



Article

Recurring Rural Destination Sport Events: A Study on Participants' Direct Spending

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Abstract: The current study explores direct spending profiles of sport event tourists in a very small rural destination as an alternative to the multiplier effect economic impact studies. Sport event tourism has been used as an economic engine tool by a variety of destination sizes but has been neglected for small rural destinations, where people arrive from various distance radiuses to participate in this central activity for the place. Data were collected from participants at a small-scale recurring mountain running event. An online survey instrument was sent to the participants after the event. Participants reported on their daily and total expenditures regarding accommodation, meals and other tourist spending. The results revealed that the participants who responded to the survey spent on average about EUR 163 for accommodation, EUR 205 for meals and about EUR 38 for other tourist spending, such as souvenirs. Respondents from closer radius, spent less on average, approximately EUR 156, EUR 383 and EUR 26 for the respective spending categories. Rural destinations counting on hosting sport events for economic boosts in poorly economic areas witness considerable financial gains for the regions via the estimation of the more feasible direct spending calculations.

Keywords: economic impact; rural sport events; small-sized sport events (SSSEs); active sport tourists; sport tourism; recurring events; new spending; mountain running; Europe



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1. Introduction

Sport tourism is an industry that was valued at USD 323,420 million in 2020 and accounts for 12.12% percent of the overall global tourism market; a proportion, which is almost double in the developed countries (GTP 2019; Kadam and Deshmukh 2021). The European sport tourism market is considered to be the largest globally with 36.8% market share, followed by the North American and the Asian-Pacific regions in the second and third positions, respectively (Vynz Research 2020; Kadam and Deshmukh 2021). Sport tourism also presents a significant growth potential, with its value being projected to grow six-fold by 2030 at USD 1,803,704 million due to the: (1) increase in the number of athletic events globally, (2) rising popularity of sports, (3) growing sports participation, (4) growing infrastructure, (5) rising disposable income, and government initiatives to promote sports tourism (Vynz Research 2020; Kadam and Deshmukh 2021). The growth of sport tourism is also evident at the individual country level; i.e., in Greece, a country where the economy largely (20%) relies on the tourism industry (WTTC 2021), the sports tourism annual increase is estimated at 41–45%, and is, therefore, considered as a sector with substantial incremental value (GTP 2019).

Running, the context of the current study, is the fourth largest of the global sports market segments representing a value of USD 33.2 billion (Footwear News 2019). Its popu-

larity has grown approximately 57% from 2010–2020, and there was a subsequent increase of 65% in running and jogging activities (Rizzo 2021). It is considered the fourth most popular outdoor activity in the US (Outdoor Foundation 2021). The popularity of running is combined with an impressive 300% growth in running events in the period 1990–2013 (Aicher and Newland 2018), creating an increasingly competitive market (Lianopoulos et al. 2022). Specifically, in Greece, there is an average of over five sports events taking place each weekend of the year, with running events being the most frequently organized and reflecting the majority of those (GTP 2019).

Sport events, one of the pillars of the sport tourism industry, provide a number of benefits to their hosting destinations, mostly revolving around the triple bottom line ones (economic–social–environmental), with the economic impact being the major focus of the academic literature (Chersulich Tomino et al. 2020). Nonetheless, there is still lack of empirical evidence of the implications on the financial impact of small and medium events (Taks et al. 2015; Chersulich Tomino et al. 2020; Achilleos et al. 2021). Current literature findings are overly focused on the impact of mega and major sports events (Kaplanidou and Vogt 2007; Kaplanidou and Gibson 2010; Gammon 2011; Kaplanidou et al. 2012; Zhang et al. 2014; Agha and Taks 2015; Taks et al. 2015; Gibson et al. 2018). Nevertheless, smaller sport events have higher promise for direct economic impact and overall sustainable tourism development, as explained in Gibson et al. (2012).

Those sport events that take place in rural areas are rather unexplored and, based on a study by Costa and Chalip (2005), who studied paragliding as a tourist product in a small rural tourist European community, there were negligible impacts to the host community. Often, European rural areas are viewed as lucrative, due to their high aesthetic value (Poruțiu et al. 2021), but in specific counties their touristic development is delayed, facing challenges and relying on EU development programs (Apostolopoulos et al. 2020). However, as Hallmann and Breuer (2011) note, sport events boost the destination image of the host community, which ultimately results in repeat visitors and boosts the potential to adopt the asset-based development community development strategy (Kaplanidou 2020). It is, therefore, still unclear how small-scale sport events benefit financially rural communities.

The purpose of the present study is to explore the direct economic impact of a recurring mountain running small event, organized at a European country, or more specifically, at its poorest region and within a rural community. The host region is also one of the least developed European regions in terms of gross domestic product (GDP) (Triarchi et al. 2021), and thus will help us understand how such events contribute to the economic engine of underdeveloped rural areas.

