the destination in which they take place (Alexandris et al., 2022). They can also be used as a strategy for destination building and branding (Kaplanidou, 2006), following at the same time the principles of sustainability (Gibson et al., 2012). It is therefore important for event managers to understand which attributes of the sport events are the most important ones for building memorable tourism experience for participants.

The objectives of the study were set as follows:

1. To test the structural validity of the Event Quality and MTE scales in the context of a recurring franchised participatory (swimming) event.
2. To test if the dimensions of the event quality can predict the MTE dimensions.
3. To test if the dimensions of the MTE can predict the word-of-mouth communications of the brand of the swimming event.

STATEMENT OF CONTRIBUTION TO EVENTS-RELATED RESEARCH

This study contributes to the literature in two directions. First, for the first time the construct of memorable tourism experience is studied in the context of a recurring franchised participatory sport event. In previous research in this area spectators of sport events were used as a sample (e.g., Stergiou et al., 2022); in this study active event participants' (swimmers') memorable experiences were studied in a franchised sport event. It is well documented that the motives, expectations and experiences of spectators are completely different from those of active sport participants (Funk et al., 2022). Second, for the first time the influence of event quality factors was tested on each one of the dimensions of the memorable tourism experience model (Kim et al., 2012), and in relation to word-of-mouth communications, in a branded franchised sport event. Such a detailed analysis has theoretical value for further modelling participants'

decision making for repeated behaviour and applied value for identifying critical event attributes which should be properly planned. The present study aimed to study the influence of event service quality factors on memorable tourism experiences of participants and in relation to word-of-mouth communications. A branded franchised swimming event was used as a case study (Oceanman), in which serious leisure participants compete internationally.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Active sport tourism

Sport tourism has been conceptualised by Weed and Bull (2012) as a phenomenon of arising from the spectrum of unique interactions between people, place, and activities. The body of literature on serious leisure (Stebbins, 1982), sport tourism and event participation indicates that people choose different forms of sport tourism for different reasons. A common tourism classification is based on the distinction between passive and active involvement in sport-related travel, with passive usually referring to watching sport and active describing participation in sport (Hinch & Higham, 2001). A preference of the tourist role is related to life course stage, gender, social class, motivation and risk aversion (Gibson & Yiannakis, 2002).

Previous research has looked at travel motives from either sport or tourism perspective and focused on interaction between sport and tourism motives (Robinson & Gammon, 2004). In general, motives for travel have been explained by push and pull factors, where push factors give tourists a reason to travel and pull factors refer to destination attributes (Crompton, 1979). When it comes to sport tourism, motivations have a very broad range (Hodeck & Hovemann, 2016; Hungenberg et al., 2016) and sport tourists can be driven by physical, interpersonal, cultural motives, as well as

status and prestige (Weed and Bull, 2012). In active sport tourism, participants register for events for personal reasons/goals which could include competitiveness, desire to win, development of skills, and competencies (Kilpatrick et al., 2005; Funk et al., 2007). They also seek to fulfil their own needs, e.g. improve mental, physical health or self-confidence, relieve stress, feel refreshed (Jeong & Kim, 2019) as well as satisfy their aspiration to alternative social identity (Green & Jones, 2005). Interestingly, a recent study by Mishra et al. (2022) found that active sport tourists are more likely to be motivated by travel motives associated with tourism (e.g., novelty and new experiences, travel exploration, social bonding, and stress relief) and less likely to be driven by the motives related to exercise and sport participation (e.g. physical strength and self-enhancement).

Alongside motivations, the meaning of a sport event experience that participants attach to an event has been an important area for researchers (Fleshman & Kaplanidou, 2023). It was previously proposed that active sport tourists engage in the process of emotional cognition – a conscious processing of an emotion caused by the sports event and applying a label to the notion and intensity of that emotion (Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2010). In the post-trip stage, this process is closely linked to memories which are crucial for understanding and defining tourism experiences (Kim et al., 2022).

Memorable tourism experience (MTE)

There has been a significant increase in studies on memorable tourism experiences (MTE) since the introduction of the concept, with a considerable growth in publications between 2018 and 2020 (Hosany et al., 2022). The notion of 'memorable' tourism captures those tourism-related experiences "positively remembered and recalled after the event has occurred" (Kim et al., 2012, p. 12). As

Kim (2010) argued, if a tourism experience is not strong enough to be recalled, it is unlikely that will contribute towards long-lasting positive attitudinal (e.g., word of mouth communication) and behavioural (e.g., repeated visits) outcomes. MTE is a key variable in tourism research since it is associated with several positive behavioural and attitudinal outcomes. Examples are intention to revisit the destination (Coudounaris & Sthapit, 2017), development of attachment towards the destination (Tsai, 2016; Vada et al., 2019a), and subjective well-being (Sthapit & Coudounaris, 2018; Sthapit et al., 2019). The body of literature suggests that MTE can affect tourists' recall (Kim & Jang, 2016; Park & Santos, 2017; Servidio & Ruffolo, 2016), word-of-mouth recommendations (Cetin & Dincer, 2014; Tham et al., 2013; Triantafillidou & Siomkos, 2014) and social media share (Bose & Biju, 2020). It can also provide a foundation for generating commercial value for events and destinations (Stergiou et al., 2022). Finally, it has been evidenced that positive MTE can lead to destination loyalty (Alrawadieh et al., 2019; Cardinale et al., 2016; Chen & Rahman, 2018; Manthiou et al., 2014; Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2013; Tanford & Jung, 2017; Zhang et al., 2014).

