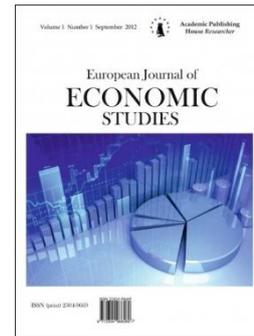


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Impacts from Sport Events for the Local Communities on Tourism, Local Economic Development and Destination Branding: the Case of Larissa Regional Unit Race Events

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Abstract

In recent years, efforts have been made in order to create a new model of development. This can be considered as a general effort of the various local communities to achieve economic development. It is also crucial for this new model to implement the social aspect as well as the economic aspect. This can be achieved by considering as critical tools for development, culture and sport, combined with the historical memory of the various societies.

Lately, there is a world trend on investing and expecting a significant turn over in terms of economic and social capital for the local communities, from local sport events and activities. Sport events are such as running races organized every weekend in the urban and rural areas.

The present research paper tries to study the effects on the local economy and local community in general, of the various running events organized in the Larissa Regional Unit, based in central Greece. Those sport events, can have a positive effect on the local community in many ways for the economy, tourism and society.

In order to identify those implications, the running events of Ippokrateios in Larissa city, and Gentiki Trail race will be studied in the present research paper. Those two sport events that are studied in the present research paper, are two characteristic events of Larissa Regional Unit, with effect on both rural and urban local communities.

Keywords: local economic development, sport tourism, sustainability, culture, destination branding.

1. Introduction

The recent economic crisis has created a need to identify new models of local development and sustainability. Moreover, it is crucial for those new models to implement the social aspect as well as the economical aspect. Lately, there is a world trend on investing and expecting a significant turn over in terms of economic and social capital for the local communities, from local sport events and activities. Sport events such as running races, are organized every weekend in the urban and rural areas. According to A. Goulas, M. Pappa, and G. Theodosiou (2017), the new model of local development, combine culture with local sporting events and activities, combined with the historical memory of the various areas. According to L. Misenert (2016), 'sporting events have become highly sought after tools for economic, tourism, and social development in cities around the world'. Also, it is well spread, the idea, that sport tourism is being utilized for the restructuring of rural and urban local communities, communities that are in necessity of development and regeneration in the emerging economies (Chalip, Costa, 2005; Grix, 2012; Tichaawa, Bob, 2015).

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In the last years, several efforts have been made to create a new model of development in the effort of local communities for economic development. It is also crucial for this new model to touch both the social and the economic dimension. This can be achieved by considering them as critical tools for development, culture and sports, combined with the historical memory of different societies. This practice, with tools for developing the local economy, culture and sports, is common in major European cities. The main theme of this research project is to identify and publish a new model of local development based on two key factors, culture and branded sporting events. For this reason, the case of the Ippokrateios road race as well as the Gentiki Trail mountain race will be studied by the Prefecture of Larissa. The Ippokrateios road race is an international sporting event with participants from Greece and abroad. That event has a significant impact on the local economy for the city of Larissa mainly and is organized every year in the city center of Larissa. The Gentiki Trail race is a mountain race and is organized in a very close to Larissa city mountainous area, at the mountain of Gentiki. The participants on that trail race are mainly from Greece, and several from abroad. However, for these two events, it is underlined, that there are three main dimensions, the economic dimension, the cultural dimension and the health dimension. In order to measure the impact of these two well-known sports events on the local development of the city of Larissa, a questionnaire was conducted which was distributed to the participants in each event and then analyzed statistically. The results of the research from the specific sport events confirmed the multiple benefits for the society of the Regional Unit of Larissa, both economically and culturally. In addition, for the needs of the present research work, the literature review and the study of similar cases were used. Moreover, it is quite important to mention the fact that those events can boost the tourism of the specific area and the surroundings, especially during the event period. Actually, research findings show that during the weekend of the organization, there was noticed a significant increase on hotel booking. That is the reason for A. Goulas et al (2017) to consider and study the race event of Ippokratios race as a tool for development for the city of Larisa mainly