In the next sections, readers will find a review of the literature followed by the methodology section; the results and discussion, which includes academic and managerial implications; as well as the limitations and propositions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Sport Tourism

The first exhibition of sport tourism can be traced back to Ancient Greece and the 10th century BC, when Greeks were travelling to either participate or watch the Ancient Greek Games; what Kurtzman described as “the use of sport as a touristic endeavor” (Kurtzman 1993, p. 6), a definition that reflects the commercial value of this economic activity. The academic establishment of the term and one of the most cited definitions relates to Gibson’s (1998, p. 49) work, who defined it as any “leisure-based travel that takes individuals temporarily outside of their home communities to participate or watch in physical activities, or to venerate attractions associated with physical activities”. The success of sport tourism is important for local communities, as it encourages support from local residents, who see benefits in economic, social and often environmental aspects (Chang et al. 2020).

Van Rheenen et al. (2017) in their meta-analysis of 517 academic studies on sport tourism, concluded on five paradigmatic dimensions relevant to the sport tourism concept, which are presented in a descending order of frequency across the literature:

- Sport as the motivation for travel: The sport activity shall be the primary reason for travel, regardless of the participants’ level of competency (professional vs. amateur and/or recreational athletes) and the level of physical exertion (participating vs. watching sports).
- Space: The location shall be different than the home address of sport tourists.
- Time: Although not firmly established, there is a proposed temporal threshold of 24 h, translating to an overnight stay at the tourism destination while the duration of the engagement with sports is also a matter of inconclusive discussion.
- Participant experience: Sport tourism as a unique experience laden with emotion (Hallmann et al. 2012; Weed 2012).
- Economic motivation: The development of an economic sector or niche market.

It is, therefore, clear that the economic dimension is incorporated in the concept of sport tourism, despite the fact that during the past two decades the focus has shifted towards the phenomenological understanding of sport tourism and the participant experience (Van Rheenen et al. 2017).

2.2. Sport Tourism Events

Similarly, sport events, a major driver for the sport tourism activity, are primarily evaluated upon their economic impact, among other criteria (Chersulich Tomino et al. 2020). More specifically, sport events, and particularly the hallmark ones, namely “major one-time or recurring events of limited duration, developed primarily to enhance the awareness, appeal and profitability of a tourism destination in the short or long term” (Ritchie 1984, p. 2), are impactful. They contribute to the economy, add tourism/commercial value, have a positive physical/infrastructure mark, as well as socio-cultural psychological and political benefits, altogether cumulatively addressed as the “legacy” of the event (Chappelet 2019).

Hallmark events fall under the category of major events that include (a) mega sport events, i.e., the Olympic Games, (b) hallmark events, i.e., the Wimbledon Tennis Championships, and (c) sports heritage, parades and festivals, i.e., the Youth Olympics (Gratton et al. 2000). The complexity of the sport event landscape at the high-profile major types of events is addressed by the typology of Gratton et al. (2000), who categorized the major sport events based on the economic activity generated, media interest and spectatorship levels as illustrated in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Typology of major sports events ¹.

Typology for Major Sports Events	Description
Type A	Irregular, one-off, major international spectator events, generating significant economic activity and media interest (e.g., Olympics, Football World Cup, European Football Championship)
Type B	Major spectator events, generating significant economic activity, media interest and part of an annual domestic cycle of sports events (e.g., FA Cup Final, Six Nations Rugby Union Internationals, Test Match Cricket, Open Golf, Wimbledon)
Type C	Irregular, one-off, major international spectator/competitor events, generating limited economic activity (e.g., European Junior Boxing Championships, World Badminton Championships, IAAF Grand Prix)
Type D	Major competitor events generating limited economic activity and part of an annual cycle of sports events (e.g., National Championships in most sports)

¹ Table adapted from Gratton et al. (2000).

Major events, such as the Olympic Games, “may take place once in a life-time in a country” (Csobán and Serra 2011, p. 19). They are high profile events that contribute positively to the host destination’s image and identity and its overall tourism promotion

(Higham 1999). Their economic impact is well-documented in the literature (Comerio and Strozzi 2019), with findings indicating that, while they substantially increase inward investment, in many cases their long-term consequences are negative (Higham 1999).

On the other hand, there are several events of smaller scale, organized mostly at the regional level, which take place regularly within their hosting communities, i.e., yearly (Csobán and Serra 2011). Contrary to the major events, the non-mega or else smaller scale sporting events (SSSEs) are generally smaller in size, scale, scope, national impact and overall reach (Taks et al. 2015; Wafi et al. 2020). Nonetheless, they may have similar if not more substantial impact for the hosting communities (Gibson 1998; Gammon 2011) and create less risk for negative impact (Higham 1999), thus being viewed as a more viable alternative for sustainable tourism development (Gibson et al. 2012). Finally, in terms of economic impact, a largely underexplored topic in the literature (Taks et al. 2015; Chersulich Tomino et al. 2020; Achilleos et al. 2021), small events are recently found to have a higher potential for positive economic impact as compared to major events (Taks et al. 2015).

2.3. Active vs. Passive Sport Tourists in Events

A dominant distinction relevant to the economic impact of sport events is that of the passive and active tourism (Standeven and de Knop 1999). Active sport tourists are those who “participate in sport while on holiday/vacation”, denoting the “behavior of physically taking part as an ‘athlete’, i.e., golf and skiing while on vacation, participating in organized events, and adventure tourism activities, e.g., hiking and canoeing (Gibson et al. 2018, p. 83). In contrast, the passive ones limit their activity to “spectating sports in a holiday setting” (Gibson et al. 2018, p. 83). To this second category, nostalgic tourists have been included, namely those who visit sport museums and facilities, although some researchers still address this segment as a separate category (Gibson et al. 2018).