The conceptualisation of MTE has been based on the literature on memory, according to which it is categorized into semantic and episodic (Kim, 2014). Semantic memory is developed based on an individual's knowledge which relates to the attributes and characteristics of the tourism trip and / or destination. On the other hand, episodic memory is related to autobiographic memory, which is built based on tourists' emotional experiences, positive and / or negative feelings. As Kim (2014) discussed, these two types of memory are interdependent because semantic memory is generally derived from episodic memory, which means that both of them contribute to the total memorable tourism experience.

According to Mehrabian (1980), “emotional (affective, connotative, feeling) reactions represent the common core of human response to all types of environments” (p. 7). We propose that participatory sport events create positive or negative experiences for participants; these experiences have an experiential nature and are mainly emotional (Jeong, Kim & Yu, 2020; Kaplanidou & Gibson, 2010; Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2010; Koo et al., 2014). Participation in such events therefore influences strongly the performance of participants’ episodic memory. It has been proposed that when people are asked to recall previous experiences from their life, they are more likely to recall those which are emotional in nature (Kim, 2014). On the other hand, contextual information (e.g., when and where an event took place) is more difficult to remember. In the tourism context this means that tourists are more likely to remember emotional moments of their holidays and events which involved positive or even negative feelings. Once again, it can be argued that participatory sport events can create an emotional environment for participants, which will positively influence their memory performance and create positive or negative memorable tourism experiences. It is well documented today that active sport participation contributes to life satisfaction (Eime et al., 2010), individual wellbeing (Chatzisarantis & Hagger, 2007; Hall, 2010; King, Clark & Kellmann, 2010; Lechner, 2009; Mirehie & Gibson, 2020) and it is associated with several positive psychological outcomes (Asztalos et al., 2009; Asztalos et al., 2012; Eather et al., 2023; Miller & Hoffman, 2009).

It can therefore be argued that participatory sport events should be among the main tools for developing memorable tourism experiences. They should be incorporated within national, regional and local tourism strategy and in line with the strategy for destination development and branding. Tung and Ritchie (2011) noted that the critical role of a destination manager is to “facilitate the development of an

environment (i.e., destination) that enhances the likelihood that tourists can create their own MTE” (p. 3). Participants’ experience on participatory sport events can certainly play this role and contribute towards the development of strong MTEs.

In the context of sport events, the body of literature on memorable tourism experience and event service quality is scarce. There was only one study by Stergiou et al. (2022) who conducted research in the context of a mega-sport event (2018 FIFA World Cup) and examined how event quality factors contribute to the development of memorable tourism experiences from spectators’ point of view. It was found that the event quality factors of authenticity, entertainment, venue quality and event competition dimensions were most significant predictors of memorable tourism experiences for event spectators. To date, there have been no studies to examine the interactions among memorable tourism experience dimensions and event quality factors from the perspective of active sport tourists (participants). There have been a few studies, which were conducted in other leisure settings. For example, Ng et al. (2022) investigated service quality and memorable tourism experience in the context of sustainable tea tourism; they found that activities, cleanliness, language, and security were significant in predicting MTEs. Another study by Tabaeian et al. (2022) found that perceived service quality contributes significantly to MTEs and revisit intention. There is still no published research on the role of participatory sport events on the development of participants’ memorable tourism experiences.

The measurement of MTE

In order to create and deliver fulfilling tourism experiences, it is important for event organisers to have clarity about factors and measures underlying MTEs (Kim & Ritchie, 2014). This has been addressed by Kim et al. (2012) who proposed a memorable tourism experience scale (MTES) with seven tourism experiential

dimensions, i.e.: hedonism, refreshment, novelty, local culture, knowledge, meaningfulness, and involvement. In MTES, following definitions of the seven dimensions were adopted: *hedonism* is about pleasurable feelings that excite oneself; *refreshment* is the state of being refreshed; *novelty* refers to a psychological feeling of newness resulted from having a new experience; *local culture* is related to experiences with local people and traditions; *knowledge* is information, facts, or experiences known by an individual; *meaningfulness* is a sense of great value or significance; *involvement* is personal relevance and physical involvement with the tourism experience.

Previously, Kim et al.'s (2012) model was applied in a variety of settings, e.g., local cuisine (Adongo et al., 2015), reuse heritage sites (Lee, 2015), and coffee estates (Wang et al., 2019) and a mega sport event (Stergiou et al., 2022). Other studies have developed new scales to capture more specific memorable experiences, i.e., dining experiences (Cao et al., 2019), destination attributes associated with memorable experiences (Kim, 2014), and memorable dining experiences in fine dining restaurants (Tsaur and Lo, 2020). In a recent study Hosseini et al., (2023) recommended testing MTES in a wider range of tourism contexts and large samples in order to be comprehensively generalisable. Similarly, it has been advised to exercise caution when applying MTES in different contexts to ensure that original seven dimensions are generalisable (Hosany et al., 2022).