Race events – Development factors for local societies

In recent years, with the ongoing economic crisis, more and more local government are trying to find a way to boost their region. One of the sectors that is constantly gaining ground is that of sports tourism. Indeed, according to T.D. Hinch, & J.E. Higham (2001), sports is an important activity in tourism, while tourism is a fundamental feature of sports. In addition, many researchers have pointed out over the years the importance and affect of sports events on the societies that organize and host these events. Thus, according to M. Weed & C. Bull (2004), athletic tourism is an economic, social and cultural phenomenon created by the unique interaction of activity, people and location. In addition, according to St. Ross (2001), ‘the sport tourism industry has a few boundaries although it primarily penetrates economic, environmental and cultural areas. Much of the research on event sport tourists has focused on their economic impact upon a host community, although measuring spending patterns is a difficult proposition. Tourism’s economic impact is one of the most researched but least understood areas of tourism’. Moreover, according to J. Conway, C. Isselhard and E. Urbanski (2007) ‘the economic impact of sport can be defined as the net change in an area’s economy resulting from a sport event. The net change will encourage or discourage a sport franchise to build a complex in a designated area’. In addition, Conway et al. (2007) underline that ‘this specific change is caused by activity involving the acquisition, operation, development, and use of sport facilities and services. This in turn generates visitor spending, public spending, employment opportunities and tax revenue’. Furthermore, A. Goulas et al. (2017) claims that ‘running race events, like Ippokratios race can have an economic impact on local economies’. In addition, G. Gkoutzioupas and D. Gargalianos, (2008), in their research work, claim that ‘sport events can increase sports tourism and also suggest that government and local authorities should invest on such events’. It is a fact that sporting events, such as the road races we are examining in this article, generate income from sports tourists' travelers, from the stay and nutrition of sports tourists, from spending in the markets while staying at the area of the sporting event, while national or international visibility of the area is achieved, depending on the size of the sporting event. S. Gammon and T. Robinson, (1997) mention that the rapid development of sports tourism in recent years is due to the increasing popularity of national and international sporting events, the understanding of the value of engaging in sporting activity as a means of promoting health internationally and the awareness of the importance of sport as a means of developing people's relations. "It is worth mention the opinion of S. Lee (2006) that ‘the indirect effects include the

recirculation of public and visitor spending for the sporting event. Induced effects are the increase in employment and household income resulting from introduction of a sport franchise'. Examples from the international literature are many. G. Papanikos (2015) claims that 'marathons are usually organized by cities and the decision making process involves many stakeholders. Eventually though a critical mass of local citizens must run behind the idea and this has to come through the local government with the support of local business interests and sport associations'. Furthermore according to M. Taks, L. Chalip and Ch.B. Green, (2015), 'sport events have a particularity; they are temporal and can trigger a variety of short term or long term positive or negative impacts'. All these organizations are invited to work together to organize the event, and we will see in the examples to be presented in this research paper, that all those mentioned above are cooperating for the organization.

Ippokratios race

The novel paradigm for local development that the present research paper presents is the case of Ippokrateios Race. For the needs of the research a questionnaire was distributed on the participants of Ippokrateios Race, which was held on the 8th of May 2016 in Larissa, Thessaly. Ippokrateios Race is a local sport event on annual basis organized by the Larissa Marathon Runners Club, an amateur running club. It is actually organized every year on May in the city of Larissa which is located in central Greece in the Region of Thessaly. Another important fact that must be highlighted is that the city of Larisa is located in the center of Greece, which makes the city easily accessible from most of the other Greek cities. Also, the city of Larissa is not cited at an altitude, on the contrary it is plane thus becoming an easy flat route for the runners, a fact that makes it attractive for the participants. Additionally, one of the characteristics of the route that will be presented further on the present research paper is that the start and finish of the 10 km race is in front of the first Ancient Theater of the city and a big part of the route passes from other monuments like the Hippocrates monument and through the Park of Pinios River. Furthermore, the children's race of 1000m starts in front of the Hippocrates monument and finishes at the Ancient Theater. This is something of a greater importance and an added value to the event.