In terms of the subsequent economic impact, passive sport tourism accounts for the 59% market share, a large proportion of which is attributed to the spectators of the mega or major sport events described in the section above, whereas the active sport tourism corresponds to the 41% market share (Kadam and Deshmukh 2021).

It is well documented that destinations gain positive economic impact when associated with opportunities for tourists to participate in sporting activities (Costa and Chalip 2005; Kaplanidou and Vogt 2007; Gibson et al. 2012; Drakakis and Papadaskalopoulos 2014; Sato et al. 2018; Drakakis et al. 2021; Achilleos et al. 2021). Finally, recurring sport events can contribute to a sustainable customer base of active event sport tourists, who may repeatedly stimulate positively the host destination via their repeated event participation (Kaplanidou et al. 2012; Getz and Andersson 2010; Kaplanidou and Gibson 2010).

2.4. Economic Impact: Multipliers vs. Direct Spending

“Economic impact is the net economic change in a local economy resulting from spending attributed to a given activity” (Agha and Rascher 2016, p. 183). Agha and Taks (2015) suggested the following drivers for an increase in economic impact following an event, new spending, attributed to the non-local event visitors, the organizer, the non-local businesses and the non-local government, increased spending, attributed to the local event visitors, the local businesses and governmental entities, as well as job creation for locals; tax revenues and intangible benefits. The new and increased spending approach builds on the central place theory regarding the range of a good in this case the service, which “marks out the zone or tributary area around a central place from which persons travel to the center to purchase the good” (Berry and Garrison 1958, p. 304).

Typically, economic impact studies have used multiplier effects to calculate the total economic impact that a sport event is creating to the region, converting the entire amount of additional spending in the host destination to a net amount of money maintained within the destination. To do so, they account for leakages from the local economy pertinent to the crowding out effects of visitors non-relevant to the sport event, that of locals and other

business activities, the potential leakages and the opportunity costs, along with multiplier calculation considerations (Gratton et al. 2000; Agha and Taks 2015).

The multiplier effect's approach is frequently used for the economic assessment of major sport events, (Leeds et al. 2018); however, its applicability for the rural small-scale sport events is questionable. For example, estimating the correct multiplier index to calculate the impact is rather precarious, as it relies on the size of the local economy and the times the money circulates in the local economy. Moreover, for small rural destinations, multiplier effects may be laden with further uncertainty because of the very small size of the area, which is further demonstrated in this section. We, therefore, suggest that direct spending estimates could provide comparable data across such destinations, thus being a more viable tool for small events.

More specifically, in the example below the multiplier effects limitations are obvious. Preuss (2005) calculates the economic impact per person (ΔY) as the spending of all additional persons visiting the destination for the event (x_a), minus the missed spending due to crowding out effects and opportunity costs x_b , plus the increase in residents' spending as a result of the event (Δx_K), plus the increase in visitors spending who are at the destination regardless of the event ($\Delta x_{H,G}$).

$$\Delta Y = x_a - x_b + \Delta x_K + \Delta x_{H,G} \quad (1)$$

Apart from the difficulty of estimating the opportunity costs for such a destination, the proposed formula leakages are not included. However, even in the case that they would be included, there are there are additional inherent and less obvious complexities. For example, visitors' spending on accommodation at a hotel does not necessarily contribute in full to the local economy. A certain proportion of the expenditure will be allocated to the total costs of the hotel to include wages, suppliers, etc.

In the second example, the proportional income multiplier (Gratton et al. 2000), by which the initial visitor income should be multiplied, limitations are evident too.

$$\frac{\text{Direct} + \text{Indirect} + \text{Induced Income}}{\text{Initial Visitor Expenditure}} \quad (2)$$

As direct income, the authors address the additional income for the local businesses directly benefited from the event, i.e., salaries for the hotels at the destination. As indirect income, they address the profits for businesses who benefit from the secondary demand generated, i.e., the hotels' and restaurants' suppliers, and the induced income is defined as the "income resulting from the re-spending of additional income earned directly or indirectly on locally produced goods and services" (Gratton et al. 2000, p. 19).

Apart from the difficulty in the measurement of the abovementioned variables, especially for small-scale events where research budgets are very low if there is any at all, the proportional income multiplier is not comprehensive either, and it includes less obvious bias. For example, the 'locality' of the direct and indirect spending cannot be safeguarded, e.g., the ownership of the hotel, the restaurant and/or the supplier might be national or even international.

Therefore, and despite the fact that the multipliers approach has a strong foundation in economics, its applicability is limited to potentially misestimating of the cost drivers. Both the crowding out effects and the level of leakages can be miscalculated, thus resulting to an unreasonably high multiplier that inflates the economic impact and the potential opportunity costs (Agha and Taks 2015; Leeds et al. 2018).