Event quality in active sport tourism

Event quality is 'a consumer's overall impression of a carefully crafted experience that is temporary and has a predetermined length' (Shonk et al., 2017, p. 2). It stems from the service quality literature, where service quality has been defined by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) as 'the consumer's judgment about an entity's overall excellence or superiority' (p. 15). The early conceptualization of service

quality was met with other studies focused on measuring service quality. For example, SERVQUAL (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988) offered five dimensions, i.e., tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, while later study by Brady and Cronin (2001) proposed three dimensions, i.e., interaction quality, outcome quality and physical environment quality.

It is well-evidenced that event quality represents a key aspect for a number of positive consumer outcomes, i.e., service value, destination image, and behavioural intentions (Byon et al., 2013; Moon et al., 2011). Studies of event quality embraced a wide range of sport settings and leisure activities, i.e., basketball games (Kim, Ko, & Park, 2013), fishing experiences (Pierskalla, Ramthun, Collins, & Semmens, 2013) and taekwondo (Ko, Kim, Kim, & Lee, 2010). It should be noted that the majority of previous studies have examined the concept of event quality primarily in the context of sports and events from the lenses of spectators (Biscaia et al., 2017; Jeong & Kim, 2020; Ko et al., 2011; Yoshida & James, 2011). More recently, there have been a few studies which examined service quality in participatory sport events, from the lenses of participants e.g., golf (Hutchinson et al., 2009; Lee et al., 2011), running (Alexandris et al., 2017; Theodorakis et al., 2019) and sambo (Matic et al., 2020; Milovanović et al., 2021).

Event quality has been viewed by previous studies as a multi-dimensional construct based on tourists', spectators' or participants' perceptions. Ko et al. (2011) developed a measurement scale of event quality in spectator sports (SEQSS) which included the dimensions of game, augmented service, interaction, outcome and environment. Similarly, event quality as proposed by Jin et al. (2013) comprised of four dimensions, i.e., game quality, interaction quality, outcome quality and physical environment quality. A more recent study by Ko et al. (2021) proposed single-item

measures for perceived quality in the spectating sport context; they developed statements that replaced 11 sub-scales of the original multiple items of Ko et al.'s (2011) SEQSS with single-items.

In the context of small-scale sport events, Chelladurai and Chang (2000) proposed a more holistic approach for measuring service quality, including aspects of the destination in which an event takes place. This is a particularly welcome approach since it is widely recognized today that sport events can have multiple tourism and economic impacts and are incorporated within communities, regional and national tourism strategy (Alexandris et al., 2022). In this line Chelladurai and Chang (2000) proposed three dimensions of service quality: physical environment (i.e., facilities, equipment, stadiums), interpersonal attributes (employees' or volunteers' attitudes and behaviour), and the core service (i.e., performance of the event itself). This model was extended further to the sport tourism context by Shonk and Chelladurai (2008, 2009) who proposed a conceptual event quality model which consists of four dimensions, i.e.: 1) access quality, reflecting how accessible are the event destination, accommodation facilities and sport venues; 2) accommodation quality, describing the quality of the hotels, their services, and the visitors' interaction with employees; 3) venue quality, referring to the quality of the sport facility, services, and sport equipment, and 4) contest quality, referring to the overall processes of the contest and the competition outcomes. The contest quality was specifically emphasized for spectatorship contexts, with perceived quality of the opponent providing high-quality entertainment for spectators. The applicability of Shonk and Chelladurai's (2008) model was tested on a spectatorship sample by Tzetzis et al. (2014), in the context of a small-scale sport event.

It has been well-established in the literature that spectators and participants (e.g., leisure or professional athletes) have different motives and perceive the services differently (Shonk & Chelladurai, 2008). To describe participatory sports-related travel associated with event participation, the term active event sport tourists was proposed by Kaplanidou and Gibson (2010). The event quality (and its core element in particular) was found to predict sport tourists' behavioural intentions and have a direct impact on the development of destination loyalty among elite sambo athletes (Milovanović et al., 2021). Alexandris et al. (2017) conducted research in the context of marathon runners and used Brady and Cronin's (2001) model to establish whether the three quality dimensions (service environment, interaction and outcome quality) have an impact on the event loyalty. Their results indicated that only the service environment and outcome dimensions contributed significantly to the prediction of event loyalty, while the role of interaction quality was not found to be significant. Another study among marathon runners showed that event quality directly affects destination image, perceived value and tourist satisfaction (Jeong & Kim, 2020). In addition, Matic et al. (2020) looked at the impact of sport event quality on athletes' revisit intention and the development of positive word-of-mouth for the city. It was found that all three service quality dimensions (i.e., core, tangibles and supporting) had a positive effect on behavioural intentions of athletes as well as word-of-mouth.

While repeated behaviour, tourist satisfaction and loyalty are the main outcomes of positive service quality that have been researched, there has been some recent research which linked service quality with total tourism experience (Theodorakis et al., 2019., Stergiou et al., 2022).

METHODOLOGY

The context of the study

The study adopts a case study approach within a quantitative method strategy. According to Yin (2014), case studies investigations are appropriate when the objective is to examine complex phenomena within a real-life setting. Such an approach might generate useful insights and reveal depth knowledge from the field. In our study we focused on the specific context of a recurring international sport event (Oceanman open water swimming series), which includes franchised swimming events across the globe. The participants of the event are serious leisure participants and non-elite athletes, i.e. they are not getting paid for taking part in the event, instead they pay a participation fee.