Last year was the 10th year that the specific event was organized and had three major events, the Ippokrateios Race of 10 kilometers, the 3kms Fun Run and the kid's race of 1000 meters. The event had a record of participants with an amount of 1250 runners registered for the race of 10 kilometers, 530 runners registered the 400 kids raced at 1000m. These numbers of participants ranked Ippokrateios Race as one of the most popular races of 10 kilometers in Greece. That number of participants was the sample of the present research.

The main objective of the questionnaire that was held on the participants was to measure the economic influence of the event on the city of Larisa for the specific weekend. The number of nights stayed in Larissa and the amount of money they spent for that weekend was two of the questions. In addition, the number of persons accompanying the runners was another important question.

Gentiki trail race

The Gentiki trail race is an annual event, which is held on the third weekend of February and is organized by the Larissa Marathon Runners Club. It has two main events, a bigger trail race of 17 km in the mountain of Gentiki and a smaller trail race of 5 km for less experienced athletes. The mountain Gentiki is a mountain close to the city of Larissa, at a distance of just 10 km, unknown even to the locals, but with a lot of history and with important historical monuments. It is known mostly from the antiquity for the extraction of the famous green stone, the green marble with which many well-known world monuments were built, such as the church of St. Sophia in Constantinople, the temple of St. Paul in the Vatican in Rome and others. The Gentiki trail event, with both events, is mainly a pole of attraction for trail runners. Indeed, the period during which the race is organized, in the heart of winter, is a period of reduced tourist traffic for the region of Larissa. As a result, this stimulates the traffic both in hotel reservations and local stores and mainly in restaurants and cafes.

On February 2020, the 4th edition of Gentiki Trail was organized, with a massive success and participation. In the main trail race, 3kms were added, in order to be a total of 20 kms for the Gentiki Trail race, and the second smaller trail race remained on 5 kms. The 4th edition was finished with 240 finishers on the 20 kms trail race and with 150 finishers on the 5 kms trail race, which are actually the race participants limit for both races. In other words the races went sold out from participations.

On that case the same questionnaire that the researchers used firstly on Ippokratios race, was used also in order to measure the economic influence of the Gentiki trail even on the area for that weekend.

2. Results and discussion

The research findings of the three race events that were studied for the present research paper were very interesting. It is very important to highlight the fact that from the analyses of the 7th Ippokrateios data is that the percentage of the athletes that were from the city Larissa is 34 % thus, the participants that visited the city of Larissa the specific weekend for the race is 66 %. We can see the data analysis at [Figure 1](#). It is particularly interesting to see and realize the importance and impact this athletic event has on the city of Larissa from the economical aspect and observe carefully the specific categories. From the city of Larissa, the percentage of athletes was 34 %, from the Prefecture of Larissa 41 % and 29 % of the participants visited Larisa for the specific race from the rest of the region of Thessaly, outside of Larissa's Prefecture, i.e. the Prefectures of Trikala, Karditsa and Volos. The total percentage of participants from the region of Thessaly was 70,5 % thus the athletes that traveled the most to Larissa, coming from regions outside Thessaly was 29,5 %. To summarize, 41 % of the participants were from Larissa's Prefecture and an impressive 59 % traveled to Larissa from other cities. The research also shows that most of the participants that traveled to Larissa had at least one companion and in many cases their whole family. A large number of them with their companions stayed in Larissa overnight. On average, every participant had one companion. According to the president of Hoteliers of Larisa's Prefecture Mrs Papaioannou Eirini, at the weekend of May 7 and 8th, the occupancy in hotels in the city of Larissa reached 90 % and this is largely due to Ippokrateios Race. Additionally, participants and their companions that visited Larissa only for the day, had lunch in restaurants. Actually all participants had coffee and lunch after the race. A positive coincidence was that at the race day, which was Sunday, the shops were open. All of the above mean that the local market was significantly enhanced.