To the aforementioned limitations, one should also consider the practicality and subsequent feasibility of the approach, the accuracy of which requires overly high research budgets, which substantially increase the costs for major and mega events (Gratton et al. 2000) and are prohibitive for smaller scale events. Moreover, the differences in the multipliers approaches, as evident in the examples (1) and (2), do not allow for comparisons among the events (Gratton et al. 2000).

It is, therefore, suggested that a back-to-basics approach should be adopted for smaller scale rural events that calculate the direct economic impact, namely the additional expenditure that the destination experiences because of the event. Our proposition is consistent with previous literature in the US (Gibson et al. 2012) and further applied in similar European events (Achilleos et al. 2021; Duglio and Beltramo 2017).

3. Results

Overall, 640 valid and fully usable questionnaires were collected. The response rate was 34.5%, well above the typical 10–25% response rates for online surveys (Zarkada et al. 2018). IBM® SPSS® 27 was used for data analysis.

3.1. Descriptive Statistics

The basic demographic and behavioral characteristics of the active sport tourists are presented in Table 2 below. The first observation is relevant to the high educational level of the participant, as 83.3% have received college education at the graduate and postgraduate level. The second finding is the high economic status of the participants, as 42.2% declare annual household income equal to or higher than EUR 20,000.

Table 2. Demographic and behavioral characteristics of the Zagori Mountain running participants.

Sample Characteristics	Categories	N	%
Gender	Male	481	75.2
	Female	144	22.5
	Prefer not to say	15	2.3
Education	High School Diploma	151	23.6
	Some College Studies	107	16.7
	College Degree/Equivalent	173	27
	Postgraduate Studies	209	32.7
Family Status	Single	194	30.3
	Married/Cohabiting	46	7.2
	Divorced	399	62.3
	Widowed	1	0.2
Work Status	Unemployed	25	3.9
	Employed	615	96.1
Annual Household Income in EUR	Low (0–9999)	132	20.6
	Middle (10,000–19,999)	238	37.2
	High (\geq 20,000)	270	42.2
Residence Location	Epirus	113	17.55
	Elsewhere	527	82.45
Travel Companionship Status	Alone	97	15.2
	With company	543	84.8
Previous Participation in the Event	No	290	39.7
	Yes	350	60.3

As per Table 2, the vast majority of the respondents (84.8%) have travelled to the event destination with another person. Of those, as it is figuratively represented in in Figure 1, 69% were accompanied by their friend(s), 60% by their spouse or partner and 65% by other active sport tourists. Approximately 30% had travelled with their child(ren). Interestingly, a substantial percentage of the respondents (60.4%) have taken part in the event during the previous years, from one to nine times.

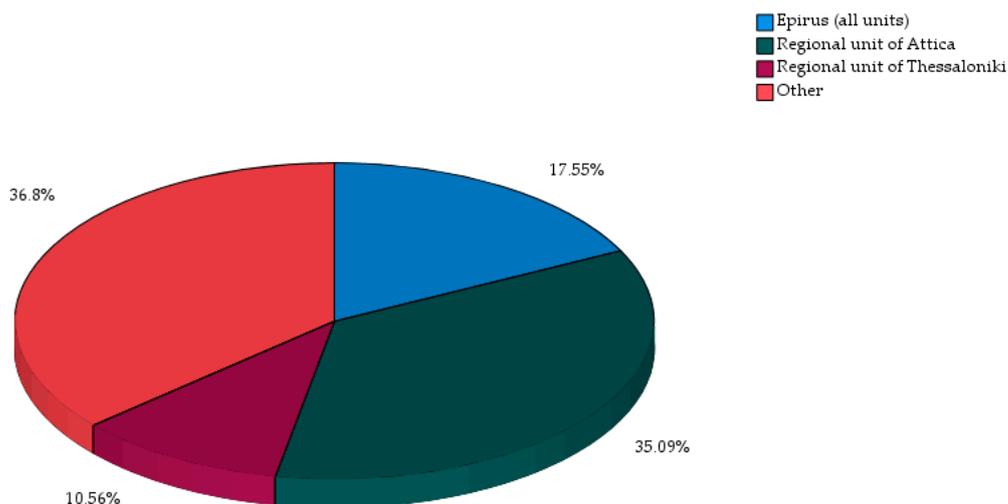


Figure 1. Major areas of residence.

Regarding the proportion of respondents, 17.55% live in the central area, in this case the host region, Epirus, and the remaining respondents (82.45%) reside elsewhere, with the main area of residence (35.1%) being the regional unit of Attica (see Figure 1), where the capital and most populated city of the country, Athens, is.

Concerning the accommodation patterns of the travelers, the average duration was $M = 2.28$ ($SD = 1.52$, $min = 1$, $max = 8$), with 7.1% of the responding athletes not having an overnight stay. For the remaining respondents (82.9%), who did, the vast majority (86%) stayed for 1–3 nights, as depicted in Figure 2.