Today, the Oceanman series includes more than fifteen events into well-known tourism destinations, such as Galapagos (Equador), Yucatan (Mexico), Somabay (Egypt), Ayia Napa (Cyprus), Phuket (Thailand), Lima (Peru), Costa Azahae (Spain) and Savador Bahia (Brazil). Each event has different routes and races (e.g., ocean-kids - swimming race for youths, ocean-teams - team relay race and sprint -fast track race) according to the area's characteristics. At the end of the year there is a world final race with many side activities and the closing ceremony of the season.

Participants' profile and procedures

This study took place over a ten-month period. It started in June of 2019 with Oceanman-Greece and finished in March 2020 with Oceanman-Mexico, before the global spread of Covid-19 pandemic. An online questionnaire in English was designed to measure the theoretical constructs. Permission was taken from the CEO of the Oceanman race before the data collection. Ten event organizers accepted to help with the data collection. Approximately, five thousand e-mails were sent from event managers to participants in these ten events. After the screening procedures eight

hundred and seventy-eight (N=878) questionnaires were valid, achieving a response rate of 18,6%. The total sample consisted of Oceanman-France (N=57, 6,5%), Oceanman-Greece (N=101, 11,5%), Oceanman-Italy (N=158, 18%), Oceanman-Mexico (Yukatan, N=86, 9,8%), Oceanman-Mexico (Conzumel, N=86, 9,8%), Oceanman-Russia (Moscow, N=67, 7,6%), Oceanman-Russia (Sochi, N=58, 6,6%), Oceanman-Spain (N=97, 11%), Oceanman-Turkey (N=99, 11,3%) and Oceanman-Ukraine (N=69, 7,9%). The dominant participant's profile of an Oceanman swimmer is male, middle age, highly educated, sporty lifestyle, participate in sport tourism holidays and attend at least one Oceanman event per year. Table 1 shows the detailed demographic characteristics of the total sample.

< Table 1 >

Instruments

Event Quality. The instrument was based on Shonk and Chellandurai's (2008) conceptual framework including four quality dimensions: access quality, destination quality, venue (race conditions) quality and contest quality. The initial scale was developed based on their suggestions and previous studies which applied the same or similar framework on an event setting (Shonk et al., 2017; Shonk & Chellandurai, 2009; Shonk et al., 2012; Tzetzis et al., 2014). A total of 18 questions were generated to capture the proposed concept. Each item evaluated the different sections of event quality factors on a 5-point scale where 1=very poor and 5=very good.

Memorable Tourism Experience. It was measured with the original MTE scale by Kim et al. (2012), with 24 items which reflected the seven dimensions: hedonism, novelty, local culture, refreshment, meaningfulness, involvement, and knowledge. This research instrument has been found reliable and valid among previous research work

(Chen & Rahman, 2018; Kim & Ritchie, 2014; Stergiou et al., 2022; Tsai, 2016). A 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1= totally disagree to 5=totally agree was used.

Word of Mouth Communications. It was measured with two items (i.e., “I will say positive words about Oceanman brand to others”, “I will propose Oceanman brand to others”). The answers were given in a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1= totally unlikely to 5=totally likely. Similar items have been used by researchers in various sport settings (e.g., Amatulli et al., 2021; Asada & Ko, 2016; Barlas et al., 2010).

RESULTS

In order to test the associations among Event Quality, Memorable Tourism Experience and Word of Mouth communication, regression analysis was used. In the first step both scales (i.e., Event Quality, MTE) were tested for their psychometric properties. Confirmatory factor analysis via AMOS 24 was used to evaluate goodness of fit indicators, reliability and validity indexes for each scale.

With respect to Event Quality scale, the Cronbach's alpha scores were satisfactory (>.75) for all the dimensions. The total evaluation of the measurement model indicated acceptable fit indices: $\chi^2=650,62$, $df=129$, $CFI=.94$, $TLI=.93$, $RMSEA=.06$ and $SRMR=.04$ (Schumacker & Lomax, 2016); all average means were relatively high. Also, the composite reliability estimator scored in an acceptable range between .83 and .88 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). So, the reliability was established. The next step was to examine the model for convergence and discriminant validity. The results showed that the average variance extracted (AVE) indicator for the latent variables was greater than the .50 cut-off criterion. Hence, convergent validity was met (Kline, 2015). Concerning the discriminant validity, Fornell and Larcker's (1981) approach was adopted. This method recommends that all square roots of AVE for each latent

variable must be greater than the inter-correlations among constructs in the matrix. Table 2 and Table 3 provide positive evidence for both reliability and validity indicators.

< Table 2>

< Table 3>

Regarding the Memorable Tourism Experience scale, the Cronbach's alpha scores were satisfactory (>.75) for all the dimensions. The total evaluation of the measurement model indicated acceptable fit indices: $\chi^2=3976,26$, $df=873$, $CFI =.91$, $TLI=.90$, $RMSEA =.06$ and $SRMR =.05$ (Kline, 2015); and all average means were relatively high. Also, the composite reliability estimator scored was in an acceptable range between .83 and .93. These results showed a high internal consistency level of the measurement instrument. Hence, the reliability was established. To further validate the proposed scale the process of convergence and discriminant validity were used. The results in Table 4 show that the average variance extracted (AVE) indicator for the latent variables was well above than the .50 threshold. Thus, convergent validity was met (Kline, 2015). For the discriminant validity process, Fornell and Larcker's (1981) approach was applied. Table 4 and Table 5 provides support for both reliability and validity indicators. Based on the above evaluation of both scales, the first research objective was achieved.