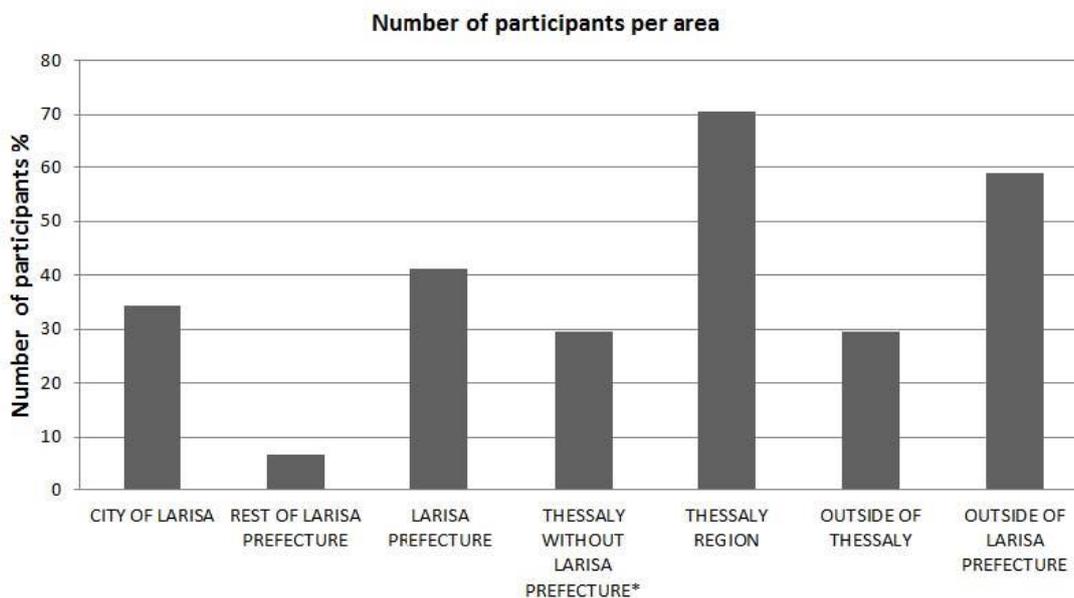


Fig. 1. Number of participants per area at the 7th Ippokrateios of 2016

*The rest of the Thessaly region Prefectures are those of Trikala, Karditsa and Volos

For the second sport event presented on this research paper is the Gentiki trail.

The research findings showed that from the City of Larissa was the 43 % and from the rest of Larisa prefecture (e.g. Tyrnavos) was the 17 % of the total participants as we can see in the data analysis on Figure 2.

It is quite important to underline that from Thessaly but outside of Larissa prefecture was 17 % of the athletes, i.e. Karditsa, Volos and Trikala prefectures.

To summarize the research findings, Larisa prefecture represented by 60 % of the total participants thus 40 % of the participants came outside of Larisa prefecture.

On this race event, 23 % of the participants came outside from Thessaly region, i.e. Ioannina, Pieria, Thessaloniki, Athens, Kozani, Grevena, Lamia and etc.

It is quite important to mention that for the day of the race event most of the athletes and their companions, had a coffee or lunch at the restaurants and cafeterias of the village of Kalochorion, which is close to the race event finish line. Also, is quite important to mention that 59 % answered that they spent at least one night at the region for the race event. All of them answered that they preferred the hotels of Larissa city for their staying. Even on that occasion, the research findings result that for the specific weekend that the race event took place, the local economy was boosted.