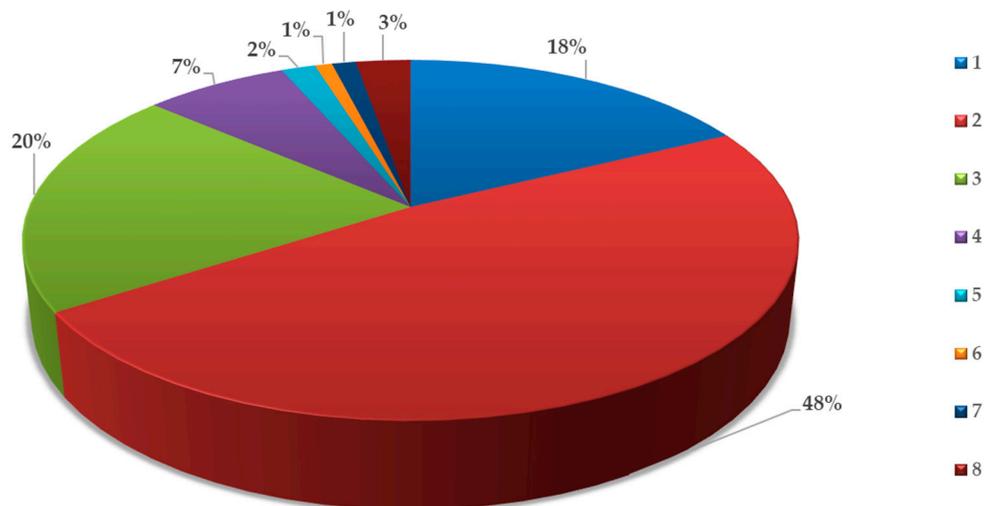


Figure 2. Number of overnight stays for Zagori Mountain running participants.

Of the respondents who spent one night or more at the event destination, the majority (77.6%) made use of commercial accommodation (see Figure 3), paying for their stay at a hotel, B&B, studio and/or apartment for rent, with prices varying from EUR 15–530. The second most preferred accommodation option was the camping (8.4%). For the respondents who chose the latter accommodation mode, the costs would range from 0 (free camping option) to EUR 100 per night. Ultimately, 78.91% of the respondents who had an overnight stay, and 72.34% of the total respondents, have contributed to the local economy in terms of commercial accommodation. In total, 463 respondents paid for a total of 1079 overnight night stays, resulting in an average of 2.27 nights.

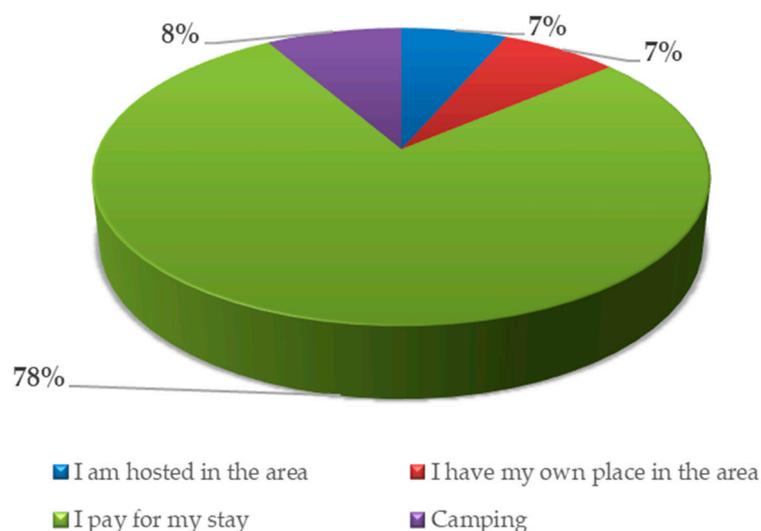


Figure 3. Accommodation types.

3.2. The Direct Economic Impact of Zagori Mountain Running

Table 3 depicts the respondents’ spending. The sample includes survey participants from both the central area and those who resided elsewhere. Their accommodation expenditure approximated at EUR 75,438, their food spending was EUR 131,585 and their retail spending at EUR 23,994.50. Table 2 also shows the spending of the total number of active sport tourists, both locals and non-locals. The accommodation expenditure for those is approximately EUR 219,124, their food spending EUR 382,210, and their retail spending EUR 70,270.

Table 3. Direct economic spending of respondents per capita and total active sport tourists per category.

Accommodation Spending (in EUR)	N	Mean	Median	SD	Min	Max	Total
Responding Active Sport Tourists	463 *	162.93	140	137.83	20	2120	75,438
Actual Active Sport Tourists	1345	162.93	140	137.83	20	2120	219,123.80
Food Spending (in EUR)							
Responding Active Sport Tourists	640	205.60	120	240.52	0	2450	131,585
Actual Active Sport Tourists	1859	205.60	120	240.52	0	2450	382,210.40
Retail Spending (in EUR)							
Responding Active Sport Tourists	640	37.80	20	64.59	0	1000	23,994.50
Actual Active Sport Tourists	1859	37.80	20	64.59	0	1000	70,270.20

* Only the active sport tourists who have stayed overnight at the destination and paid for accommodation are included, namely 72.34% of the total.

As noted in the materials and methods section, to estimate the total lodging spending of the study participants, we multiplied the declared paid price per night per respondent with the number of nights they had spent at the destination and calculated the sum total for all participants. We excluded from the calculations the respondents who were on a daily trip without overnight stay and the ones who did not qualify for commercial accommodation because they camped free, they stayed at their own property in the area or were hosted by friends (see Table 3 note).