< Table 4>

< Table 5>

A standard multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine how much of the variance in MTE's dimensions could be explained by the four components of the Event Quality. Table 6 and Figure 1 show the overall impact of Event Quality on the MTE's factors. The results suggested that all models were statistically significant ($p<.001$). The examination of the standardized beta coefficients revealed that access

quality had no positive impact on MTE. On the other hand, destination, venue, and contest quality had a strong contribution on the development of memorable tourism experiences. Additionally, the examination of MTE contribution on the event's word-of-mouth communications revealed statistically significant results. In detail, the MTE's dimensions explained 53% of the dependent variable ($R^2=.53$, $F=47,02$, $p<.001$). Particularly, hedonic ($b=.25$, $t=5,35$) had the highest contribution, followed by knowledge ($b=.24$, $t=5,23$), involvement ($b=.19$, $t=3,51$), meaningfulness ($b=.14$, $t=2,87$) and novelty ($b=.09$, $t=1,91$). The local culture ($b=.07$, $p=.12$) and refreshment ($b=.04$, $p=.45$) factors had not statistically significant scores. Based on these results, the second and third research objectives were met.

< Table 6 >

< Figure 1 >

To further validate our results a MANOVA analysis was performed to examine potential differences among Oceanman events, against the event quality factors. The Box's test of Equality of Covariance Matrices showed statistically significant results (Box's $M=307,3$, $F=3,3$, $df=90$, $p=.005$), as well as the multivariate test (Wilks' $\lambda = .633$; $F = 11,688$, $p=.001$). However, the test of between subjects' effects revealed statistically significant effects mainly for the access quality dimension ($F=3,25$, $p=.005$). The post hoc results are presented in Table 7.

< Table 7 >

DISCUSSION

This paper aimed to test the influence of event service quality on MTE of participants in an international franchised swimming event. The results of the study first provided evidence for the reliability and validity of the holistic four-dimensional event quality model, as proposed by Shonk and Chelladurai (2008, 2009). Peripheral aspects of the

event, related to the destination quality (e.g., accommodation, entertainment, local residents' attitudes) were shown to be important on determining participants' total experience and word-of-mouth communications; they should therefore not be overlooked by event organizers. Once again to emphasize that the sample of this study included only participants (swimmers), and not spectators, as in previous studies (e.g., Stergiou et al., 2022).

In terms of the MTE model, the results of the study provided support for the factorial validity of the scale (Kim et al., 2012), which has not been previously tested on a sample of sport participants. MTEs made a significant and strong prediction on word-of-mouth communications, which supports previous studies and shows the value of including this construct in tourism behaviour models (Stergiou et al., 2022). In terms of the relationship between service quality and MTE the results provided support of our hypothesis that service quality is one of its antecedents. Six of the seven MTE dimensions were significantly predicted by the four service quality dimensions, with the hedonic and local culture having had the highest predictions.

On discussing the individual contribution of each of the four service quality dimensions on MTE, some clear patterns are revealed. First, the destination quality dimension was the one that consistently had the strongest influence on all the six of the seven MTE dimensions. As previously noted, this dimension relates to the attributes of the destination in which the event takes place and it includes accommodation, local people attitude towards the event, entertainment and shopping opportunities. It covers the service quality aspects, which were proposed by Chelladurai and Chang (2000) to be measured in order to provide a holistic measurement of event service quality. Destination quality had the strongest impact on the local culture element of the MTS. As previously noted, the local culture dimension

includes visitors' perceptions related to their experience of interacting with local people and experiencing local traditions. It covers what has been reported in previous studies as the "authentic" element of tourism experience (Alexandris et al., 2017). The results of this study propose that, while competition is obviously one of the main motives for participants in such events (Alexandris et al., 2022), the experience of the authentic aspects of the destination and their interaction with local culture is a strong factor for building MTEs. Once again, event organizers should not focus only on the quality of the actual race, but they should cooperate with local tourism authorities and development officers in order to provide a holistic experience. It is clear, that the choice of the destination is an important element on event organizers' decision-making in the case of franchised recurring sport events.

The destination quality dimension had also a strong influence on the involvement dimension of MTE. In the case of a participatory sport event, involvement is a strong dimension since it indicates participants' interest and devotion to the activity, which in our case is both the contest and the experience of the destination. Coudounaris and Sthapit (2017) argued that involvement is an important psychographic construct because it affects people's attitudes towards an activity and subsequently their behaviour, with respect to the activity. It is an affective response, which arouses from participating in the activity. These results can be discussed with reference to the semantic vs. episodic memory. Event service quality influences involvement, which, as an affective response, influences episodic memory, which builds stronger and more memorable tourism experiences (Kim, 2014).