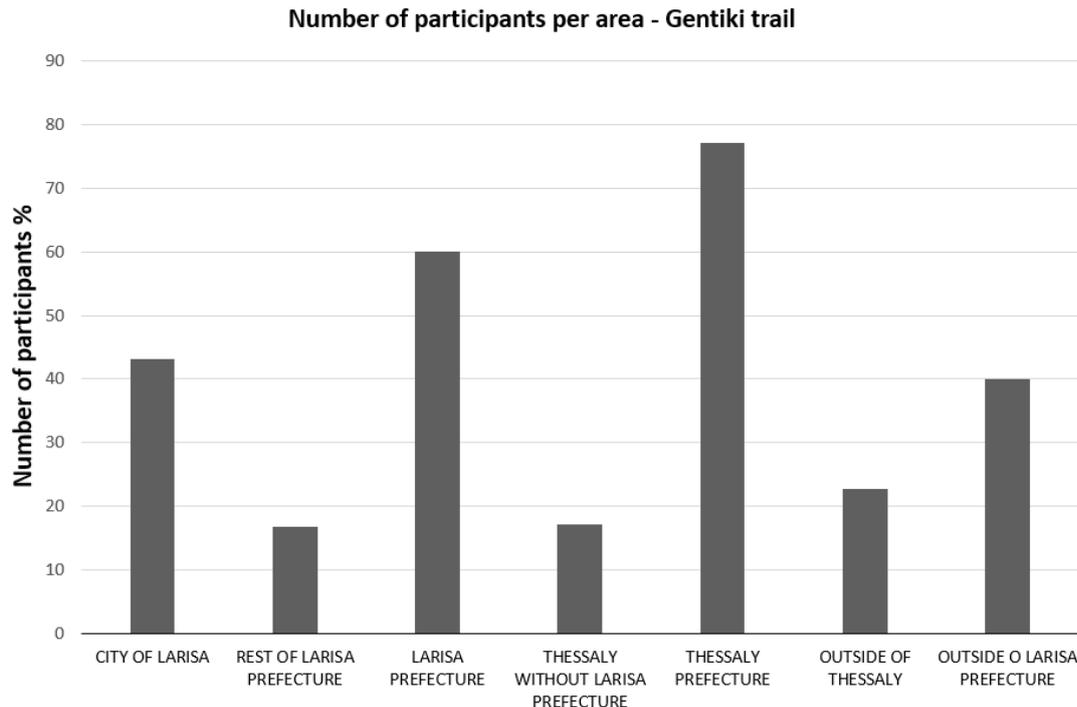


Fig. 2. Number of participants per area at the 2th Gentiki trail of 2018
The rest of the Thessaly region Prefectures are those of Trikala, Karditsa and Volos

3. Conclusion

In the present research paper, a new model paradigm of local development for the prefecture of Larisa based on two different running events was presented. The researchers choose to study and analyze two local running events, organized in different periods that attract a vast number of runners and visitors in the city of Larissa and the surroundings. Mainly the biggest running event of region of Larissa, Ippokratios race, attracts more than 2000 runners, attendants and visitors with a big impact on the local economy and with important social and cultural aspects as well. Then Gentiki Trail race is organized during the winter period and create the factors to help the tourist aspect of the events. Thus, in fact, the combination of these two race events creates in the same year the appropriate conditions for Larissa, so that it is a touristic destination for athletes from all over Greece. Larissa Regional Unit, with the organization of running events can claim that is becoming a sport tourism destination during the year. This has economic, social, cultural, sporting and tourism impact on the city and its citizens. In fact, with the sport events presented in this research paper, two weekends of the year, athletes and escorts from all over Greece come and stay in the city of Larissa. Athletes and their escorts have lunch, they shop, they consume and have fun during their stay in Larissa. However, the most important aspect of all, which is not directly measurable, is the fact that the visitors get to know the beautiful side of the city of Larissa and leave with excellent impressions, since their participation in one of those three races and tourism on the occasion of this

event, is the purpose of their visit. This creates a brand image for the city. In a future research the impact of these events on the creation of the city branding will be analyzed and presented.

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