Moreover, as discussed in the methodology in Section 5, the registered number of participants was around 2500, but the ones who participated were 1859. Therefore, the extrapolated expenditure for the total population of the actual active sports tourists (N = 1859) accounts for EUR 671,604.40, broken down to EUR 219,123.80 accommodation expenditure (contributing by 32.63% to the total expenditure). Food expenses accounted for 56.91%

of the total expenditure, summing up to EUR 382,210.40 and spending on shopping, i.e., souvenirs, gifts, etc., accounted for 10.46%, approximately EUR 70,270.20.

In Table 4, the total spending is shown. For the survey respondent this was EUR 231,017.50, while for the overall event, this was estimated to be EUR 671,604.40.

Table 4. Total direct economic spending of responding and total active sport tourists.

Spending in EUR	Accommodation	Food	Retail	Total
Responding Active Sport Tourists	75,438	131,585	23,994.50	231,017.50
Actual Active Sport Tourists	219,123.80	382,210.40	70,270.20	671,604.40

3.3. New and Increasing Spending

The results of the new and increased spending indicate that the dominant source of revenues is the first. 89.7% of the respondents' expenditures are attributed to travelers outside the central area.

In Table 5, it is also evident that in all three categories, the new spending outnumbered the increased one. More specifically, visitors spent on accommodation almost 17 times more than locals, for food approximately 8 times more, while regarding shopping this figure was slightly higher than 10 times more. One could argue that the reported difference in total expenditure is relevant to the higher proportion of the active sport tourists from outside the central area over the ones residing in the central area, namely Epirus. This is true. Indeed, active sport tourists from closer radius represented only 6.2% of the sample for accommodation and 25% for the remaining two categories. Still, when reviewing Table 5 in detail, it is noticeable that the average spending per category was higher too, as reflected by both the mean scores and medians.

Table 5. New and increased spending of respondents *.

Spending (in EUR)	N	Mean	Median	SD	Min	Max	Total
Total accommodation spending	463	162.93	140	137.83	20	2450	75,438
New accommodation spending	434	163.41	140	138.88	20	2450	70,918
Increased accommodation spending	29	155.86	120	122.86	25	600	4520
Total spending on food	640	205.60	120	240.52	0	2450	131,585
New spending on food	527	221.74	160	250.89	0	2450	116,859
Increased spending on food	113	130.32	70	165.81	0	800	14,726
Total spending on shopping (Souvenirs, gifts, etc.)	640	37.80	20	64.59	0	1000	23,994.50
New spending on shopping	527	40.02	25	68.23	0	1000	21,090
Increased spending on shopping	133	25.70	15	40.03	0	250	2904.50

* New spending is the expenditure of respondents residing outside the central area, and increased spending is the expenditure of respondents residing within the central region of Epirus.

To further explore statistically significant differences between new and increased spending, a *t*-test analysis for independent groups was performed. The findings revealed that the Epirus residents' total spending on food ($M = 130.32$, $SD = 165.81$) was significantly lower than that of the residents from other locations in Greece ($M = 221.74$, $SD = 250.89$) $t = 4.80$, $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed). Regarding the overall retail spending of the Epirus residents ($M = 25.53$, $SD = 40.10$), it was significantly lower than that of the residents from other locations ($M = 40.44$, $SD = 68.46$) $t = 2.234$, $p = 0.03$ (two-tailed). No statistically significant differences were found regarding accommodation.

4. Discussion

The present study explored the direct spending economic impact (captured through the direct spending of participants) of a three-day recurring small-scale sport event, organized during summer at an underdeveloped small mainland mountain area in Greece.

Following the direct expenditure approach and excluding multiplier effects, we estimated the total accommodation, food and retail spending expenditure of the 1859 active sport tourists at EUR 671,604.40. Of this amount, approximately 90% reflect new spending, namely expenditure by travelers outside the central area, Epirus, that would not have been there without the event. This is particularly important, especially given the fact that this is a low season, if not the lowest season for the specific destination. Based on the tenets of central place theory, the results of the study show how much new spending come to an economically undeveloped place, where the activity takes place who travel to purchase the “good” (Berry and Garrison 1958).

In addition to the above, our study demonstrated statistically significant differences in the average expenditure between active tourists travelling from a closer radius and those travelling from a further radius, namely areas outside the host region. More specifically, for the first category, non-local visitors, the average per capita daily expenditure on meals was 41% lower, whereas the average per capita total expenses on retail purchases are 35.8% lower.

The results, therefore, confirm previous findings that argue for the positive economic impact on destinations that provide opportunities for tourists to participate in sporting activities (Costa and Chalip 2005; Kaplanidou and Vogt 2007; Gibson et al. 2012; Drakakis and Papadaskalopoulos 2014; Sato et al. 2018; Achilleos et al. 2021; Drakakis et al. 2021).