The hedonic dimension of MTE was the second highest predicted by the service quality dimensions. As previously noted, this dimension focused on the pleasurable experiences of consumption, with a strong emphasis on fun and enjoyment

(Goossens, 2000). It has been proposed that the desire to seek hedonic experiences, such as excitement and enjoyment, is a fundamental factor in tourism experiences (Otto & Ritchie, 1996). As discussed above, this dimension influences the semantic memory, acting as an affective response. Three dimensions had a significant influence on the hedonic experience (venue, destination, and contest quality). The influence of the contest dimension on the venue quality supports the recreational experience of such events for competitors. Previous studies in other event settings (e.g., running marathons, Alexandris et al., 2017) had shown that, while competition is one of the main motives for participating in an event, competitors also expect to have fun and enjoyment. Participants in such events view their activity as “serious leisure” (Veal, 2017), since they invest considerable amount of time and money in their training. They value both the competition and the total tourism experience. Once again, these results support the argument that in participatory sport events experiences have an experiential nature and are mainly emotional (Jeong, Kim & Yu, 2020; Kaplanidou & Gibson, 2010; Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2010; Koo et al., 2014).

The novelty dimension of MTE was the third most highly predicted by the service quality dimensions. Novelty is a psychological feeling of newness, resulting from having a new experience. Seeking novel information and new experiences are among the main motives of tourists (Skavronskaya et al., 2020). It involves visitors ‘willingness to take psychological, social and even physical risks for the sake of pleasure’ (Coudounaris and Sthapit, 2017). This dimension has a double meaning in the case of participatory sport events. It involves competing (swimming) in a new destination, and therefore accepting to face physical and psychological challenges, but also experiencing the local culture and authentic elements of the destination, as an associated experience to their race activity. The interaction with the other

competitors and the local residents can also create a situation for the social risk, as it was referred by Coudounaris and Sthapit (2017). This is supported by the strong influence of the venue and contest quality dimensions on the novelty aspect of MTE. It has to be noted, that in the case of an open event, and since there is no real sport facility like a stadium, the venue dimension covers perceptions about the starting line of the race, combined with the contest's related aspects such as the actual swimming route, the employees' knowledge and the support during the race. Contest quality is also evaluated based on the level of competition, the schedule of the event and operational aspects. It is quite difficult for event organizers to create a perception of a novel race, in order to influence the novelty aspect of MTE. However, with the use of technology this aspect can be also built.

Refreshment was the next dimensions which was highly predicted by service quality perceptions. It is a major component in tourism experience, since it is one of the psychological benefits which are expected by visitors. Previous research has shown that escape, freedom from daily routine, relaxation and stress reduction are among the main motives for tourism behavior (Skavronskaya et al., 2020). Satisfaction of these motives will lead to refreshment perceptions, as part of MTEs. Once again, three of the four service quality dimensions (Destination Quality, Venue and Contest) offered significant predictions.

Meaningfulness was also predicted by the Venue, Destination Quality and Contest dimensions. This dimension relates to the visitors' expectations for self-development and personal growth through tourism experiences (Coudounaris and Sthapit, 2017). Tung and Ritchie (2011) proposed that for many people tourism experience is linked with self-discovery. This dimension is particularly applicable in the case of participatory sport events. Research has shown that many participants

perceive competition as an opportunity for self-reflection, self-discovery and personal growth, through achieving competition goals (e.g., to finish the race or to compete with themselves, e.g., Alexandris et al., 2017). In this line, while the influence of venue and contest dimensions of service quality on the meaningfulness dimension was expected, once again the contribution of the destination quality dimension is a finding to be noted. Participants view their interactions with locals, their culture and entertainment opportunities as means for self-development and personal growth. All these interactions may lead them to change their life approach when they get back home.

The only dimension of MTE that was not predicted by service quality was the knowledge one, which refers to informative experiences, and improving tourists' education. Since learning involves a cognitive process, this dimension is linked with the semantic memory, which as previously discussed, is developed based on an individual's knowledge about an activity. Semantic memory is not as strong as episodic (Kim, 2014); tourists are less likely to recall cognitive information than emotional experiences. However, previous studies in other tourism contexts have provided support for the value of this dimension on the memorable tourism experience construct (Stergiou et al., 2022). Our results can be contextual and related to the nature of the sample (participants). In this line, event organizers should work on the design of service quality strategies that can influence the development of the knowledge dimension. Story telling marketing, through using unique aspects of the destination, and the swimming route can help towards this direction.

The last note should be made about the examination of the differences in service quality among the different destinations of the study. The MANOVA showed statistically significant differences in the Access dimension of service quality. These results show that the administration of Oceanman International is doing a very good

job in carefully selecting destinations with similar attributes, following specific criteria to achieve standardisation in service quality, and providing a good framework for the contest quality. As previously noted, Oceanman International operates under a franchised growth strategy, in which standardisation in service quality is a prerequisite. Access quality is a dimension that cannot easily be standardised, considering the geographical locations of the different destinations. These results also partially validate our merging of the data and presenting them on a global level, since limited significant confounding effects of the different locations were identified.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As previously discussed, competitors in such events view this activity (swimming competition) as a serious leisure. However, they are not a unified group. As previously studies showed (Alexandris et al., 2017) they are driven by several motives, and they have different involvement levels with the activity and the event. Segmenting them on clusters according to psychographic characteristics, such as involvement and participation motives, can further share light to how service quality perceptions influence MTE; it is probably expected that service quality perceptions will be different among participants with different involvement levels, and in relation to the development of MTE. This is an issue that needs further research. We also note that using a survey in English in a number of non-English speaking countries may create an opt in bias among the participants due to language; future studies are recommended to use translation if carried out in an international context.

A final comment should be made about the brand of the event. Brand image was not included among the variables in this study. Previous studies have shown that both the brand / event and the destination image can be important factors on participants' decision-making on which event to participate. However, there have been

no studies so far to examine the branding aspects of the event and destination in relation to MTE. Future research could incorporate event and destination personality and in relation to MTE in an integrated model.

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Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Swimmers

Variable	Number	Percentage
Gender		
Male	569	64.8
Female	309	35.2
Age group		
Up to 30	165	18.8
31-40	282	32.1
41-50	273	31.1
51-60	131	14.9
More than 61	27	3.1
Education level		
High school	88	10.0
University/ College	489	55.7
Postgraduate studies	301	34.3
Oceanman per year		
My first Oceanman	84	9.6
One	510	58.1
Two	206	23.5
Three	55	6.3
More than four	23	2.6
How did you know about Oceanman swimming events?		
Social Media (Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, etc.)	176	20.1
Friends/ word of mouth	334	38.0
Official website	251	28.6
On-line sport news	30	3.4
Oceanman community forums	87	9.9
Do you combine your participation to the race with some sport holidays?		
Yes	569	64.8
No	309	35.2
How many sport events (e.g. swimming, running, biking) do you attend every year?		
One	419	47.7
Two or Three	169	19.3
Four or Five	211	24.0
More than six	79	9.0

Table 2. Event Quality Scale

Variables	λ	t-value	SMC	M	α	CR	AVE
<i>Access quality</i>				4.05	.81	.84	.59
Destination accessibility	.84	1	.72				
Sport venue accessibility	.84	12,28**	.73				
Availability of local transportation	.70	11,51**	.64				
<i>Destination quality</i>				4.15	.84	.83	.64
Locals' attitudes toward tourists	.74	1	.55				
Accommodation	.71	12,30**	.51				
Food and beverage	.70	12,01**	.49				
Entertainment and shopping	.72	15,01**	.52				
Hygiene environment	.70	13,09**	.49				
<i>Venue (race conditions) quality</i>				4.29	.83	.83	.61
Employee' behavior	.78	1	.61				
Employees' knowledge	.74	17,01**	.55				
Events' location	.76	19,51**	.61				
Social Atmosphere	.68	23,88**	.49				
Social Interaction	.72	12,50**	.51				
				4.20	.89	.89	.60
<i>Contest quality</i>							
Safety	.87	1	.74				
Management	.86	10,52**	.72				
The racing route	.74	14,17**	.61				
Feed stations	.76	13,01**	.63				
Event schedule	.80	12,01**	.68				

Notes: λ = path loadings; **= $p < .01$; SMC= square multiple correlation; M= average mean; α = Cronbach's alpha; CR= composite reliability; AVE= average variance extracted.

Table 3. Event Quality Inter-correlation Matrix

Variables	1	2	3	4
1.Access quality	.768			
2.Destination quality	.723	.800		
3.Venue quality	.686	.558	.781	
4.Contest quality	.680	.672	.553	.774

Table 4. Memorable Tourism Experience Scale

Variables	λ	t-value	SMC	M	α	CR	AVE
<i>Hedonic</i>				4.11	.91	.83	.56
Thrilled about having a new experience	.80	1	.79				
Indulged in the activities	.75	20,54**	.56				
Really enjoyed this tourism experience	.76	20,58**	.68				
Exciting	.75	20,63**	.57				
<i>Novelty</i>				3.86	.89	.88	.66
Once-in-a-lifetime experience	.77	1	.60				
Unique	.86	22,64**	.75				
Different from previous experiences	.80	20,30**	.65				
Experienced something new	.81	19,01**	.66				
<i>Local culture</i>				4.00	.87	.88	.71
Good impressions about the local people	.88	1	.77				
Closely experienced the local culture	.76	27,42**	.58				
Local people in the destination were friendly	.87	29,23**	.77				
<i>Refreshment</i>				4.06	.84	.93	.77
Liberating	.84	1	.72				
Enjoyed sense of freedom	.86	27,95**	.75				
Refreshing	.91	29,51**	.82				
Revitalized	.89	27,88**	.77				
<i>Meaningfulness</i>				4.05	.82	.92	.79
I did something meaningful	.91	1	.83				
I did something important	.89	25,33**	.79				
Learned about myself	.87	24,87**	.75				
<i>Involvement</i>				3.97	.81	.85	.66
I visited a place where I really wanted to go	.78	1	.61				
I enjoyed activities which I really wanted to do	.81	22,17**	.66				
I was interested in the main activities of this tourism experience	.84	23,52**	.76				
<i>Knowledge</i>				3.71	.87	.88	.72

Exploratory	.91	1	.83
Knowledge	.88	28,11**	.79
New culture	.53	11,58**	.53

Notes: λ = path loadings; **= $p < .01$; SMC= square multiple correlation; M= average mean; α = Cronbach's alpha; CR= composite reliability; AVE= average variance extracted.