Our findings are also consistent with previous studies in Greece. Kaiser-Jovy et al. (2019) evaluated the total impact of a two-day triathlon event, a six times smaller event with 300 participants and around 1000 additional incoming visitors, at EUR 150,000. They are also in line with findings from studies in similar contexts, i.e., in Cyprus, a more expensive destination, and for an event with higher average stay, the impact of 433 international active sport tourists (lodging and food expenses) was estimated at EUR 202,621.79 (Achilleos et al. 2021). In Italy, Duglio and Beltramo (2017) have estimated that the 920 active sports tourists of a transnational mountain race competition, for whom the average stay is limited to one night, and those have spent EUR 56,149 in total accommodation and food expenses.

Finally, our study lays support in the work of Agha and Taks (2015), who suggested that two important drivers for increased economic impact is new spending, attributed to event visitors outside the central area and increased spending, connected to visitors within the central area. Our results not only show that 89.7% of the expenditure comes from non-local event participants, but that there are statistically significant differences in their consumption patterns.

4.1. Practical Implications

The success of this benchmark event lies in its ability to grow its customer basis and to include nationwide participants and this is the first managerial implication. Event organizers at similar destinations, apart from setting immediate goals, should also have a longer-term vision that considers wider targeting, focusing on non-local participants.

Destination management organizations could also benefit from the results, to maximize the economic benefits of such events. Indicatively, they could consider introducing ways to extend the average stay and facilitate local businesses into offering retail spending alternatives. Additionally, and since crowding effects were reported in food services, alternatives for local restaurants should be explored (e.g., pop-up restaurant facilities).

Finally, and since sport and tourism are the two leading forces for the promotion and sustainable economic development of tourism destinations, policymakers in Greece need to carefully monitor the success of the sector and its future needs and establish a baseline of economic impacts to be able to evaluate its progress longitudinally. This paper has

contributed to the latter, and the authors aspire to also be instrumental in this process in the future.

4.2. Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited to the single country and event contexts and the cross-sectionality. Future research efforts should consider this and focus on the following directions.

These directions include the pursuit of further methodological rigor, meaning that when estimating the direct impact, context-specific information about the events shall be disclosed. For example, for the event under study, food expenditure is affected negatively by the following conditions. The participating athletes were offered one free meal per day by the organizers, which was also the case with the [Duglio and Beltramo \(2017\)](#) event, in which participants were offered two free meals. Moreover, the hosting destination in our study allowed for limited food alternatives (the restaurants were few in total number and in terms of serving capacity). The research team, who were in the field for observation purposes, had received informal feedback by some athletes who prepared the meals themselves to avoid crowding and other inadvertent circumstances, i.e., delays, limited choice of dishes, etc. Similarly, the free camping option lowered the total accommodation expenditures. All the above, should be safeguarded for with ex ante remedies, i.e., survey/diary items for realistic recording of the direct expenditures and ex post remedies, i.e., by providing an explicit discussion in the analysis, and make more exact calculations. Such practices will allow for more accurate estimations and comparisons between different events.

Apart from methodological propositions, the academic research agenda should also be enriched. Scholars could investigate the effect of behavioral characteristics, i.e., loyalty to the event, loyalty to the destination, interest in running, years of running and social capital on the consumption patterns and total spending of the active sport tourists.

Finally, and inasmuch as the current study is one of the few to explore direct spending profiles of active sport tourists in a very small rural destination as an alternative to the multiplier effect economic impact studies, we stress out the importance of longitudinal academic studies across multiple event destinations.

5. Materials and Methods

The context was set to a recurring three-day mountain-running event, taking place every end of July at Epirus (336,856 residents according to the ESLSTAT Census Bureau 2011). This is a peripheral tourism destination located in the northwest of Greece, the country's poorest region, and one among the least developed European ones ([Triarchi et al. 2021](#)). The event is organized at a very small village, Tsepelovo, part of the cluster of 46 villages, Zagorochoria, at the municipality of Zagori, the total population of which was estimated at 3724 citizens ([ESLSTAT Census Bureau 2011](#)). During summer, Epirus is mostly visited for tourism on the coast (35%), therefore, water sport is considered as the most appealing sport activity (30%), while mountainous sports are less popular (5%); the mainland is mostly visited during winter and autumn ([Triarchi et al. 2021](#)). In terms of additional potential temporal variations, it shall be noted that this was one of the first sport tourism events following the COVID-19 pandemic repercussions that came after a decade-long financial crisis in the country. At the time of data collection, the country was experiencing an 8% hit in its economy ([Baltas 2021](#)), a factor demonstrated to have a negative impact on the hospitality industry ([Dimitropoulos et al. 2019](#)).

5.1. The Sampling Frame

The sampling frame was set to the active sport tourists, who have been proven to largely contribute to the local economies of Greek destinations directly, where the majority of the spending is distributed in lodging and food and beverage ([Drakakis and Papadaskalopoulos 2014](#)) and indirectly with large effects on local income and employment ([Drakakis et al. 2021](#)).

5.2. The Method

Among the three distinct methods to determine the amount of economic impact generated by an event; (1) *ex ante* studies that ask participants how much they intend to spend, (2) concurrent studies that ask participants how much they are spending during the events, diaries are included here too, and (3) *ex post* studies that ask participants to recall how much they have spent and/or use other measures of spending to operationalize the impact after the impact occurs (Agha and Rascher 2016; Leeds et al. 2018), the third option was selected. Based on previous research findings, we anticipated a slight underestimation of the declared expenditure for entertainment and shopping, due to the limitations of the recall method (Gibson 1998). This was a conscious compromise over the diaries alternative, due to the inherent methodological limitations, i.e., “non-response bias and visitors’ reluctance to keep a record of their expenditures” (Gibson 1998, p. 59), as well as the situational factors, i.e., limited duration of the event, the organization of the trails and the event setting.

5.3. The Instrument

To explore the direct economic impact of the event, as driven by the participants, we adapted the methodology of Gratton et al. (2006). A self-administered questionnaire was employed to:

1. Explore basic demographic and behavioral characteristics of the participants;
2. Quantify the proportion of respondents who live in the host region and those who are from elsewhere (“Where do you live?”);
3. Quantify the number of visitors staying overnight in the host area and the proportion of these making use of commercial accommodation (“What is the duration of your stay?”);
4. Quantify the number of nights those using commercial accommodation stayed in the host area and the average accommodation cost per night (“How much money does your daily accommodation cost?”);
5. Quantify the total spending on food of those participating in the event (“How much money do you spend for meals per day?”);
6. Quantify the total commercial spend in the host area (“How much money have you spent on purchases, i.e., souvenirs in total?”).

The instrument was pilot tested, and after all the necessary corrections (typing errors, use of more understandable expressions, aesthetics and question progressing, etc.), the final version was uploaded on Google Forms®.

5.4. Data Collection and Data Analysis Processes

Approximately 2500 registered participants, namely active sport tourists, received an email invitation with the online survey URL through the organizers’ newsletter address two days after the event. The email also communicated the incentive, a lottery prize, more specifically one EUR 50 gift card from the largest chain of technology and entertainment department stores. The participants would get in a lottery draw for the prize if they completed the survey and provided a valid email address. Of those 1859 participated in the mountain running events and comprised the pool of potential respondents, as registered athletes who did not show could not respond regarding their individual expenditures (the survey asked the respondents to report their individual expenditures).

Having a goal to present the direct spending in the area, we employed the following calculations:

- Accommodation: We calculated the number of commercially accommodated respondents by only including in the sample the percentage of those who met the following conditions: (1) having stayed one or more nights at the destination, and (2) having paid for the accommodation. Of the total 643 respondents, 463 fulfilled the above-mentioned criteria. We then estimated the average accommodation spending per capita, as per the following formula, where N is the number of nights each respondent

declared to have stayed and P the declared price. After summing the accommodation spending of all qualified respondents in the denominator, we inserted the total number of respondents, namely Σ_n .

$$\text{Average Accommodation Spending Per Capita} = \frac{[\Sigma(N \times P)_n]}{\Sigma_n} \quad (3)$$

We then estimated (1) the commercially accommodated survey respondents' spending and (2) the spending of all event participants by multiplying the average accommodation spending with the equivalent numbers (for more see Table 2 in the Results section).

- **Food:** The same rationale was followed for the calculation of the food spending. Here, all respondents were included in the sample and have reported the amount of money that they spend daily on meals. After estimating the average food spending per capita following the logic in Formula (3), we multiplied it by the sample size number and total number of active tourists, respectively.
- **Retail Spending:** All respondents were included and reported their total expenditure on retail purchases, i.e., souvenirs. We then averaged their spending and multiplied it by the sample size number and the number of race participants.
- **New and Increased Spending:** The sample was divided in two categories, the new spending that included the expenditure of respondents whose residence area was different than the host region, and increased spending included the spending of the survey participants who had travelled to the event from a closer radius, in this case the region of Epirus.

6. Conclusions

As it was established earlier in this paper, sport tourism is a highly valued industry and it accounts for a good percentage of the overall global tourism market, while the European sport tourism market is specifically the largest globally (Vynz Research 2020; Kadam and Deshmukh 2021). On the other hand, sport tourism presents a significant growth potential due to many factors and growth of sport tourism is also evident at the individual country level. In the case of Greece, this sector is considered to present a substantial incremental value (WTTC 2021). Running events, the context of this study, are among the largest in the global sports market segments and their popularity has grown immensely since 2010. This growth is also evident in Greece, where running events are the most frequently organized sport events (Rizzo 2021; Lianopoulos et al. 2022). The social, environmental, as well as economic benefits of hosting small recurring events are well established in the literature (Gibson 1998; Gammon 2011; Gibson et al. 2012; Taks et al. 2015; Chersulich Tomino et al. 2020; Achilleos et al. 2021).

The current study further laid support to the above by exploring the economic impact by active sport tourists for a small-scale recurring mountain running event, which takes place annually at a rural destination and during its lower season. Its economic impact, calculated following the direct expenditure approach, was proven substantial and majorly driven by visitors outside the central area. It is, therefore, evident from the current results that a sport tourism event generates a significant economic benefit to households, businesses, and eventually the local government and it has been established as a critical driver of the overall economy. The present study lays support for the extant literature and provides the direction according to which small rural destinations may pursue sustainable tourism development, namely through recurring small-scale sport events, the economic impact of which, is hereby clearly demonstrated.

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