Table 5. Memorable Tourism Experience inter-correlation matrix

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1.Hedonic	.743						
2.Novelty	.715	.817					
3.Local culture	.724	.717	.843				
4.Refreshment	.650	.700	.704	.878			
5.Meaningfulness	.697	.677	.644	.716	.893		
6.Involvement	.733	.651	.687	.713	.647	.815	
7.Knowledge	.452	.613	.692	.678	.568	.711	.849

Table 6. Path coefficients on the dependent variables

Exogenous variables	Endogenous variables						
	Hedonic R=.58***	Novelty R=.46***	Local R=.58***	Refreshment R=.52***	Meaningfulness R=.43***	Involvement R=.51***	Knowledge R=.45***
Access Quality	-.03	.04	-.05	.03	.09**	-.05	.02
Destination Quality	.25***	.14***	.48***	.35***	.12***	.44**	.07
Venue Quality	.34***	.30***	.21***	.16***	.27***	.07	.05
Contest Quality	.10*	.09*	-.02	.11***	.11***	.07	.06

Table 7. MANOVA's Post Hoc Tests

Event Quality Factors	Events' Mean Scores										Sig. differences (p<.05)
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Access Quality	4,1	3,6	3,6	4,1	3,9	4,1	4,5	4,2	4,5	3,9	1-2,1-3,1-7,1-9,2-4,2-5,2-6,2-7,2-8,2-9,3-4,3-5,3-6,3-7,28,3-9,3-10,4-7,4-9,5-6,5-7,5-10,6-7,6-9,7-8,7-9,7-10,8-9,8-10,9-10
Destination Quality	3,9	4,1	3,9	4,2	4,1	4,1	4,3	4,1	4,3	4,1	
Venue Quality	4,2	4,3	4,2	3,9	4,1	4,3	4,4	4,2	4,2	4,2	
Contest Quality	3,7	4,2	4,1	3,8	4,2	4,0	4,2	4,2	4,3	4,3	

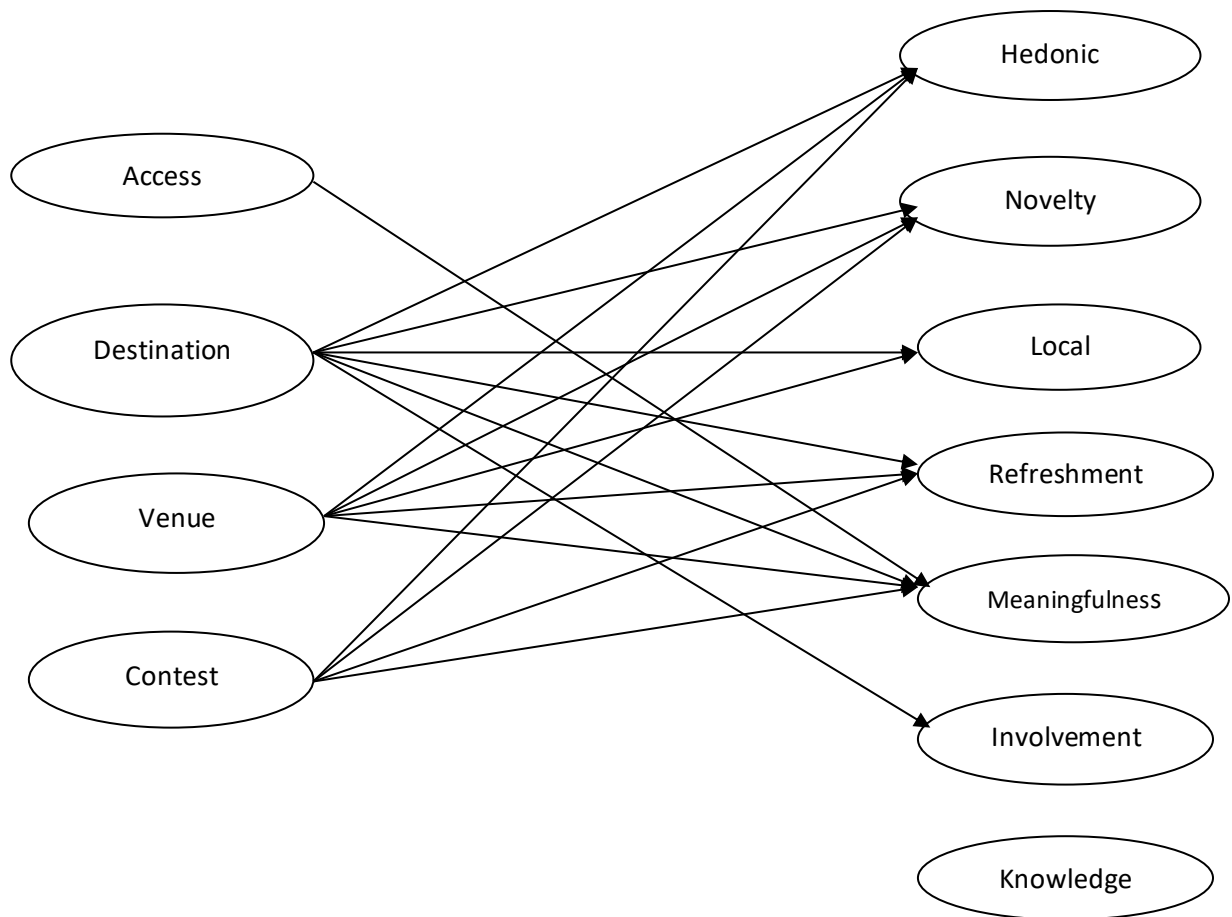


Figure 1. Contribution of Event Quality factors to the Memorable Tourism Experience dimensions

Footnote: Only the significant paths are presented.